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Philosophy East and West, Vol. 21, No. 2. (Apr., 1971), pp. 195-201.

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Memorial Tribute to the Late Professor K. N. Jayatilleke

The death of Professor K. N. Jayatilleke has removed from the world of scholarship a brilliant Buddhist scholar with a unique training and background. He was born in Ceylon on November 1, 1920. He had an excellent scholastic record at Royal College where he studied. At the University of Ceylon where he pursued the study of a Pāli and Sanskrit, he did extremely well and was graduated in 1943 obtaining a First Class in Indo-Aryan studies. Having won the Government Scholarship, he decided to do the Moral Science Tripos at Cambridge University.

He impressed his tutors at Cambridge and was fortunate enough to follow the classes of Ludwig Wittgenstein. This unique training in Eastern and Western thought was the background that nourished Jayatilleke's work throughout his career. It was at Cambridge that he assimilated the analytic approach to philosophy, which later was to form a characteristic quality in all his writings.

He joined the University of Ceylon as Assistant Lecturer in Philosophy in 1951 and was made Professor and Head of the Department in 1963. Later, he made his mark as an international scholar and as a visiting professor of philosophy in the United States. He read a number of papers at conferences abroad, and one of the last conferences he attended was the 1969 East-West Philosophers' Conference at the University of Hawaii.

Jayatilleke is best known to the world of scholarship as the author of the *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*,¹ which won for him the degree of Ph.D. from the University of London. The late Professor Robinson described this work as a masterpiece, judged by any standards. A later work of Jayatilleke which also deserves publicity and discussion is *The Principles of International Law in Buddhist Doctrine*.²

He also took an active interest in student problems as the warden of a hall of residence for students. He evinced a lively interest in the burning political and social issues of the day. Even if philosophers were not kings, he sincerely felt that philosophers had something worthwhile to say regarding the social and political issues of a country.

His personality had many facets, and I cannot claim to have understood him completely. A student's first encounter with Professor Jayatilleke was disappointing; one had to build up some kind of acquaintance to understand him. In fact, one of his students described the situation extremely well: "Some people are like mangoes, some are like coconuts; mangoes are very sweet at the first bite, but then you come to the hard seed. Others are like coconuts, if you break through the hard exterior you discover the sweet coconut water. Jayatilleke belongs to the latter category."

¹ K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963).

² K. N. Jayatilleke, *The Principles of International Law in Buddhist Doctrine* (Leyden: A. W. Sijthoff, 1967).

Jayatilleke was always a man of moods. When things went wrong, his countenance and speech took an angry turn. A few hours later his inner gentleness reappeared. Like J. L. Austin, his way of speech was “dry and slow” but “very clear with all edges sharply defined.”³ He was a man who aimed at perfection in doing a job, but what he valued most was clarity of thought and expression.

Sometimes I felt that he could be flattered, but my better judgment suggests that he was pleased when others appreciated his work. Even his opponents, who sometimes violently disagreed with him on ideological grounds, always admitted that “K.N.” (as he was popularly referred to by his friends) was frank, outspoken, and both fearless and militant in saying what he had to say. This had its merits and drawbacks. One great merit was that he did not shirk responsibility and fought for his place when he felt he had a right to be consulted. Though noncommitment has its own advantages, Jayatilleke was always keen on taking a side and committing himself to a view. The drawback was that he took on a load of work humanly impossible for one man to handle.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCHOLARSHIP

Jayatilleke’s contributions to scholarship center on his having initiated a new approach to the study of Buddhist philosophy and his having attempted to point out the relevance of the philosophy of the Buddha to contemporary philosophical controversies and the problems of modern man.

In his *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, which gives a comprehensive insight into his general philosophical outlook, he says, “The present work seeks to evaluate the thought of the Pāli Canon from a new point of view and in the light of new material. In it an attempt is made to uncover the epistemological foundations of Pāli Canonical thought.” Jayatilleke was basically interested in the inquiry into the means of knowledge and the questions relating to the means of knowledge. It is not that Jayatilleke was merely limiting his analysis to the theory of knowledge in preference to ethics, metaphysics, aesthetics, etc. But he firmly believed that it is first necessary to lay bare the epistemological foundations of early Buddhism before examining other aspects of the philosophy of the Buddha.

Very often, both in everyday discourse and in highly sophisticated philosophical discussions, we raise questions such as: Is Buddhism true? What kind of knowledge did the Buddha possess? Is rebirth a fact? What kind of state is *nibbāna*? Can we know at least what *nibbāna* is like? Jayatilleke attempted to work out a general methodology of answering questions of this sort; he attempted to discover a basis upon which to examine such questions. This he did very skillfully against the background of the Buddhist empiricist tradition.

³ *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XLIX (1963), 361.

