

The Idea of Reality in Buddhism and Postmodernism

Ravi Bhatt

Department of English and other European Languages, Dr. Harisingh Gour Vishwavidyalaya Central University, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh 470003, India

Abstract

The Paper deals with the idea of Reality as it has come to be examined in the fields of Buddhism and Postmodernism. Buddhism and Postmodernism question the established ethos of the society in their own distinct ways. The Paper, being Philosophico Literary in nature, examines the idea of Reality with reference to the Buddhist idea of universal impermanence and the Postmodern idea of the “Rejection” of the established values. The Paper traces the development of Buddha’s doctrine of Universal Impermanence by the followers of Madhyamika doctrine of Buddhism and equates it with the Lyotardean notion of “incredulity towards meta-narratives”, which Lyotard famously propounded in his Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, on the grounds that Buddhism and Postmodernism in their own ways reject any kind of establishment/permanence/fixation.

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, Madhyamika, Postmodernism, Reality, Knowledge.

Philosophy has always been, and will continue to be, a base for all that is written under the broad head of “Literature”. All the major theorists, social scientists, and political ideologues have always followed (or developed) a philosophical doctrine on the basis of which they have developed the entire nucleus of their genius. Systems of Knowledge which have come into being across the civilizations in the world have strongly responded to the epistemology developed around reality, truth and experience and for the matter of that, each system of Knowledge has made a preoccupation with understanding the true mode of existence whereby the question of the ideal has also been successfully answered.

Buddhism, one of the dominant religions of Asia which teaches the path of non-violence was founded by Siddhartha Gautama around 6th Century B.C. and from then it has been divided into numerous schools and sub-schools. All the major thinkers of Buddhist tradition have tried to interpret Buddha’s teachings from their own point of view thereby giving rise to numerous divisions and subdivisions. The two major and broad divisions prevailing in Buddhism currently are Mahayana School and Hinayana School (called Theravada by the western scholars). Under one of this broad categorization comes the Madhyamika School of Buddhism (which associates itself with the Mahayana Cult) which, arguably, is believed to best represent the middle way as it was taught and practiced by Gautama Buddha. Having sprung in 2nd century A.D. from the teachings of Nagarjuna, a Hindu Brahmin born in South India and educated in the Buddhist university of Nalanda, and Ashvaghosha, author of the famous Buddhacharita, the Madhyamaka School is generally believed to be the best representative of the Buddhist thought. In the words of T.V.R Murthy:

The Madhyamika Philosophy claims our attention as the system which created a revolution in Buddhism and through that in the whole range of Indian Philosophy. The

entire Buddhist thought turned on the Sunyata doctrine of the Madhyamika. The earlier pluralistic phase of Buddhism, its rejection of substance and the rather uncritical theory of elements, was clearly a preparation for the fully critical and self-conscious dialectic of Nagarjuna. The Yogacara-Vijnanavada Idealism explicitly accepts the Sunyata of the Madhyamika and gives it an idealistic turn. The critical and absolutist trend in the Brahmanical thought is also traceable to the Madhyamika. (Murthy vii)

The World War II era had shaken the beliefs of mankind to the core. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed the two most destructive wars ever fought under the sun. The wars ended in the genocide of hundreds of thousands of people all over the globe. Of the two wars that are mentioned here, Post-Modernism is widely considered as a Post World War II movement that primarily occurred in the West. The 1950's Post War society saw the emergence of a bipolar world and also the rise of America – the Superpower and for this reason, Post-Modernism is chiefly considered to be rooted in the American ethos. All the aspects of human life are deeply affected by this movement which started basically as a movement in architecture. Post-Modernism as a movement is best defined by Jean Francois Lyotard in his 1979 Magnum Opus *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* as “Incredulity towards meta-narratives” since the World War II made humans think and question all that is revered and considered right. The biggest victim was of course the-then dominating religion in the West – Christianity. The Christian ideals, beliefs and the Christian worldview as a whole were questioned and rejected by the people who saw a massacre at the end of World War II. Ravi Zacharias, a famous Indian-born Canadian-American Christian apologist rightfully defined this Postmodern ‘mood’ in his *Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims of the Christian Message* as:

