



# AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF SIXTY-TWO VIEWS IN THE BRAHMAJĀLA SUTTA

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## ABSTRACT

The worldviews regarding the nature of reality are constantly discussed and explored by philosophers and religious thinkers. By the time that Buddhism emerged, Brahmanical and Śāmaṇa tradition were two prominent sects that had claimed various truths and had strong influence on people's daily life. As the first sutra among the entire body of suttas in the Pāli Nikāyas, the Brahmajāla Sutta acts like the sentry at the gateway to the doctrine in order to make clear what in the spiritual life should be looked for and what should be left out. In this paper, with the intention of distinguishing Buddhism from other belief systems and ideologies and finding out the right path of practice leading to ultimate liberation, sixty-two views that are enumerated by the Buddha in the Brahmajāla Sutta will be analyzed, as well as the Buddha's judgement regarding their limitation and the reasons why they are rejected will be analyzed. On the basis of this, no matter how many theories emerge in the future or how many interpretations of Buddhist doctrine are given, one will be able to recognize matters clearly, and will not be misguided

## INTRODUCTION

Historically, there are several common questions about existence that have been continuously explored by philosophers and religious thinkers: Who am I? How do I come to be? What will I become? Or what is the world? How does the world come to be? What will the world become? In order to answer these questions about the nature of the self and the world, different theories are formed which bring the establishment of different philosophical branches and belief systems. With the development of science and technology, human understanding of the universe, the world at large and the nature of each individual, is constantly broadening.

At the time when the Buddha emerged as one of the thinkers and teachers, he clearly pointed out that what he taught was completely different from what was existing or what has ever existed. It is something entirely new. So far, Buddhism, one of the most popular religions in the world has lasted for more than 2500 years. As one of the most ancient religions, Buddhist teachings are not just something new and completely different from existing ideologies, but also something gradually proven to be correct.

In the modern multicultural society, in the face of information blast, it is important for Buddhists to distinguish the difference between Buddhism and other belief systems or ideologies. Only those who have right views about the starting point and destination of Buddhism, and about the Buddha's teachings regarding the true nature of reality are capable of distinguishing the right doctrines, and firmly follow and practise the Buddha's teachings, in order to finally achieve the ultimate liberation, Nibbāna. For the purpose of developing right views (*sammā diṭṭhi*), wrong views (*micchā diṭṭhi*) must be eliminated. Therefore, it is important and necessary to know what wrong views are from Buddhist point of view.

The Brahmajāla Sutta, the first discourse of the first collection out of the five Nikāyas of the pāli tradition discusses sixty-two frequently encountered speculative views about the nature of self and the world which existed during the time of the Buddha. The strategic position that the Brahmajāla Sutta was assigned was highly likely not to have been a matter of chance, but must have been a result of careful deliberation. An analysis of the sixty-two views will make clear what the mistaken views from the Buddha's point of view were and why the Buddha criticised them. As the first sutta among the entire body of suttas in the Pāli Nikāyas, it is like the sentry at the gateway to the doctrine in order to make clear what in the spiritual life should be looked for and what should be left out. On the basis of this, no matter how many theories will emerge in the future or how many interpretations of Buddhist doctrine are given, one can recognize what is consistent with the Buddha's teachings, what can be followed and practised, and what should be abandoned.

## MICCHĀ DIṬṬHI: SIXTY-TWO VIEWS

### Sixty-two Views that Fall into Two Extremes

In the Brahmajāla Sutta, altogether sixty-two worldviews represented by numerous teachers during the time of the Buddha are enumerated. However, if they are based on the final proposition held by those renunciants, it is not difficult to notice that all these sixty-two views can be classified into three categories: schools that believe in eternalism; schools that take the annihilation standpoint; and schools of Skepticism that refuse to give any categorical statement.

