

**Buddhist Logic (Volume I)**  
**Stcherbatsky**  
(Book Review by Radhika Abeysekera)

### **Biography**

Stcherbatsky who lived from 1866 to 1942 was a Russian known as a specialist in the study of Tibet and India. A professor at St. Petersburg University in Tsarist times, Stcherbatsky was elected to the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union in 1918. In 1928 he assumed direction of the Institute of Buddhist Culture in Leningrad. He became renowned for his translations of Tibetan and Sanskrit. He was also the author of a number of work in English including *The conception of Buddhist Nirvana* (Leningrad 1927), *The central conception of Buddhism and the Meaning of the word Dhamma* the second edition of which was published in Calcutta in 1956 and his two volumes of *Buddhist Logic*. His work has been translated to German, French and Japanese. Contemporary Soviet scholars note that his work remains unsurpassed to this date. Stcherbatsky died on March 18, 1942.

### **Overview**

There is a wide spread prejudice that positive philosophy is to be found only in Europe. It is also a prejudice that Aristotle, Plato Socrates and modern philosophers such as Kant, Hegel and Hume had no predecessor in this field in the East. This work considers a system of logic, but it is not Aristotelian. It is epistemological but not Kantian. It is philosophical but not Socratesan.

In his book *Buddhists Logic* (volume I) Stcherbatsky is addressing a system of logic and epistemology (knowledge based study) realized by the Gotama Buddha in 600 BC. A system of logic that predates Aristotle, Plato and Socrates. Of the three periods of growth and change in Buddhism Stcherbatsky has selected the most recent or third period and the philosophy expounded by two great Buddhists masters in the VI and VII century AD - the Masters Dignaaga and Dharmakirthis for his book

**(Extracted from Page 1)**. Stcherbatsky claims that the logic in Buddhist philosophy contains more than just syllogism (deductive reasoning). It contains a theory of sense perceptions or more precisely a theory on the part of pure sensation in the whole content of our knowledge and on the reality of the external world as cognized by us in sensations and images. These problems are usually treated under the heading of epistemology. Therefore we may be justified in calling the Buddhist system a system of epistemological (knowledge based) logic. The Buddhists themselves call their science a doctrine of logical reason. It is a doctrine of truth through experience.

The ultimate aim of Buddhist logic is to explain the relation between a changing reality (internal and external) and the conditioned fabrications of thought. This doctrine of changing reality opposed the schools of realist such as Nyaya -Vaisesika and Mumamsa

for whom reality was static. Stcherbatsky feels that Buddhist logic was created in a spirit of opposition to the doctrines of these realists.

In Part I and II of this book, Stcherbatsky analyses key Buddhist concepts using epistemic factors such as dialectics, syllogisms, contradiction, inference, judgment etc and then compares them to both Indian and European thought.

In part III of this book Stcherbatsky analyses the various methods of comparative philosophy specifically with Master Diganaaga's views of the various methods. He shows the influence of Diganaaga on the logical fallacies of the Nyaya - Vaisheshika system. He also analyses the Buddhist theory of negation and judgment. He then compares the usage to both ancient Indian and European parallels.

By using comparative philosophy and epistemic factors Stcherbatsky tries to show that the Buddhist logic is a positive philosophy comparable with any European philosophy and one that is more ancient than most found in the West.

### **The History of Buddhism and an Introduction to Buddhist Logic**

The history of Buddhism in India may be divided into three periods. During all three periods the Buddhist concept of a dynamic flow of existence - a changing reality-remained steadfast.

During the first period three fundamental concepts of Buddhism were brought forward: The concept of no permanent self or soul, the concept of impermanence or change and the concept of stress or suffering. These components were conditionally related in a law of causality known as the doctrine of dependent origination.

The doctrine was summarized in what is known as the four noble truths.

- 1-The existence of stress and suffering
2. The cause of suffering –grasping or clinging (Tanha)
3. The absence of suffering Nirvana or the final goal (Being the absence of grasping)
4. The path leading to the absence of suffering. – The Noble Eightfold Path.

