

## LANGUAGE AND REALITY: THE BUDDHIST AND WITTGENSTEIN APPROACH

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### **Introduction:**

Philosophy of language concerns about the relationship between words and reality. The central questions of the philosophy of language is whether language describe successfully the way things really are or do words in fact function as a mask that conceals the reality. There are different opinions prevail regarding this question. Some are having the opinion that would posit a comfortable fit between words and reality known as naïve linguistic optimism. Some are having the opinion that some words do depict reality with some degree of accuracy known as moderate and possible linguistic optimism. However, words do miss their mark, failing to pick out things as they really are. Some are having the opinions that completely undo any relation between language and things, as they really are known as linguistic pessimists. In fact, linguistic pessimism should be distinguished from linguistic skepticism; this is because it says that we cannot know to what extent our words correspond to the world as it really is. Regarding this an attempt has been made in this paper to present the arguments against predicaments of *self* and the private language sensation. Further it also discusses the idea that the language is connected with mind activity and social conventions or agreements. In the Buddhists and Wittgenstein framework the assumption of the grammar, *self* leads to the assumption of ontological *self*. In order to reject the ontological *self*, the Buddhists on one hand and the Wittgenstein on the other hand argued against solipsism, nominalism and private language-sensation arguments, which is the crux of this paper.

### **Buddhist view on Language and Reality:**

The relation between language and reality has been interpreted and understood by the Buddhist texts and traditions in many ways. The Buddha looked upon language as an activity.<sup>1</sup> Buddhist texts typically express caution about the tendency for words to lead us astray and there is a strand of moderate linguistic

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<sup>1</sup> Kalupahana.J.David, “The Buddha’s Philosophy of Language”, Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha Publication, Srilanka, 1999, p.48.

optimism in some forms of Buddhism. In other words, when language used carefully and appropriately, language is capable of describing things as they really are.

According to the Buddhists, man is analyzed into the five impersonal aggregates (*pañcaskandhas*). They are a) form (*rūpa*) consisting of the different factors which we perceive in this body b) feelings (*vedanā*) of pleasure, pain and indifference c) Perception including understanding and naming (*sañjñā*) d) predispositions or tendencies generated by the impressions of past experience (*samskāras*) and e) consciousness itself (*vijñāna*)<sup>2</sup>. The five aggregates as being impermanent (*anitya*), without an enduring self (*anattā*) and thus the cause of suffering (*dukkha*)<sup>3</sup>. It proves that, a person is complex bundles of mental and physical inter connected events with no unchanging agent or subject of experience. An alternative analysis explains that the individual and objects as comprising twelve spheres (*āyatana*s) namely the six senses (the five physical senses and the mind) and the six types of objects of those senses.<sup>4</sup> Another explain found in the literature which refers to 18 elements (*dhātus*) namely the six senses, six types of sense objects, and six types of consciousness<sup>5</sup>. All these explanations describe accurately the genuine constitution of the individual and the world of objects, leaving no room for a belief in anything unchanging and uncaused. The descriptions are thought to pick out the genuine character of the world as it really is, independently of our interpretations. In contrast to this, the enduring self and stable external objects identified by language as tables, chairs, trees and so forth do not exist independently of our perceptual and cognitive processes that reify the flux of causally connected mental and physical events.

Early Buddhism is a form of nominalism, according to which much of the world described by words does not exist independently of our minds. In other words, some language hits the mark. For example, the statement that ‘things are impermanent and dependently originate’ is an accurate proposition about the nature of reality. The descriptions such as *skhandhas*, the *dhātus*, the *āyatanās* and so forth

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<sup>2</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya*, pp. 138-45.

<sup>3</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya*, i, 138-139.

<sup>4</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya*, iii, 62.

<sup>5</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya*, I, 138-39.

are thought to be precise and correct uses of language. Furthermore, the statement that ‘linguistic referents such as ‘chariot’, ‘Nāgasena’ and ‘being’ exist only in dependence upon our perceptual and cognitive faculties also expresses the way things really are. According to Hamilton<sup>6</sup>, *sanjñā* is the capacity to discriminate, identity and name in early Buddhism. Our ability to form concepts picks out objects from their environment. Further, Hamilton clarifies that *sanjñā* does not in itself mean false conceptions. This is because some conceptions or names are compatible with things as they really are. However, some *sanjñā* is incompatible with reality. For example, the statement ‘things are permanent and uncaused’ is simply incorrect as is the claim that entities such as ‘chariot’, ‘Nāgasena’ and ‘being’ exist independently of our cognitive and perceptual processes. These propositions misrepresent the way things really are.

In Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakosa* and Saṅghabhadra’s *Nyāyānusāra* a systematic account of nominalism and modern linguistic optimism explained for the first time in early Buddhist texts. There is an analysis of the *self* and objects into constituent processes is more sophisticated with the elucidation of many types of momentary physical and non-physical events (*dharma*) and also the various types of causal relationships that pertain between them. The non-physical *dharmas* are the range of psychological occurrences that together categorized in the mind. The physical *dharmas* are related to atomic sense data out of which sensed objects and the human body are fashioned and named by consciousness. In Buddhist epistemological framework we found the general characters known as *sāmānyalakṣaṇas* notably impermanence and dependent origination, which are shared by all of these conditioned (*saṃskṛta*) *dharmas*. In addition, each *dharma* has a defining characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*) which allows it to be described as a particular type within the classification of *dharmas*. According to Vaibhāṣikas these *dharmas* have substantial existence (*dravyasat*) or inherent existence (*svabhāva*) and are ultimate truths (*paramārtha satya*). In other words, the conditioned *dharmas* are the real features of the world that exist independently of language but can be described accurately by it. In contrast to this, things that are formed out of these *dharmas* are

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<sup>6</sup> Hamilton.s, “Identity and Experience. The constitution of the Human Being according to Early Buddhism”, London, Luzoc Oriental, 1996, pp 53-65.

said to have conceptual or nominal existence (*prajñaptisat*), to be conventional truths known as *saṃvṛtisatya* and to have no inherent existence<sup>7</sup>. It explains that language that refers to things such as tables and chairs describes reified objects that do not exist independently of the mind. Vaibhāṣikas thinks that sense data, as raw material, gets interpreted and labelled as the discrete everyday objects our conventional world. This is because we impose on the sense data a cognitive and linguistic framework that does not correspond to the complex dependently originality flow of events that is ultimately real.

A.K.Warder further confirmed that *Theravāda Abhidharma* texts express a similar attitude to language and reality. For example, the *Abhidharmavatāra*, distinguishes between concepts or names (*paññatti*) that are occurring (*vijjamāna*) and non-occurring (*avijjamāna*). For Warder, ‘occurring’ means that there is a reality, which corresponds to the name; whereas ‘non-occurring’ means that, there is no such reality. In other words, occurring concepts are those that refer to something ultimately real (*paramārtha*). They identify the defining characteristics of the *dharmas*, a non-occurring concept has a referent, such as the *self*, which is a mere name (*nāmamattai*). Further, Warder explains that *Paramatthavinicchaya* of Aniruddha similarly distinguishes between occurring and non-occurring names. The former identify the ultimately real elements, that is, the *dharmas*. They are not contradicted (*avisamvādaka*) by reality. In contrast to this, the concepts or names that are non-occurring have conceptual or nominal objects such as ‘being’, ‘person’, ‘I’, ‘table’, ‘chair’ and so forth. They are not ultimately true but are in conformity to the linguistic usages of the world in everyday language<sup>8</sup>.

Both Vaibhāṣika and Theravāda forms of Abhidharma combine nominalism and moderate linguistic optimism. For them many entities exist only as referents of language, some named entities, that is, the *dharmas*, exist independent of our perceptual and cognitive interpretations. For instance, if language goes wrong, it attributes a mind-independent existence to those things that are simply conventions. It also misses the mark if it misidentifies the *dharmas* and their general and individual

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<sup>7</sup> Williams, ‘on the Abhidharma Ontology’, in the Journal of Indian Philosophy, 1981, pp.227-257.

<sup>8</sup> Warder.A.K., ‘The concept of a concept’, in the Journal of India Philosophy, 1971, pp.181-196.

characteristics. However, these *dharmas* and their causal relationships can be accurately described. Thus, language can express about the way things really are, including that many things identified by language do not have a mind independent existence.

From this, it is evident that the Buddhists think that the world of everyday things is dependent on language for its existence. Thus, tables, chairs and mountains exist; this is because language categories the world into these objects. It is claimed that such things only exist because of language. Philosophically it seems to be it is problematic, given that there is evidence of pre-linguistic discrimination of objects. Things sometimes seem to be identified, or picked out from their surrounding environment without the use of names. For instance, witness the ability of young babies and non-human mammals to recognize features of the world without having any linguistic skills. Those who know language can often recognise objects without having known their names or when their names have been forgotten. In our day-to-day activities most of them seems to takes place at a pre-linguistic level where we identify objects and yet do not name them. It would be known that perceptual and cognitive processes, some of which are pre-linguistic, identify the world of objects. Our sense organs and minds act as interpreters of the even-flowing world of *dharmic* processes, shaping these processes into the relatively stable objects of perception that we experience. This interpreting activity happens even prior to naming through the use of language which adds a new level of complexity to the individuation of objects.

### **Wittgenstein view on Language and Reality:**

Like the Buddha for Wittgenstein, too philosophy is not a body of doctrines, but an activity<sup>9</sup>. According to Wittgenstein, philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts and the task of philosophy is to clarify the thoughts expressed in language. Wittgenstein in his early philosophy goes with Russellian atomism by holding the relation of picturization between language and reality. The whole life of Wittgenstein can be discussed in two phases namely ‘Tractatus’ or Early Wittgenstein and ‘Investigation’ or Later Wittgenstein. The main aim of Wittgenstein

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<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, 4.112 (Translated by D.F.Pears and B.F.Meguinness, London, 1961).

is intended to bring out the philosophical implications of the use of language. He stood against the traditional concept that philosophy is an attempt to explain life and the universe as a whole and advocates that the central problem of philosophy is the analysis of language.

