

The *Alagaddūpama Sutta* as a Scriptural Source for Understanding the Distinctive Philosophical Standpoint of Early Buddhism

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The *Alagaddūpama Sutta* is the 22nd discourse of the *Majjhima-nikāya* of the Pali canon. In the sutta itself it is mentioned that the Buddha's delivery of this discourse was necessitated by the need to refute a wrong view held by one of his disciples named Ariṭṭha. Parallel versions of the sutta are found preserved in the Chinese *Āgamas*. The two main similes used in the sutta, those of the snake and of the raft, are referred to in the scriptures of a number of non-Theravāda Buddhist traditions as well, showing that the Buddhist doctrine represented in it is early and authentic and the message contained in the sutta was considered to be extremely significant by many early Buddhist traditions. The *Alagaddūpama Sutta* shows the Buddha's role as one of the earliest thinkers in the history of philosophy who engaged in a critique of the craving for metaphysics and dogma frequently exhibited in those who propound worldviews. The Buddha did not value a belief or a worldview on grounds of the logical skill with which it was constructed but on grounds of the transformative effect it could have on the character of an individual and the sense of wellbeing it could promote. There are several discourses of the Pali canon which give prominence to this aspect of the Buddha's teaching. Among them the *Brahmajāla Sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya* and the *Aṭṭhakavagga* of the *Suttanipāta* need special mention. The Buddha is seen to have consistently avoided engagement in speculative metaphysics, pointing out that the goal of his teaching goes beyond all such engagement. The Buddha himself distinguished his own worldview as a Teaching in the Middle (*majjhena*) avoiding the common tendency of humankind to be trapped by either of the two extremes, Eternalism or Annihilationism. These distinctive standpoints of the Buddha are all seen to be amply represented in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*.

The *Alagaddūpama Sutta* in different Buddhist traditions

I am extremely grateful to the editors of the Lance Cousins memorial volume for giving me the opportunity to contribute a paper by way of tribute to a scholar of

the calibre of Lance, particularly in the field of Buddhist and Pali studies, and the practical aspects of the Oriental religious traditions in general. I believe that the illumination that he has brought to the field of textual studies in the Pali canonical and post-canonical literature, and the interpretations of key Buddhist concepts contained therein, are of immense value to the future generations of scholars. As a close associate of Lance during a period of three years when both of us were students of the University of Cambridge in the mid-1960s, and ever since, although physically separated by the distance between Britain and Sri Lanka, I have had many opportunities to share my knowledge of the subject area of Pali studies that happened to be a major part of our common academic interests with him. It is in view of the indelible memories of such association both at the level of academic study and the practice of the methods represented in the Buddhist contemplative tradition that I made up my mind to contribute this paper to the proposed volume.

Non-Pali versions of the sutta are found in whole or in part in the *Āgama* collection of suttas preserved in Chinese. They were probably translations of an early Buddhist Sanskrit version which derived the material from a common early source which served as the basis for the Pali version as well. The fact that the same account is preserved in different Buddhist traditions provides substantial evidence for the antiquity of the Buddhist doctrines presented in it. The Chinese parallel in the *Madhyama Āgama* names it as ‘The Discourse on Ariṭṭha’ (Anālayo 2011, 147) as the Buddha’s delivery of this discourse is mentioned as having been necessitated by the need to refute a wrong view held by one of the disciples of the Buddha named Ariṭṭha.

The simile of the snake and the simile of the raft recur as discourses on their own in the *Ekottarāgama*; in addition to which parts of the discourse are also preserved in two discourses. The introductory part of the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, which narrates the monk Ariṭṭha’s obstinate adherence to his misunderstanding, recurs in the *Vinayas* of the Dharmaguptaka, Kāśyapīya, Mahāśāṅghika, Mahīśāsaka, (Mūla) Sarvāstivāda, Sarvāstivāda and Theravāda traditions as an exemplary case for unwillingness to give up a wrong view. (Anālayo 2011, 147)

All these references point to the importance attached to the sutta across a number of Buddhist traditions.