In brief, it is either directly the physical body, or simply something believed to exist owing to faith or deduction, or what is experienced by cultivated sense in meditation that is regarded as the self. When the existence of the self is acknowledged, of course there is existence of the others, such as family, friend, property, the world. Naturally, there is mine and others', gain and loss, and all sorts of pleasant and unpleasant emotions arise accordingly. Generally, all the things are automatically placed in a map which is centred on the self. From Buddhist perspective, this is where the differential treatment comes in, this is where the attachment comes in, and this is where suffering comes in. Therefore, one of the most fundamental common features of most heretical views is the acknowledgment of the self which leads to the strong attachment to the self and to things related to the self. Someone might say that this seems not the case for those who believed in Gods as their attachment to the self looks weak, and sometimes, they are even willing to devote themselves to the Gods. In fact, there is no essential difference in this regard. Instead of taking their own self as the unchanging and eternal substance, they regard their Gods as supreme and eternal. Consequently, getting final salvation of the self from the Gods becomes their ultimate goal. All their efforts and sacrifices are aimed at this end. The same is also true for the strict practise of austerities in Jainism as they believe that that is the only way to have bad Karma exhausted and achieve ultimate emancipation of the self. Therefore, no matter under the guise of whatever, the essence is the same in all these cases: to defend the best interests of the self. Even though what is called the self can be observed to be changing, people still take it as one identical object. Eventually, such self can only get one of two destinies: eternity or destruction.

When the self is considered destructible, it is understandable that there is no point in discussing about cause and effect because no matter what effort one makes, annihilation is the ultimate result. Indulging in sensual pleasure is usually considered as the highest happiness. As for the belief in the eternity of the self, there are generally two cases: one is that the self can only be ultimately liberated through one's own efforts, and the other is that the self will automatically gain liberation without making any effort.

Obviously, Jainism is the former while the Ājīvakism belongs to the latter. As the self is believed to be eternal, of course it must not be the physical body, but something higher than that. What they consider to be the highest happiness, ultimate liberation accordingly is far more than the physical sensual pleasure. If the self is experienced in meditation, attaining and abiding in that state will be regarded as the ultimate liberation. For those who believe in Gods or whatever kind of supernatural force, only those who believe in them, follow what they taught can get redemption, attain heavenly life and live eternally with God. Those who disobey Gods' command shall go to hell and live in hell eternally. Therefore, instead of gratifying the sense as much as possible in materialism, those who followed various religious practices and belief systems seemed to be more self-disciplined. It is not because they did not value the self, but because they tried to protect the purity of the soul in order to achieve the highest happiness, immortality. That is also the reason why Eternalism is associated with the extreme called self-mortification while Annihilationism is another extreme called self-indulgence.

When the self is believed to be eternal, there must be a space which bears the existence of this self, and consequently, such space must be eternal as well. Similarly, when the self is believed to be infinite, the space must correspondingly be infinite. That might be one of the the reasons why it seems that there was a logical connection between the concepts of the soul and the world. If the self is thought to be destructible, it will be meaningless for one to discover whether the world is eternal or not as it makes no difference. In the Brahmajāla Sutta, it is only in the eternalism, partial-eternalism and doctrines of Fortuitous Origination that the world is discussed along with the self. What claimed to be annihilated by annihilationists is just an existent being but not the world.

What is completely opposite to the above doctrines which acknowledge the existence of the self is another extreme viewpoint that denies any reality to things that exist. Not just the next life is denied, but also this very moment. What is called I now is completely different from what it was a second ago. Accordingly, it is understandable that most questions that have been argued by philosophers and religious thinkers are rejected by them. There is no self, no existence, no God, no good or bad, and it is meaningless to discuss value or truth. Of course, they would not bother to talk about causation because it is a totally different person to experience the result.

