

## Rationality and Critical Inquiry in Buddhist Literature: Their Significance and Relevance to the Indian Knowledge System in the Context of NEP 2020

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### Abstract

*Buddhism, founded by Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), is widely regarded as a rational philosophical tradition that encourages critical inquiry and empirical reasoning. Buddhist teachings were compiled after the Buddha's parinirvāṇa at the First Council of Bhikkhus, under the chairmanship of senior monk Mahākāśyapa, and preserved in the Tripiṭaka: the Sutta Piṭaka (discourses), Vinaya Piṭaka (monastic discipline), and Abhidhamma Piṭaka (philosophical analysis). Beyond these canonical texts, Buddhist literature comprises extensive philosophical treatises that consistently foreground rationality and critical investigation as means to truth.*

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*India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), emphasises on the integration of IKS into modern education to foster critical thinking, multidisciplinary learning, and holistic development. Keeping this in mind, the present paper is written with the objective to highlight the importance of Buddhist literature in reviving critical inquiry that aligns with NEP 2020's vision of an equitable and culturally rooted education*

*This paper examines key texts—including the Kālāma Sutta of the Saṃyukta Nikāya, Dignāga's Pramāṇa-samuccaya, and Dharmakīrti's epistemological works—to demonstrate how Buddhist literature challenges scriptural absolutism and emphasises empirical verification. Through historical analysis, textual interpretation, and comparative philosophy, this study argues that Buddhist rationality democratized knowledge by integrating soteriological aims with logical rigour, thereby enriching India's intellectual heritage.*

**Keywords:** *Buddhist Rationality; Critical Inquiry; Tripiṭaka; Kālāma Sutta; Buddhist Logic; Pramāṇa Theory; Dignāga; Dharmakīrti; Indian Knowledge System; Empirical Verification, etc.*

## Introduction

The Indian Knowledge System encompasses a vast legacy of philosophical, scientific and cultural traditions that have evolved over ages, based mainly on Vedic, Jain, Buddhist, Sankhyas and other sources. The centre of it is a commitment to inquire after and understand the nature of reality, suffering and liberation. Among all these, Buddhist literature stands out for its resolute emphasis on rationality (*yukti*) and critical inquiry (*vicāra*), which served as tools for personal verification and ethical living rather than mere intellectual exercises. Speaking about the rationality and critical inquiry prevalent in Buddhist epistemology, a renowned Buddhist thinker Prof. P.L. Narasu, remarks: “Standing on the firm rock of facts, Buddhism, unlike the so-called revealed religions, has never contested the prerogative of reason to be the ultimate criterion of truth.” (Narasu)

Thus, Buddhism does not accept anything without proper investigation. It does not ask its followers to believe blindly in order to understand. Buddha even rejects the citation of the holy words of the Vedas by Brahmins as mere vain repetition of the words of others and not indicative of faith. Buddha rejects blind faith in favour of personal discernment and pragmatic outcomes. Such an approach not only empowered individuals but also sparked inter-school debates that refined Indian philosophy as a whole.

In Buddhism, critical inquiry plays a significant role in systematically deconstructing assumptions, as seen in the *Milindapañha*'s chariot analogy, where the monk Nāgasena rationally dissects the concept of self: “Just as, when the parts are rightly set, the word ‘chariot’ is spoken, so when the aggregates exist, the conventional term ‘being’ come into existence”. (An Analogy of a Chariot from *Milindapañha* on Non-Self and Five Aggregates).

This example from *Milindpanha* is the testimony of the use of analogies in the Buddhist texts to promote analytical thinking and challenging the essentialist views prevalent in Brahmanical system.

The significance of these elements to Indian Knowledge System is multifaceted. The epistemological innovations in Buddhism, particularly through thinkers like Dignaga and Dharmakirti, introduced thorough *pramāṇa-vāda* (theory of valid knowledge), limiting sources to perception (*pratyaksha*) and inference (*anumāna*) thereby influencing Nyaya's logical frameworks and Mimamsa's hermeneutics. (Tom)

This cross-pollination fostered a pluralistic knowledge ecosystem, where rationality served both soteriological (liberative) and epistemological purposes.