The principal message of the sutta happens to be emphasized and reiterated in the early *Prajñāpāramitā* literature which represents an attempt to rectify some of the misguided doctrinal tendencies that appeared in the historical development of Buddhist ideas within about the first two centuries after the demise of the Buddha. The *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, for instance, refers to one of the two similes used by the Buddha in the sutta, namely the simile of the raft, in its attempt to deny the substantial existence of any real entities in the form of either Self or Dharma (Na khalu punaḥ Subhūte bodhisattvena mahāsattvena dharma udgrahītavyo nādharmah. Tasmād iyaṃ tathāgatena sandhāya vāg kolopamaṃ dharmaparyāyam ājānādbhir dharmā eva prahātavyā prāge vādhamā iti: Mss 77). It is said in this context that Bodhisattvas entertain neither the conception of *dharma*s nor that of *adharmas*, for, if they were to entertain such conceptions they would also be involved in the grasping of a (real)

self (*ātmagrāho*), being (*sattvagrāho*), soul (*jīvagrāho*) or person (*pudgalagrāho*). The Bodhisattva should neither grasp *dharma*s nor *adharma*s. Therefore, on account of this the *Tathāgata* spoke of the way of *Dharma* which is similar to a raft so that by those who understand, even *Dharmā* ought to be abandoned, while to begin with *Adharmā* ought to be. All these references point to the importance attached to the *sutta* across a number of Buddhist traditions.

The *Alagaddūpama Sutta* in the Pali Canon

As in the non-Theravāda versions of the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, the version in the Pali canon too, which is our primary source for discussion, opens with mention of Ariṭṭha's firm commitment to the wrong view that in associating with practices that the Buddha had declared to be conducive to danger in safeguarding the principles of the holy life, such association (*ye te antarāyikā dhammā vuttā bhagavatā te paṭisevato*) really conduces to no danger (*nālaṃ antarāyā ti*). The commentarial explanation of 'practices conducive to danger' in this context is that it concerns sexual relationships (*methunadhamme doso natthīti*; Ps II 103). In the *sutta* itself, however, the Buddha draws attention not so much to the specific point about Ariṭṭha's view on sexual misconduct, but on the general point about the proper way to adopt and utilize his teachings. Ariṭṭha is initially reprimanded by the Buddha for holding on to a wrong view and in the ensuing discussion the Buddha focuses mainly on the possible abuses of his teaching.

According to the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, having severely reprimanded Ariṭṭha, the Buddha drew attention to the wrong motives from which some may study what he taught. If anyone were to learn his *Dhamma* for the purpose of censuring or reproaching others who held different views with feelings of hostility (*upārambhānisaṃsaṃ*), or for the purpose of defending one's own dogma against the criticism of others (*itivādapamokkhānisaṃsaṃ*), the Buddha says that they make an abuse of the *Dhamma*. They are comparable to persons who take a snake by its tail, resulting in immediate harm to themselves. The simile of the snake is immediately followed by the simile of the raft (*kullūpama*) in which the Buddha compares the *Dhamma* taught by him to a raft used in order to cross over from insecurity to security and safety, keeping clearly in mind that the *Dhamma* should not be grasped with passion as a dogma. The *Alagaddūpama Sutta* belongs among other instances in which this theme of the Buddha's teaching distinguishing it from numerous worldviews known during his time. It shows the Buddha's role as one of the earliest thinkers in the history of philosophy who engaged in a critique of the craving for metaphysics and dogma frequently exhibited in those who propound worldviews. A belief or a worldview having no (positive) consequence upon the practical life of the individual believers, with no transformative effect upon the quality of their way of life, character traits, interpersonal relationships and sense of well-being, was considered as worthless. This feature of the Buddha's teaching has been presented as a distinguishing mark in several discourses as well as sections specially allocated in the canon for emphatically reiterating it.

References to the central message of the sutta in other Theravāda canonical sources

