

Arvind Sharma  
Mc Gill University, Canada

## A THIRD WAY OF SPIRITUALITY BEYOND FAITH AND REASON IN BUDDHISM

A popular book on the philosophy of religion contains the following epistemological observation: "Philosophy recognizes two ways in which human beings may come to know whatever there is to be known. One way (stressed by empiricism) is through experience, and the other (stressed by rationalism) is through reasoning."<sup>1</sup> Three points need to be made before proceeding any further. The first is that the word experience here must be taken as confined to normal sensory experience and excludes both extra-sensory perception and mystical experience.<sup>2</sup> The second is that experience and reason can be combined as a way of knowing which one might call rationalism, as reason operates within the realm of sensory experience. The third point is that although philosophy of religion discusses the nature of faith<sup>3</sup> it does not, unlike theology, accept it as a way of knowing.

If now we take a comprehensive view of the ways of knowing reality as acknowledged in philosophy then we obtain the following two classes of thinkers whose approach to the ultimate reality is characterized by a reliance on reason or faith:

- (1) The Traditionalists who rely on revelation based on faith, and
- (2) The Rationalists who rely on reason (which includes experience in the sense of sensory experience).

The debate between reason and revelation as ways of knowing is a time honoured one and it is not our purpose here to prolong it but rather to ask: is there any *other* way in which the ultimate reality may be known? Or, in other words, can the ultimate reality be known without or outside of faith and reason?

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1. John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Third Edition) Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.), p. 57.

2. *Ibid.*, *passim*.

3. *Ibid.*, Chapter Five.

In the rest of this paper I shall argue that there is historical evidence from India to suggest that there may be a third way of knowing and that this new and third way of knowing should be considered seriously in the study of religion, specially in that branch of it known as the philosophy of religion. But before this line of investigation can be pursued fruitfully, the sense in which the terms faith and reason are being used needs to be clarified.

## I

First faith. Faith can mean many things but it may here be taken to convey "the notion of an intellectual assent to the content of revelation as true." It can easily be seen that this kind of intellectual assent we regularly extend to reason so that it boils down to a question of – from one point of view – whether we are going to have faith in revelation *or* faith in reason. This is to make the point that the issue need not always be between faith and reason but could as well take the form of having either faith in revelation or faith in reason. Here an analysis of the Hindu analogue to faith, namely *Śraddhā* is helpful. Seshagiri Rao concludes after an analysis of the term in some of the major bodies of religious literature in India that the contents of *Sraddhā* "differ with each unit examined"<sup>4</sup> and that "there is no one meaning of formulation of *Sraddhā* which is accepted by all of them."<sup>5</sup> He goes on to suggest that "the continuity of the concept of *Śraddhā* in Hinduism does not consist in its material content but in its formal aspect"<sup>6</sup> and that these formal aspects could be identified as (1) the aspiration for a transcendent goal; (2) the confidence of appropriate means and (3) the reliance on a scripture (*Śāstra*). These aspects are "uniform and consistent" throughout the historical development of the concept and "appear as essential elements of *Śraddhā* all the way through."<sup>7</sup>

Thus although one could obtain two meanings of faith and the second of these would tend to diminish the traditional polar distinction between faith and reason, the word faith will be used here only in its first sense. One may also distinguish here between provisional

4. K.L. Seshagiri Rao, *The Concept of Sraddhā* (Patiala: Roy Publishers, 1971), p. 188.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

and ultimate faith. When we say that even the use of reason involves faith in reason it carries the implication of the results of such faith being subject to empirical verification. Hence such faith may be designated provisional as distinguished from faith in religion where it tends to be ultimate in terms of this life, though, I suppose, open to post-mortem verification.

One also needs to distinguish similarly between the various senses of the word reason. It can be understood in at least three senses. Let these be called the primary, the secondary and the tertiary senses of the word for convenience. In its primary sense, reason would be "the intellectual process of seeking truth or knowledge by inferring from either fact or knowledge." However, it will be noticed that sometimes we use reason also in a secondary way. Let us suppose, for instance, that a scholar suggests morality as a yardstick for judging the relative merit of various religions. One might be tempted to ask: on what grounds, that is, for what *reasons* should we choose morality as such a criterion. As soon as this question is asked two points deserve to be noticed. The first is that as reasons are to be given for morality as a criterion in effect reason and not morality has become the criterion. At the same time, however – and this is the second point – reason in this case has a different role to play than in the primary meaning. For instance, one could as well select rationality rather than morality as a criterion in which case the sense in which reason will be used is different. Then there is the possibility to conclude on rational grounds that reason cannot suffice to provide an insight into the ultimate reality which may, for instance, be supramental. This is yet another sense of the word reason – when reason is used to give reasons why reason cannot deliver the goods.