It is possible that someone will raise the question, "Why was Jayatilleke only interested in epistemology?" If we examine some of his later writings,⁴ it is certainly possible to discover that Jayatilleke had a more comprehensive vision of the message of the Buddha. In fact, his untimely loss occurred just as he was getting into these wider horizons. In one of his unpublished papers,⁵ he says, apart from the questions, How do we know? and What do we know?, the question, What should we do? (referring to an ethical situation), has both a personal and social dimension. With this rejoinder to a possible critic, let us examine his views on early Buddhist epistemology. His basic contentions were that early Buddhism has an empiricist outlook, gives a significant place to the analytic approach in philosophy, and does not contradict the findings of modern science.

According to Jayatilleke, the empiricist theory in early Buddhism is evident in its treatment of some of the fundamental questions like the nature of soul and substance, causation, and meaning. According to the Buddha, there is no permanent substance in either mental or physical phenomena. The Buddhist analysis of mind, for instance, sounds almost Humean. But there is a difference that is like the positivist and unlike Hume: the Buddha, too, examines some of the misleading aspects of linguistic usage. "In any case, with regard to the use of both words and sentences, we find that the Buddha is anxious to avoid disputes which are purely verbal in character and the confusions which arise when we transgress the limits of linguistic convention," says Jayatilleke.⁶

According to Jayatilleke, Buddhism rejects the anthropomorphic activity theory of causation and also discards the entailment theory which holds that there is a necessary connection between cause and effect. "The Buddhist Theory closely resembles the Regularity theory which is favored by most scientists. . . ."⁷

Regarding the Buddhist concept of the external world Jayatilleke had two views. In some of his writings, he seems to hold a realist theory of the external world, but in his personal discussions in class, he once remarked that, though the Buddha used a realistic phraseology and language, at moments when the Buddha is deeply philosophical, he appears to take a phenomenalist view of the external world. Of course, now it is no longer fashionable for an empiricist to hold a phenomenalist view of the external world.

The Buddhist attitude to metaphysics is one of the central themes of his *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*. In fact, the distinction between the rational metaphysicians and the experientialists that he brings out at a very early

⁴ See, *The Principles of International Law in Buddhist Doctrine*.

⁵ K. N. Jayatilleke, "The Basis of Buddhist Ethics," p. 1.

⁶ *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, p. 313.

⁷ K. N. Jayatilleke, "The Contemporary Relevance of the Philosophy of the Buddha" (unpublished paper), p. 5.

part in his work seems to be the central point around which the early Buddhist epistemology revolves. The Buddha refers to three types of philosophers: (1) revelationists (*anusavikā*), who claim final knowledge on the basis of revelation; (2) the rational metaphysicians (*takki vimamsī*) whose claims are based on pure reason and speculation; (3) those whose claims are based on personal understanding derived from their extrasensory powers of perception and sense perception. The interesting conflict is between the second and third groups. This neat structure laid out at the beginning of the work culminates in the analysis of unanswered questions and the Buddhist attitude toward metaphysical questions in the last chapter.

But, if Buddhism is empiricist in outlook, how can one uphold the veracity of extrasensory perception and the allied mystical elements in Buddhism? Jayatilleke describes the Buddha as an "experientialist," and under this come facts found through both sense perception and extrasensory perception. Here are the concluding lines of the *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*: "It was not that there was something that the Buddha did not know, but that what he knew in the transcendent sense could not be conveyed in words because of the limitations of language and empiricism" (p. 476). Thus at this point, it is admitted that Buddhism goes beyond empiricism.

One of the most interesting points brought out by Jayatilleke is the resemblance between the Buddhist and Wittgensteinian analyses of meaning. This roused the attention of Ninian Smart, who in a recent review observes that:

Perhaps the most interesting feature of early Buddhism was the recognition that certain questions cannot be answered, not because of lack of information, etc., but because of the nature of questions themselves. Certain metaphysical questions were classified by the Buddha together with the question "Where does the flame go when it goes out?" Some commentators, both Eastern and Western have misunderstood this point, and have attributed the Buddha's silence to a pragmatic concern that people should not waste their time on speculation. But Professor Jayatilleke conclusively argues for a Wittgensteinian interpretation (indeed, Wittgenstein used the same examples: was this a coincidence?).⁸

Another problem which appears to have a metaphysical coloring is that of rebirth. Jayatilleke took great pains to bring it under the searching eye of Western analytic thought and to show that the concept of rebirth makes sense. Being a person who had a great respect for British analytic philosophy, he always referred to the words of A. J. Ayer on the subject: "The Contemporary Analytic Philosopher A. J. Ayer grants the 'logical possibility of reincarnation.'"⁹ Thus as referred to earlier, he attempted to work out systematically the empiricist outlook in the Buddhist theory of knowledge, though at certain

⁸ Ninian Smart, review of Jayatilleke's *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, in *Mind* 75, no. 299 (Jul. 1966), 454.

⁹ Jayatilleke, "Contemporary Relevance of the Philosophy of the Buddha," p. 9.

points Buddhism went beyond empiricism. By this attempt he presented Buddhism through the idiom, the language and methodology of the contemporary philosopher. That is how he attempted to make Buddhism a relevant message to the contemporary world.