Above also explains why in Buddhism, the discussion about existence is usually classified into two common well known categories in Pāli texts: one is *bhavadit̥ṭhi*, the belief in being; the other one is *vibhavadit̥ṭhi*, the belief in non-being. In ordinary language, when people talk about is and is not, they are simply using language to communicate some kind of reality which is perceptual. However, in philosophical or religious discussion, talking about is and is not is associated with the ultimate reality: is there a persistence of unchanging substance that exists underlying the reality. *Bhavadit̥ṭhi* is the term used to characterize all belief systems holding the view that there is a sense in which everything that exists in the world is indestructible. They make a distinction between the metaphysical self and physical self and claim that the soul or the self-subsisting spiritual entity is immutable, or permanent. On the contrary, *vibhavadit̥ṭhi* is the term for all theories which deny existence in every sense. Even though they might acknowledge the existence of the soul, however, they believe that it will be annihilated along with the destruction of the body. It is apparent that all the schools that believe in an eternal self in the Brahmajāla Sutta belong to the category of *bhavadit̥ṭhi* while all those that believed in annihilation belong to *vibhavadit̥ṭhi*. Although Partial-eternalism does not admit the eternal self of all beings, it recognizes the eternal self of gods, and hence, it can be counted as *bhavadit̥ṭhi*. The only one that is difficult to classify is Skepticism.

Superficially, it seems that Skepticism has avoided falling into two extremes. However, that is not the case if the matter is reflected deeply. The reason that the Skeptics do not adopt both position is not because they do not agree with them but because they do not know which one is true and which one is false. When they say they do not say Annihilationism or Eternalism is not, in fact, they have a tendency to acknowledge that Annihilationism or Eternalism is true. No matter how sincere and honest their reasons for refusing to give categorical answers are, what we can be sure of is that their knowledge of the self and the world do not go beyond the sphere of *bhavadit̥ṭhi* and *vibhavadit̥ṭhi* because if they did know, they would have explicitly criticized these two viewpoints instead of talking something equivocal. What's more, Skeptics refuse to give any categorical statement but do not claim that truth is impossible because this itself would be a claim of truth. In fact, they don't doubt the existence of phenomena and people's perception. Because if they do so, they also will be uncertain about their own uncertainty regarding truth, and then their theory cannot be self-consistent because it is paradoxical. What they doubt is people's knowledge deriving from this perception. For instance, a correct statement for skeptics will be "honey is sweet to me" but not "honey itself is sweet" because it is not clear that honey itself is sweet or not. If so, what can be seen from here is that skeptics actually recognize the existence of a substance called honey, and oneself distinguished from this external substance. Even though they refuse to give any categorical proposition regarding external existence, they do have a tendency to recognize the existence of the self and other existence accordingly. This also can be seen in the ultimate goal of Skepticism, which is to suspend discussion of truth for the sake of inner peace. Owing to the reason that judging what one does not understand can only lead to agitation and trouble, skeptics choose not to argue or discuss in order to keep some kind of mental stability. In this case, peace of mind is also an implicit recognition of the existence of the self. Therefore, Skepticism still falls into either *bhavadit̥ṭhi* or *vibhavadit̥ṭhi*.

### **Why are these two extremes not granted by the Buddha**

Even though the final conclusions that all sixty-two views reached in the Brahmajāla Sutta are not exactly the same, they come through similar process and share something in common:

1. No matter by what means those renunciants obtained the knowledge, they select a certain view, and then affirm it as the unique truth, the ultimate and absolute reality. In most cases, related to the sixty-two views dealt with in the sutta, it is clear that they originated from one of two epistemological grounds: (1) meditative experience; (2) pure reason or inference. However, pure reason alone as the method of knowing is not acknowledged by the Buddha. Logical thinking and reasoning are based on certain assumptions while most of these assumptions come from personal experience and the common sense. However, personal experience and human common sense always have their limitations. If one used to have direct contemplative experience and achieved kind of jhānastage, one will experience something beyond the sphere of his common knowledge. Even modern scientific discoveries continue to prove that human beings' knowledge of the world and substances so far is very limited and there are lots of phenomena that can be said to be inexplicable by science. Although meditation is admitted by the Buddha as an effective approach to knowing, it is accepted with certain conditions. In the Brahmajāla Sutta, apparently, when some renunciants attain certain meditative stages and come out with one idea, there are always some other renunciants who attain a higher stage and proclaim something totally different from or beyond that. Even though someone is assumed to have attained the highest meditative realm, that stage too can not last forever and will pass away someday. Moreover, even if some people have similar or same experiences in meditation, their interpretation of such experiences may be completely opposite to each other. Therefore, although meditation indeed opens a fresh and new window of knowing for human beings, such experience can never be taken as the ultimate liberation because it is changeable, will cease and the knowledge that one gains from such experience is not necessarily a true reflection of reality.
2. These views are strongly defended and protected. As these renunciants believed that what they discovered was the ultimate and whole truth in the world, they firmly grasped and defended it, turned a blind eye to all other views and claimed that whatever other viewpoints there may be, they must be inferior or false. However, from Buddhist perspective, as long as one clings to a certain view, his mind will be easily agitated because both praises and disputes would create an obstacle to one's inner peace.
3. Most importantly, most of the sixty-two views are based on a certain presupposition of the existence of a particular thing which has the nature of an indwelling substance in it, such as the self, the world and even Nibbāna. When these substances are believed to be ultimate realities, it is understandable that those renunciants would like to find out where they are, what do they look like, how do they exist and so on. Accordingly, such substance has only one of two destinies: being eternal or perishing sooner or later. However, when one has presupposition in advance, he has already set a certain standard of judgement in his mind and all the things that he sees happen necessarily to be influenced by such self affection and tendentiousness. It is just like someone seeing the world through colored lenses. It is impossible for him to see the world as it exactly is.