### **Rationality and Critical Inquiry in Buddhist Literature**

Buddhist literature has ample instances wherein the Buddha and the Bhikkhus of the Sangha gave importance to reason, rationality and critical inquiry over blind faith, belief and authority of a learned or renowned person, including a teacher. Buddha, in reality, was a free thinker. He exhorts his disciples not to accept his dhamma out of respect for him, but after proper investigation and proper examination, just as gold is tested by fire.

Buddha admonished his disciples to teach not what they merely believed out of reverence for their teacher, but what they knew to be established and right, and those principles with their reason accepted after free inquiry. Prof. P.L. Narasu, in the book 'Religion of Modern Buddhist' cites the example of Buddha's caution to his disciple named Upali: "When Upali, the millionaire, became a disciple, Sakyasimha cautioned him saying, 'of a verity, O householder! Make a thorough investigation. It is well for a distinguished man like you to make first a thorough investigation.'" (P. Narasu 69)

Buddha, in his discourse, successfully refuted the false claims and prejudiced opinions of his adversaries over superiority on the basis of birth by his reasoned answers to dispel the darkness of their views.

The first and foremost Buddhist literature that promotes rationality and critical inquiry is the Kalam Sutta, the Buddha's advice to the people of Kesaputta, known as Kalamas. It is recognized as the "charter of free inquiry" or the "manifesto of critical inquiry". Once, the Buddha was journeying with a great number of the order of monks through parts of Kosala, he arrived at Kesaputta, a market town of the Kalama people. Kalamas of Kesaputta were confused over the various views expressed by various people and the discourses delivered by the learned men and teachers of various sects. They were in a dilemma over which view or which ideology they had to accept, and make a way of their lives. When the Blessed One arrived there, the Kalamas felt that he is the right person to dispel the doubts that arose in their minds. They asked him their doubts:

Venerable sir, certain ascetics and priests who visit Kesaputta praise, glorify, their own doctrine and disparage, despise, contemn, and pull to pieces, the doctrine of others; certain

other ascetics, too, who visit Kesaputta praise, glorify, their own doctrine, and disparage, despise, condemn, and pull to pieces, the doctrine of others. Concerning them, venerable sir, we are in doubt, we are uncertain, "Of these venerable ones, who speak truth and who, untruth? " (Buddha)

Buddha did not advise Kalamas to doubt the views of the people, ascetics and teachers of various sects; rather, he advised them to make a thorough investigation before believing any views. He laid down the following conditions before believing in anything:

Do not believe in anything (simply) because you  
have heard it.

Do not believe in traditions because they have  
been handed down for many generations.

Do not believe in anything because it is spoken  
and rumoured by many.

Do not believe in anything (simply) because it is  
found written in your religious books.

Do not believe in anything merely on the authority  
of your teachers and elders.

But after observation and analysis, when you find  
that anything agrees with reason  
and is conducive to the good and benefit of one  
and all, then accept it and live up to it.

(Buddha, Kalama Sutta from Anguttaara Nikaya)

Thus, Kalama Sutta lays down conditions of observation, analysis, application of reason and the good and the test of being conducive to the good and benefit of one and all in accepting any views rather than getting confused over its acceptance or denial. These conditions are really helpful for anyone who is in search of the truth that would help in improving and elevating human life. These conditions allow students to question and raise doubts over the knowledge disseminated by teachers before accepting it. It also promotes the idea that the knowledge disseminated by the teacher is not absolute and that students should investigate the truth on their own by applying their reason and logic. Not only that, if any

innovation can be carried out by any researcher, they should also consider its significance, relevance, and benefits for uplifting society.

Another evidence of Buddhist literature that sheds light on rationality and critical inquiry is the Vimamshaka Sutta of Majjhim Nikaya. The sutta is translated as “The Discourse on Scrutiny/ Investigation”.

In Kalama Sutta Buddha emphasizes on avoiding the blind acceptance of any doctrine or view without proper investigation; Vimamsaka Sutta provides a detailed step-by-step methodology for personal verification of the integrity and enlightenment of a teacher.

The background of the sutta is Jetavana monastery at Savatthi which was built by Anathapindika. A group of bhikkhus approaches Buddha and affirms their faith in him as their guide and refuge of Dhamma. They seek an advice from the Buddha to clarify the meaning of their statement. The Buddha to fulfill their request, delivered a sermon as to how a judicious inquirer should critically examine any teacher who claims awakening.

