

Workshop on  
**BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY AND MODERN SCIENCE:  
MATTER AND MOTION**

Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, Nalanda, Bihar,  
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*Inaugural Address by Lama Doboomb Tulku*

I am not someone who goes around performing rituals of inaugurating events and delivering public lectures. But here in this workshop, the biggest attraction for me was Nalanda itself. Then, the graciousness of Dr. Panth was responsible for bringing me here. I don't possess any special quality to make me deserving of such an honour. However, he must have thought of me as an old monk who has spent a considerable amount of time in monasteries and institutions.

The venerable Theravada monks recited passages from Pali Suttas in front of the Buddha Statue in the central yard just before we assembled in this Conference Hall. I believe that there is no better way of inaugurating an event such as this workshop.

Buddhism and Modern Science represent two differing perceptions on matter and motion. The question that arises is: Are the two mutually exclusive? Can they never meet?

Or, can they share a common space? Can Buddhism and Modern Science share concepts and even a vocabulary?

We are aware of the fact that many attempts are being made to compare these two areas of human knowledge. We have to be guarded against over-simplifying. Because it can't be that simple. One cannot simply juxtapose the findings of the physics on matter and motion with the Buddhist insights into matter and motion. They are not like the two wings of a mechanical bird, the one material and the other spiritual. If by any device they can be put together, the bird, which is supposed to fly, will not be able to take off, I'm afraid.

For, the points of departure, the prasthāna, as they are called in Sanskrit, are different in each case. And prasthāna bheda darshan bhedah; ie, owing to differing prasthāna, or points of departure, perceptions differ.

Further, the intent of the Buddhist and the modern scientific explorations are different. In classical terms, the prayojana, the purpose, the intent, is different. The Buddhist exploration starts with the perception of dukha satya, and goes into the causes and conditions of it, the end of it, and the way to end it. One does not know the real intent, the prayojana, of modern science and technology.

Experts from both the sides shall go into the complex nature and significance of matter and motion in the days to come. As a student of Buddhist Philosophy, it occurs to me that the classical theory of universal flux, the impermanence of it all, the momentariness of all conditioned existence, if it really exists, may be considered in depth.

However, the categories of Nāma-rūpa come to my mind in this regard. This may not fit into the module of the workshop; but it nevertheless takes care of both mind and matter, the material as well as the conscious skandhas. I recall here my meeting with late Prof. D. S. Kothari, the eminent scientist whose centenary year is also being observed at this workshop, many years ago in Delhi University. He used to deploy the concept of Nāma-rūpa of Abhidharma Philosophy to explore the meaning of matter and mind. One intuitively feels that modern science has a lot more to contribute to the ancient understanding of the nature of matter. But the ancient Indian systems of philosophy in general and the Buddhist philosophy of Abhidharma, the practice of Samath-Vipaśyanā and Tantra have a lot more to contribute to the study of consciousness. I do not know if the scientists, present company excepted, are fully prepared to receive it as yet.

As a Buddhist, I may be permitted to point out that no serious enquiry can proceed without an understanding of the two levels of truth: (a) the ultimate, paramārtha; and (b) the conventional, vyavahāra or samvriti satya.

While meeting various people who are spiritually and or philosophically oriented, it is interesting to observe a very common tendency. As soon as the context of 'the Ultimate' comes up, it is immediately pushed aside or rather upwards by saying that is beyond everything; so the word "beyond" becomes very handy. Here we are talking about a system, which holds that every phenomenon has these two levels of truth. Each of the Buddhist schools of thought provides an explanation of these two levels of existence: from Baibhasika to Prasāngika Mādhyamika, getting subtler as they go.

Modern physical science is perhaps largely concerned with the conventional, relative truth, and not the ultimate. It is not that the two are different worlds, unrelated and unconnected. In fact, one may not speak of the ultimate without reference to the conventional or the relative. Examining the relative truth, the ultimate is revealed. And it is in the light of the ultimate that the relative appears to be relative, or conventional, vyavahārika. Seeing Samsāra as it leads to Nirvāna. Nirvāna is not away from Samsāra, not in the seventh heaven. That is how, examining motion, gati, Nagārjuna finds that there is nothing like motion, a movement from here to there. But for all practical purposes, there is coming and going, Samsāra. Perhaps, examining matter, one may find that in the ultimate sense

it does not exist, neither born on its own, nor from the other, nor from both, nor without a cause.

Can science open itself to the intimations from the other dimension, i.e. the ultimate? Of course, that ultimate is not completely divorced from the proximate, the conventional, the relative. In fact, going into this alone, one has intimations of that. But the ideology of science shuts that out from entering into their domain. Or at least it appears so to us.

Nāgārjuna, Ācharya of the Nālandā tradition, does not deny the vyavahārika, the conventional, the relative aspect of it all. But in the ultimate analysis, he would not find any substantial inherent, independent nature of matter, time, and motion, and the rest of it. Śūnyatā is not just emptiness or nothingness.

Śūnyatā is niḥsvabhāvatā: nothing has an inherent, substantial, independent existence

of its own. All are interdependently caused and created.

Can the principle of Pratityasamutpāda-- this being, that happens; this not being there, that does not happen-- be of any help in explaining matter and motion in the world of relativity? I do not know. I can only hope that the workshop has the time and inclination to go into this question.

I understand that the ancient Nālandā Mahāvihāra had had a place for both the spiritual and physical sciences of its times. (Of course, not of the modern scientific-technological age!) Can the Nava NālandāVihārā, or the proposed international university at Nālandā, explore the potential of a fusion at a higher level between the spiritual science of the Buddhists and the modern physical science of matter and motion? This in my view should be done with both sides staying on the relative level and then gradually peeping in the ultimate. Otherwise, I am afraid, there will be no coming closer and each will remain in its own separate sphere.

It reminds me of a nice joke once told to me by a learned Theravada monk by the name of Olande Ananda:

Mind is Mind, Matter is Matter;  
Mind is not Matter; Matter is not Mind;  
Mind does not matter; Matter does not mind;  
Never mind, it does not matter!

I do hope and pray that modern Nalanda takes up the challenge as a response to the thrust of modern science and thereby honors the ancient heritage of Nālandā.

I wish the workshop a success.