

## WITTGENSTEIN, MEANING-MODEL AND BUDDHISM

Wittgenstein in his 'Philosophical Investigations' speaks thus : "And the best I can propose is I suppose that we yield to the temptation to use this picture; but now investigate how the application of this picture goes."<sup>1</sup> In this way Wittgenstein talks of 'models' to take the 'ontological sting' out of many concepts which might otherwise be dismissed for absence of correspondence with facts, consistency, etc. The notion 'model', if taken in this sense, I believe, will do good to the concepts of 'causality' in Buddhism. In this paper I shall re-examine the contemporary empirico-buddhistic interpretation of the concept of 'causality' in Buddhism in the light of Wittgenstein's above passage.

### 1. The concept of 'causality' :

1.1. The concept of 'causality' is not an easy one to understand as it takes different meanings in different contexts. Wittgenstein once remarked that a word can take very different uses<sup>2</sup> and, hence one has to be careful in one's uses of words in one's argumentations. The concept of 'causality' in Buddhism does not pose a philosophical problem; but if it be isolated from the context to which it naturally belongs, in which it should be used, in which alone it has meaning, will give rise to puzzlement and confusion which in turn gives rise to a pseudo-problem. The attempt of some contemporary buddhist thinkers towards understanding the concept of 'causality' outside its natural context leads us to a confusion which results in simply uttering words without meaning. This trend can be avoided if the notion of 'model' as envisaged by Wittgenstein be incorporated as it successfully prevents a pseudo-problem on the one hand and any sort of ontological commitment from slipping into the argumentation, on the other. My attempt in this paper is to elicit this point.

1.2. In the philosophical tradition of Graeco-Roman classical thinking, orientation and emphasis were knowledge and wisdom. The latter concept had something to do with a sort of ethical virtue; yet after David Hume, it took a new turn. Needless to say that the stress is simply philosophical analysis. Alternatively, ethics, morality and religion were either discouraged or

avoided. The seeds of this trend came to its fruition in Early-Wittgensteinian philosophy. The method envisaged here is as follows : to say nothing except what can be said. All meaningful statements must conform to a model. Ironically, though, the model is but the scientific one. To put the point yet more explicitly, the philosophers who conform to this model, namely, Logical positivists, aimed to vindicate science and mathematics on the one hand and to discredit metaphysics on the other. The scientific model embeded in "factual content" is accepted as the only criterion of meaning. This is a very narrow conception of meaning, needless to add. However, it occupied a significant place in the recent philosophy in the English speaking world.

## **2. Positivism and the meaning-model :**

2.1. Two buddhist thinkers, K. N. Jayatilleke and D. J. Kalupahana have tried to interpret Early Buddhism, taking refuge in the above conception of meaning. This contention is amply justified if one cares to go through Jayatilleke's *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*,<sup>3</sup> and Kalupahana's *Causality : The Central Philosophy of Bhuddhism*.<sup>4</sup> The thought process in both these books develops in and through the most significant concept in Logical positivism, namely, "The meaning of a factual statement is the method of its verification."<sup>5</sup> This standpoint is amply substantiated by the following. For instance, Jayatilleke contends, "For the Positivist, a statement to have meaning must be in principle verifiable but verification for him is solely in respect of sense-experience, whereas the Pali Nikāyas would admit extra-sensory experience as well."<sup>6</sup> D. J. Kalupahana expresses, "Following a method comparable to that adopted by the modern Logical Positivists, he sometimes resorted to linguistic analysis and appeal to experience to demonstrate the futility of metaphysics."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the oft-quoted empiricism in the theses of these said thinkers too substantiates their indebtedness to the positivistic meaning-model, in general. Indeed, it is difficult to present Logical positivism as a tidy philosophical position as the positivists themselves modified their ideas to meet criticism. The basic aim of the mathematico-philosophers of the Vienna Circle (subsequently known as Logical positivists) was to vindicate science and mathematics on the one hand and to demolish metaphysics on the other. It was, hence, necessary to devise a means

or introduce a method of doing this. They found it in Humean atomic empiricism which Early-Wittgenstein developed in his *Tractatus*. Humean atomic empiricism can be expressed thus : " Meaningful statements are of two kinds. Those of logic and mathematics which are analytic and certain, and statements of fact based on empirical investigation which are synthetic and probable; statements of any other kind are literally meaningless." The above ideas were developed into a broader theory in which scientific probability was heavily involved. But Jayatilke and Kalupahana seemed to have taken asylum in this science-oriented model to give a modern interpretation to Buddhism. Do they give a convincing one ?