The Buddha in his discourse emphasizes the fact that true faith should not be mere devotion or assumption but must be grounded (akaravati saddha) -which is supported by reason, observation and direct evidence. He encourages scepticism over unexamined authority, even his own, underlining the Buddhist rejection of blind faith. (Sujato)

To investigate and understand who the awakened one is, the Buddha unravelled the process of identification in stages:

1. External Scrutiny of Visible and Audible Behaviour: Identifying whether they came across the defiled states of the teacher through his actions, eye movement or speech. Whether they have observed any hatred, bodily misconduct, harmful speech, greed or delusion on the part of teacher. If they notice such corrupt behaviour on the part of the teacher, then their inquiry should proceed to the next stage.
2. Direct Questioning of the Teacher: The inquirer can directly ask the teacher: “Are there any corrupt states visible or audible in you”? If the teacher’s answer is in the negative the inquirer should follow the next stage.
3. Further Probing of Motivation and Consistency: The inquirer should pay attention to whether teacher show any favouritism based on social status, wealth or rebirth. Is

their restraint from sensual indulgence due to genuine eradication of lust, or fear of consequences? Do their teaching lead to wholesome outcomes, praised by the wise, and free from any hidden agendas?

4. Outcome: Reasoned Faith: If the teacher successfully passes all these tests, then the inquirer's faith becomes grounded (akravati) and unshakable (asamhariya). This faith is the result of proper investigation and verification of the teacher's intention, teacher's behaviour and is not based on dogma propounded by the teacher.

This knowledge is really helpful and relevant in assessing the teacher to arrive at a definite conclusion whether he/she is a genuine teacher committed to dispelling the darkness of the students with a good intention in promoting the well-being of them.

Another Buddhist literature that enriched Indian Knowledge System is Abhidharma, the Buddhist analysis of mind and mental processes, a wide-ranging systematization of the Buddha's teaching that combines philosophy, psychology and ethics into a unique and remarkable synthesis.

Speaking about the significance of Abhidhamma, Bhikkhu Bodhi, the Editor of a Comprehensive Manual of Buddhism notes:

The system that the Abhidhamma Piṭaka articulates is simultaneously a philosophy, a psychology, and an ethics, all integrated into the framework of a program for liberation. The Abhidhamma may be described as a philosophy because it proposes an ontology, a perspective on the nature of the real. This perspective has been designated the "dhamma theory" (dhammavāda). Briefly, the dhamma theory maintains that ultimate reality consists of a multiplicity of elementary constituents called dhammas. The dhammas are not noumena hidden behind phenomena, not "things in themselves" as opposed to "mere appearances," but the fundamental components of actuality. (Bodhi and Mahathera)

Abhidhamma Piṭaka comprises seven books, but Dhammasangani (Enumeration of Phenomena) and Vibhanga (Book of Analysis) form the foundational core, emphasizing the tradition of rationality.

Dhammasangani represents the methodological approach of Abhidhamma, opening with a comprehensive matika (matrix or schedule of categories)-a foundational list of classificatory schemes that serves as the analytical framework for the entire Piṭaka.

These matrices show the systematic categorization of all phenomena(mental and physical).

Vibhanga complements the Dhammasangani by providing deeper analytical breakdowns of key doctrinal categories, including 18 treatises analysing major Buddhist concepts through multiple methods.

Nagarjuna, the originator of Sunyavada, wrote two tracts: Repudiation of Contests and the Dialectical Splitting(of every thesis). Both the tracts contain the exposition and vindication of the unique method of conducting a debate which consists in proving nothing positive, but in applying the test of relativity.

Speaking about the contribution of Nagarjuna F.Th. Stcherbatsky states:

There is indeed absolutely nothing which would not be relative in some respect, and therefore everything can be denied ultimate reality when its dialectical nature is disclosed. The first of these tracts mentions the four methods of proof current in the Nyaya school and the second quotes the initial aphorism of Gotama in which the 16 topics to be examined in the treatise are enumerated. By applying his critical axe of relativity, Nagarjuna establishes that all the 16 topics are relational and therefore ultimately unreal. (Stcherbatsky)

After Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu the great Buddhist master carried the legacy of rationality and critical inquiry further. He was so popular among the people that he was known as the Second Buddha. Vasubandhu was a renowned master of logic and he composed three treatises on logic. He also provided definitions of sense-perception and of inference.

