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The Concept of the Principle of Excluded Middle in Buddhism

In popular, and to a degree, in scientific thinking in the West, the principle of excluded middle seems to have been one of those dogmatic laws, the absence of which in any philosophy has irrevocably led to its condemnation as unscientific. The object of this paper is to present a few observations regarding the position of this principle in Buddhist philosophy on the one hand, and on the other to explore whether it can be usefully and helpfully applied to the analysis of Buddhist doctrines.

From the time since Buddhist philosophic and religious texts have been made available in quantities sufficient to justify detailed analyses of the various systems of Buddhism, discussions entered into by over-philosophically minded scholars raised a number of suspicions and sounded caution and warnings of contradictions prevailing in these systems. The warnings went sometimes to such extremes as to deny altogether any uniformity in the structure of individual systems or schools of Buddhism and to declare them so self-contradictory as to be unfit to deserve the name of any philosophy at all.

And so, to quote well-known instances at random, discussions on the Nirvāna gave rise to ascribing to Buddhist thought negativist intentions; the theory of the *śūnyavāda* was being described as revealing pessimism and negativism, and the dispute (in the *Sutta-piṭaka*, for instance) on the existence or non-existence of self (*atman*) was considered as a classical example of contradictoriness. (In the *Sutta-piṭaka*, the existence of *atman* is both affirmed and denied.) Consequently, some of the Western scholars have pronounced with little hesitation that Buddha had never intended to establish a philosophic system. This in itself may remain an open question, but any arguments for or against such an assumption have to be based on other premises.

It is my belief that one of the reasons of these various interpretations or misinterpretations of Buddhist philosophies is the application of heterogeneous instruments to the analysis of Buddhist doctrines. Many of these instruments, forged in the shops of Western philosophies and traditions, even if they are fit to dissect a Buddhist theory, may fail to re-assemble its elements into the precise model originally conceived.

The principle of excluded middle seems to be one of the main misleading principles in our analysis of any Indian philosophy, and of Buddhism in particular, and this is why I have chosen to touch upon this subject.

In the first place, here is an elementary definition of what is called the principle of excluded middle, in as many forms as can be clearly understood: A either is or is not B, or A is either B or non-B, or if A is B it is not non-B, or, as given in a broader descriptive, "of two contradictory predicates one can be asserted of every relevant subject". The principle of excluded middle, naturally, can be connected with, or even inverted to, the laws of identity and contradiction but the purpose of the following observations requires no such elaboration. Yet, even without doing so, it is possible to doubt the validity of this principle and, what is more important, its need or usefulness. The descriptive definition attempts to correct the definition expressed in the disjunctive clauses by the insertion of the adjective "relevant". However, if we substitute music for A, and white for B, we have a proposition asserting that music is either white or non-white, either being a nonsensical statement. The corrective expression "relevant", intending to exclude subjects like music from being predicated by predicates like white or non-white, actually does not exclude such possibility entirely, since "relevant" being merely an expression of opinion leaves no assurance as to which predicate is and which is not relevant.

On the other hand, i. e. if it were considered universal, as it has been instanced a minute ago by the example white or non-white music, the principle would itself run into the danger of being self-contradictory because universally it could not be applied with sense. Moreover, the definition referred to as descriptive is flexible and thus not precise, and in addition it is not identical with the other definitions. Briefly, it can be said that the law of excluded middle, even from the Western point of view, is not satisfactory and has its serious shortcomings. Yet, it is in the West strongly embedded in our philosophical thinking and mental operations, as it keeps in line with our picture of the world and our epistemological concepts.

As a study in contrast with the general Indian concept, hardly anything could better illustrate the fixation of the principle of excluded middle in the general philosophical outlook than the exposition set forth by Sir William Hamilton as rendered by his commentator and opponent John Stuart Mill¹. The passage in question says:

"To deny the universal application of the three laws [scil. Identity, Contradiction and Excluded Middle], is in fact, to subvert the reality of thought; and as this subversion is itself an act of thought, it in fact annihilates itself.

¹ John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, 2 vols., Boston 1886. See vol. 2, pp. 181—183.