The very first discourse of the Buddha included in the *Sutta Piṭaka* of the Pali canon, the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, aims at a classified enumeration of all worldviews (*diṭṭhi*) that were known during the time of the Buddha with a view to emphasizing the fact that the Buddha's teaching transcended all those previously existing dogmas and was meant to serve a totally different purpose. The Buddha classified all the views known at that time into two main categories as (1) those propounded by speculators about the past (*pubbantakappikā*) and (2) those propounded by speculators about the future (*aparantakappikā*). The former are mentioned as those who made diverse illegitimate affirmations concerning the absolute beginning of the world and living beings, transcending the limits of all human experience (*pubbantaṃ ārabbhā anekavihitāni adhivuttipadāni abhivadanti*). The latter made similar statements about the ultimate destiny (*aparantaṃ ārabbhā*) of the world and its beings. In this context it is pointed out that the realities the Buddha realized and revealed to the world, having directly experienced them by himself through higher knowledge, were different (*aññeva dhammā ... ye tathāgato sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā pavedeti*); they are profound, difficult to see, difficult to understand, calming, excellent, not conclusions derived from speculative reasoning, subtle and to be known by the wise (*gambhīrā duddasā duranubodhā, santā, paṇītā, atakkāvacarā, nipuṇā, paṇḍitavedaniyā*: D I 12). There are several characteristics common to these diverse views that the Buddha enumerated and considered objectionable. First, he pointed out that all those views were nothing but expressions of the sense of insecurity felt by persons who did not know and did not see, and were driven by craving, agitation and a sense of insecurity (*ajānataṃ apassataṃ vedayitaṃ taṇhāgatānaṃ paritasitavipphanditameva*; D I 41). Secondly, the foundation of each different view is given as the subjective sense experience of each individual with none of those views having a foundation other than sense impression (*phassa paccayā ... aññatra phassā paṭisaṃvedissantīti netam thānaṃ vijjati*; D I 43–4). Thirdly, the Buddha employed his vision into Dependent Arising to explain the destiny of those who depended on their subjective sense impressions and tried to cling to a world view objectified as the absolute truth due to their craving and attachment. He says that dependent on their craving arises clinging, and dependent on clinging the process of becoming, bringing about all the pains of a continuing flow of existence (D I 45).

The next noteworthy section in the Pali canon which draws attention to the same theme is the *Aṭṭhakavagga* of the *Suttanipāta*, the antiquity of which also can be established on strong evidential grounds.¹ The discourses in this section of the *Suttanipāta* emphasizing this particular theme are the *Duṭṭhaṭṭhaka*, *Suddhaṭṭhaka*, *Paramaṭṭhaka*, *Māgandiya*, *Pasāra*, the *Cūlavīyūha* and the *Mahāvīyūha Suttas*. In the *Duṭṭhaṭṭhaka Sutta* the Buddha points out that people are inclined to grasp views

1. Regarding evidence for the antiquity of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* of the *Suttanipāta* see Norman 2001, Introduction; Pande 1983, 53–54; Jayawickrama 1948, 42–43.

with great tenacity and are unwilling to let go of them because they have taken them up due to the influence of strong desires and individual preferences:

How could one go beyond one's own dogma to which one has been led in accordance with one's intense desire and preference (*sakaṃ hi diṭṭhiṃ katham accayeyya* — *Chandānunito ruciyaṃ niviṭṭho*). One would make one's own conclusive judgments depending upon (the confines of) one's knowledge (*Sayaṃ samattāni pakubbamāno — yathā hi jāneyya tathā vadeyya*). (Sn 781)

The Buddha points out how dogmas are a consequence of rationalizations of people's inclinations, desires, propensities, likes and dislikes. They are motivated and propelled by certain transient desires and they come to grasp a view strongly because they see some temporary advantage in holding it (*Yad attani passati ānisaṃsaṃ taṃ nissito kuppapaṭiccasantiṃ*; Sn 784). Due to the psychological fact that people have the latent tendency to cling to dogmas (*diṭṭhānusaya*) even if one dogma is given up they cling to another like monkeys who let go of one branch only to cling to another (*Te uggahāyanti nirassajanti — kapīva sākhaṃ pamañcaṃ gahāya*; Sn 791). The dogmatism that goes with it usually results in interpersonal hostility, because one tends to look upon the views held by others as inferior. Whatever one exalts as the most superior view (*Yaduttariṃ kurute jantu loke*), in terms of that, one declares all other views as inferior (*hīnāti aññe tato sabbam āha*). Therefore, one cannot avoid conflicts and controversies (*Tasmā vivādāni avitvatto*; Sn 796). People call each other fools, each one clinging to their own dogma. The Buddha notes the ridiculous nature of such controversy, pointing out that if by virtue of rigidly conforming to a dogma one becomes wise then all of them could claim to be wise, and none among them is of inferior wisdom (*na tesam koci parihīna pañño*; Sn 881), while by virtue of not conforming to one's own dogma, another person becomes a fool, then all those who do not conform to the dogmas of others will turn out to be fools (*sabbeva bālā sunihīnapaññā*; Sn 880). The only reward they get from engaging in controversy in public debate regarding views is a boost to their pride and conceit, which in itself is morally damaging (Sn 829 and 883; see also 895–896).

