

**A BUDDHIST APPROACH TO KNOWLEDGE  
CONSTRUCTION AND EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA  
(CEYLON) IN THE CONTEXT OF COLONISATION AND  
SOUTHERN THEORY<sup>4</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT** This paper examines knowledge construction and education informed by Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) and their subordination to Western knowledge construction and education during the British colonial period. Taking the writings of a bilingual Buddhist scholar-philosopher on Buddhist concepts, approach and theory as the basis, the author considers how they can be used for transforming contemporary education characterised by self assertion and self actualisation. The author is critical of the rationalist-empirical approach to education advocated and adopted by modern social sciences. As an alternative, the paper presents details of virtuous form of education based on Buddhist values, ethics and contemplation capable of addressing issues facing individuals and societies.

**KEYWORDS** Southern Theory and Buddhism, Buddhism and education, Buddhism and Sustainability, Buddhist worldview, Mindfulness in education

### **Introduction**

This paper investigates what the Buddhist intellectual tradition, which is considered as a source of knowledge and wisdom in Sri Lanka, reveals about humans, society, reality, self, perception and existence as well as their implications on

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alternative educational practice. It introduces selected Buddhist concepts that shaped the mainstream knowledge paradigm and social organisation, institutions, community life as well as social imaginary in the country<sup>5</sup>. The illustrations in the paper are useful for identifying features of Buddhist discourses that can have implications for postcolonial and post-modern education. The ideas discussed can be useful for alternative education based on values that are commensurate with the manifold needs of contemporary society.

The paper offers a reasoning about human suffering and its continuities-discontinuities as well as a methodology based on Buddhism to develop wisdom that can help in a path to liberation, happiness and fulfillment on a sustainable basis. It is a path mapped out by the Buddha based on sensory and extra sensory knowledge, understanding and insights generated via deep self-analysis and reflection to be sustained through personal commitment, individual and collective human endeavor. It claims to produce inner harmony and enlightenment through non-competitive efforts of individuals and groups that enable them to look for meaning in life beyond what is defined for us by dominant forces – whether they are the market, the media, modern education systems, dominant knowledge production and dissemination mechanisms, or other agencies on different missions. Buddhism provides a logically consistent and complex but inter-woven set of propositions enabling human beings to achieve intellectual emancipation and control of mental energies so that their physical pain and suffering are understood for what they are rather than for what they are not – as commonly assumed.

The Buddhist intellectual tradition and knowledge production methods in Sri Lanka were subjected to significant stresses during the European colonial period, in particular the British period. They sustained these stresses by creatively and critically engaging with the Western languages and knowledge systems on one hand and sustaining the traditional methods of knowledge production in the face of modernity by dedicated Buddhist scholar monks on the other. In the process, a

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<sup>5</sup> *Theravada* Buddhism is one of the two schools which 'claim the authority of the Buddha for their propositions' (Carr, B. & Mahalingam, M.1997, p. 303). The basic sources of this tradition are the texts of the Pali *Tripitaka*, compiled during the first century BC' (Jackson, R.J. 1997, p. 325). The other school is called *Mahayana*.

religious modernization and a national revival process occurred paving the way for political independence of the country in 1948. This brought about further changes in the way knowledge was produced and the Buddhist intellectual tradition was maintained.

The paper highlights the connections as well as contrasts between Buddhist thought in Sri Lanka and those of the metropole. It provides an illustration of Connell's view that 'the hegemony of metropolitan knowledge does not obliterate all others' (Connell, 2007, p. xi) and shows that it is possible to undo any erasure of experience and knowledge from the periphery resulting from colonisation by employing the tools embodied in Buddhist thought. Southern Theory, details of which are presented by Connell (2007), provides a framework to explore alternative knowledge systems in the global periphery that are useful for the conceptualization of non-Western social science and education and the erasure of knowledge that took place in the global periphery as a result of colonization and the embedding of modernist paradigm of thought and action. In the next section, Connell's views are briefly stated.

### **Connell and Southern Theory**

Connell (2007) uses *Southern Theory* to call attention to 'periphery-centre relations in the realm of knowledge' (p. viii). But doing Southern Theory ought not to be limited to this aspect only. She explains two important aspects of doing Southern Theory. The first is to comprehend the way modern social sciences have been contributing to the reshaping of societies in the global periphery. The second is for societies to develop self-understanding on their own terms, through their own intellectual traditions, analytical approaches, concepts and theories (Connell, 2007, p. vii). She claims, 'the hegemony of metropolitan knowledge does not obliterate all others. Alternative ways of thinking about the world certainly persist. But they are readily marginalised' (Connell, 2007, p. xi). She cites examples of the contestation and the manner in which intellectuals in the global south also exercise agency (Connell, 2007, p. 219). More importantly, she says 'the relationship with metropolitan knowledge in these cases also involved a critical distance: a willingness to challenge metropolitan

formulations, or to judge when to leave a certain theoretical position' (Connell, 2007, p. 223).

This paper makes a particular contribution to understanding the second aspect of doing Southern Theory as explained by Connell (2007), i.e. self-understanding of Sri Lanka's Buddhist intellectual tradition in relation to colonisation and modern knowledge construction processes. As Southern Theorists anticipate, this task requires engagement with and contestation of metropolitan knowledge and theoretical formulations while maintaining a critical distance and shifting the focus from 'modern' to 'alternative knowledge paradigms'.

### **British Colonisation and its Impact on Buddhist Intellectual Activity: Role of Bilingual Intelligentsia**

This section provides details on (a) the origin and development of Buddhism and Buddhist education in Sri Lanka, and (b) the role of Buddhist clergy, English educated intelligentsia and the bilingual intelligentsia in knowledge production and dissemination in order to provide a sense of the historical context.