### **SAMMĀ DIṬṬHI: UNIQUE TEACHING OF THE BUDDHA**

#### **Non-cling as A Golden Requirement in the Search for Truth**

One of the most important criteria that sets the Buddhist viewpoints apart from all other heretical views is that there is not even the slightest tendency of clinging hidden behind Buddhist viewpoints. From the Buddhist perspective, clinging itself is damaging to the person who does so. It is not just because the content of the viewpoint is not correct so that one should not cling to it; even though it is the right understanding, one should not cling to it. Non-clinging as the most important criterion that distinguishes the Buddha from all other renunciants is also a golden requirement in the search for truth and for the avoidance of wrong views.

First of all, from the Buddha's point of view, is not clinging to whatever standpoint as this alone is the truth in the search for truth. Only those who are freed from clinging have no personal interest, no presupposition, no subjective affection tendentiousness and his mind can be completely open to anything. With such a completely open mind, one becomes capable of seeing the world as it is and find out the truth or reality. Therefore, even though the Buddha also gained the knowledge of liberation through meditation, as he had been emancipated through non-clinging and never stopped himself from discovering truth because of any achievement, he gained direct insight into the ultimate reality of existence which is completely different from two extreme viewpoints.

Secondly, only when one has no clinging at all, his mind will not be agitated because of anything and the inner mental peace can be maintained. In Buddhism, the attainment of the peaceful mind is what the Buddha emphasized and as something worth striving for. In the Brahmajāla Sutta, the Buddha himself sets a good example of tolerance and compassion in confronting conflicts and

disputes as well. The Buddha asked the monks not to get themselves carried away by praises or disapproval of the Triple Gem because both jubilation and resentment spring from defilements, and to yield to them would create an obstacle to one's inner peace.

Hence, the Buddha explicitly criticised clinging and clearly pointed out that his teachings were to produce non-clinging to any entities, any theories and the liberated one must release all the bonds of existent grasping. In this sense, non-clinging could be one of the golden criteria examining the state of enlightenment that one has attained. The less clinging that one has, the more peaceful the mind will be maintained and the closer one will get to ultimate liberation. Not to mention the external entities or persons that Buddha taught not to cling to, even in relation to the Dhamma, the truth preached by the Buddha himself, the Buddha had no attachment whatsoever and he never asked his disciples to defend it with passion or blindly believe in it. In *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, with the parable of the raft, the Buddha points out that Dhamma too has to be abandoned in the end. The whole teaching of the Buddha should only function as a tool and act like a raft helping beings to cross the saṃsāric river, but not for the purpose of grasping.

