A Study of Buddha’s Philosophy on The Problems of Life


Who is man? is our first question. Let us proceed with what is self-evident and perceptible to all. Man possesses a body which is seen either by our senses or by means of apparatus. This material body consists of forces and qualities which are in a state of constant flux.

Scientists find it difficult to define what matter is. Certain philosophers define “matter as that in which proceed the changes called motion, and motion as those changes which proceed in matter.”

According to Buddhism there are four fundamental material elements. They are Pathavi, Apo, Tejo, and Vayo. Pathavi means the element of extension, the substratum of matter. Without it objects cannot occupy space. The qualities of hardness and softness which are purely relative are two conditions of this element. This element of extension is present in earth, water, fire and air. Apo is the element of cohesion. Unlike Pathavi it is intangible. It is this element which enables the scattered atoms of matter to cohere and thus gives us the idea of body. Tejo is the element of heat. Cold is also a form of Tejo. Both heat and cold are included in Tejo because they possess the power of maturing bodies, or, in other words, the vitalizing energy. Preservation and decay are due to this element. Vayo is the element of motion. The movements are caused by
this element. Motion is regarded as the force or the generator of heat. Both motion and heat in
the material realm correspond respectively to consciousness and Kamma in the mental.

**Whence?** is our second question. How did man originate'? Either there must be a beginning for
man or there cannot be a beginning. Those who belong to the first school postulate a first cause,
whether as a cosmic force or as an Almighty Being. Those who belong to the second school deny
a first cause for, in common experience, the cause ever becomes the effect and the effect
becomes the cause. In a circle of cause and effect a first cause is inconceivable. According to the
former life has had a beginning; while according to the latter it is beginningless. In the opinion of
some the conception of a first cause is as ridiculous as a round triangle

According to the scientific standpoint, man is the direct product of the sperm and ovum
cells provided by his parents. Scientists while asserting “Omnevivum ex vivo” — all life from
life, maintain, that mind and life evolved from the lifeless.

According to Buddhism man is born from the matrix of action (kammayoni). Parents
merely provide man with a material layer. As such being precedes being. At the moment of
conception, it is Kamma that conditions the initial consciousness that vitalizes the foetus. It is
this invisible Kammic energy generated from the past birth that produces mental phenomena and
the phenomenon of life in an already extant physical phenomenon, to complete the trio that
constitutes man.

**Whither?** is our third question. Where goes man?

According to ancient materialism which, in Pali and Samskrit, is known as Lokāyata,
man is annihilated after death, leaving behind him any force generated by him. “Man is
composed of four elements. When man dies the earthy element returns and relapses into the
earth; the watery element returns into the water; the fiery element returns into the fire; the airy
element returns into the air, the senses pass into space. Wise and fools alike, when the body
dissolves are cut off, perish, do not exist any longer. There is no other world. Death is the end of
all. This present world alone is real.

Buddhism believes in the present. With the present as the basis it argues the past and
future. Just as an electric light is the outward manifestation of invisible electric energy even so
man is merely the outward manifestation of an invisible energy known as Kamma. The bulb may
break, and the light may be extinguished, but the current remains and the light may be
reproduced in another bulb. In the same way the Kammic force remains undisturbed by the
disintegration of the physical body, and the passing away of the present consciousness leads to
the arising of a fresh one in another birth. Here the electric current is like the Kammic force, and
the bulb may be compared to the egg-cell provided by the parents. Past Kamma conditions the
present birth; and present Kamma, in combination with past Kamma, conditions the future. The
present is the offspring of the past, and becomes in turn the parent of the future.
Why? is our last question. Why is man? Is there a purpose in life? This is rather a controversial question.

What is the materialistic standpoint? Scientists answer:—

“Has life purpose? What, or where, or when?

Out of space came Universe, came Sun,

Came Earth, came Life, came Man, and more must come.

But as to Purpose: whose or whence? Why, None.”

Buddhism denies the existence of a Creator. As such from a Buddhist standpoint there cannot be a fore-ordained purpose. Nor does Buddhism advocate fatalism, determinism, or pre-destination which controls man’s future independent of his free actions. In such a case freewill becomes an absolute farce and life becomes purely mechanistic. To a large extent man’s actions are more or less mechanistic, being influenced by his own doings, upbringing, environment and so forth. But to a certain extent man can exercise his freewill. A person, for instance, falling from a cliff will be attracted to the ground just as an inanimate stone would. In this case he cannot use his freewill although he has a mind unlike the stone. If he were to climb a cliff, he could certainly use his freewill and act as he likes. A stone, on the contrary, is not free to do so of its own accord. Man has the power to choose between right and wrong, good and bad. Man can either be hostile or friendly to himself and others. It all depends on his mind and its development.

Although there is no specific purpose in man’s existence, yet man is free to have some purpose in life.

What, therefore, is the purpose of life?

In the opinion of a Buddhist, the purpose of life is Supreme Enlightenment (Sambodhi), i.e. understanding of oneself as one really is. This may be achieved through sublime conduct, mental culture, and penetrative insight; or in other words, through service and perfection. In service are included boundless loving-kindness, compassion, and absolute selflessness which prompt man to be of service to others. Perfection embraces absolute purity and absolute wisdom.