The repeatedly emphasized message of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* of the *Suttanipāta* is that dogmatism is a product of an attempt to grasp a subjective construction of sense experience and affirm with strong conviction that one's construction is in accordance with the objective and absolute truth. The Buddha points out that this leads to a diversity of 'truths' that happen to be self-contradictory, resulting in disagreements and hostile debates about the nature of truth. People are attached to their individual subjective constructions in terms of *saññā* (perception) without realizing that *saññā* in itself is of an alterable nature. According to the Buddha, there cannot be diverse mutually contradictory eternal truths in the world other than due to *saññā* (*na heva saccāni bahūni nānā — aññatra saññāya niccāni loke*; Sn 886). It is persons who grasp *saññā* that come into conflict in the world clinging to dogmatic views (*saññāñca diṭṭhiñca ye aggahesuṃ — te ghaṭṭayantā vicaranti loke*; Sn 847). One who is unattached to *saññā* has no bonds (*saññā virattassa na santi ganthā*; Sn 847). In the *Cūḷaviyūha Sutta* the Buddha speaks of one truth, the understanding of which puts

an end to all disputation (*Ekaṃ hi saccaṃ na dutiyaṃ atthi — yasmiṃ pajā no vivade pajānaṃ*; Sn 884). This statement of the Buddha is likely to be misunderstood as an affirmation of an absolute truth in terms of which nothing else can be considered as true. However, what was intended by the statement was that when one attained calmness and peace by the eradication of all corruptions of the mind, an attainment which was considered by the Buddha to be truly possible, there could no more be an inclination to enter into debates about truth (*no vivade*). This is further confirmed by the *Māgandiya Sutta* of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* where Māgandiya questions the Buddha to present his own dogma (*diṭṭhigataṃ ... vadesi kidaṃ*; Sn 836). In response, the Buddha presents no thesis as his judgment about absolute truth in the form 'This is what I affirm', having considered all the known dogmas (*idaṃ vadāmi na tassa hoti dhammesu niccheyya samugghataṃ*). He further says that with vision, he does not cling to any view, but has seen the peace and tranquility within (*passaṇca diṭṭhīsu anugahāya — ajjhattasantiṃ pacinaṃ adassaṃ*; Sn 837).

The Buddha used the term *pacceka-sacca*, 'individual truth' (Sn 824), signifying the subjective nature of opinions about truth that people affirmed primarily on the basis of speculative reason. It is observed that people get strongly attached to what they themselves conceive as the truth and due to being impassioned by their own dogmatic opinion (*sandiṭṭhirāgena hi te'bhirattā*; Sn 891) seek conformity of other persons also to the same viewpoint. Ten basic positions came to be identified in early Buddhism as dogmas pertaining to ultimate questions about the beginning and end of things (D I 187–188). The Buddha was sometimes found fault with for his refusal to commit himself to any one of those ten positions (D I 189). A disciple of the Buddha named Māluṅkyaputta threatened to leave the Buddha's order if the latter did not commit himself to a categorical position regarding those views (M I 426 f.). Sāriputta describes Buddhist monks with *ariya* dispositions as those who have discarded the various subjective truths believed by diverse renunciants and brahmins, they have totally abandoned, thrown away, vomited them out, they are released from, have given up and relinquished them (*puthu samaṇabrāhmaṇānaṃ puthu paccekasaccāni nunnāni honti panunnāni cattāni vantāni muttāni pahīnāni paṇinissaṭṭhānāni*; D III 270). In the *Udāna* of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* those positions are compared to the descriptions of the reality of the nature of an elephant by persons born blind after experiencing with touch some limited part of the elephant's body (Ud 68f). The reasons given by the Buddha for not committing himself to any of those views were primarily of a pragmatic nature. They were considered as not productive of any beneficial outcome (*na atthasaṃhitāṃ*), not relevant to the objectives of his teaching (*na dhammasaṃhitāṃ*), not related to the fundamentals of the higher life (*na ādibrahmacariyakāṃ*), not conducive to disenchantment (*na nibbidāya*) with things that produce bondage, to dispassion (*na virāgāya*), to cessation (*na nirodhāya*), meaning the cessation of the continuing unsatisfactory process of existence, to calmness (*na upasamāya*), to higher understanding (*na abhiññāya*), to awakening to the immediately observable realities of existence (*na sambodhāya*) and to the peace of *Nibbāna* (*na nibbānāya*) (D I 188–189).