We are living in a time when sensitivities are at the surface, often vented with cutting words. Philosophically, you can believe anything so as you do not claim it a better way. Religiously, you can hold to anything, so long as you do not bring Jesus Christ into it. If a spiritual idea is eastern, it is granted critical immunity; if western, it is thoroughly criticized. Thus, a journalist can walk into a church and mock its carryings on, but he or she dare not do the same if the ceremony is from the eastern fold. Such is the mood at the end of the twentieth century. A mood can be a dangerous state of mind because it can crush reason under the weight of feeling. But that is precisely what I believe postmodernism best represents - a mood. (23)

Buddhism was first to take up these questions and come to the understanding that position and authority invested on the existence are contrary to the actual nature of existence and thus it is only in ignorance that one can understand that this life of ours can grow, develop, enlarge and finally becomes exponential. In other words, one can say that the cause that is created does not seem to be in harmony with the effect that has come up. Consequently, there is a gap between causal and effectual imperatives and it results in the human becoming impervious to the nature of Reality that seems to be always surrounding him/her. What is real therefore is not what has been in the conventional sense of the term real rather reality is something that is adequate to the suitable conditions in which we can successfully prepare ourselves for transportation. Such transportation is threefold-accordingly, from the object, they are modified into subjects and from subjects they

become universal. The object is at random crude and insignificant and is thus prone to decay and denigration. Once the process of transformation is initiated, the organization is also randomly commenced, and upon the organization, we can understand that the Universals are the realities.

The revolutionary idea of universal impermanence (anityata-vada) forms the very core of the Buddhist teachings. According to Buddha, everything that comes into being is said to bear three characteristics, namely – Unsatisfactoriness (Dukkha), Impermanence (Anicca), and Absence of self-essence (Anatta). Buddha believed in the impermanence of things in this world and so says that as all the things are impermanent so the attachment to them is but meaningless and it is this attachment which leads to the desire of possessing them which in turn becomes the cause of suffering. About the Truth of suffering said the Shakya Muni:

This, O Monks, is the sacred truth of the origin of suffering: it is the thirst (for being), which leads from birth to birth, together with lust and desire, which finds gratification here and there: the thirst for pleasures, the thirst for being, the thirst for power. (Keown 50)

The idea of universal impermanence is further developed by Madhyamikas who believed that not only the things are impermanent but also they lack any inherent real being. All the phenomena is essentially empty or Sunya. They believed that the true status of phenomena is something midway between existence and non-existence. The Madhyamikas held that as all the things are ultimately empty of any real being so the difference lies in our perception of them and essentially a correct vision of things is needed for the liberation. The famous doctrine of Emptiness or Sunyavada states that if we have a correct vision of the true nature of things, that is, everything devoid of any real element then the desire for/fear of them will automatically perish (Buddha characterized these three roots of evil as Greed, Hatred, and Delusion) and the ultimate state of liberation will be achieved.

In Buddhism, Reality is real to the extent that reality is an object in itself, a situation or condition that subsists in itself with both beginning and end being defined in its own measure. The manner in which the entire external manifestation comes to be excluded in Buddhist understanding of reality is also pertinent to the fact that it should like to endorse the view that things exist in this world not because of the fact that they subsist or persist but because of the reason that they can exist only to the extent of existing. Sun, therefore, exists not because of the fact that yesterday it was, and the day before yesterday it had been rather it exists only because it can offer itself to be factually placed, factually comprehended and factually realized in the present moment of time. From this also, it must be brought to the contention that tomorrow it will come into existence only because once again tomorrow it will be capable of proving itself to the taste of observation and examination otherwise there shall be no credentials in the knowledge that one should like to expect from the Sun. In this way, Reality is observed at the radius of the extremes. Consequently, it is rationally radical in nature. In the same manner, it can also be argued that there cannot be any inclination left, right, North, South, East, West so on and so forth, it must remain specific to the center and center only. No sequence neither any

consequence nor any subsequence would be attached to it and exactly in Dhammapada (translated by Radhakrishnan), Buddha would maintain and keep up the same:

Sāraṃ ca Sārato nātvā asāraṃ ca asārato

Te sāraṃ adhigacanti sammāsamkarappagocārā

The above is translated as, “But they who knew truth as truth and untruth as untruth arrive at truth and follow right desires” (Radhakrishnan 62).

