

Two Schools of Materialism in Indian Thought

by

D. J. KALUPAHANA

Dept. of Pali and Buddhist Civilization, University of Ceylon, Peradeniya.

THE concensus of opinion among scholars who analysed the thought of the Materialist schools of India is that according to these Materialists the material or the physical world was the only reality and that non-material phenomena such as consciousness are unreal. But the existence of a text called *Tattvopaplavasimha* compiled by Jayarāsi Bhaṭṭa,¹ being a unique work in that it is the only surviving text of the Materialistic schools in India, alters the situation leaving us with two distinct schools of thought. The *Tattvopaplavasimha* presents us with a school of Materialistic thought which is quite different from the classical form of Materialism represented by texts like *Ṣaḍdarśanasamuccaya*² and *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*.³ Comparing the conceptions of reality given in the above mentioned sources, it would be possible to classify the Indian Materialists into two groups, viz.,

- (1) Those who upheld a theory of evolution (*pariṇati*) of physical objects from material elements and ascribed reality to these, denying the reality of mental phenomena, and
- (2) those who upheld a nihilistic theory denying the reality even of physical objects.

Group (1) is certainly the best known. Both the *Ṣaḍdarśanasamuccaya* of Haribhadra and the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha* of Mādhava present this theory. The *Ṣaḍdarśanasamuccaya* states the theory thus: 'As a result of the evolution (*pariṇati*) of body (*deha*) by the combination of elements of

¹ Edited by S. Saṅghavi and R. C. Parikh (Baroda Oriental Institute, 1940, Gaekwad Oriental Series, 87).

² *Ṣaḍdarśana-samuchchaya* by Haribhadra with Guṇaratna's commentary *Tarkarahasya-dīpikā*, edited by Luigi Sualì, *Bibliotheca Indica*, Work No. 167, (Calcutta 1905).

³ *Sarvadarśana-samgraha*, edited by V. S. Abhyankar, The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona 1924.

TWO SCHOOLS OF MATERIALISM IN INDIAN THOUGHT

earth, etc., consciousness arises'.⁴ The same theory is set out in the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha* which says 'Here the elements, earth, etc., are the four realities; from the evolution of the form of body (*dehākāra*) from these (realities), consciousness is produced'.⁵ Thus, according to this theory, body or form (*deha*) of a physical thing is real in that it is directly evolved from real material elements. But these bodies are distinguished from consciousness (*caitanya*) which arises in them once they have evolved (*pariṇatebhyaḥ*). This implies that the physical bodies are as real as the material elements that go to constitute them, while consciousness is only a by-product and, therefore, unreal. These materialists accepted the validity of perception (and also inference in a limited sense⁶) as a source of knowledge and therefore they were able to grant the reality of physical bodies. But they rejected consciousness, etc., as unreal because these are not subject to perception, they are *adr̥ṣṭa*. The example quoted in the *Ṣaḍdarśanasamuccaya* amply illustrates this. Spirituous liquor is derived from a combination of various ingredients.⁷ The ingredients as well as liquor are real. What is unreal is the alcoholic content or power of liquor (*madaśaktiḥ*) which is not perceived.

The above was an Evolutionary school of Materialism. The belief in the evolution of physical bodies (*deha-rūpa*) from material elements and the granting of a greater degree of reality to objects which have evolved in this manner than to consciousness, may have led these Materialists to accept a personality lasting from birth to death. This gave rise to a school of Materialists who were represented as holding the view that the soul is identical with the body (*tajjivataccharīravāda*) referred to in the Buddhist⁸ as well as the Jaina⁹ texts.

⁴ p. 306, *pr̥thivyādisamhatyā tathā dehāpariṇateḥ ... tadvaccidātmani*.

⁵ p. 2, *tatra pr̥thivyādīni bhūtāni catvāri tattvāni, tebhya eva dehākāra-pariṇatebhyaḥ caitanyam upajāyate*.

⁶ Jayatilleke, K. N., *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, London, 1963, p. 72.

⁷ p. 306, *madaśaktiḥ surāṅgebhyaḥ*.

⁸ *Dīgha Nikāya*, edited by T. W. Rhys Davids and J. Estlin Carpenter, Pali Text Society, London, 1949, vol. i, p. 55, *attā rūpi cātummahābhū-tiko*; = *Ch'ang-a-han-ching*, 17.1, *Taisho Shinshu Daizōkyō*, edited by J. Takakusu and K. Watanabe, Tokyo: The Taisho Issai-kyo Kanko Kwai, 1924-1932, vol. i, p. 108b; *Majjhima Nikāya*, edited by V. Trenckner and R. Chalmers, Pali Text Society, London, 1948, vol. i, p. 426; = *Chung-a-han-ching*, 60.6, *Taisho Shinshu Daizōkyō*, vol. i, p. 804a.

⁹ *Sūtrakṛtāṅga*, 2.1.9, *Sūyagaḍam*, edited by P. L. Vaidya, Poona, 1928, p. 71.