It is in the light of the Buddha's remarks represented in numerous discourses scattered in the Pali canon regarding the harmful consequences of dogmatic clinging to views resulting from the craving for grasping something as the absolute truth that the two similes occurring in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* have to be understood. The importance of avoiding commitment to speculative views appears to be the central theme in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*. This distinguishing feature of early Buddhism is consistently related and tied up in the sutta with other unique characteristics of the Buddha's teaching. In the *Samyutta-nikāya* the Buddha propounded his Philosophical Middle against two extreme positions held almost universally in human thought since the beginning of attempts on the part of humans to account for our experience of the world and its living beings. The Buddha's pronouncement of the Philosophical Middle was as a response to his own disciple Kaccāyanagotta's question regarding what is considered as the right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*). This brings us to the point that although the Buddha kept away from speculative views, he had a notion of a right view. The first extreme rejected in this context is that of Eternalism (*sassatavāda*) according to which both the self and the world are eternal (*sassato attā ca loko ca*) or everything exists (*sabbam atthi*), in the sense that the underlying essence of everything is eternal. The second extreme was that of Annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*), according to which there is no continuity whatsoever and everything is just annihilated or destroyed at death including the life process of living beings (S II 17f.). The Buddha attributes both positions to craving and desire which take the two extreme forms of seeking for eternal existence due to intense attachment to life, or hoping for total destruction so that one does not have to care about how one lives one's life here and now.

The distinctive philosophical standpoint of early Buddhism as stated in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*

In the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* after presenting the simile of the raft, the Buddha condenses the first extreme in the sphere of speculative views into a six-fold scheme (*cha diṭṭhiṭṭhānāni*) out of which the first five are attempts to see an eternal essence in one of the five aggregates of personality, namely, material form (*rūpa*), feelings (*vedanā*), perceptions (*saññā*), volitional constructions (*saṅkhārā*), and the totality of sensory consciousness inclusive of all its associations. The reference is to a mistaken identification of these processes superimposing an eternal essence on them and considering them as identical with a supposed eternal Self. The sixth is the view that the essence of the individual self is identical with the eternal essence of the cosmos and that departing from this world a person becomes one with the cosmic essence and survives to eternity (*so loko so attā so pecca bhavissāmi nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāmadhammo sassatisamaṃ tatheva ṭhassāmi*). In the history of human thought some philosophical conclusions relating to the nature of ultimate reality conform to this view point as in the monism of the *Upaniṣads* and the monism of Spinoza, while in others such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam the saved soul is not seen to become one with God, but to be eternally in God's presence.

The Buddha recognized that those who entertained such views were agitated by the very thought of conceiving the non-existence of such a reality. However, the noble disciple who heeds the teaching of the Buddha is considered here as not being agitated by such a prospect (*so evaṃ passato asati na paritassati*). Agitation and dejection could occur due to the evanescent nature of things of the external world to one who is attached to those things, confirming the directly experienced truth about suffering caused by craving. Attention to this fact is drawn in the sutta by the Buddha saying that there would be suffering to a person due to the impermanence of external things (*siyā ... bahiddhā asati paritassanā*). In the case of a person who does not entertain thoughts associated with craving for such things, agitation does not occur. At this point the Buddha refers to his teaching which does not contain any view pertaining to eternity of any sort. The Buddha's teaching is for the total destruction of all dogmatic positions, and fixations of mind, the excitation and flaring up of all unwholesome emotions, and the latent tendency to strongly cling to things (*diṭṭhiṭṭhāna-adhiṭṭhāna-pariyuṭṭhāna-abhinivesa-anusayānaṃ paṭighātāya*). It is also for the appeasement of all volitional constructions (*sabba-saṅkhāra-samathāya*), for the giving up of all tendency to fix one's mind on things having approached them with craving (*sabbūpadhi-paṇissaggāya*), for the destruction of craving (*taṇha-kkhayāya*), for dispassion (*virāgāya*), for cessation (*nirodhāya*) and for the tranquility of *Nibbāna* (*nibbānāya*). Those deeply immersed in the view that there was some kind of eternal life for the self were found to be intensely agitated when the Buddha or a disciple of the Buddha presented such a teaching. They suffered from the fear of annihilation of the Self and going into non-existence (*ucchiṇṇissāmi nāma su vinassissāmi nāma su na hi nāma bhavissāmi*). A unique feature of the teaching of the Buddha among all religious philosophies consists in the negation of eternal life as the ultimate goal of the practice of the higher life. The aim is not to attain eternal life, but to understand the futility of aiming at such a goal, and liberating one's mind totally from craving and desire for the transient things of the world including the craving for continued existence in some form.