In this paper the word reason, like faith, is only used in its primary sense.

## II

K.N. Jayatilleke tries "to classify the thinkers of the pre-Buddhistic era in accordance with their epistemological outlook and approach to problems"<sup>8</sup> in India and concludes that as a whole these thinkers

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8. K.N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1963), p. 169.

fall into three classes according to the stress they laid on a particular way of knowing, viz.,

- (1) The Traditionalists, who derived their knowledge wholly from a scriptural tradition and interpretations based on it. Prominent in this class were the brahmins who upheld the sacred authority of the Vedas.
- (2) The Rationalists, who derived their knowledge from reasoning and speculation without any claims to extrasensory perception. The metaphysicians of the Early Upaniṣads, the Sceptics, the Materialists and most of the Ājīvakas fell into this class.
- (3) The 'Experientialists,' who depended on direct personal knowledge and experience, including extrasensory perception on the basis of which their theories were founded. Many of the thinkers of the Middle and Late Upaniṣads, some of the Ājīvakas and Jains are classifiable in this group. The Materialists, as empiricists, would also fall under this category if not for the fact that they denied the validity of claims to extrasensory perception.

K.N. Jayatilleke then goes on to show how the Buddha identifies himself with the members of the Third Group.<sup>9</sup>

Several points need to be noted about this classification: (1) that the classificatory categories precede the rise of Buddhism, that is to say, they represent three broad approaches to the question of religious knowledge; (2) that early Buddhism aligned itself with the third position; (3) that these three approaches can be identified within a particular school of Hinduism itself and (4) that this classification can be extended to the study of religion in modern times. The next three sections will be devoted to the explication of the second, third and fourth points.

### III

It could possibly be argued that later Buddhism may have departed from the category assigned to it by the Buddha himself. But that the category continued to operate within Buddhism can be seen from the distinction drawn in Buddhism between the four ideal types:

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9. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

the Arhat, the Bodhisattva, the Pratyeka Buddha and the Buddha.<sup>10</sup> It could be argued that the distinction in Theravāda Buddhism between one who obtains liberation by the faith (*Saddhā*)<sup>11</sup> as distinguished from one who attains it by insight (*Paññā*)<sup>12</sup> involves a virtual reversion to categories (1) and (2) on the part of Buddhism. Even if this is admitted it is clear that the private Buddhas attain direct personal realization entirely on their own. Hence even if it is argued that later Buddhism incorporated other modes of knowing it never abandoned the 'Experimental' one.

#### IV

The trichotomy mentioned earlier can be successfully applied within Hinduism at least to the school of Advaita Vedānta. Advaita Vedānta, the non-dualistic school of Hindu philosophy, generally espouses the traditional position – that the ultimate reality can only be known through revelation which in this case takes the form of Vedic testimony.<sup>13</sup> This is generally held to be the position espoused by Śaṅkara, the best known formulator of this school.<sup>14</sup> His predecessor, Gauḍapāda, however, seems to allow for reason by itself as capable of yielding knowledge of the ultimate reality<sup>15</sup> so much so that Śaṅkara's handling of the passage wherein this is allowed has caused controversy among scholars regarding Śaṅkara's position on the issue of revelation versus reason.<sup>16</sup> Yet it is not often realized that Śaṅkara himself concedes the possibility of "direct personal knowledge and experience" of the ultimate reality. As this is not widely known the relevant section of his gloss on Brahmasūtra is cited below:

Scriptural text, &c., are not, in the enquiry into Brahman, the only means of knowledge, as they are in the enquiry into active duty (i.e. in the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā), but scriptural texts

10. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

11. Nalinaksha Dutt, *Mahayana Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977), p. 100–101.

12. *Ibid.*

13. R. Balasubramaniam, *Advaita Vedānta* (University of Madras, 1976), pp. 6–7.

14. K. Satchidananda Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), Part Two. Chapter Four.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 163. Also see S. Radhakrishnan, *The Brahma Sūtra: The Philosophy of Spiritual Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1960), p. 104.

on the one hand, and intuition, &c., on the other hand, are to be had recourse to according to the occasion: firstly, because intuition is the final result of the enquiry into Brahman; secondly, because the object of the enquiry is an existing (accomplished) substance. If the object of the knowledge of Brahman were something to be accomplished, there would be no reference to intuition, and text, &c., would be the only means of knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

Thus all the three categories mentioned by Jayatilleke can be seen as operating within a major school of Hindu School as much as on the Indian religious scene in general.<sup>18</sup>

## V

It is, therefore, a persistent Indian tradition that the ultimate reality can be known without faith and reason. These may follow but need not necessarily precede the knowledge.