According to the Sri Lankan chronicle *Mahavamsa*, the son of Emperor Asoka in India, Arahant Mahinda came to Sri Lanka with the message of Buddhism in 246 B.C. and the King *Devanampiyatissa* was impressed with the message of Buddhism delivered by Rev. Mahinda and converted to Buddhism. Since then, Buddhism received royal patronage through the centuries and spread in Sinhalese society including its beliefs and practices pertaining to agriculture, medicine, trade, healing, education, inter-personal relations and the core values. Learned monks in temples engaged in teaching, learning and reflection. Buddhist monasteries such as *Mahāvīāraya* (late 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C) and later *Abhyagiriya* (2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C) founded with royal patronage became two centres of excellence mentioned in the historical records. Gradually, 'temples came to be established in each village and town, which became centres of learning for the priesthood as well as the male part of the population amongst well-to-do families. Apart from Buddhist teaching, students learned languages – i.e. Sinhala, Pali and in the case of priests,

Sanskrit – as well as astrology, medicine, and so on’ (Gamage, D. T., 2010, p. 396).

The knowledge production and intellectual activity in the country during the pre-European colonial period was closely associated with the system of government, temples and the monks (*Bhikkus*). According to Obeyesekere (1984 based on Amunugama, 1973),

The bureaucratic and political system under the Sinhala kings, had a network of office holders and scribes which spread from the centre (king) through the nobility (*adigars* and *dissavas*) down to provincial chiefs (*ratamahattayas*) and finally down to the village level (headmen). The monastic system (*Sangha*) also had an organisational structure moving from the major monastic centres through regional and provincial centres to the village temple and its priests (p. 72).

This system encountered significant changes during the European colonisation period (1505-1948), in particular the British period (1796-1948) having an impact on Buddhist education and maintenance of Buddhist scholarship<sup>6</sup>. In comprehending these changes and their impact on education, one has to be conscious of the Buddhist revival that occurred during the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as the schools established with the assistance and encouragement of the Buddhist Theosophical society and *Mahabodhi* Society (see Gamage & Setunga, 2010, pp. 412-413).

The introduction of English education in the British colonial period resulted in the dislocation of the existing hierarchies of educated intelligentsia in the Sinhalese society. They formed ‘into two water tight compartments; an English educated upper-class elite and a Sinhala speaking, middle and lower middle class intelligentsia’ (Obeyesekere, 1984, p. 72). The predicament of Buddhist clergy, who were a part of local Sinhalese intelligentsia but excluded from the English education system, was quite turbulent and distressing. Their activities went through a period of decline and revival in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a response to the changes introduced by the British colonial government, missionaries and others active in the economic and social spheres. As a result of losing state patronage and the expanding influence of Christianity and

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<sup>6</sup> In 1815 the British captured the Kandyan kingdom with the support of Sinhalese nobility who had been frustrated with the rule of last Nayakkar king Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe. Until then, British administration was limited to the maritime provinces of Ceylon.

mission schools, the Buddhist clergy retreated into remote rural locations. They kept alive the Buddhist intellectual and literary tradition among the rural intelligentsia (the school teacher, *ayurvedic* physician, astrologer, village headman, rural landowner, etc.).

Buddhist clergy considered themselves as the guardians of the country's language, culture and religion when they were being undermined by the forces of westernisation and Christianity (Obeyesekere, 1984, p. 73). English educated Sinhalese were generally known as Westernised, Anglicised elites.

During the early stages of colonisation, the Sinhala aristocracy 'had already held office under the Portuguese and Dutch and realised the privileges an English education would confer' (Obeyesekere, 1984, p. 73). Those considered as '[t]he English educated elites of the British period were the sons and daughters of the Sinhala aristocracy especially of the former maritime provinces and of an affluent new entrepreneurial class' (Obeyesekere, 1984, p. 73). This group also included the English educated intelligentsia. Its knowledge of Sinhala language was poor due to assimilation and members came from the Sinhalese aristocracy as well as the upper middle class<sup>7</sup>.

The large masses of people in the island depended on Sinhala speaking intelligentsia, including Buddhist monks, for their intellectual pursuits around the time of independence and afterwards. However, after the independence, the Sinhala-speaking intelligentsia were kept securely outside the centres of political and economic power for a period of almost a decade' (Obeyesekere, 1984, p. 74).

The English educated Sinhalese intelligentsia who contributed to the intellectual life were 'the scholars, scientists, social scientists, doctors, lawyers and university teachers whose fluency and command of English gave them ready access to the larger world of scholarship and thereby enabled them to make a significant contribution not just in a Sri Lankan context but in many cases as theoretical contributions to their specific disciplines' (Obeyesekere, 1984, p. 86).

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<sup>7</sup> See Roberts, M (1982).

Second group, the bilingual intelligentsia, played a significant role in the early decades following independence in 1948. They were the product of the revivalist nationalist and Buddhist educational movements of the twenties, who were different in character and outlook from their English educated predecessors. Being fluent in two languages, this new generation received their education in Buddhist schools in the English medium and had access to university education. They were able to compete with the westernised elites in most employment fields (Obeyesekere, 1984, p. 78)

This new intelligentsia was able to span two cultures while proving to be the agents of modernisation 'percolating new ideas, attitudes and values, through the press and the literature to the larger society' (Obeyesekere, 1984, p. 79). With the emergence of a bilingual intelligentsia the older intellectual groups did not disappear completely (Obeyesekere, 1984, p. 82). David Kalupahana, whose work I examine later, was part of the bilingual intelligentsia. He started his academic career at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya.