...when it is asserted that A existing and A non-existing are at once true, what does this imply? It implies that negation and affirmation correspond to nothing out of the mind, — that there is no agreement, no disagreement between thought and its object; and this is tantamount to saying that truth and falsehood are merely empty sounds. For if we only think by affirmation and negation, and if these are only as they are exclusive of each other, it follows, that unless existence and non-existence be opposed objectively in the same manner as affirmation and negation are opposed subjectively, all our thought is a mere illusion”.

Strangely enough H a m i l t o n ’ s angry conclusion (*prasāṅga* ?) warding off the ensuing incompatibility between thought and object, coincides with the fundamental premise of most of the Indian philosophical schools asserting that our thought is a mere illusion. But the illusion does not stop here: by identification of thought with phenomenal life the doctrine of illusion spreads over phenomena as well: “this threefold world is only thought” declared Buddha. In consequence H a m i l t o n ’ s arguments do not arise in Buddhist philosophy at large; for the illusoriness of thought is not the result of differing processes occurring in the mind and the objective world; on the contrary, processes in the external world of phenomena are the reflection of mind, but since the mind does not reflect the absolute existence, the phenomenal world has no objective foundation. The world is illusory including both mind and phenomena; it behaves as if it were true but it is true only in the range of the *vyavahāra* or *avidyā*; the latter can be determined in the affirmative as a state of conviction that all reality is enclosed in the mind, the phenomenal world, and the relationship of the two. To those, however, for whom *avidyā* is not the basis of behaviour, the world is mere illusion, an appearance of truth.

Thus, reality, being true for some and untrue for others, is both true and untrue. It can, therefore, be predicated by *asti* and *nāsti*, A and non-A. It is true *samvṛtitaḥ* and untrue *paramāṛthataḥ* (or vice versa). Having its roots in perception the empirical life (*vyavahāra*) was seldom minimized or condemned by the Buddha or his disciples; it had its important rôle as the resting-place and foundation (*aśraya*) of reality in its absolute sense (*paramārtha*). The Buddhist philosopher has always soberly admitted the validity of those perceptual and speculative faculties that make the insight into reality possible. In the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*² there occurs the following sentence: *punar apa-*

² Cf. *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, ed. by B. N a n j i o, Kyoto 1923, p. 109. I find it difficult to reconcile myself to the translation of this phrase by Professor S u z u k i which reads: “... Māyā is not an unreality, because it has the appearance of reality; and all the things have the nature of Māyā”. Even the syntax of the sentence renders such translation unlikely. The emphasis

ram mahāmāte na māyā nāsti sādharma-darśanāt sarvadharmānām māyopamātvam bhavati. "Moreover, Mahāmāti, [you cannot maintain] that Māyā [means that things] are unreal (*nāsti*). Since everything has the appearance of coherent [reality] everything becomes Māyā-like."

A further step towards this admission is made by Nāgārjuna, who quotes in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 28³ from his *Mūlamādhyamikakārikās* XXIV, 10⁴. There Nāgārjuna says:

*vyavaharam anāśritya paramārtho na deśyate/
paramārtham anagamyā nirvāṇam nādhigamya itii//*

"Absolute reality cannot be explained unless [the explanation] is based on phenomenal truth; *nirvāṇa* cannot be obtained without the realization of absolute reality".

The *Mūlamādhyamikakārikās* XXIV, 8 and 9, also remind us that the Buddha's doctrine is dependent on two truths (*lokasamvṛttisatya* and *paramārthasatya*), and those who do not recognize the two cannot grasp the profound essence of Buddha's teachings (*tattvam na vijānanti gambhīram buddhaśāsane*).

These quotations have been cited to supply further evidence that the theory of interdependence of the two realities (*satya*) as evincing from the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* and the *Mūlamādhyamikakārikās* does not lend itself, for the purpose of analysis, to the application of the law of excluded middle. The adoption itself of the theory, common to practically all Buddhist schools, of two realities supporting and eventually ousting each other, allows them to exist side by side in a situation likely to be considered by many Western philosophers as self-contradictory.

