

Workshop on the Textual Study of *Kathāvatthu*

Kathāvatthu, one of the earliest works of the Buddhist Tradition, forms a part of the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* (composed during 3rd BC). It is a text that depicts rich and varied ways in which the teachings of Buddha have been understood by his followers. Richness and variedness of the views presented in the text fascinates the reader to explore the text and understand the various points of controversy that are provided in it.

The text *Kathāvatthu* composes of a discussion of the ‘points of controversy’ between the *Theravāda* and the *Mahayāna*, while arguing in defense of the former. The importance of this text lies in the fact that for the first time in the history of Buddhist Philosophy, there came to be a systematized record of the eighteen sects of the Buddhist *Śāsana*. Thus in this text, the reader finds the recording of the internal differences (on points of metaphysics, epistemology, etc.) that existed between the eighteen schools of Buddhist Tradition. In this sense, *Kathāvatthu* represents the ‘systematic stage’ of Buddhist Philosophy, as understood in the backdrop of the general classification of the development of a Philosophical School, as proposed by Prof. TRV Murty – the first stage of development being ‘Suggestive’ in nature ; the second stage, ‘Systematic’ ; the third stage, ‘Critical’ and the fourth, as the ‘Implicative Stage’. Thus *Kathāvatthu* becomes significant to the modern day reader of Buddhist Philosophy as it gives him a chance of reconstructing the historico-philosophical development through the lens of this text.

Buddha explained the processes of the phenomenal world using the principle of ‘dependent-arising’ (*Paṭiccasamutpāda*). He established the non-substantiality and impermanence of experienced phenomenon, thus, avoiding the metaphysical extreme of absolutism. However, His word could be misinterpreted and misrepresented. In fact, during His lifetime itself absolutistic interpretations of His teaching started emerging.

With the passage of time, many schools of Buddhism emerged, each one understanding, interpreting the message of Buddha according to their own dispositions

and inclinations. At some point in history, it would have become imperative to delink the true teachings of the Buddha from its varying interpretations, or rather misinterpretations.

It is said that King Aśoka invited one of the most respected monks, *Moggalīputta-Tissa*, to convene a council for purging heretical views and restoring the purity of the Buddha's teachings. The proceedings of this Third Council are recorded in the *Kathāvatthu*.

Kathāvatthu text enumerates the various schools and their thoughts on various doctrinal topics as well as on the code of conduct. The teachings of various schools are analyzed, debated to verify whether it confirms with the teachings of the Buddha and thus through the Third Buddhist Council, the 'heretical' interpretations are purged. The text mentions the presence of eighteen different schools out of which *Therāvādin* is mentioned as a non-schismatic sect, while the rest are schismatic sects. The text deals with some of the fundamental notions and issues in Buddhism, like (1) the reality of the elements that constitute the human personality (2) to account for continuity of the individual in an impermanent and non-substantial world (3) the status of the liberated person etc.

Many schools and their teachings seem to have ignored Buddha's explanation of phenomenon (*Dhamma*) as non-substantial and impermanence and leaned towards absolutistic explanations. The *Puggalavādins* mentioned in the text believed in the substantial existence of the human personality. They believed that the real person transcends both realistic and nominalistic explanations. This analysis seems to go against the dependent-arising of human personality in terms of *Pañca-khandha* as explained by the Buddha.

There is a debate regarding the real existence of "everything" (*sabbaṃ*) at all times (*sabbadā*). The school which propounds this view is of *Sarvāstivādins*. *Sarvāstivādins* distinguished between a thing, an event, a phenomenon and its intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). They maintained the real existence of all temporal periods. The past and future exist with the same level of reality as present exists. Their ontological

commitments are debated, questioned and debunked as it directly goes against the Buddha's teaching of impermanence and non-substantiality.

The nature of the Buddhahood, the status of an enlightened person after death is also discussed and debated in *Kathāvatthu*.

The text is so vast and its coverage of issues so wide that it is difficult to highlight all of its main aspects. However, keeping the limitations of conducting the workshop, some objectives are enlisted below:

- The identification and analysis of issues which are dealt in the *Kathāvatthu* which are indispensable in the understanding of Buddhism.
- To map the evolution of ideas pertaining to major doctrinal topics in Buddhism. For example, the non-substantial account of human personality slowly evolved and solidified into a substantial account of it and the nature of evolution of ideas, the conditions and circumstances effecting such changes etc.
- To have a better comprehension of the teachings of the Buddha in the light of the debates and controversies that surfaced around his discourses.
- The evolution of major doctrinal ideas that are debated in the text. The way concepts and notions central in Buddhism like causation, impermanence, non-substantiality, time have changed over the course of centuries leading to the compilation of the text.