In the formal academic life at the University of Ceylon (later Peradeniya) where the medium of instruction was English until the 70s, the scholarly work was dominated by Western education and metropolitan knowledge production. This was a result of the academic staff receiving postgraduate training in countries such as Britain and U.S.A. leading to a sharp division of knowledge production process in the university. The Sinhala-Buddhist realm of knowledge production was sustained by a dedicated group of academics that were bilingual and/or multilingual in the faculty of Oriental Studies, which was later absorbed into the faculty of Arts. Many of them had obtained formal training and qualifications in oriental languages, history, literature, and religions with emphasis on India and Sri Lanka on one hand and Western knowledge and methodology of social sciences and humanities on the other. In other faculties, Western science including medicine, technology and professional/disciplinary knowledge, was embedded in teaching, research and publications.

In the academic life of the university, Western-oriented academics labeled as 'traditionalists' those who based their scholarly work on Indology, Buddhism, Sinhala language, art, culture, literature, Eastern history, archaeology etc. Those

who used Western philosophy, social science, and humanities disciplinary knowledge predicated on Western science, technology and other fields were considered as 'modernists'. Respective academic discourse also reflected this division. An example is the academic discourses on development pertaining to post colonial, underdeveloped societies in the 60s and 70s<sup>8</sup>.

With the expansion of the University system, in particular the upgrading of two former *pirivena* - centres of learning for monks - to be universities in 1959 and the establishment of Buddhist and Pali University in 1982, the production of knowledge in relation to Buddhist scholarship increased. As a result, there is a substantial body of texts written in Sinhala and English representing Buddhism and associated theories, concepts, methods and the ethical dimension. Anthropologists and sociologists have also contributed to the analytical study of Buddhism, though with an emphasis on rural religious beliefs and rituals at the empirical level rather than in textual analysis.

Thus due to colonization, science, technology, social sciences and philosophy emanating from the global North have reshaped Sri Lanka's education system and knowledge products in line with the requirements of Western European societies and USA. However, according to Goonatilake (2011), Sri Lanka had a long intellectual tradition that stuck to Buddhism's explanation of human behaviour. Indeed, the Buddhist intellectual heritage includes elements of science, psychology, and philosophy. They have been taken seriously in Western disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, and science also (p. 11). The work of Buddhist scholars like Kalupahana and the Buddhist epistemology, theories and concepts assist us to understand Sri Lanka's philosophical and religious heritage on its own terms.

Kalupahana (1933 - 2014) was a bilingual intellectual who was literate in Sinhala and English languages. He possessed a knowledge of Pali, Tibetan, Chinese, and Sanskrit also. His scholarly contribution has been to the comparative and critical understanding of Buddhist philosophy and theory, including its signature conceptions and approach to human being, individual-society relationship, theory of knowledge,

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<sup>8</sup> See Hennayake, N (2006)



human perception and its relationship to phenomena, and the ethical dimensions. The key Buddhist conceptions that he dealt with include topics such as human experience, existence, change, human society, morality and path to human liberation. His work embodies an analysis relating to *Theravada* Buddhism and critical evaluation of Western philosophical ideas and concepts.

In addition to his knowledge of Buddhist texts, Kalupahana had a fair grounding on the historical, cultural and social context of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. He devoted his academic life to counter Western philosophical assumptions on individual and society, the factors that sustain these or subject them to change, as well as the necessary foundational thoughts for dealing with them from a Buddhist perspective. We can consider his writings as embodying elements of Southern Theory. Next I look at his writings and selected Buddhist concepts from *Theravada* Buddhism to show the value of Buddhist epistemology as an alternative knowledge paradigm helpful in understanding the underlying features of human existence and human emancipation. In this task, I rely mainly on Kalupahana's paper titled *Buddhism and Society in Sri Lanka: A comparative Study* presented to the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Sri Lanka studies in Canberra in 1999 and his other publications.

### **Critique of Western Philosophical Conceptions**

Kalupahana (1999) examines a range of conceptions constructed by Western philosophers about society that he considers as dominating 'a major segment of humanity but with unfortunate consequences' (p.1). An example given is science. Kalupahana (1999) identifies two fundamental ideas embodied in Western philosophical tradition: 1. The true-false dichotomy and the fact-value distinction. He says, 'Philosophers as well as social scientists have often remained faithful to these ideas' (p. 1).

Referring to British philosophers who adopted an empiricist standpoint, he claims that as for the scientists, 'discovery of truth was completely dominated by the search for objectivity and certainty' (1999, p. 1). Yet it 'undermined several important facts relating to human life' (1999, p. 1) such as the devaluation of moral discourse, highlighting of the

individual giving rise to ‘the popular Western view of the absolute independence of a person, this being its conception of liberty’, and ‘the empiricist emphasis on the true-false dichotomy and the reliance on the particular rather than the universal in determining what is true or real’ (1999, p. 1). He says, ‘while the empiricist tradition that claimed to have followed the method of science generally tended toward the recognition of the reality of the particular or the individual, the rationalist tradition moved in the direction of highlighting the universal or the social’ (Kalupahana, 1999, p. 2). Kalupahana questioned how European sociologists such as Durkheim and Comte ‘who wanted sociology to be an exact science, banished psychology’ (Kalupahana, 1999, p. 3).

### **Concepts from the Theravada Buddhist Tradition**

In the following pages, I look at selected Buddhist concepts based on Kalupahana’s writings in order to show how the Buddhist approach/Perspective could contribute to Southern Theory in terms of a distinctive knowledge of self and society based on human experience. Kalupahana’s paper (1999) provides a discussion of the ‘major contribution of the Buddha toward understanding the foundations of human knowledge, conception of a human person, society, morals and freedom’ (p. 3). In doing so, Kalupahana makes reference to a range of Buddhist textual sources.