The Goal or salvation was freedom from stress and suffering through self-purification. God played no part in this quest, which was essentially a path of salvation through self-purification. As the Buddhist doctrine had perceived reality and absolute reality and contained many key concepts such as the four noble truths and the doctrine of not self, impermanence and suffering it was known as a pluralistic system.

At the beginning of the fifth century, during the second period of Buddhism a radical change in Buddhist philosophy occurred. Buddhist philosophers changed the concept of the Buddha as being a perfect human - a fully enlightened Buddha - and made him a divine being. This new Buddhism gave up the idea of personal salvation where each

person strived on his own with the help of the teachings and the teacher and instead replaced it with universal salvation with the help of the divine Buddha. The core philosophy was based on emptiness, which was a hybrid of the doctrine of no soul and impermanence. It also changed the philosophy from radical pluralism to radical monism where emptiness was the key concept of reality. This new Buddhism also condemned logic and gave predominance to mysticism.

The third period of Buddhist philosophy, which begins in the sixth and seventh century, changed Buddhism further. The first outstanding feature of the third period was a revival of logic. A further feature was that Buddhism became idealistic. It maintained that all existence is necessarily mental and that our ideas have no support in corresponding external reality. Consciousness became the focus of this third period.

Throughout the three periods of Buddhist evolution the doctrine of impermanence, the doctrine of no permanent self or soul and the doctrine of dependent origination remained in some form or other. Elucidating the system of philosophy in this third period is the object of Stcherbatsky's present work.

### **Comparative philosophy to existing systems in India**

Stcherbatsky, Begins his book on *Buddhist Logic* by comparing Buddhist philosophy to those of other philosophies that existed at the time in India, namely the Materialists, Jainism, Sankhya System, The Yoga System, The Vedanta, the Mimamsa and The Nyaya-Vaisesika system. Stcherbatsky explored the dialogue and contradiction used among the various schools to clarify and modify or strengthen their individual position. Stcherbatsky then compares the various schools to arrive at the similarities and differences of the various systems using Buddhism as the norm. For example he compares Buddhism with the materialist and summarizes as follows: "In the denial of a permanent self and an omnipotent creator God materialist fell in line with Buddhism. It diverged from Buddhism in denying kamma (The law of cause and effect) and Nirvana (absence from suffering)" **(Page 15)**

His comparisons of Buddhism to the other systems in existence followed this pattern. He also hi-lighted when other systems had changed resulting from Buddhism and dialogue and contradiction with Buddhist ideals. **(Page 22)** For example he says: "The Mimamsa was a business like religion. There was no religious emotion or moral evaluation. It was founded on the principle that you pay the Brahmin his fee and you had your reward. However, in the face of Buddhists logic and reasoning they were driven by necessity to defend this business religion and for strengthening the authority of the Vedas".

However, at this point in his book Stcherbatsky does not use logical reasoning or syllogisms or any other methodology to first defend the Buddhist philosophy. Instead taking it as norm he outlines the similarities and differences of the other systems to Buddhist philosophy and the influence of Buddhism on them and the influence of these other religions on Buddhism. While he addresses the fact that dialogue and contradiction

arose among the existing religions, which helped to formulate the various doctrines he does not prove or disprove Buddhist philosophy.

### **Comparative philosophy to European systems**

Stcherbatsky then moves to Buddhist logic in China and Japan and Buddhist logic in Tibet and Mongolia. By this time Buddhism had become extinct in India but every remarkable work of the Indian Buddhists had been translated to Tibetan. The Indian Master Darmakirthis had given Buddhist logic to Tibet. Stcherbatsky compares Darmakirthis's logic in Tibet to Aristotle's European Logic. "The Tibetan logical literature he says corresponds to European medieval scholastic literature. The chief reasoning being the reducing of scientific thought to the three terms of a regular syllogism". **(Page 55)**

It is at this point in his book that Stcherbatsky analyses Buddhist logic using epistemic factors. He does this by categorizing Buddhist logic into its predominant characteristics. Starting with the theory of instantaneous being or the doctrine of impermanence he moves to the doctrine of dependent origination, sense perception and ultimate reality. He begins by looking at epistemic factors to reason the logic of the Buddhist philosophy. He then looks for European parallels.