### 3. Causality and its nature :

3.1 The central concept that any buddhist thinker would quote in this connection is that of 'causality'. But what is the nature of the concept of 'causality' in Buddhism ? Samyutta Nikāya notes the concept of 'causality' in the following way : " Imasmiñ sati idaṃ hoti, imassa uppāda idaṃ uppajati: Imasmiñ asati idaṃ na hoti, imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati."<sup>8</sup> ( The meaning of this passage is as follows : " When this is present, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises : When this is absent, that does not come to be; on the cessation of this, that ceases too.") The Pali term *paṭiccasamuppāda* denotes the causality expressed above. 'Paṭicca' means " having come on account of," and 'samuppāda' means " arising."

3.2 However, the above expressions do not reveal the logical nature of the concept. The most noteworthy expression which helps to detect the logical nature of the buddhist concept of causality can be found in the Samyutta Nikāya. It says, " causation is said to have the characteristics of objectivity, necessity, invariability and conditionality."<sup>9</sup> This statement expresses a kind of universal truth which is valid ethicalwise, independently of the advent of the Buddhas. However, there is a point of interest here which perhaps gives a clue to understanding the very logical nature of the concept of 'causality' which is basically neglected by the contemporary interpreters of Early Buddhism; and that is that the concept is expressed in the wider context of an atheistic ethics rather than in a kind of empiricism which has considered Physics as a model

for philosophical inquiry. The strict causal basis emphasized in the doctrine testifies to it. But the basis is embedded in ethical determinism. This conclusion is resented by empirico-buddhistic thinkers. They argue against any ethical determinism being implied here. Yet I believe that this is a crucial point which shall help to grasp the nature of Buddhism.

#### 4. The nature of Buddhism :

4.1 Often we find arguments developed on the wider basis that Buddhism is a philosophy rather than a doctrine/religion. Needless to say that this contention is not borne out by scriptural passages in the Pali canon or any other source like Chinese Āgamas. The Buddha clearly testifies to the effect that " . . . I am one of those who profess the basis of a religion . . . " <sup>10</sup> Now it is obvious that the Buddha claims himself as a religious teacher one amongst many. It is tempting at this point to raise the following question, namely, " Is Buddhism a religion ? " Indeed, just like most words, the word ' religion ' is not that clear-cut. Alternatively, it stands defined in many ways depending on the contexts, tastes, etc. It is generally held that Buddhism, often a " view " of life ( *darśana* ) and a " way " of life ( *patipadā* ). Therefore, the Buddha's doctrine is held to be a *philosophy of life* which leads to liberation or moksha. Yet this is not the only interpretation possible. For instance, the word " doctrine " in the English version of the Nikāyas is derived from the Latin " docere " meaning " to teach. " But what does the Buddha teach ? He teaches a doctrine developed on a value system which prescribes a procedural guide on an ethical code. <sup>11</sup>

4.2 Very broadly speaking, though we may use the word " true " when dealing with an ethical system, ethical statements are neither true nor false. What I mean here is that the very logical nature of ethical statements is but value-orientation; hence criteria of truth or falsity and tools of validity measurements as accepted in the broad spectrum of physical sciences are inappropriate. <sup>12</sup> We need not borrow a model from Physics for philosophical inquiry. Alternatively, we need not borrow a model from contemporary Logical positivism to suggest *significant* ( meaningful ) statements in Buddhism. The point I labour to make, I hope, is clear now. That is : The word " true " in certain

ethical statements does not emphasize a literal meaning but only a figurative one. This tendency is amply evident in the buddhistic ethical system. If one cares to examine the concept of "Āriya Sacca" ("Noble Truths"), the above tendency is revealed. For instance, can one entertain the idea to the effect of a possible falsity of the Āriya Sacca (Noble Truths)? In the buddhistic context, a possible falsity of Noble Truths cannot be entertained, logically, as empirical falsity is inappropriate. It is noteworthy that Buddhism, by nature, is an ethico-religious system in which falsity of its statements is not entertained. Such questions make no sense in the system.