#### *Human Experience: the basis of Buddhist theory*

Kalupahana (1987) observes that to the Buddha, any theoretical explanation of the individual and society is to be based on the nature of human experience. Buddha’s early discourses make it clear that ‘sensory experience is the basis of all human knowledge and understanding’ (Kalupahana 1987, p. 9). In fact, the Buddha did not show interest in discussions ‘relating to a theory that has no basis in sense experience’ (1987, p. 9). Kalupahana (1987) describes this as the perspective of a radical empiricist who is ‘compelled to admit the impermanence and non-substantiality of all human experience’ (p. 11).

Kalupahana (1976) states that Buddhism ‘is empiricistic and anti metaphysical and that it does not accept anything

which cannot be experienced either through senses or extrasensory perception' (p. ix) Buddhism helps us to understand the constitution of things, the elimination of craving (*rāga, tanhā*) and grasping (*upādāna*) (p. xiii). The Buddha rejected any ultimate principle like the individual 'self' (*atman*) or the universal reality (*loka* = Upanisadic *Brahman*). This 'was based on the fact that any such ultimate reality, which was recognized as non sensuous, indescribable, and transcendental, is also metaphysical' (Kalupahana, 1976, p. xiii).

#### *Human Conception, Perception (sensory and extra sensory) and Knowledge Types*

Human conception plays a main 'role in the evolution as well as the dissolution of social and political institutions' (Kalupahana, 1987, p. 11). According to *Samyutta Nikaya*, a Buddhist text, human conceptions relate to 'what is seen (*dittha*), heard (*suta*), thought (*muta*), cognized (*vinnata*), achieved (*patta*), sought (*pariesita*), and reflected (*manasa anuvicarita*). It is conceptual knowledge about physical as well as non-physical objects achieved through human experience, which is important. Buddha however warned against the 'reification of such objects moving far beyond the limits of human experience' (Kalupahana, 1987, pp.10-11).

Kalupahana (1976) explains that 'for the Buddha, one's knowledge and vision is a natural, not a supernatural occurrence. His claim was of a threefold knowledge (*tisso vijjā*) pertaining to the extra sensory knowledge: 1) retracognition (the ability to perceive one's own past history), 2) clairvoyance (the knowledge of the deceased and survival of other beings who wonder in the cycle of existence), and 3) knowledge of the destruction of defiling impulses' (p.19)<sup>9</sup>. These three are considered as most important among the six types of higher knowledge, the other three being psychokinesis (power of will), clairaudience (faculty of perceiving sounds at a distance), and telepathy – ability to comprehend another's mind (1976, pp. 21-22).

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<sup>9</sup> For more on these see chapter 7 in Kalupahana (1987)

### *Sense Data and Perception Process*

Buddha recognised the validity of sense perception. ‘Sense data (*phassa* or *Sanna*) are the primary sources of our knowledge and understanding of the world...Man has been conditioned to interpret what he sees, hears, feels, and so forth’ (Kalupahana, 1976, p. 20). However, sense perceptions can mislead a person.

### *Theory of Causality (Patichhasamuppāda)/Dependent Arising and the Twelve Factors*

In this section, I narrate Buddha’s interpretation of causality based on Kalupahana (1976). The Buddha rejected the existence of a substantial self. The middle way adopted by him to explain human personality is ‘dependent arising’ or *Patichcha Samuppāda*. It includes twelve causal factors in a sequence where the presence of one leads to another. Buddhist scholars describe this as the theory or formulae of causality<sup>10</sup>. All phenomena in the universe including human personality are subjected to this theory.

Buddha explained causal relations and causally conditioned phenomena, including human personality, without any metaphysical assumptions. He thus formulated an empiricist theory of causality to explain life process, how the individual experience happiness or suffering, and other phenomena in the universe. Buddha discovered uniformity in causally conditioned phenomena and relations. ‘While individual instances of causal happening were verified on the basis of experience, sensory and extra sensory, the uniformity of the causal law was reached through inductive inference based on these experiences’ (Kalupahana, 1976, p. 29).

As memory fades over time, even knowledge of the past is based on inductive inference. Knowledge of the future can be had only through inductive inference. ‘Thus experiential knowledge (*dhamma ñāna*) consists of knowledge of causally conditioned phenomena as well as the causal relations (*patichhasamuppāda*) of the present and partially of the past’ (Kalupahana, 1976, p. 30). In my view, *patichcha samuppāda*

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<sup>10</sup> This is also known as *Conditional Genesis*. According to this, by using twelve factors ‘the whole existence and continuity of life and its cessation are explained’ (Rahula, 1978, p. 53).

has deep meanings to education of the individual and his/her mental dispositions conditioned by not only the sensory data but also their distortions.

In Buddha's application of this formulae or theory to the human personality (and life process) ignorance (*avijjā*) heads the list. It creates dispositions (*sañkhāra*) or mental formations, which in turn condition one's consciousness (*viññāna*). Consciousness in turn determines the psychophysical personality (*nāmarūpa*). It conditions six senses (*salāyatana*) which in turn create contact (*phassa*). Contact leads to feeling (*vedanā*) –pleasurable, painful, or neutral. 'Depending on the nature of the feelings, there arises craving (*tanhā*) which is generally considered to be threefold: desire for sense pleasures (*kāma*), for existence (*bhava*), and for nonexistence (*vibhava*). Craving is the cause of grasping (*upādāna*), as a result of which the process of becoming (*bhava*) is set in motion. This stage represents again the end of a life span and the beginning of a fresh one' (Kalupahana, 1976, p. 32).