### **Paṭiccasamuppāda as the Right View Affirming the Middle Way**

Paṭiccasamuppāda which is also translated as dependent origination, dependent arising, and theory of the Twelve Nidānas (cause, motivation) is a comprehensive insightful understanding of the psycho-physical process of existence. The entire process of the arising of suffering and re-becoming has been elaborated. With the introduction of the doctrine of Paṭiccasamuppāda, a passageway to holy existence, Nibbāna is suggested as some goal achievable by bringing an end to the process of further becoming of life. In the Paṭiccasamuppāda sutta (S. 12.1), the Buddha briefly explains how the linkage of twelve Nidānas work:

Dependent on ignorance arises volitional formations.

Dependent on volitional formations arises consciousness.

Dependent on consciousness arises the mentality-materiality.

Dependent on mentality-materiality arises sixfold base.

Dependent on the sixfold base arises contact.

Dependent on contact arises feeling.

Dependent on feeling arises craving.

Dependent on craving arises clinging.

Dependent on clinging arises becoming.

Dependent on becoming arises the birth.

Dependent on birth arises old age, death, grief, lamentation, pain, depression and despair.

Thus the entire mass of suffering arises.

From the teaching of Paṭiccasamuppāda, it is observable that the arising and cessation of existence are conditioned and these Twelve Nidānas in sequential order are a series of causal links that describe the entire process of saṃsāra, cycle of re-becoming and the arising of dukkha as a result while in reverse order are a series of causal links that describes the process of cultivation towards being free from saṃsāra, dukkha and attaining Nibbāna. In the chain, when necessary conditions are present, they give rise to subsequent conditions which in turn become the requisite condition and give rise to another condition. As soon as the sustaining factors cease, the subsequent phenomena will not sustain as well.

Owing to the reason of being ignorant and having craving, one is continually reborn in the saṃsāric life. If ignorance and craving are destroyed, one will have no urge for birth, and the chain of rebirth will be cut off accordingly. Hence, the substance that eternalists have taken as the self which is believed to exist independently and last forever actually can not be found. Conversely, as long as ignorance or craving is not abandoned, the re-becoming process will never stop and the entire five aggregates will be sustained, be constantly changing and will not simply be destroyed with the breakup of the physical body. Therefore, the Buddha rejected Eternalism and Annihilationism in this sense. A famous classical philosophical puzzle "Ship of Theseus" can be well illustrated from the Buddhist viewpoint in this regard. The question was raised as follows: "It is supposed that the famous ship sailed by the hero Theseus in a great battle has been kept in a harbour as a museum piece, and as the years went by some of the wooden parts began to rot and were replaced by new ones. After a century or so, all of the parts had been replaced. Then is the restored ship still the same object as the original? Or at what point did this object become different?" This is usually taken as a philosophical puzzle about personal identity. From the Buddhist perspective, it is Eternalism if one says that it is the same ship while it is Annihilationism if it is believed to be a totally different one. The ship is obviously changing during the entire repair process. Even if it is just a wooden plank that has been replaced, it is no longer exactly the same ship any more. However, it is not a completely different one as there are still parts that at least seem to be consistent. What would be recognized by the Buddha is the continuity of the existence that so-called "the ship" which comes to be owing to series of causes and conditions. Although the entity changes all the time, the causally related continuity persists exactly which causes confusion for people to tend to take it as an identical substance. Hence, it can not be simply said that it is the same one, or a completely different one or at some point that it becomes a different one. Similarly, five aggregates in the so-called "I" are changeable and impermanent as well. A person's outer appearance and inner mental activity could

be different from the person he was a second ago. However, it is still possible for one to have memories of his past, even past lives. Therefore, it cannot be said that it is a same person or a totally different one or even there is no existence at all. As long as one fails to see the reality of existence, and has craving for life or whatever, the continuity of the re-becoming process goes on. One point that should be noted here is that it is the causally related continuity that is recognized but not the continuity in the sense of the continuity of an identical substance. The persistence of unchanging substance is never accepted by the Buddha. For practical and communication purpose, the notion of the self is admitted and used by the Buddha as well, but when the Buddha used "I" and "self", it is just the usage of language but does not mean there is any real entity designation through the word.