The logical difficulty arising from dual approach does not present any unusual problem. It is similar to the type of difficulty presented by perspective, intensity of light, etc. The relativity of this approach also occurs in the *syād-vāda*-theory of the Jaina. There, the three types of approach recorded by the expressions *syād asty eva*, *syān nāsty eva*, *syād asti nāsti ca* remove the logical difficulty by asserting that none of the expressions can be used simultaneously with the other, but they have to be applied in sequence. This means that

of Buddha's utterance seems to have been laid on *darśana*, the meaning being that from the conventional aspect, *māyā* must not be dismissed as a realistic approach to the phenomenal world which, by the habit of our mind to construe it in an orderly sequence of events, has its coherence and semblance to reality. Hence everything has the element of *māyā* in it, *māyā* itself being the necessary outcome of the *samvṛtti* world structure.

³ Ed. E. H. Johnston and Arnold Kunst, *Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques*, 1951.

⁴ Ed. De La Vallée Poussin, *Bibliotheca Buddhica* IV, 1913; see also M. Walliser's *Translations from Tibetan and Chinese*. The translations vary somewhat.

existence, non-existence, and both existence and non-existence are valid predicates of one and the same subject, provided the basic approach is established in advance. Yet, the law remains that even if not simultaneously, each subject can be predicated by a qualification which, in accordance with our thinking, would defeat the principle of excluded middle.

*Punar apāram mahāmate dvīprakara buddhiḥ: pravicyabuddhiḥ ca vikalpala-kṣaṇagrāhābhīveśapratīṣṭhāpikā ca*⁵. [Moreover, Mahāmati, our mind is twofold: 1) the searching mind, and 2) the mind which functions on the basis of adherence to conceptions determined by construction (= created by the mind)]⁶ — explained Buddha to Mahāmati. The searching mind is further explained as that penetrating into the very nature of things (*bhāvasvabhāva*). It analyses the world of phenomena by applying four couples of propositions and enquires into the veracity of these propositions. After this enquiry it concludes that phenomena are 1) neither a unity or other than unity; 2) neither both nor not both; 3) neither being nor non-being; 4) neither permanent nor non-permanent.

This method of enquiry is handed down to have been recommended by the Buddha himself.

What are the functions of the speculative mind? It adheres to reasoning and definition, and construes (*samarōpayati*)⁷ temperature, fluidity and solidity as characteristics of matter. At this stage it asserts quality and thereby the principle of contradiction as laws guiding human thinking and would-be controlling the phenomenal world. Yet Indian philosophy in general and Indian soteriology do not accept these principles as either binding or realistic.

In turn, it will be of interest to subject to some scrutiny the extent to which the principle of excluded middle may have been treated in discussions, analyses or definitions within the framework of Buddhist logic.

As far as could be ascertained the subject in itself has not been closely examined by Buddhist logicians, neither has it been treated as a category independent of other rules considered to be primary logical principles. References to it, however, though in an ancillary manner have been made incidentally in connexion with the examination of the relationship between the probans (*hetu*), and the probandum (*sādhana*) within the scope of an inference (*anumāna*).

The following examples attempt to show that, although the Buddhist logician was acutely aware of the fallacy of two or more mutually exclusive statements he circled around the problem cautiously without affixing to it the type of contradictoriness so unequivocally defined by Hamilton.

⁵ *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, p. 122.

⁶ By construction (*vikalpa*) is meant here the particular speculative capacity of mind to construe manifoldness and diversity.

⁷ Cf. *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, ib.

A few typical examples have been selected from the *Nyāyapraveśakasūtra* ascribed to Śāṅkaraśvāmin, and from Haribhadra's commentary thereon discussing the fallacies of the probans (*hetvābhāsa*). These instances may illustrate the type of reasoning devoted to contradictory predications. The most direct illustrations may be encountered in the analysis of the fallacies of the probans in a syllogism (*anumāna*), and particularly in that of the fallacy termed *viruddhāvabhicārī* (antinomic). A usual example for this fallacy is presented by the juxtaposition of two parallel syllogisms:

- a) *śabda anityaḥ kṛtakatvād: ghaṭavat* (the sound is transient because it is a product like a pot);
 b) *śabdo nityaḥ śravaṇatvād: śabdatvavat* (the sound is permanent because it is audible like "soundness").