According to Kalupahana (1987), Buddha's 'view that all experienced phenomena are dependently arisen or are related events dissolved the sharp dichotomy between the particular and the universal' (p.10). Moreover, it 'enabled the Buddha to accommodate a variety of factors generally excluded by the absolutist and essentialist accounts of individual and society' (Kalupahana, 1987, p.10). Change is a keyword in Buddhist philosophy.

In my view, this theory of personality can explain the accumulation drive in the modern global capitalist economy and neoliberal education whose aim is to create ever more increasing efficiencies in terms of human capital and greater returns for educational organisations. Similarly, the human trait of domination-subordination that drives individuals and groups to exercise power over others, in particular those who are vulnerable, could also be explained by this theory.

#### *Conception of the Permanent vs. Non Substantiality*

Kalupahana (1987) believes that Eastern and Western transcendentalists had emphasised that 'the conception of the permanent and incorruptible is a necessary condition for explaining the flux of experience' (pp. 9-10). But the Buddha

has argued against this assertion. Utilising the doctrine of non-substantiality (*anitta*)<sup>11</sup>, Kalupahana (1987) explains that the Buddha's doctrine of non-substantiality (*anitta*) aims to deconstruct fossilised relations and entities (p.10). This concept of non-substantiality is a Buddhist principle that distinguishes it from other religious explanations of continuity and change in human life. The Buddhist views of human experience and sensory-extra sensory conception are important principles of Buddhist worldview. They are the basis on which Buddhism critiques other worldviews.

### *Prejudices, Subjective Attitudes, Ego Consciousness and Reflection*

Subjective prejudices play a significant role in one's understanding or perception of truth. For instance likes (*ruchi*), dislikes (*aruchi*), attachment (*chanda*), aversion (*dosa*) confusion (*moha*) fear (*bhaya*). These 'prevent one from perceiving things as they are' (Kalupahana, 1976, p. 19). For right understanding (*sammā ditthi*), the Buddha explained two sources, 1) the testimony of another (*parato ghosa*), and 2) proper reflection (*yoniso manasikāra*) (1976, p. 20). The testimony of another should be verified in the light of one's experiences to arrive at the truth, as testimony alone could be either true or false. 'Proper reflection involves both experience and reflection or reasoning. Thus the Buddha recognized experience, both sensory and extra sensory, and reasoning or inference based on experience as sources of knowledge' (Kalupahana, 1976, p. 20).

Kalupahana (1976) reiterates Buddha's view that the intrusion of the ego consciousness fashions the entire process of perception with obsessions. Obsessions such as craving (*tanhā*), conceit (*māna*), and dogmatic views (*detthi*) are the result of ego intrusion. Subjective attitudes interfere with sense perceptions and distort them (e.g. likes and dislikes). The process of meditation and the development of extrasensory perception are, in a way, directed at eliminating these subjective prejudices' (1976, p. 21)<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> In the popular usage in Sri Lanka, *anitta* or *anitya* is translated as impermanence.

<sup>12</sup> For a diagrammatic presentation of sensory and extra sensory perception, see figure 1, in Kalupahana (1976, p 3).

### *Conception of Society: Mutual Self-interest and Human Desire*

According to Buddha's view, '[s]ociety is neither an aggregate of separated individuals nor an objective and universal reality unperceived by human consciousness' (Kalupahana, 1999, p. 7). As observed by Kalupahana, 'if the normal human person constitutes simple self-interest, explained in terms of dependent arising, society is no more than mutual self-interest' (Kalupahana, 1999, p. 7).

'In contrast to the Brahmanical theory of the divine ordering of the four classes', Kalupahana adds that the Buddha explained 'the evolution and dissolution of society', (Kalupahana, 1999, p. 7). Kalupahana (1999) contends that, '[t]he discourse relating to the origins (*Aggaññā Suttanta*) is the Buddha's response to the Brahminical caste system' (p. 7). Society is subjected to three natural disabilities or diseases (*ābādha*): Desire (*icchā*), hunger (*anasana*), and decay (*jarā*). According to Buddhist theory that recognises mutual self-interest or collective human interest as the definition of society, human desire can be the most potent cause of social ill.

Kalupahana (1999) emphasises that for the scientific sociologist, this is merely a psychological factor having no relevance to the evolution and function of society. For the Buddha, the effect of greed on the social life of human beings is devastating. It is the 'disease of mind' (*cetasika roga*) that can destroy the moral fabric of society (p. 7).

After building his argument based on Buddha's teachings, Kalupahana (1999) makes a very important point. Referring to the two extremes of possessive individualism philosophy founded on absolute self-assertion and self-negation embodied in self-mortification (foundation of absolute altruism), Buddha's belief was that '[i]t is the middle way between these two that constitutes the moral life and which contributes to a healthy individual and society' (Kalupahana, 1999, p. 8). This is to be understood in relation to the conditional arising of self and impermanence or non-substantiality described earlier.

### *Moral life based on Buddhist Principles and Ethics*

The fundamental perspective required for moral life is that a human person is not absolutely independent but dependent. This was part of the Buddhist social and cultural experience in Sri Lanka. Egoism, self-centredness or possessive individualism did not figure in the lives of Sri Lankans (Kalupahana, 1999, p. 11). Buddhism provides causal explanations to moral, social and spiritual behaviour (see chapters 5, 6, 7 in Kalupahana, 1976). Kalupahana (1999) contends that 'the doctrine of causality or Dependent Arising (DA) provided a solid theoretical foundation to 'the moral principles that served as the backbone of a healthy society' (p.11).

Kalupahana (1999) elaborates on moral life based on dependence between individual 'self-interest' and the society with 'mutual self-interest' (p.11). It provided the foundation for the tank and *dagaba* culture in Sri Lanka (Kalupahana, 1999, p. 12). It also nurtured art in temples and certain rituals associated with worship (pp. 11-13). Such a moral life replaces 'life based upon the belief in rewards and punishments' (Kalupahana, 1999, p. 12) with virtuous life.