Out of Vasubandhu's school arose teachers such as Dinnaga, Dharmapala, Sthirmati, Silabhadra, and Dharmakirti, who are dated to the sixth and seventh centuries. (Joshi)

Dinnaga was the founder of Buddhist logic. Professor Stcherbatsky recognised in him not only “ a comprehensive system of critical philosophy”, but also “a most excellent achievement of Indian mind.” The sharpness of his insight and the soundness of his critical logic were so great that “No praise seems too high for him. Indeed, he may fittingly be styled as the first and last of Indian logicians.” (Joshi, Studies In The Buddhistic Culture Of India (During the 7th and 8th Centuries A.D.)

Dinnaga was the most celebrated logician and his works were studied as text books during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. His famous work *Pramana-Samuccaya* was the most trustworthy sastra of Buddhist dogmatics in logic. In this book, Dinnaga reduces the means or source of knowledge (pramanas) to two: (i) Sense perception (*pratyakṣa*) and (ii) Inference (Anumana); the latter is twofold; for one's own sake (Svarthanumana), and for the sake of others.

Through his book, Dinnaga repudiated the Naiyayika theory in which Sabda (Scriptural testimony) and Upamana (comparison) were established as separate means of knowledge. Dinnaga has rightly credited with establishing the distinction between the actual process of reasoning for the ascertainment of truth and the reasoning of another, which latter is in the form of communication by a three membered syllogism.

Another Buddhist logician who contributed to enriching the Indian Knowledge System is Dharmakirti, the disciple of Isvarsena, who was the disciple of Dinnaga. Dharmakirti is recognised as an Indian Kant. According to Chinese traveller I-tsing, "Dharmakirti made further progress in Buddhist logic after Dinnaga, and discussed the problem of means of proof on his *Pramana-Viniscaya*, while critically elaborating the doctrines of Dinnaga in *Pramanavarttika*." (Yamada)

According to Dharmakirti, right knowledge is the knowledge not contradicted by experience and all successful human endeavours are preceded by right knowledge. He classified right knowledge into two categories: (i) direct (*Pratyakṣa*) and (ii) indirect (Anumana). In his opinion, perception or perceptive knowledge is knowledge which is free from 'Construction' (Judgement) and 'illusion'. It means the direct knowledge is non-constructive and non-illusive cognition.

Dharmakirti, thus adds one more condition of right knowledge to the definition of Dinnaga, namely the compound 'abhrata' "non-illusive". Right knowledge should be not only 'stripped of characters (Kalpanabodha) but also 'free from illusion'.

He further adds that this direct knowledge can be obtained by four ways: (i) sensation (indriya jnana), mental sensation (mano vijnana), (iii) self-consciousness (atma-samvedana) and (iv) mystic intuition of the Saint (Yogijnana).

### Relevance in the Context of NEP 2020

As NEP 2020 envisages the integration of Indian Knowledge system, the Buddhist Logic, Rationality and Critical Inquiry found in Buddhist literature can help students, researchers, scholars and teachers to investigate and bring about innovation in the Education System and pedagogy to utilise the traditional and enriched source of knowledge for carrying out independent research. Rationality and Critical inquiry plays significant role in carrying out researches in science, technology and humanities, which is the need of the hour. Integration of Buddhist Literature into Indian Knowledge System that motivate students to walk on the path of rationality and critical inquiry will be really added advantage to the students, teachers and research scholars to undertake research for the betterment of society. The Buddhist literature also will help in dispelling the Mithya Drishti(False notion) and prejudiced opinion about particular sections of society and in knowing ‘truth as truth; and untruth as untruth.’”

### Conclusion

After briefly analysing the Buddhist literature, with selective text and Buddhist concepts of Dependent Origination, Four Noble Truths, Kalama Sutta and other notable Buddhist thinkers, the conclusion can be drawn that the integration of Buddhist literature in Indian Knowledge System as per the National Educational Policy 2020, will help educators, students and society to devise a better pedagogy and curricula. It would create interest among students about ancient Indian Knowledge which was overlooked by earlier education policies. Introduction of Jataka Tales in Value Education courses will help in inculcating ethical values among students. Rationality and Critical Inquiry found in the Buddhist texts will certainly help in inculcating a scientific temperament and critical inquiry among students that would motivate them to undertake innovative projects for the betterment and development of society and the nation.

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