This standpoint reminds us of the English poet Shelley who expressed in one of his verses, thus:

Worlds on worlds are rolling ever

From creation to decay,

Like the bubbles on a river

Sparkling, bursting, borne away (Shelley).

The above arguments point that Reality in Buddhism subscribes to the idea of the impermanence of things.

Postmodernism stands for a condition or a situation or event in which truth seems to be losing its ground thereby all the attendants which inhere upon the truth come to have a loss in respect to viability and authority. In this regard, one can make mention of all the great institutions of human existence which come to derive their strength from the nature of truth and these institutions may be mentioned to be as Knowledge, Religion, Society, History, Ethics, Morality, Time, Space, Universe, and the like. Each of these tend to become the constructs just in want of the truth or reality or any meaning because of the reason that the people at large do not find ground for composing their conviction in/through them.

Reality in the postmodern debate means the possible lack and loss in all the possible forms. In Postmodernism, all the foundational entities are being rejected as they question their existence and reject the existence of any Meta-narrative. The Knowledge has totally become a saleable commodity which Lyotard describes as “Mercantilisation of Knowledge”. The economies have become totally information-oriented. The existence of Plurality is one of the chief traits in the postmodernist debate and the postmodern irreverence towards the established icons becomes apparent with its questioning the validity of all that is considered right and all that is considered established thus far. Jean Baudrillard, one of the chief protagonists of the postmodern theory rejected the entire concept of Reality in the Post-modern society stating that what one has is the Simulation of Reality. Things that appear to be real are mere images that represent reality and these images are created by people like us. According to Jameson, Postmodernity is characterized by absence of the original and the presence of the Pastiche and this is clearly visible in all the possible forms of human existence.

In Postmodernism, such nature of permanence and continuity, as it happened in the case of Buddhism, moved down to marginalisation and complete abstraction. No concrete absolute could afford to be subjected to the extraction of tertiary abstraction thus we have both paradox and heterodox and in that real is assisted as if it is unreal, Total is understood as if it is incomplete. Since the beginnings of the systematic philosophy in the western world and with the advent of Descartes, one understands that universal laws of existence got comprehensible assessment and examination and the way of assessing the events of cognition and orders of permanence was rather experimental in nature far from being conducive to any commonplace reality. One can clearly observe that in Postmodernism there is a movement away from the centre and towards the peripheral. W.B. Yeats could be rightly mentioned here as he, in his 1919 poem *The Second Coming*, writes:

Things fall center the centre cannot hold,
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world (Yeats).

The entire Postmodern era can be aptly defined by these. Also, about the culture prevalent in Postmodernism, Jarmusch Insch in his critique of the Postmodern condition said -

Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination. Devour old films, new films, music, books, paintings, photographs, poems, dreams, random conversations, architecture, bridges, street signs, trees, clouds, bodies of water, light and shadows. Select only things to steal from that speak directly to your soul. If you do this, your work (and theft) will be authentic. Authenticity is invaluable; originality is nonexistent. And don't bother concealing your thievery—celebrate it if you feel like it. In any case, always remember what Jean-Luc Godard said: "It's not where you take things from—it's where you take them to (Insch).

Hence, Reality in Postmodernism subscribes to the Rejection of the established values/ethos.

From the above arguments, it can be concluded that the idea of Reality can be related to the Buddhism's doctrine of 'Impermanence', and post-modernist denying the credulity of the meta-narratives and hence rejecting the 'Reality' as they question the universals. In their own ways, they reject what they see as the current state of human existence and project that the "Impermanence"/ "Temporariness" takes the hold. The human existence is not stable and things are in a flux. In Postmodernism, every order of Permanence like Time, Space, Universe, God, Knowledge, Soul and the like have been subjected to inquisition, assessment and examination and, in the end each has come out to be inconsequential on the ground of abstraction that it suffers. Lyotard thus puts it:

In contemporary society and culture – postindustrial society, postmodern culture – the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or narrative of emancipation (Lyotard 37).

Buddhism and Postmodernism in their own ways reject any kind of establishment in so far as the establishment denotes permanence and fixation, in turn, signifies universality which according to the proponents of these philosophies has not yet been achieved.

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