For example the doctrine of impermanence and no self or no soul in Buddhism is compared to the modern philosopher Bergson's writings. **(Page 115)** "Bergson makes a statement to the effect that there is no ego. ie no permanent substratum for mental phenomena, that existence means constant change or what does not change does not exist... Instantaneous being (ever changing) they are connected only by casual laws. The comparison to Buddhism cannot be more complete. Buddhism is called the no ego doctrine, the doctrine of impermanence or instantaneous being and the doctrine of causation or dependent origination."

Stcherbatsky begins by analyzing the law of karma using critical thinking and dialectic (arriving at the truth by logical arguments). In short karma is a moral law of cause and effect that links intentional wholesome and unwholesome action to reactions. **(Page 134)** Stcherbatsky claims "The Buddha has revealed the law of karma". He then adds, "the law of karma can not be proved experimentally. It is transcendental. But when critically examined it will be found to have no contradiction and therefore it can be believed even by critical minds".

Stcherbatsky then addresses the doctrine of dependent origination and tries to validate its truth. **(Page 119)** He claims: "Among all the jewels of Buddhist philosophy the chief jewel is the theory of causation or the doctrine of dependent origination". Stcherbatsky then compares the doctrine of dependent origination to the theory of Universal Momentariness for validation. **(Read from book page 119)**. Stcherbatsky then uses the mathematical proof of S. March as an epistemic factor to substantiate the logic and reasoning of the doctrine of dependent origination. **(Read from book page 142)**

After describing the doctrine of dependent origination as laid out in both the Mahayana and Theravada traditions Stcherbatsky looks for comparison in Europe. **(Quote page 142)** “The doctrine of dependent origination and its profound brilliance has fascinated the Western world. The reason for this lies partly in the fact that it seemed highly improbable, too improbable beside sheer logical possibility, that the Indians should have had at so early a date in the history of human thought a doctrine of causation so entirely modern, the same in principle as the one accepted in the most advanced modern science”.

Stcherbatsky is acknowledging the fact that the Buddha pre dated philosophers such as Socrates and Plato by over a century and Aristotle by about two centuries

He also compares the standpoint of J.S. Mill for whom substance is nothing but permanent possibility of sensation, to Kant for whom substance is but a mental category and to Bertrand Russell for whom substance is not permanent bits of matter but brief events. **(Page 142)**

The Kantian idea that substance is a category forced upon us by the general reason and conducted by the reason on the basis of a manifold of sensibility, Stcherbatsky feels would not have been objected to by Buddhists since it implies the acceptance of a double reality, the ultimate reality of the things by themselves and the constructed reality of empirical things. **(Page 142-143)**. Stcherbatsky then continues to analyze the standpoint of J.S. Mill and Russell from the point of view of the Buddhists.

Stcherbatsky concludes his comparison of the doctrine of dependent origination to Western thought with a quote from professor T.W. Rhys David’s **(Page 144 read quote)**

**“Buddhism stands alone among the religions of India in ignoring a soul. The vigor and originality of this new departure are evident from the complete isolation in which Buddhism stands in this respect, from all other religious systems then existing in the world. And the very great difficulties which these European writers, who are still steeped in animistic preconceptions, find in appreciating, or even understanding the doctrine, may help to realize how difficult it must have been for the originator of it to take so decisive and so far reaching a step in philosophy and religion, at so early a period in the history of human thought.’**

Stcherbatsky continues in this manner taking each of the concepts of Buddhist philosophy such as sense perception, ultimate reality etc and proving the logic and reasoning by using epistemic factors. He then compares the Buddhist philosophy to Western philosophers thought by looking for similarities. When he finds similarities he injects his views by saying that if questioned he is feels that Buddhist would agree to these similarities. Stcherbatsky quotes extensively from Kant (160, 177, 200-202, 270-275 317-318 424, 436) and Bertrand Russel 131,142,-144, 165, 179, 180 455, 456) but also Hume, Reid (176) and M.H. Bergson (151) Bertrand Russel 131, . In doing so at times Stcherbatsky misrepresents the essence of the Buddhist doctrine.