Fresh with the impact of the reigning Cambridge philosophers, Russell, Moore, and Wittgenstein, it was natural that in most of his earlier writings Jayatilleke emphasized the resemblances between his teachers and Buddhism. But in some of his later unpublished papers he often says that Buddhism goes beyond positivism, empiricism, and linguistic philosophy. In fact, during the last few years of his writings, there are a few references to existentialism, and I had quite a few personal discussions with him on the relevance of this philosophical movement to contemporary man. Another aspect of Buddhism that attracted the attention of Jayatilleke was its analytic flavor, especially in view of the fact that Buddha himself claims to be a *vibhajjavādin* (analyst) rather than a dogmatist. Jayatilleke cites four ways of examining philosophical questions that bring out the analytic approach in Buddhism: (1) A question which ought to be explained categorically; (2) A question which ought to be replied to with a counterquestion; (3) A question that should be set aside; (4) A question which ought to be explained analytically.¹⁰

Jayatilleke always referred to the critical outlook embodied in the *Kālāma Sutta*. But he points out at great length that it is wrong to consider the Buddha as a mere "rationalist" philosopher. The Buddha does not believe in self-evident truths from which you can deduce logical conclusions. The Buddha criticized systems beaten out of mere logic (*takka*). Reasoning based on logic may be valid or invalid and, in the light of facts, true or false. However, the Buddha upheld the value of analytic reason rather than speculative reason.

The respect for the analytic approach is something that had gone into Jayatilleke's personality and writings. A great merit of his writings is the clarity that was displayed in them. Thus the "need for clarity" was not merely a slogan with him but a living reality. This was one of the first lessons that students learned in his tutorial classes. I can recall how, at the time the Indian Philosophical Congress had its sessions at Peradeniya, Jayatilleke once dispelled a heavy and obscure metaphysical discussion with few words. Some of the leading philosophers claimed that the state of *nibbāna* was just "nothing," and others claimed that it was "something." Jayatilleke picked up a glass from the table. There was no water in the glass, the president having drunk all the water in it. Jayatilleke said, "we can say that this glass is 'empty' as there is no water in it. But we can also say that it is 'full' as it is full of air. Thus in a similar way the talk about Nibbāna becomes a controversy due to the limitations of language." The ability to give a reply of this sort was characteristic of him.

¹⁰ Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, p. 281.

Finally, Jayatilleke had a great respect for modern scientific findings. While this emerges as a necessary corollary of the empiricist outlook, he did make a great effort to be in touch with the recent developments in the physical and biological sciences, psychology, and even astronomy (for which he had a great fascination). "I find that Early Buddhism emphasizes the importance of the scientific outlook in dealing with the problems of morality and religion. Its specific dogmas are said to be capable of verification. And its general account of the nature of man and the universe is one that accords with the findings of science rather than being at variance with them."¹¹

The honest and impartial search for truth emphasized in the *Kālāma Sutta* is similar to the scientific attitude. The Buddhist picture of the cosmos is similar to the modern conception of the universe;¹² so is the Buddhist concept of the nature of causation. Jayatilleke also has hinted at the similarities between the Buddhist and Freudian theories of mind.¹³ Finally Jayatilleke regards rebirth as a hypothesis capable of being scientifically verified.

Thus there are three significant elements in the "new point of view" from which he presents the thought of the Pāli Canon—the empiricist outlook, the analytic approach, and the scientific attitude.

OTHER WRITINGS

Apart from his basic writings in the field of epistemology, there are a number of other works. The most significant of these are "Buddhism and the Race Question" and *The Principles of International Law in Buddhist Doctrine*. The latter was one of his last contributions to the world of Buddhist scholarship. "Buddhist conceptions of law are closely related to its ethics and social philosophy. Although it is possible to study the law in isolation from the latter, law becomes meaningful only on the basis of ethics."¹⁴ This again is related to the Buddhist theory of reality and theory of knowledge. Thus he attempts an interesting diagnosis of ideological disputes in the light of the philosophy of the Buddha. Jayatilleke sincerely felt that the message of the Buddha had a definite relevance to the contemporary world.

The sudden death of Professor Jayatilleke leaves a vacuum hard to fill; he was a scholar hard to replace. But by his writings and talks, he has charted the direction in which Buddhist studies should be pursued in the future. Though

¹¹ K. N. Jayatilleke, "Buddhism and the Scientific Revolution," in *Buddhism and Science*, ed. K. N. Jayatilleke, Robert F. Spencer, and Wu Shu (Ceylon: Buddhist Publication Society, 1959), pp. 2-3.

¹² Jayatilleke, "Buddhism and the Scientific Revolution," p. 3.

¹³ It was Professor Jayatilleke who suggested to me that I work on Freud and the Buddha. See "A Study of Motivational Theory in Early Buddhism with Special Reference to the Psychology of Freud" (Ph.D. diss., University of Hawaii, 1967).

¹⁴ Jayatilleke, *The Principles of International Law in Buddhist Doctrine*, p. 447.

his physical presence and authority have been removed from this world, I am sure his writings will remain for us as a constant companion. Professor Jayatileke left behind his wife, Patricia, and his two daughters, Anjani and Nandani.

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