The teachings of group (2) are represented in the *Tattvopaplavasimha*. Here, the constitution of the phenomenal world is described in a slightly different way. It does not speak of an evolution, but maintains just that 'earth, water, fire, and air are the realities and as a result of their combination (arise) body, senses, objects and consciousness'.¹⁰ The important feature in this statement is that even the body, the senses and the external objects are considered to be in the same category as consciousness. As the statement stands, it is not possible to make any distinction between the body, the senses, and the objects on the one hand, and consciousness on the other. Now, consciousness is considered by all the Materialists as unreal. Therefore, the conclusion that according to this school of Materialism even physical bodies are unreal, is irresistible. Moreover, if we are to understand body and senses as representing the subject, the objects as referring to the external objects perceived and consciousness as the experiential content, then all the conditions of the perceptual process are unreal; the only reality being that of the four elements. Such a theory is quite consistent with the epistemological standpoint adopted by this school. As K. N. Jayatilleke has pointed out, they denied even perception¹¹ and thus there was no ground for them to hold that physical bodies are real.

Dialectical arguments were adduced by this school of Materialists to refute the conception of causality (*hetupalabhāva*).¹² Jayarāsi rejects the idea of production (*janakatva*)^{12a} as well as concomitance (*sahotpāda*).¹³ The rejection of the idea of production or of origination led Jayarāsi to deny the idea of destruction (*viṇāśa*).¹⁴ It appears to be the result of the *a priori* premiss. 'What is does not perish, and from nothing comes nothing,'¹⁵ generally held by the Materialists.¹⁶ With the rejection of destruction

¹⁰ p. 1, *prthivyâpastejovâyur iti tattvāni, tat samudaye śarīrendriya-
viṣayasamjñā*. Guṇaratna, in his *Tarkarahasyadīpikā* (p. 307), quotes a
similar passage where *viṣaya* is placed before *indriya*, and also with an
addition, namely, *tebhyas caitanyam*, which Jayatilleke considers to
be a reference to an emergent *ātman* (v. *op.cit.*, p. 81, n. 2).

¹¹ *op.cit.*, p. 71.

¹² *Tattvopaplavasimha* p. 87.

^{12a} *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 70 f.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁵ *Sūtrakṛtāṅga*, 2. 1. 10, see P. L. Vaidya, *op.cit.*, p. 72, *sao natthi viṇāso
asao natthi sambhavo*.

¹⁶ *Sūtrakṛtāṅga*, with the commentary (*vivaraṇa*) of Śīlāṅka, edited by
A. S. Sūri and C. Gaṇindra, Bhavanagara, 1950-3, vol. ii, folio 17;
Jayatilleke, *op.cit.*, p. 70.

(*viṅśā*), Jayarāśi had to accept the permanence of all realities.¹⁷ This he did without any hesitation when, after criticizing the conception of causality, he comes to the conclusion that ‘anterior or posterior activity is not generated by immovable or static matter (*avicalita-rūpa*)’.¹⁸ This means that the Nihilist school of Materialists, unlike the Evolutionary school, upheld the theory of motionless permanence (*avicalita-nityatvam*). With the acceptance of the principle of motionless permanence, these Materialists were compelled to maintain the unproductivity or barrenness of phenomena. This idea is explicitly stated by Jayarāśi Bhaṭṭa when he said: ‘The wise do not query about causation or absence of causation as in the case of a barren woman’s child who is non-existent’.¹⁹

The *Sūtrakṛtāṅga* of the Jainas, attributes the doctrine of motionless permanence (*avicalita-nityatvam*) to a school of amoralists (*akiriyavādin*) and it states as follows: ‘Those amoralists, who have no understanding, posit various theories. ... the sun does not rise or set, the moon does not wax or wane, rivers do not flow and winds do not blow; the whole world is deemed barren (*vañjho*)’.²⁰ While commenting on this passage, Śīlāṅka, the Jaina commentator, has identified this theory with the teachings of Cārvākas and the Buddhists.²¹ In the previous paragraph we have given sufficient evidence to show that the Nihilist Materialists as represented in the *Tattvopaplavasimha* advocated such a conception of reality. When Śīlāṅka made this identification, he seems to have been definitely aware of the existence of this school of Materialism, for he even refers to their epistemological standpoint depending on which they maintained that this world was barren and unreal. He says: ‘In putting forward the theory that ‘nothing exists’, the Lokāyatikas admit

¹⁷ *Tattvopaplavasimha*, p. 106, *tadā sarvabhāvānāṃ nityatvam āpadyate viṅśāsasyāsambhavāt.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 87, *avicalitarūpena pūrvāparakāryaṃ na janyate; also ito’pi dahanadhūmayoḥ hetuphalabhāvānupapattiḥ yathā avicalitadahanarūpasya pūrvāparānekakāryāvīrbhāvakatvaṃ na pratipadyate.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 106, *na hi vandhyāsutasyābhāve sahetukatvaṃ nirhetukatvaṃ vā vicārayanti santaḥ.*