For example Stcherbatsky compares the Buddhist doctrine of sensation of experiential wisdom to quotes from Kant on sense perception as follows – (**Kant page 177**) “Without sensation says the Buddhist our knowledge would be empty of reality. Without intuition says Kant all our knowledge would be without objects and it would therefore remain entirely empty.” However, in trying to find parallels between Buddhist philosophy and Western thought Stcherbatsky misinterprets Buddhist thought. For example the Buddhists view of sense perception is tied very much to experiential wisdom and insight gained through intense development of the mind. The Buddhist philosophy though profoundly analytical and logical does not limit itself to only reasoning. It encourages experiential wisdom gained through cultivation of the mind through insight meditation. In this comparison Kant’s quote on intuition is no parallel to the experiential wisdom or insights that Buddhist refers to as sense perceptions.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Stcherbatsky ‘s book Buddhist logic is a serious attempt at comparative philosophy. Stcherbatsky first outlines key doctrines found in the Buddhist philosophy. He then uses epistemic factors such as syllogism, dialectic, dialogue and contradiction to support the doctrine. And finally he finds comparisons in ancient Eastern and modern Western thought to try and bring understanding and acceptance to Buddhist logic. Then, to make his work more comprehensive in part III of the book Stcherbatsky analyses syllogism, logical fallacy, negative judgment etc from the Buddhist point of view of Master Diganaaga and Dharmottara and compares them to the European parallel.

Stcherbatsky acknowledges the fact that while European logic has developed from the writings of Aristotle and Kant that a parallel Indian philosophy that is more ancient has developed independently. “As such” he says, “it is of highest historical interest to note cases when both systems have a common theory or conception.” Considering the fact that the Buddha pre dated philosophers such as Socrates and Plato by a century and Aristotle by about two centuries and that most Western spiritual systems are intrinsically in variance with Buddhists doctrine Stcherbatsky’s work is comprehensive and commendable. The fact that Master Diganaaga’s philosophy is complex, massive, solid and uniform makes Stcherbatsky’s undertaking daunting and has resulted in two complex yet comprehensive volumes on Buddhist logic.

However the following weaknesses need attention. First Stcherbatsky could strengthen his epistemic proof of Buddhist logic by using the documented teachings of modern day Arahants. Stcherbatsky introduces his subject by attesting to the fact that “Buddhism contains a theory of sense perceptions or more precisely a theory on the part of pure sensation in the whole content of our knowledge and on the reality of the external world as cognized by us in sensations and images. These problems are usually treated under the heading of epistemology”. As Buddhism is a doctrine of experience he could have used the teachings and writings of those who have reached the same spiritual goals and experiences that the Buddha did to strengthen his arguments. (A spiritual biography Venerable Acariya Mun Bhuridatta Thera, and Ajahn Lee Dhammaro)

Stcherbatsky could have also used the work of modern scientists. There are many instances where scientists have used modern methods, which collaborate the doctrine found in Buddhist logic. (Buddhism and Science - Buddhadasa Kirthisinghe).

Second unlike in other reading that we have done there does not seem to be comparative philosophy as it relates to Western spiritual thought or Christian philosophy. The comparisons being more to Western thought or the thinking of Western philosophers as opposed to Christian Philosophy.

And third, and in my opinion where he fails most, is in his effort to find European comparisons for understanding. In doing so at times he stretches the truth and misrepresents Buddhists logic leading the reader to assume that at times he does not have a true understanding of the Buddhist concepts and Buddhist logic that he is writing about.