The section that follows the above in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* clearly affirms the verifiable and non-authoritarian basis of the Buddhist teaching. In this section the Buddha compares the insights he had gained about reality with those of his disciples. He says that if there were to be any object of grasping that is permanent, fixed, eternal, not subject to change, and would stay as it is (*nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāmadhammo tatheva tiṭṭheyya*) one may grasp it. However, it is confirmed that neither in the personal experience of the Buddha nor in those of his disciples is such an object of grasping to be found. The Buddha also enquires about the possibility of clinging to a notion of self (*attavāda-upādānam*), which by so doing would not give rise to grief, dejection and despair. Finally he asks whether there is any form of dependence on a dogma, depending on which the same consequence would not follow. There is common agreement on an experiential basis about the impossibility of this.

At the end of the discourse the Buddha points to the folly involved in the search for eternal life immersing oneself in the dogma of Eternalism and concludes that the view that one becomes eternal by merging with the Absolute Essence of the

cosmos is entirely a foolish doctrine (*kevalo paripūro bāladhammo*). The Buddha's attention is drawn to the internal adjustment of the person resulting in a transformation at the cognitive and emotive levels of personality in such a way that the mind gets liberated from all defiling tendencies. Such a person is described in the *sutta* as one with a liberated mind (*vimuttacitto*). A person liberated in this manner is also described as one who has removed the cross-bar (*ukkhittapaligho*) signifying removing all the hindrances to insight, having destroyed ignorance altogether. He/she is also described as one who has filled the trench (*saṅkiṇṇaparikho*) in the sense that one has transcended altogether the possibility of becoming a victim of the cyclic process of existence which is productive of misery. He/she is one who has drawn out the arrow (*abbūlhesiko*) in the sense that craving, which hurts like a poisoned arrow that has pierced the heart, causing existential suffering, has been altogether removed. Such a person is one who has been unlocked (*niraggalo*) in the sense that all the fetters belonging to the lower realms of existence have been broken asunder. He/she is a noble one who has thrown away the flag, laid aside the burden, and is undefiled (*ariyo pannadhajo pannabhāro viṣaṃyutto*) in the sense that all feelings of pride and conceit of the form 'I am' are altogether destroyed (*asmi māno pahīno*). Here, the Buddha says that a person with a liberated mind of that sort can be tracked by no other being in the world in such a way as to say 'his/her consciousness is fixed to (or leaning on) this' (*idaṃ nissitaṃ tathāgataṃ viññāṇanti*).

A statement made by the Buddha in this context needs special attention because of the fact that the uniqueness of the Buddhist teaching implicit in the *sutta* tends to get blurred due to a misinterpretation of that statement by those who wish to bring back eternalist metaphysics into the teaching of the Buddha. The Buddha says that even in this life the *Tathāgata* cannot be known (*ditṭhevāhaṃ dhamme tathāgato ananuvejjo vadāmi*). The mistake occurs in attempting to interpret the Buddha's statement as a reference to the mysterious nature of the *Tathāgata*. The point is likely to get further confused when one relates this statement to other instances in which the Buddha speaks about the impossibility of categorically answering questions relating to the destiny of the liberated person after death.² However, little heed is paid to the simile of the fire that the Buddha used, in for instance, the *Aggivaṇṇagotta Sutta*, because of the undue attention paid to the Buddha's use of words such as 'profound' (*gambhīro*), and 'immeasurable' (*appameyyo*) in describing the nature of the liberated person. The main point made in this context seems to be the meaninglessness of the questions raised regarding existence, non-existence etc. just as much as it is meaningless to question in which direction the fire has gone. There is no eternal essence in the flame which is a product of conditions. It goes on until the conditions consisting of the fuel last. The flame has come from no previous storehouse, nor will it be reabsorbed into an original essence from which it was produced. The conditions for its continuity have been removed or have ceased to be. Consequently the fire is extinguished. This analogy suits well to explain the continuity of individuated existence through the five aggregates. It is only under