Both the Buddhists and Wittgenstein did not commit to either nominalism and realism. In the *Aranavibhanga Sutta*<sup>10</sup>, the Buddha advises to the monks as “thus, monks, is the non-commitment to the language of a country and the non-transgression of common parlance”, while in the paragraph of 383 of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (now onwards PI), says nominalists make the mistake of interpreting all words as names and so of not really describing their use .....<sup>11</sup>. In the PI, paragraph 383 says that “we are not analyzing a phenomenon (e.g. thought) but a concept (e.g. thinking), and therefore the use of a word. So, it may look as if what we were doing were nominalism. Nominalists make the mistake of interpreting all words as names, and so of not really describing their use, but only, so to speak, giving a paper draft on such a description”. (Page.8 of PI).

Sometimes it is not about different meanings but different symbols for instance to say “green is green”. The use of signs is the result of arbitrary convention. Thus if we want to grasp the meaning of the words, we have to look at its conventional use. The use of the words is always manifested in the limit of certain language-games, which implies ‘the actions’. In brief, the meaning of the words is determined by the language-games where words are inserted. Between language-games, there could be generalities, which are called “family resemblances”. There is no meaning outside of the language-games. Finally, it can be seen that Wittgenstein’s criticism of “our craving for generality addresses either nominalism or realism. This can be seen in Wittgenstein’s PI where he said, “We predicate of the thing what lies in the method of representing it. Impressed by the possibility of a comparison, we think we perceive a state of affairs of highest generality<sup>12</sup>. The Buddhist philosophy of language has been recurrently characterized as ‘nominalism’. However, this theory is

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<sup>10</sup> *Aranavibhanga Sutta* - The Exposition of Non-conflict (MN 139). translated by Ñanamoli/Bodhi. Retrieve from <http://buddhism.vipassati.ch/nikaya/mn-139-aranavibhanga-sutta-the-exposition-of-nonconflict>.

<sup>11</sup> Wittgenstein’s “*Philosophical Investigations*”, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1958, page 8, paragraph 383.

<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein’s “*Philosophical Investigations*”, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1958, p.46.

debatable and has not accepted since from the Buddhist doctrine of dependent arising and non-self (*anattavāda*). It has been understood that concepts do not refer to entities taken as either particulars or universals.

David Burton in his article ‘Language and Reality in Buddhism, The case for Moderate Linguistic Optimism’ argues that there are different streams of Buddhism namely the *Nikaya, Abhidharma* which advocates the view that Universals depend on the mind perception cognitive processes and that language, if carefully used may describe things. According to this view the notions of *skandhas, ayatana* and *dhatu* describe the human person and the world extensively, analytically, accurately and objectively, independent of our interpretations. On the contrary, to this, the meaning of terms such as tables, chairs, and mountains depends on our perceptual and cognitive processes, which falsify reality. From this, one can find moderate linguistic optimism and nominalism. The *Nikaya Suttas* postulates that ‘names are mere sounds’. From this, it seems that the Buddhist philosophy of language advocates ‘nominalism’. The idea ‘names are mere sounds’ does not mean that words are mere mind construction. It is very much clear from *Milindapanha sutra* that the emphasis on conventionality as a source of the function of the designation of names. Buddha observes common parlance to impart meaning without clinging to the words. In this *sutra* one can read the notions such as ‘living being’ are mere a conventional way of speaking. The main focus is on the idea about the conventional source of meaning is found more explicitly in *Niruttipatha sutta*, where it says the meaning and its change of words and sentences depend on the changes of linguistic conventions.

In order to understand the relation between language and reality Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus* develops a representational framework. The basic concern for Wittgenstein is the structure of the sense, since it provides the key to the structure of language and the world. In this context, the world represents the reality. For him, the structure of the world is the same as the structure of language and this can be unfolded by the logical structure of sense. This is the source of the idea that logic is transcendental since it brings out the underlying structure of language and the world<sup>13</sup>. Wittgenstein in his transcendental logic attempted to bring out the essence of

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<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, 4.01.

language and the world. With regard to language-world relationship Wittgenstein, showed thought and language together make up the logical space that makes the notion of world-representation possible and thus solves the so-called ontological issues. Thus in Wittgenstein framework world representation has become crucial component of the semantics of representation. Wittgenstein holds that neither sense nor reference is sufficient in itself to fix the relation between language and the world. Hence, for him, there is no semantic problem of setting the language-world relationship.

**Conclusion:**

To conclude, Buddhist philosophy of language should be considered rigorously when the linguistic clinging becomes an epistemological subject. The same kind of attitude we can find in Wittgenstein's philosophy of language that which is epistemologically inspired. However, it should not minimize the centrality of the mystical in his Tractatus. Hence, the explicit focus on the stereological must not be established as criteria of incommensurability between Buddhism and Wittgenstein. In Buddhism, we can find an idea that the language is connected with mind activity and social conventions. From this, it is evident that language does not only names things and intervenes in the reproduction of the self-identification and the assumption of ontological self. The assumption of self leads to the assumption of ontological self. Rejecting the ontologization of the self, Buddhism and Wittgenstein argue against solipsism, nominalism and private language sensation arguments.