In the context of Indian religiosity it is clear that the knowledge of ultimate reality has been considered possible without recourse to faith or reason or, shall we say, religion and philosophy in the formal sense. This fact seems to get lost sight of because religion and philosophy in their formal aspects tend to dominate the landscape of life and one has to take a close look to discover what room, if any, is left for someone not willing to toe the line. The question arises: can an individual by a sincere search for truth on his or her own attain it?

One possible response is that such insight could be attained through *Yoga* in its formal sense. Through the "control of the fluctuations of mind and continuous practice of concentration," the practitioner of

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17. George Thibaut, tr., *The Vedānta Sūtras of Bādarāyaṇa with the Commentary of Śaṅkara Part I* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), p. 17-18.

18. Sometimes all the three positions are reflected in the same Upanisad. See Bṛhadāra-ṇyaka Upanisad: 2, 4, 3-4; 4.4.19 and 3.5.1.

*Yoga* attains an insight which "is different from the insight generated by scriptural and inferential knowledge" through which it is "possible to have *visio Dei*"<sup>19</sup>—the vision of God or the ultimate reality. While it is true that the approach to ultimate reality via meditation need not involve either faith or reason and has a time-honoured place in Eastern civilizations, it presents philosophical and cultural difficulties. The philosophical difficulty is that its highest state involve deep trances and "as the mystics themselves admit, while in a trance a mystic does not know what he is experiencing, but after coming out of the trance he interprets his experience in terms of his beliefs."<sup>20</sup>

In order to see the cultural difficulty this whole discussion needs to be placed in a historical perspective. Since the establishment of Christianity in the Western world two broad phases towards the discovery of truth may be discerned. The first relied on God, grace, revelation and faith. Then came the Enlightenment and the reliance was now placed on man, effort and reason for the discovery of truth. With this change brought about by the Enlightenment, however, there was also a change in the nature of the truths sought. The search for truth about God gave way to search for truth about nature.

Modern man is a product of this Enlightenment and therefore seeks the truths of nature by effort through reason. Of late modern man has shown revived interest in seeking spiritual truths. Should he persist in this the question arises whether there is a way for modern man to discover truth on his own even if he shies away from meditational techniques involving trances because of the modern temper which believes in doing research while wide awake.

## VI

Is such a method available?

It would seem that there is. It is primarily but not exclusively<sup>21</sup> found in Zen Buddhism where the state of realization involves neither

19. K. Satchidananda Murty, *op.cit.*, p. 135.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 258.

21. M. Hiriyanna, *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949), p. 106.

faith nor reason nor transic meditation. It involves reflection and uses the very mind which we are using now. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad says that the reality is "known through the mind" (4.4.19), the mind which makes the world around us a living fact. "This passion for the living fact accounts for that quality in the Zen masters which must seem most amazing to the Westerner: their supreme matter-of-factness. 'What is the Tao (the way, the truth)?' asks the disciple. 'Your everyday mind,' replies the Master; and he goes on to amplify: 'When I am hungry, I eat; when tired, I sleep.' The disciple is puzzled, and asks whether this is not what everybody else does too. No, the Master replies, most people are never wholly in what they are doing; when eating, they may be absent-mindedly preoccupied with a thousand different fantasies; when sleeping, they are not sleeping. The supreme mark of the thoroughly integrated man is to be without a divided mind. This matter-of-fact spirit of Zen is expressed in another paradoxical statement: 'Before you have studied Zen, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers; while you are studying it, mountains are no longer mountains and rivers no longer rivers; but once you have had Enlightenment, mountains are once again mountains and rivers are rivers.' The stories of their arduous struggles for Enlightenment teach us that this matter-of-fact spirit of the Zen masters is not a thing easily come by: they are indeed awesome figures who have crossed the mountains and rivers, floods and fires of the spirit in order to come back sole and whole to the most banal things of daily life."<sup>22</sup>

One should not make the error here of concluding that according to this paper the ultimate can be known without faith and reason and that this can be achieved only through Zen. The conclusion the paper suggests is that the ultimate reality may be known without faith and reason (and even without transic meditation) through intense introspection. One may conclude with

... a very concrete description of the process involved: a man sees a scene and then makes a conscious reflection by means of which he understands the meaning of everything he sees; this is an act of *paññā*. In the same way, he can by introspection

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22. William Barrett, ed., *Zen Buddhism* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1956), p. xvi-xvii.



see himself, how he is caught in a vicious circle of causality, how everything in his life is caused and only leads to suffering, further exactly what those causes are and how the law can be used to counteract the effects – and we can understand how this vision and understanding can lead to an experience of liberation. Even dynamic factors (desires, emotions) may be influenced, diverted or dissolved, by a causal analysis of their origin and their effects. This is not commonly recognized in contemporary psychology, but the matter has never been properly investigated.<sup>23</sup>

It is high time it was.

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23. Rune E.A. Johansson, *The Psychology of Nirvāna* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 70.