2. This question is raised in the *Aggivaṇṇagotta Sutta* in M I 486 f. where the Buddha attempts to explain the issue bringing in the simile of a fire.

the presupposition that there is an underlying essence that the questions relating to the after-death state of the liberated person could arise. There occurs in these instances a tendency towards the expression of the lurking metaphysical inclination in the minds of interpreters of religious doctrine to justify Eternalism.

There surely is an express denial by the Buddha in the concluding section of the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* of his association with any annihilationist view about the final destiny of living beings. The Buddha complains that some renunciants and brahmins falsely accuse him (*asatā tucchā musā abhūtena*) of being an Annihilationist, misrepresenting his position saying that he teaches about the annihilation, destruction and the disappearance (*ucchedaṃ vināsaṃ vibhavaṃ*) of a really existent being (*sato sattassa*). The emphasis here should be on the two terms '*sato sattassa*'. The Buddha's teaching is unique in this respect for not accepting the common assumption that there is a really existent being in the sense that there is an essence separable and apart from the observed transitory mental and material phenomena that constitute a living being, or indeed within these. The Buddha did not reject the notion of a living being as admitted in conventional language. What he rejected was that there is a hidden metaphysical reality which corresponds to terms used in our language for the purpose of identification through individuation the variety of sense impressions that impinge upon a person. According to the Buddha, the notion of a really existent being (*sato satta*) whose existence or non-existence needs to be predicated after death is based on an unwarranted assumption. It was due to that unwarranted assumption that the four questions pertaining to the after-death destiny of the liberated person were raised.

The above point is further clarified in the *Avyākata-saṃyutta* of the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, where mention is made of Anurādha, a disciple of the Buddha being confronted with these questions by other religious teachers. Anurādha seeks the help of the Buddha himself in order to get a clarification. The Buddha then points out to Anurādha that all the aggregates of personality such as material form are characterized by change, unsatisfactoriness and absence of a soul essence. Having taught about the reality of each of the personality aggregates and shown that one should be disenchanted with them, the Buddha asks Anurādha whether the *Tathāgata* is identical with any of the aggregates (*rūpaṃ tathāgatoti samanupassasi ...*), whether the *Tathāgata* is conceivable within one of the aggregates (*rūpasmiṃ tathāgatoti samanupassasi ...*), whether the *Tathāgata* is conceivable apart from the aggregates (*aññatra rūpā tathāgatoti samanupassasi ...*), whether the *Tathāgata* is conceivable as the collection of the aggregates (*rūpaṃ vedanā saññā saṅkhārā viññāṇaṃ tathāgatoti samanupassasi*) and finally whether there is some entity without the possession of material form etc. who is conceivable as the *Tathāgata* (*ayaṃ so arūpī avedano ... tathāgatoti samanupassasi*) to all of which Anurādha responded in the negative. At this point the Buddha draws the attention of Anurādha to the fact that in truth and reality the *Tathāgata* cannot be obtained as an essence even in this immediate life (*ditṭheva dhamme saccato thetato tathāgate anupalabbhiyamāne ...*; S IV 380–384). If that is so the questions pertaining to his existence etc. after his death become senseless. On the

premises of the teaching of the Buddha, such questions become meaningless. They become meaningful only on the assumption of an essential person to begin with.

In the concluding section of the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, the Buddha draws attention to the fact that throughout his career (*pubbe cevāhaṃ etarahi ca*, literally meaning both previously and now) he taught about suffering and its cessation (*dukkhañceva paññapemi dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ*). The uniqueness of the Buddha's teaching rested on the fact that he was not engaged in the search for eternal life, but the understanding of suffering and eliminating it. The reason why the Buddha consistently refrained from committing himself to the existing viewpoints relating to the metaphysical questions raised, saying that they should be treated as undeclared or unexplained issues (*avyākata*) and that instead, there is a significant body of issues on which he provided explanations (*vyākata*), is amply clarified in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*.