These articulations of Buddhist concepts and theory relating to human experience, sensory knowledge and its distortions, non substantiality and conditional genesis of self and the moral life etc. can help us to conceptualise an education based on virtuous rather than short-term individual self interest. It is to be noted that the Buddhist concepts as discussed earlier and principles of analysis are different from the empiricist, positivist perspective characteristic of metropolitan social sciences that were ingrained in Sri Lanka's first university during the British colonisation period and subsequently spread into others. Bilingual scholars such as Kalupahana attempted to navigate the Western world of social sciences and philosophies on one hand and highlight the core analytical concepts and methods in the Buddhist philosophy on the other.

### **Buddhist Concepts and their Implications on Alternative Form of Education**

Thus far the paper presented a series of Buddhist concepts and theory of causation as well as how they influenced in the



formation of moral life and a particular kind of society based on mutual self-interest in Sri Lanka. In this section, I discuss the implications of such concepts and corresponding practices to visualise an alternative form of education based on the views of other Buddhist scholars. This can be an important aspect of the knowledge construction and dissemination process pertaining to Southern Theory, especially its applied dimension.

According to Bodhi (1998), when discussing education based on Buddhist principles (*Dhamma*), educators have to determine the ideals of education (p. 2). She says that the Buddha held up five qualities of a model student, whether monk or layperson, i.e. faith, virtue, generosity, learning, and wisdom (Bodhi, 1998, p. 2).

Bodhi (1998) believes that education should be aimed at the development of positive virtues such as kindness, honesty, purity, truthfulness, and mental sobriety. The task of education is 'to draw forth from the mind its innate potential for understanding' (p.1). Education informed by Buddhism 'aims at a parallel transformation of human character and intelligence, holding both in balance and ensuring that both are brought to fulfillment' (Bodhi, 1998, p.1). To this end, 'the practical side of education must be integrated with other requirements designed to bring the potentialities of human nature to maturity in the way envisioned by the Buddha' (Bodhi, 1998, p. 1). Such an education must instill values. However, the commercialisation of education and the economic order designed to drive maximum profits are major problems in achieving such a goal.

Buddhist scholars, social scientists and philosophers have also discussed several problematic aspects of currently dominant education and social science knowledge while identifying certain remedies based on Buddhist principles and how to apply Buddhist principles and practice in disciplines. Some of these are outlined below:

Firstly, there is a perspective difference. De Silva (2014a) explains the difference between education informed by Buddhist thought and the currently dominant model of school education, which emphasises 'rational and sensory knowing' (p. 3). Here 'the rational involves calculation, explanation, analysis, sensory lives of observation and measurement.

Together these form the rational-empirical approach that has set the standard of knowledge across disciplines' (De Silva, 2014, p. 3). Drawing inspiration from Buddhism, De Silva proposes contemplative and transformative education of which the primary aim is not information gathering or seeking quick answers (De Silva, 2014, p. 2). Instead, getting immersed in the question is a major part of it. Buddhist approach to education is focused 'on the experiential, self-reflexive and the contemplative dimensions of learning' (De Silva, 2014, p. 3). Insight meditation (*vipassana*) is a 'unique dimension of Buddhist contemplative practice' (De Silva, 2014, p. 3).

Secondly, the emphasis on socially and culturally constructed 'identity' in social sciences has been called into question by the Buddhist concept of non-self. Questions arise about the identities constructed by family, culture and society, their permanence and grasping or clinging by individuals and groups. According to Waldron (2008), social scientists are suspicious of the appearance of things and look beyond or behind them to disclose their hidden structures (p. 2). In this sense, when we look at the identity construction process, 'we must ignore or repress our own involvement in its construction' (p. 2), and 'take identity as a given, something independent, substantial, even sacred' (Waldron, 2008, p. 2). However, when viewed from a Buddhist perspective, there is no autonomous identity. 'Nothing in the world has an isolated existence: all things exist in relation to each other and are interdependent' (Shen & Midgley, 2007, p. 182). Here the Buddhist concepts of dependent arising of phenomena, including self and causal relations discussed by Kalupahana in previous pages, are relevant. Individuality and identities are transient as any other phenomena. They are vehicles for achieving something else, not the ends.

Waldron (2008) clarifies that 'it is our misguided attempts to protect and sustain such constructed identities that lead to the preponderance of suffering caused by human actions' (p. 3). Buddhism promotes selflessness and non-attachment to identities constructed by sensory processes rather than attachment to individuality or self-centred identities. This difference has high educational relevance in postcolonial societies where a crisis is emerging between modern social scientific knowledge and traditional knowledge on the one hand and between Buddhist concept of

self/identity and postcolonial identities constructed by globalising processes on the other<sup>13</sup>.

Immergut and Kaufman (2014) propose Sociology of No-self by applying Buddhist social theory to symbolic interaction. They argue that the 'self-other dualism organizes a reality in which the self is in competition with others in order to secure rewards and avoid costs' (p. 269). The key difference between sociology and Buddhism is that the former stops at the dualism between self-other and 'leaves us with a threatened self' (Immergut & Kaufman, 2014, p. 270). However, Buddhism 'deconstructs the self-other dualism and conceives a nonthreatened, no-self' (Immergut & Kaufman, 2014, 270). They explain the Buddhist concept of 'interdependence' or 'dependent co-arising' as 'specific series of psycho-physical causes that lead to the formation of human perception of self and reality' (Immergut & Kaufman, 2014, p. 272). Together with interpretations presented by Kalupahana previously on concepts like *Patichcha Samuppāda*, non-substantiality, and sensory perception, we can see how the self is constructed from causes and conditions rather than a product of an innate essence.