Justification of Selecting the Theme

- The doctrinal points covered, the range of issues analyzed, the number of competing doctrines debated make *Kathāvatthu* a vital document in the history of Buddhist philosophy in particular and the history of philosophy in general, as recognized by Max Muller in his *Sacred Books of the East*.
- The study of the text is important to understand the doctrines of different schools which emerged after the death of the Buddha.
- The study of text is critical in deciphering meaning in the other books of the *Abhidhamma* Canon, of which *Kathāvatthu* is one of the parts.

- The study of the text presents an excellent opportunity to analyze the history of the evolution of ideas.
- It is an opportunity to understand how ideas can take their own shape in time and how to analyze and evaluate them against a common benchmark.
- The analyses of the debates in the text presents an opportunity to better comprehend the teachings of the Buddha.

Above all, in an era of simultaneous discourses, where competing narratives keep colliding with each other without critical examination of issues, the study of *Kathāvatthu* is a good reminder as to how to interact and counter the ‘other’, who is of a different opinion and hold different beliefs.

Sub-themes for academic deliberations

There are several allied aspects to the study of the text of *Kathāvatthu* which will help bring out its themes and analysis of various standpoints more clearly. Papers are invited from various aspects which are incidental to the study of the text.

- Understanding the significant themes in the other texts of *Abhidhamma* Canon in relation to the controversies in *Kathāvatthu*. *Kathāvatthu* is one of the seven texts of the *Abhidhamma* Canon. A better understanding of the concepts and notions used in the other texts can aid in the understanding of the controversies that are debated and resolved in the *Kathāvatthu*.
- The historical analysis of the text. *Kathāvatthu* is not only an important philosophical treatise but a significant historical text. It mentions numerous schools and their doctrines that have emerged in the early history of Buddhist philosophy. A study of the historical forces, social, political, economic which necessitated the text would be a worthwhile exercise.
- Significant themes of various schools which are debated in the text. For example, numerous schools like *Sautāntikas*, *Sarvāstivādins*, *Vatsīputriyas*, *Lokuttaravādins* are mentioned in the text. The metaphysical notions and ontological commitments which they adhere to, for better contextualizing the debates in the text would provide a rich perspective of the text.

- Various approaches to the content of the text. The text is divided into 23 books which explicate almost 217 varied views on the teachings of the Buddha. Rhys Davids while translating Kathavatthu with the title Points of Controversy or Subjects of Discourse notes various possible approaches to the text; one from the point of view of Canonical Order (which is the usual presentation), two from the grouping under subjects of discourse and three from the grouping according to dissentient schools. Not limiting to these, there is a need to explore possible ways of approaching the text which is also one of the major concerns of the workshop.

The workshop is an attempt to enter into one of the earliest classical texts of Buddhist tradition which exhibits acute resilience to the perspectives of the ‘others’ within the tradition. Its democratic spirit is visible in the way it accommodates varied and sometimes opposite perspectives within the tradition and to show the limitations of each of them. The workshop majorly attempts to encourage scholars to open themselves to the textual tradition, especially of the early Buddhist Pali tradition. Unless one is introduced through a workshop it would be hard for the young scholars of early career to develop deep understanding of such a complex text. This workshop, in that way, initiates the scholars into developing skills of dealing with a complex text of various philosophical traditions of India.

The number of participants would be limited to thirty plus local candidates up to ten. The expenses for travel by 3rd class A/C, boarding and lodging and course-literature would be borne by the ICPR. The intending participants may apply by 31st May 2018 on the ICPR's form which could be downloaded from its website, www.icpr.in Academic Centre, 3/9 Vipul Khand, Gomtinagar, Lucknow-226010 or by email at icprlkw@gmail.com. For any clarification kindly contact at 0522-2392636 or by email at the above noted email address. The workshop shall be coordinated by Professor Balaganapathi Devarakonda, Professor of Philosophy, University of Delhi, Delhi, balaganapathid@gmail.com, 8500052757