The real significance of the Buddha's claim that his teaching is in the middle, avoiding the extremes of Eternalism and Annihilationism, has often been undermined even in serious scholarly attempts made to interpret his teaching due to the weighty influence that the common ways of philosophizing about existence have had upon the human mind. One of the reputed Eastern scholars of the previous century who interpreted Buddhism as presenting the conception of an Absolute metaphysical Being as the ultimate goal to be attained is S. Radhakrishnan. According to him:

Nirvāṇa is an eternal condition of being, for it is not a *saṃskāra*, or what is made or put together, which is impermanent. It continues while its expressions change. This is what lies behind the *skandhas*, which are subject to birth and decay. The illusion of becoming is founded on the reality of nirvāṇa. Buddha does not attempt to define it, since it is the root principle of all and so is indefinable. (Radhakrishnan 1929, 449)

Nirvāṇa is timeless existence, and so Buddha must admit the reality of a timeless self. There is a being at the back of all life which is unconditioned, above all empirical categories, something which does not give rise to any effect and is not the effect of anything else. (Radhakrishnan 1929, 451–452)

It is not difficult to see that the above interpretation of Radhakrishnan goes completely against the spirit of the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*.

Two recent scholars who have interpreted the Buddhist concept of *Nibbāna* in a manner that is compatible with the present interpretation of the Buddha's message in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* are D.J. Kalupahana and Asanga Tilakaratne. Kalupahana argues against Rune Johansson's view that what survives the death of the person who attains *Nibbāna* is *citta* or a kind of refined consciousness (Kalupahana 1976, 82–87). He also believes that K.N. Jayatilleke, who consistently argued the case for the attribution of an empiricist epistemology to the Buddha, finally compromised his position by admitting in connection with the concept of *Nibbāna* after the death of the person who attains it, the existence of something “transempirical which cannot be empirically described and understood but which can be realized and attained” (Kalupahana 1976, 87, citing Jayatilleke 1963, 476). Asanga Tilakaratne has attempted to interpret the notions of transcendence and ineffability in the context of Buddhist teachings could be understood in a way that obviates the necessity to

affirm the notion of a persisting transcendental and ineffable reality beyond death (Tilakaratne, 1993).

As the Buddha pointed out, the people of the world are mostly stuck in one or the other of two viewpoints (*dvaya-nissita*), both of which are produced by the inability to see things with proper insight (*sammāppaṇṇāya passati*) as they really come to be (*yathābhūtaṃ*). The most distinguishing feature of the Buddha's teaching is the avoidance of the dogma of an eternal Self or Being, while at the same time not falling into the extreme of materialistic Annihilationism. A close look at the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* shows that the message contained in it is in conformity with this distinctive characteristic of the Buddha's teaching.

Abbreviations

- D I *Dīgha-nikāya* Volume I. 1975. edited by T.W. Rhys Davids and J. Estlin Carpenter. London: Pali Text Society.
- M I *Majjhima-nikāya* Volume I. 1979 edited by V. Trenckner. London: Pali Text Society.
- M III *Majjhima-nikāya* Volume III. 1977 edited by Robert Chalmers. London: Pali Text Society.
- Mss *Mahāyāna-sūtra-saṃgraha* Part I, 1961. edited by P.L. Vaidya. Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning.
- Ps II *Papañcasūdanī Majjhimanikāya-Aṭṭhakathā* Volume II. 1979 edited by J.H. Woods and D. Kosambi. London: Pali Text Society.
- S II *Samyutta-nikāya* Volume II. 1989 edited by M. Leon Feer. Oxford: Pali Text Society.
- S IV *Samyutta-nikāya* Volume IV. 1990 edited by M. Leon Feer. Oxford: Pali Text Society.
- Sn *Sutta-nipāta*. 1984 edited by Dines Anderson and Helmer Smith. London: Pali Text Society.
- Ud *Udāna*. 1982. edited by Paul Steinthal. London: Pali Text Society.

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