### 5. Science and causality :

5.1 Since the nature of Buddhism is clear, now, we shall attempt to analyse one of the major concepts—that of 'causality'. Ironically, though, the concept of 'causality' has become, nowadays, the battle-ground of the so-called empirico-buddhistic academics; for it is a fashion to interpret Buddhism on a scientific line incorporating scientific methodologies. In this connection, a statement by Ninian Smart seems very well appropose. He says, "... the power of the Canon ( meaning : Pali canon ) is that it can still be modern"<sup>13</sup>. It's a weakness on the part of Ninian Smart to allow a word to remain unanalysed, as if it is context-free. To put the point in other words, the word 'modern' in the statement can mean anything or nothing at all. Buddhism, essentially, is the doctrine established, preached and taught by the Buddha. It has its own natural context; and any attempt to use words in this religious system out of the natural context that is their natural home, can lead to emptiness alone.

5.2 Suppose we accept Ninian Smart's assertion to the effect that Buddhism can be given a 'modern' ( 'mod' ? ) interpretation. And in this connection, the concept of 'causality' is, certainly, unavoidable. A 'modern' interpretation, I believe, cannot escape, a scientific colouring. K. N. Jayatilleke and D. J. Kalupahana are noteworthy academics who have tried to interpret Buddhism on this line. Referring to the concept of 'causality' as depicted in the Samyutta Nikāya,<sup>14</sup> K. N. Jayatilleke says, "That a causal sequence or concomitance occurs independently of us and that all we do is to discover this, is implied in the follow-

ng description of causation. . . .”<sup>15</sup> In this connection Jayatilleke quotes the following scriptural passage found in the Samyutta Nikāya. “What is causation? On account of birth arises decay and death. Whether Tathāgatas arise or not, this order exists namely the fixed nature of phenomena, the regular pattern of phenomena or conditionality. This is the Tathāgata discovers and comprehends; having discovered and comprehended it, he points it out, teaches it, lays it down, establishes, reveals, analyses, clarifies it and says ‘look’!”<sup>16</sup> Commenting upon this description, D. J. Kalupahana says “...according to the Buddha’s philosophy, there are no accidental occurrences; everything in the world is causally conditioned or produced. The realization that every occurrence is a causal occurrence is said to clear the mind of all doubts, a characteristic of the state of perfect knowledge and enlightenment. This truth the Tathāgata discovers and comprehends. . . .”<sup>17</sup> Paradoxically, though, the above exposition does not help to unearth the nature of the concept of ‘causality’ in Buddhism, both narrations depict the following words such as “comprehension”, “truth”, “discovery”, “teaching”, etc., but fail to explicit the logical nature of them and their natural context.

5.3 Now one cannot agree fairly readily with the contemporary buddhist thinkers who satisfy themselves with :

- (i) quotations from the Pali Nikāyas or the Chinese Āgamas or both,
- (ii) historical analysis,
- (iii) sweeping statements incorporating modern science, and,
- (iv) borrowing models in Physics for philosophical inquiry.

5.4 The above are, certainly, methodologies, but they do not help to clarify concepts in buddhistic religion. It’s only a conceptual analysis that would help us to understand, very clearly, the nature of the major concept in the argument, its natural context and the major conceptual family which makes the body of the argument. We do not aim to fulfill all what is expressed and hinted above. Yet, hope to analyse, briefly, the concept of ‘causality’ in Buddhism to note its logical nature.