The chain of *saṃsāra* is possible to be cut off accordingly. Every *Nidāna* fuels the mechanism to enhance the process of future birth while the cessation of whatever *Nidāna* brings about the cessation of the entire process of re-becoming. However, the practise usually starts with being free from craving and clinging as they play a crucial part in the cycle of rebirth. *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* (M.18) gives a detailed explanation of how the condition of craving causes pain to oneself and those around. The entire process is explained as follows, taking eye faculty as an example: When one has eyes to see and there are material forms, eye consciousness automatically come to be. When these three come into contact, feeling must arise. Even when one closes his eyes, he still can see darkness and the feeling regards this darkness must be there although it might be neither pleasure nor displeasure. For a being who has come to be, this is an unavoidable process. As long as there is both the body and external name and form, in dependence on this duality, both the fools and the wises are sensitive to feelings. However, the practise that leads to ultimate liberation starts from the next process which is also regarded as the key to distinguish the wise from the fool. After this objective process, the subjective process follows. When a feeling arises, one will perceive and think about it, then this feeling will be objectified and such objectification will assail one with regard to past, present, and future forms cognizable via the eye. When the feeling is delightful, a mundane being normally will welcome it, delight in it, remain holding onto it and accordingly he will want to possess this material form so that he can have pleasant feeling all the time. Otherwise he will dislike it, try to get rid of the feeling as well as the material form if it is unpleasant. Whether it is the desire to hold onto it or the desire to get rid of it, this desire is craving while this strong desire which one cannot let go is clinging. As feeling arises and ceases dependently, one's desire of holding a certain feeling forever can never be successful, neither the desire of getting rid of certain feeling forever. This is how mundane beings indulge in sensual pleasure and are overwhelmed by sensual pleasure which lead to suffering and the endless cycle of rebirth. For the wise who have practiced the holy life for the right ending of stress, craving has been destroyed so that at the breakup of the body, they have no more hunger for birth, are not headed for a new body and are entirely freed from birth, aging, death, sorrow and suffering. Hence, to escape and to leap out of the cycle of rebirth, it is important for one to take no delight in form, sound, odor, taste, tangible and mind object, to guard oneself to be free from clinging to the sensual things, dogmatic views, virtue and ego-belief. Being free from craving, one is not sustained by anything in the world, as a consequence, the mind of equanimity is developed accordingly. As a result, the chain of re-becoming is cut off and there will be no more becoming. That is how one achieves ultimate emancipation in Buddhism. Therefore, what is called *Nibbāna* in Buddhism is the freedom from the fetters of mental impurities, such as craving, hatred and delusion. It is the destruction of further birth as well as the cessation of the whole mass of suffering. However, in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, *Nibbāna* is equated with *Jhāna* stages by most renunciants. Although eight *Jhānas* are also called eight liberations by the Buddha, they are shakable, returnable and could not be equated with the ultimate liberation. Owing to the fact that the arising and cessation of *jhāna* stages is conditioned, eight kinds of liberation do not transcend the cycle of existence and are not beyond life and death. Accordingly, they do not lead to the complete cessation of suffering.

## Conclusion

During the development of human civilization, philosophical questions about existence have been constantly discussed and explored. In the long history of the last five thousand years, the Buddha's wisdom in answering these questions has not been abandoned. Instead, it has become one of the most popular teaching nowadays which has countless followers and researchers. It is quite evident how incomparable the Buddha's teaching is. Being completely different from other existing religions and belief systems, the Buddha discovered and proposed an absolutely new understanding about existence. As the first sutta of first *Nikāya*, the *Brahmajāla Sutta* draws a clear boundary to distinguish the Buddhist doctrines from other dogmatic thoughts.

From the analysis of sixty-two views in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, it can be seen that the fundamental difference between Buddhism and other 'isms' lies in their understanding of the self. All other views either recognize the existence of a persisting substance as the self which is eternal or will be annihilated with the breakup of the physical body, or deny any form of the existence of the self at all. However, these are rejected by the Buddha as what the Buddha approved of is the middle way, dependent origination. Accordingly, their worldviews and values which are constructed on the basis of their understanding of the self are completely different. Only by fully understanding the *Brahmajāla Sutta* can one fully understand the uniqueness of the Buddha's teaching.

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