Immergut and Kaufman (2014) recognise some of the common themes in sociology and Buddhism such as impermanence and social change; dependent arising and the social construction of reality; and suffering and inequality. The paper explains some of the efforts made by Buddhist scholars to synthesize sociology and Buddhism and those by sociologists to explicate Buddhist sociology.

Thirdly, Buddhist concepts and practices have been applied to various fields. Ideas on a range of topics important to resolve human problems in the modern world have been proposed in disciplines such as management, psychology, development, conflict resolution & peace, counseling and therapy, caring for patients, and sustainable development. For example, Toh (2012) shows that empathy arising from compassion and loving-kindness toward other human beings and the universe can address root causes of ecological crisis while reducing the suffering of other human beings. In his view, '[a]ction to save the planet and humanity will not be

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion on how the social sciences, in particular sociology, in South Asia were constructed by the imperial powers of Britain and USA and the resulting crisis, see Gamage (2016 forthcoming).

effective and sustainable unless grounded in mindful understanding and analysis arising from critical and empowering educational processes' (Toh, 2012, p. 65). Toh also makes the point that engaged Buddhists provide helpful insights and strategies to promote education for sustainable development (ESD). Accordingly, '[e]ngaged Buddhist initiatives affirm that 'development' needs to be mindful of the goal and processes of inner cultivation that transcends attachment to or craving for unlimited possessions' (Toh, 2012, p. 64). Toh provides examples of specific initiatives that complement sustainable living with Buddhist teachings from different parts of the world.

Chansomsak and Vale (2008) provide further information about the Buddhist approach to culturally sensitive sustainable education including a school design based on Thailand experience. They emphasise a paradigm shift from the currently dominant worldview towards an ecological one where 'the ecological system is viewed as an overarching whole' (p. 36) that includes human beings and other life forms. There are also multiple applications of Buddhist concepts such as 'self' and 'mindfulness' in the field of psychology, emotion, and human well-being. In this regard, De Silva's published work (2014b) on Buddhist psychology and counseling can be useful. Riner (2010) makes useful observations on similarities and differences between Buddhist psychology and invitational education.

Fourthly, questions arise about the distinctions made by educationists between 'cognitive'-as relating to the brain - and 'affective' - as relating to the heart. 'No such dichotomy exists within Buddhist thinking: there is rather something which is whole and complete and which does not give primacy to one rather than the other' (Miller, 2007, p. 2). Miller (2007) points out that '[t]he primacy of mind and reason has dominated western thinking since the (European) Enlightenment, resulting in the relegation of the heart and emotions to a lower order' (p. 2). But real learning should be transformative and it changes us- our hearts and minds. Miller emphasises the importance of emotional and spiritual intelligence and the Pali word *chitta* when considering the Buddhist educational approach (Miller, 2007, pp.1-2)<sup>14</sup>. She argues for equal emphasis in our schools for the acquisition of

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<sup>14</sup> Miller translates *Chitta* (*sita* in Sinhala) as mind and/or heart.

knowledge and skills on one hand and the development of attitudes and values on the other along with emotional and spiritual intelligence. In the Buddhist perspective on education and learning, Miller shows the importance of four *Brahma Viharas* (mental states): 1. *Metta* (loving kindness), *Karuna* (compassion), *Mudita* (Sympathetic joy), and *Upekkha* (equanimity). These are qualities opposing the egoism and possessive individualism that Kalupahana discussed in relation to moral life based on Buddhist principles and ethics.

Fifthly, Buddhism's contribution to critical education can be significant. Scholars often quote *Kalama Sutta* where Buddha says not to believe anything because of tradition, because someone told so, or written in a text but to convince oneself about the true nature of a phenomena or another's view by critical examination. In this regard, Flores's (2014) examination of the different approaches of Buddhism and critical social sciences plus the grounds for mutual enrichment is a useful one. Shen and Midgley's (2007) discussion of the similarities between Buddhism and Critical Systems Thinking (CST) is a similarly useful one. They contend that in both of these fields, 'existing inequalities of wealth, status, power and authority are not regarded as fixed and permanent, and the status quo can be challenged in order to bring changes to the future' (Shen and Midgley, 2007, p. 180). Shen and Midgley further point out that people having freedom to create own futures in Buddhism connects with the emancipatory dimension of CST and discuss the meaning of ten Buddhist concepts in relation to the development of a Buddhist Systems methodology.

According to Bai (2005), Hattam explores the common ground between Buddhism (Tibetan variety) and Critical Social Theory. One common ground in the Buddhism and critical social theory is their commitment to human liberation. In Hattam's view, Buddhist meditation practices can be read as 'technologies of self (Bai, 2005). Hattam's book (2004) should be of use to those interested in the implications of Buddhism to critical social theory.

Sixthly, we can explore the Pedagogical Implications of Buddhist thought. In an education informed by Buddhist thought, it is wisdom more than knowledge that is to be realised through mental training in calm and insight. In this task, learning and wisdom are closely interwoven, the former

providing the basis for the latter' (Bodhi, 1998, p. 2). Bodhi (1998) emphasises that students 'must acquire the spirit of generosity and self-sacrifice (*caga*), so essential for overcoming selfishness, greed, and the narrow focus on self-advancement that dominates in present-day society' (Bodhi, 1998, p. 2). Cooperation is better than competition and 'our true welfare is to be achieved through harmony and good will rather than by exploiting and dominating others' (Bodhi, 1998, p. 2).