5.5 The significant words in the above quotations such as “comprehension”, “discovery”, “truth” and “teaching” remain as borrowed ones from different contexts, but ironically depicted as if they are context-free. This has led to confusion of contexts.

An implication follows, namely, that the concept of 'causality' stands riddled. These buddhist thinkers err, philosophically, as they often tend to isolate the context whenever the need arises to clarify concepts. As a matter of logic, the context of the buddhistic concepts is ethico-religious; and that is their natural home.

5.6 Often, Jayatilleke<sup>18</sup> and Kalupahana<sup>19</sup> argue as if the concept of 'causality' in Buddhism is not *that* different from that in the sciences. Both the thinkers quote a one-one correlation in this connection. What is a "one-one correlation?" The aim of the scientific investigator is to find a relation that is equally determinate in either direction, that is, a one-one relation: "Whenever X occurs, E occurs, and E does not occur unless X has occurred."<sup>20</sup> Commenting on this, Kalupahana adds: "The general statement of causation, 'whenever this exists, that exists or comes to be' when coupled with the negative aspect, 'whenever this does not exist, that does not exist or come to be,' seems to establish a one-one relation which, according to Stebbing, is a scientific theory of causation."<sup>21</sup> But Kalupahana's sweeping generalization is a significant philosophical error for he misconceives the nature of this relation. As he himself notes, "The change in things is not haphazard or accidental. It takes place according to a certain pattern and this pattern of things, this orderliness in things, is said to be constant. It is a cosmic truth eternally valid and independent of the advent of the Tathāgatas."<sup>22</sup> The expression suggests as if the buddhistic causality expresses a universal truth which is valid, independently of the advent of Buddhas. If so what is the logical nature of the one-one correlation? A probable one or a necessary one? Neither Kalupahana nor Jayatilleke nor Ninian Smart seems clear as to the very nature of the relation being expressed in buddhistic causality. If it is being absorbed in a scientific theory of causation, then the relation is probable. But "*a probable relation*" and "*a cosmic truth eternally valid*" are not one and the same thing. The former is a logical ingredient in a scientific theory of causation while the latter falls outside the boundary of science. What I mean there is not any kind of inaccessibility but simply an emphasize of a different subject, say, Logic and Mathematics where necessary truths (which are eternally valid) or necessary implications are worked out or dealt with. The conceptual structure in these

sciences basically differs from that in the descriptive sciences such as Physics or Astronomy. "*A probable relation*" is an ingredient in the latter sciences and not in the former ones. Now, Buddhism, the religion of the Buddha, does not fall into either category of sciences. Its conceptual structure is normative in nature. To put the point yet more explicitly, its nature is ethical in character with a set procedural guide which commands the adherents to do certain deeds. The procedural guide is expressed in the ethical mean or the Middle Path or *Majjhima Patipadā*. This path or *patipadā* is neither true nor false. Furthermore, a statement dealing with the *patipadā* too is neither true nor false.

5.7 How, then, this causation or *paṭiccasamuppāda* be referred to as the truth? In most religions inclusive of Buddhism, the word "truth" ("true") is used in a figurative sense which is basically different from the usages of the word in our everyday and scientific parlances. As Wittgenstein remarks, a word can take many different uses. He expressed this idea by employing the concept "countless different kinds of use."<sup>23</sup> It is revealed, therefore, that the use of the word "truth" in the sciences is different from the use of the same word in Buddhism or any other religion or ideology, etc. The emphasis is the avoidance of confusion of contexts, say, scientific, religious, political, poetic, managerial, etc. It seems as if the quest for truth is replaced by the clarification of concepts with a view to avoid confusion of contexts.