²⁰ *Sūtrakṛtāṅga*, 1.12.6–7, (V. P. L. Vaidya, *op.cit.*, p. 53), *te evam akkhanti abujjhamānā virūvarūvāni akiriyavāi ... nāicco udci na atthamei, na candimā vaḍḍhai hāyaī vā, salilā na sandanti na vanti vāyā, vañjho niyao kasine hu loe.*

²¹ *Sūtrakṛtāṅga*, with the commentary (*vivarāṇa*) of Śīlāṅka, vol. i, fol. 220, on *Sūtrakṛtāṅga*, 1.12.6.

no means of knowledge, for it has been said: 'all principles have been upset' ...".²² In the light of the explicit references to the doctrine of motionless permanence (*avicalita-nityatvam*) in the *Tattvopaplavasimha*, we find it difficult to contribute to the view put forward by Jayatilleke when he says that, 'it is unlikely that the Nihilist Materialists would have made a detailed denial of the reality of motion since they merely denied the existence of the world as such on epistemological grounds, because there were no valid means of knowing it'.²³ In spite of this remark, Jayatilleke has tried to identify the Materialist teaching referred to by Śīlāṅka with the teachings of the Nihilist School.²⁴ This inconsistency may be due to the failure to notice the occurrence of the doctrine of motionless permanence in the *Tattvopaplavasimha*. A. L. Basham too, when he discussed the Ājīvika doctrine of motionless permanence,²⁵ failed to notice that it also occurred in the treatises of the Nihilist Materialists. It is a doctrine which, among others, is common to both Ājīvika and Materialist traditions.

The criticism of causality, coupled with the doctrine of motionless permanence of material elements, led the Nihilist Materialists to believe that the world perceptible to the senses was unreal, not to speak of the other-world or the world beyond. Jayatilleke has, for the first time, observed the connection between this theory and the doctrine attributed to Ajita Kesakambali in the early Buddhist texts.²⁶ Here Ajita is represented as maintaining that 'neither this world nor the other exists' (*natthi ayaṃ loko natthi paro loko*).²⁷

²² *ibid.*, *Lokāyatikānāṃ sarvaśūnyatve pratipādye na pramāṇam asti, tathā c'oktaṃ tattvāny upaplutānīti*. Dr. Jayatilleke seems to have quoted this passage wrongly when he stated it thus: *Lokāyatikānaṃ sarvaśūnyatve pratipādyatvena pramāṇam asti*, and has translated it as: 'The Lokāyatikas do have a means of knowledge in putting forward the theory that nothing exists,.....', in spite of his admission that they 'denied the existence of the world as such on epistemological grounds, because there were no valid means of knowing it', *op.cit.*, p. 256.

²³ *op.cit.*, p. 256.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 256.

²⁵ Basham, A. L., *History and Doctrines of the Ājīvikas, a vanished Indian Religion*, London, 1951, p. 236.

²⁶ *op.cit.*, p. 90-91.

²⁷ *Dīghī Nikāya*, vol. i, p.55; *Majjhima Nikāya*, vol. iii, p.71, *n'atthi ayaṃ loko n'atthi paro loko*. The Chinese version of the *Sāmaññaphala Suttanta* attributes this statement to Makkhali Gosāla, v. *Chang-a-han-ching*, 17.1, *Taisho Shinshu Daizōkyō*, vol. i, p. 108 b.

TWO SCHOOLS OF MATERIALISM IN INDIAN THOUGHT

Furthermore, the idea of indestructibility, and, therefore, of permanence of matter as envisaged in the doctrine of motionless permanence (*avicalita-nityatvam*) is also implied in the teaching of Ajita Kesakambali, who is considered to be the earliest and chief representative of Materialistic thought in India. His doctrine is set out in the early Buddhist texts thus : 'Man is composed of the four great elements ; when he dies, the earth returns to the earth aggregate, water to water, fire to fire, air to air, while the senses vanish into space'.²⁸ The most significant feature of this theory is that it implies the indestructibility of matter, an idea which is generally attributed to the Ājīvika teacher, Pakudha Kaccāyana.²⁹ We are told that the physical personality consisting of the four great elements, according to Ajita's theory, is completely cut off and destroyed, but not the material elements. They return to their natural places, earth to earth, water to water, fire to fire and air to air. Thus the material elements are indestructible and permanent. Therefore, not only in the matter of denying the reality of this world, but also with regard to the conception of matter, Ajita Kesakambali's teachings represent the doctrines of the Nihilist school of Materialists in germinal form.

²⁸ *Dīgha Nikāya*, vol. i, p. 55, *cātūmmahābhūtikō ayaṃ puriso, yadā kālāṃ karoti paṭhavi paṭhavikāyaṃ anupeti anupagacchati, āpo āpokāyaṃ..., tejo tejokāyaṃ..., vāyo vāyokāyaṃ..., ākāsaṃ indriyāni saṅkamanti, = Ch'ang-a-han-ching*, 17. 1 *Taisho Shinshu Daizōkyō*, vol. i, p. 108b.

²⁹ *Dīgha Nikāya*, vol. i, p. 56; v. Basham, *op.cit.*, p. 16.