This exploration of Buddhist theory, approach and views in relation to education thus provides us insights into its unique contribution as well as the contrasts with dominant education paradigm. The latter is based on self-advancement constructed with the influence of modernist thinking, market forces and individualistic values rather than mutual self-interest. What does all this mean for teaching and learning practices in the classroom? In the next section, a practical exercise aimed at the development of an observational self is presented based on De Silva (2014a).

### **Mindfulness based Schema for the Classroom**

According to De Silva (2014a), '[t]o overcome the impact of impulses, reflex actions and even subliminal desires, the mind has to protect itself by the growth of spontaneous moral and spiritual practices' (p. 6). As Nyanaponika (1986) has explained, development of a non-violent attitude towards oneself and others is a key virtue of mindfulness. De Silva (2014a) explains the virtues of contemplative/Mindfulness-based therapy as well as contemplative emotional training for professionals that can reduce negative emotion and promote pro social responses. De Silva (2014a) presents a miniature model to control anger also.

De Silva (2014a) has proposed a schema for the classroom based on mindfulness-based skills. Buddhist concept of mindfulness 'as *sati* is just moment-moment awareness, knowing what you are doing in the moment' (De Silva, 2014a, p. 6). It is important to bridge the 'observational function of mindfulness and the direction towards wisdom' (De Silva, 2014a, p. 6). The first step in this schema is stopping and slowing down to make the mind alert and deferring actions. Second step is to develop a capacity to see our inner selves leading to the development of tranquility and

inner stillness. ‘Gradually several components of meditative tranquility emerge: calmness, concentration, firmness and the reduction of multiple objects’ (De Silva, 2014a, p. 6). The intention is real awakening that comes with training and morality.

There are other publications available on school reform from a Buddhist perspective both in the Asian context and elsewhere (see Gates, 2005). Gates (2005) talks about the loss of community, personal alienation, and the need for improving schools through reform. Buddhism offers a philosophy rich in conceptual and technical discourses good for community based educational reform. In this task, community should replace the goal of individualism.

## **Conclusion**

This paper considered the way knowledge production by the Buddhist clergy in Sri Lanka was affected by the British colonization process, the emergence of an English educated class of intellectuals followed by the emergence of bilingual intellectuals in the first university established in the country. It then considered Buddhist concepts and their meanings as illustrated by Kalupahana, a Buddhist scholar-philosopher who acquired knowledge of both Buddhist and Western philosophical assumptions and conceptions.

The delineation of Buddhist concepts by Kalupahana highlighted several key dimensions of Buddhist framework of thought. For example, taking human sensory experience (and perception built on this) as the basis of any theoretical explanation of the individual and society while considering reasoning or inference based on experience (and perception) as sources of knowledge. Buddhist way of middle path is one between the two extremes of possessive individualism and self-negation. Virtuous life rather than one based on rewards and punishments is considered the ideal in Buddhist way of thinking. Instead of the rational-empirical approach currently dominant in education, a contemplative and transformative education is considered as suitable for the contemporary society.

The role of ego consciousness in distorting or fashioning perception and using meditation to eliminate subjective prejudices and obsessions and to understand causally

conditioned phenomena and causal relations occupy an important place in Buddhist thought. Possibility of gaining extra-sensory knowledge is also discussed while emphasising Buddhist way as the middle way. As Edelglass and Garfield (2009) state, insight is an important quality necessary for liberation. It 'is an anti-dote to ignorance, but liberation also requires the overcoming of attachment and aversion, which is achieved through the cultivation of moral discipline and mindfulness' (Edelglass & Garfield, 2009, p. 7). A distinction is made in Buddhist thought between the nature of reality and apparent reality.

The conceptual expositions by Kalupahana about Buddhist doctrine (*dhamma*) examined in the paper have made a distinct contribution to the discourses on 'human existence' and 'experience' as the foundation of 'perception' and the categories or theoretical formulations that construct knowledge about who we are, what we are, where we are going, and what we ought to do and how in the context of Buddhist philosophy. The skill that Kalupahana displays in his writings on Buddhism is not only the deep understanding of Buddhist intellectual tradition found in the texts but also his ability to find corresponding ideas, concepts and formulations in western philosophy and to some extent social sciences while subjecting the latter to critical scrutiny.

The work of Sri Lankan Buddhist scholars during the British colonial period and after, including those of Kalupahana, then can be considered as instances of Asian scholars speaking to the West in the English language. Such exercises have influenced the way the study and practice of Buddhism was undertaken in Europe and America. As pointed out by Blackburn, Lopez (2002) provides relevant information on this theme. His 'anthology offers voices from colonizing and colonized Buddhist arenas, and is especially strong as a resource for thinking about which interpretations of Buddhist textuality and history were exported from Asia to Euro-America' (Blackburn, 2010, p. 2). K.N.Jayatilleke's work (1963) on Buddhist theory of knowledge is also a valuable source.

Implications of Buddhist thought for alternative education discussed in the paper provide clues for contemplative education based on self-awakening instead of the currently dominant education based on rational-empirical



approach. Empathy arising from values such as compassion and loving kindness can not only reduce human suffering but also contribute positively to sustainable development and culturally sensitive, sustainable education. Furthermore, an alternative education can be formulated on values such as selflessness and non-attachment rather than attempting to protect and sustain constructed identities reducing the human suffering caused by identity conflicts and notions of threatened self. Buddhist concept of dependent co-arising is helpful in the realization that the self is constructed from causes and conditions that are interdependent and subject to change. An alternative education focused not only on the development of knowledge and skills but also the attitudes and values such as the four *Brahmaviharas* (mental states) discussed earlier, cooperation than competition and wisdom (*paññā*) is shown to be desirable for the world to address its current challenges. The paper showed that the schema for the classroom developed by De Silva (2014a) based on mindfulness skills can be used to achieve holistic education goals.

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