Of the two syllogisms, in the former, permanence is denied to the sound on account of its being produced, in accordance with the Vaiśeṣika popular phrasing, and in the latter permanence of the sound is affirmed on account of its having the properties of sound in accordance with the Mīmāṃsā doctrine that "soundness" (*śabdatva*) which is the assembly of diverse sounds, is audible

In conformity with the principle of excluded middle it should be logical, and natural to maintain that, no matter what significance is attributed to the phrases "like a pot" and "like soundness" one of the syllogisms must be false. However, the *Nyāyapraveśa* approaches the problem more cautiously and with no such radical reasoning. According to it, of two predications (*hetu*) when they exist simultaneously, one must be doubtful (*anaikāntika*). The emphasis, being laid on the predications (*hetu*) and not on the syllogisms (*anumāna*) as a whole on the one hand, and on the simultaneity of their validity on the other, switches both the mental process and the logical significance on to a different plane from that of the principle of excluded middle.

In the first place, it attempts to establish the basic approach based on the *siddhānta*. In other words, if the Vaiśeṣikas adhere to the equation "what is produced is transient", while the Mīmāṃsakas to the equation "what has sound properties is permanent", then both are correct in their respective assertions. The question that might arise is which assertion is right in its substance and which of the arguments is more compelling: that of the Vaiśeṣikas (sound is produced and thus transient), or that of the Mīmāṃsakas (sound has sound properties and is thus permanent). The fact admittedly remains that it is impossible to say at the same time and by an adherent to one philosophical school that sound is permanent and transient, but the validity or invalidity of either cannot be judged by the terms of the Hamiltonian "objective opposition of existence and non-existence".

The contradictoriness of any statement will not be gauged by the Buddhist in general on the basis of "objective truth" as this would lead nowhere. In logic such contradictoriness will be established on the basis of,

popularly speaking, lack of consistency, or more philosophically, of a gap in the system based on a set of accepted conclusions (*siddhānta*). A favourite though somewhat complicated example of the Buddhist analysis of contradictoriness is given in a number of Buddhist logical treatises. The Sāṃkhya syllogism frequently quoted says: eyes, etc., serve something else because they are composite like a bed, a chair or another object [which is known to be composite]⁸. It is based on a Sāṃkhya doctrine, by which it is maintained that sense organs, which are composite, not simple (*saṅghāta*), serve something else which is simple, not composite, as for instance the *atman*.

The argument (being composite), says the Buddhist, though we have no quarrel with its substance, is contradictory, since, trying to prove that sense organs serve something else (*parārtha*) which is simple and permanent, you do not prove that this "something else" is permanent and simple. In fact the argument proves that something else is composite, and such proof is indicated by the examples you adduce, since beds, chairs, etc., do serve other composite object like, for instance, people. Furthermore, the Buddhists admit such syllogism because in conformity with their system senses remain in causal relation to the mental faculty (*viññāna*), which is neither simple nor permanent.

This example has been cited with the purpose of the following conclusion: It is permissible "in universo" to juxtapose against "reality" two arguments which appear contradictory to prove one thesis and it is permissible to pose one argument to prove two theses which appear mutually exclusive. It is not permissible to do so at the same time in one system, which, as it were, assumes under these circumstances the weight of reality in the form of an adopted set of dogmas, doctrines or conclusions (*siddhāntas*), whichever may be applicable. Here seems to lie the fundamental difference between the Hamiltonian approach who isolated reality from the mind and endowed it with truth independent of human mind, whereas the Buddhist would seek reality in the mind making it only partly a function of extraneous phenomena.

It would seem that neither ontological nor epistemological nor logical conceptions of the Buddhist, and in this case the rule appears to apply to all schools of thought, would either necessitate or indeed require the application of the law of excluded middle. Ontological or metaphysical concepts make such law heterogeneous even within the framework of a single philosophical school (*saṃvṛtti* and *paramārtha*), and rules of disputation make it baseless for the purpose of logical analyses, as was shown in the Buddhist exegesis of the Sāṃkhya and Vaiśeṣika syllogisms.

⁸ *parārthāś cakṣurādayaḥ saṅghātatvāt śayanāsanādyaṅgavat.*