5.8 Same is the case concerning the word 'causality.' It is not probable causality in Science which is noted in Buddhism. What is noted in the latter is moral causality which is neither true nor false empirically. It is tempting to say that it cannot be established or substantiated scientifically. 'Causality' or '*paṭiccasamuppāda*' is a belief entertained by the buddhist adherent who accepts the "middle path" or the "*majjhima patipadā*." Conceptually speaking, according to Buddhism, a logical relation exists between "*majjhima patipadā*" and "*nirvāna*." The following question shall clarify the point. That is: Does "*majjhima patipadā*" pave way to realize *nirvāna*? The answer to it within the buddhistic model is a categorical affirmation. Another way of making this point would be to say that the future position, namely, *nirvāna*, is strictly determined in a sort of



Newtonian sense. This is *the* essence of Buddhism. What is emphasized is *moral causality*, a strict logical relation between *the path* (*majjhima patipadā*) and its *certain effect* (*nirvāṇa*). In this sense, the ontology of causality stands inappropriate simply because, all analysis of causality, by necessity, may not end in noting what actually exists and in what way. Our attempt is to analyse the notion of 'causality' on the basis of limiting it to a context, say, religious one, only. It is, in other words, an investigation of the application which it finds in a particular context. It is noteworthy that the phenomenon of experimentation and substantiation is simply irrelevant as it is not what is needed.

5.9 The logical nature of the concept of 'causality' in Buddhism is further made explicit, once its conceptual family is noted. Needless to add that the effort is a very difficult one indeed. The religious argument in the buddhist doctrine runs incorporating certain significant concepts such as "*impermanence*", "*nonsubstantiality*," "*moral causality*", "*middle path*", "*nirvāṇa*", "*saṃsāra*", etc. Major excursions into Science and Western philosophy is thus, stands, logically inappropriate. The buddhistic argument develops within an atheistic religious context where significant statements must be formulated in the language of religion and *not* in that of physics or aerodynamics.

## 6. Conclusion :

6.1 The upshot of our brief argument must be very clear indeed. The buddhistic concept of 'causality,' if needs clarification, in fact it does, it is *pointless* to do the following :

- (i) quoting statements from the Pali Nikāyas or Chinese Āgamas or both,
- (ii) attempting a historical analysis,
- (iii) reading Empiricism,<sup>24</sup> Positivism and Science into Buddhism,
- (iv) borrowing meaning-models from science and Western philosophy, and,
- (v) formulating statements in the language of physics.

6.2 Evading the above mentioned methods, one can get buddhistic concepts analysed, slowly but gradually, firstly, by noting the context of the argument. And secondly, by detecting and eliciting *the conceptual family*. If an analysis of this sort can

be called a method, it suggests the following : It prevents any sort of "ontological commitment" from slipping too easily into the argument. With this triumph, empiricism of the kind being read into Buddhist religion by empirico-buddhistic thinkers, stands, doomed, indeed. But as we clearly pointed out, if we can draw the "ontological sting" from the key concept—causality—in Buddhism, and satisfy with noting its language-game only, then, we can avoid many meaningless philosophical problems.

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#### NOTES

1. *Philosophical Investigations*, L. Wittgenstein, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1953, p. 116e.
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3. *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, K. N. Jayatilleke, Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1963.
4. *Causality : The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, D. J. Kalupahana, The University Press of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1975.
5. *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, L. Wittgenstein, Tr. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1961, p. 151 ( 6.53 ) " The correct method in philosophy would really be the following : to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions in natural science. . .".
6. *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* ( op. cit., ) p. 331.
7. *Causality : The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* ( op. cit., ) p. 185.
8. *Samyutta Nikāya*, ed. L. Feer, Vol. 11, P.T.S., London, p. 28, p. 70, p. 96.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
10. *Majjhima Nikāya*, Tr. I. B. Horner, Middle Length Sayings, Vol. II, P.T.S., London, p. 211.
11. " Philosophical Reflections on Modern Empirico--buddhistic Claims," A. D. P. Kalansuriya, *Dialogue*, New Series, April, 1976, Sri Lanka, p. 9.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 9 & 10.
13. " Remarks on Critique of Christian Theism," Ninian Smart, *Dialogue*, *Ibid.*, p. 20.

14. Samyutta Nikāya, Vol. II, ( op. cit., ) p. 25.
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17. Causality : The Central Philosophy of Buddhism ( op. cit., ) p. 89.
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19. Causality : The Central Philosophy of Buddhism ( op. cit., ) p. 97.
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