

## Matter, Essence, Anti-Essence: *Svabhāva* vs *Nisvabhāva*

Narmada P

**Abstract:** *Although much work has been carried out on ‘Materialism’ as a philosophical tradition and movement in Western thought and history, there is hardly any such similar effort made in the Indian context, except for a few so-called Marxist thinkers and some anti-caste writers. The influence of ‘materialism’ as a philosophy on Indian thought and subsequent socio-religious movements in India have been enormous. Despite the claims made by Western Indologists, writers of texts on Indian philosophy characterizing Indian thought as essentially ‘spiritual’ ‘religious’, ‘idealistic’; philosophy as originating from the Śramaṇas is irreligious, rooted in materialism and naturalistic. In this paper, I attempt to revisit the materialistic traditions of Indian thought with a special focus on Buddhist materialism. The notion of svabhāva also translated as “own-nature”, “self-nature”, “essence” is central to both Brahmanical and Buddhist thought, it is that which also distinguishes one from the other at a fundamental metaphysical level. The Buddhist ontology, epistemology and ethics center around disproving the existence of a svabhāva or fixed nature of things, entities, persons and phenomena through their anti-essentialist (nisvabhāva) position closely connected to the doctrine of no-self (anātma). The purpose here is to locate this concept within the larger context of Buddhist materialism and to bring out the differences with the other essentialist traditions.*

**Keywords:** Materialism, idealistic, naturalistic, Śramaṇas, svabhāva, nisvabhāva, anātma.



narmada.p16@gmail.com

Narmada holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the Dept of Philosophy, University of Hyderabad, India. She taught Philosophy as a Guest Faculty in the Dept of Philosophy, University of Hyderabad, India. Her areas of research include Indian Intellectual History, and Early Buddhist Ethics, and Metaphysics, Social and Political Philosophy.

## Introduction

Materialism is the oldest known philosophy in the world, it is closely connected with one of the fundamental philosophical problems which is based on the distinction between ‘spirit’ and ‘matter’ or more broadly between ‘mind’ and ‘matter’. The ‘mind’ is taken to belong to the realm of the ‘spirit’, it is ‘internal’ and ‘metaphysical’ while ‘matter’ is ‘external’, ‘physical’ and is characterized as having properties which are extended outwardly. This problem is also referred to as the ‘mind-body’ problem<sup>1</sup>. Philosophers have throughout history variously characterized the relationship between ‘mind’ and ‘matter’ or addressed the ‘mind-body’ problem by positing various positions such as monism or idealism, dualism or Cartesianism, realism, parallelism, interactionism etc.

Materialism also called ‘physicalism’ is taken to be opposed to spiritualism. It is a philosophical standpoint which argues that ‘matter’ is the fundamental substance of nature and all things, events, mental states, and consciousness are products of material interactions. Conversely, all things, events, mental states, the human mind, and will through history are causally dependent on physical processes or are reducible to them. Naturalism also comes from materialism<sup>2</sup>, it argues that all processes in the world can be explained only by natural laws. Both materialism and naturalism reject the metaphysical or the supernatural existence such as ‘God’, and ‘soul’. Science has its roots in both naturalism and materialism. Friedrich Engels, while speaking about the beginnings of science located it within the philosophical struggles between the “two great camps” idealism and materialism when he says, “there are those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature and therefore in the last instance assumed the world creation in some form or other,” which we term idealism and on the other there are those “who regarded nature as primary, [belonging] to the various schools of materialism.” (Engels, 1976) Therefore, a materialistic assumption of the world is the basis for all genuine science. The materialistic outlook has been the basis for many scientific developments and socio-political movements from the Copernican revolution, scientific revolution which marked the beginning of modern science to the French revolution, the protestant revolution, Industrial revolution, logical positivism etc.

The earliest form of materialism in western thought can be traced to Epicurus (341–270 B.C.E.) and to Epicurean thought. Epicurus was the first atomistic materialist who argued that reality was

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<sup>1</sup> The mind-body problem is a foundational philosophical problem although it has been credited to Rene Descartes, the problem has been in existence for thousands of years starting with the Buddhists, and the Greeks. This problem concerns the nature of relationship between thought and consciousness in the human mind, and the brain which is the part of the body. Descartes famous cogito ergo sum, “I think, therefore I am”, establishes a duality between ‘mind’ and ‘body’ stating that the two are distinct entities, and the ‘body’ can only be sensed through the mind, and its independent existence can also be doubted. So, the only thing that is certain is the fact that ‘I can think’ or that ‘one can think’ while everything else is subject to doubt.

<sup>2</sup> While some regard ‘naturalism’ and ‘materialism’ as being synonymous. While ‘materialism’ is naturalistic, which is that the world is essentially objective composed of real things which can be understood using natural laws, ‘naturalism’, on the other hand, need not be materialistic.

composed of atoms, which were the basic constituents of things. Epicurus' basic propositions on the nature and constituent of the universe are 1. nothing is ever created out of nothing. 2. Nothing is ever annihilated, 3. Matter exists in the form of indivisible particles (atoms) 4. Besides matter the universe contains empty space, 5. The universe consists of matter (with its properties and accidents) and of nothing else and 6. the atoms are indestructible (Latham, 1961, p. 22). Epicureanism was the first sustained skepticism against the platonic forms, ideas of an immaterial soul, God etc. He put forward a hedonistic ethic, which claimed that pleasure was the ultimate goal or telos which all our actions should aim at, but we would need to limit our desires and get rid of the fear of Gods and of death. Epicurean thought slowly declined with the rise of Christianity however it was renewed in the renaissance period. Epicurean philosophy and thought were reconstructed through the works of Roman poet Lucretius (94-55 BCE) and Roman politician Cicero. Lucretius' poem, "*On the Nature of Things*", or "*De Rerum Natura*", in Latin was the first poem to expound the philosophy of Epicurus.

In the East, the first known form of materialist philosophy is the school of Lokayata/ carvaka (600-400 BCE). Lokayata also translated as *loka* (this-worldly) *yatah* as prevalent, or the philosophy prevalent among the people. Lokayata—true to their materialistic and atheistic standpoint—rejects ritualism, supernaturalism, soul, God, and afterlife. Also, it is important to remember that materialism started as a revolt against Vedism and orthodoxy, and Materialists were called the *nastikas*<sup>3</sup> or the *Śramaṇas*. They were consistently marginalized and rebuked as being without ethics, lacking a sense of right and wrong, often characterized in Indian texts as the “eat, drink and be merry” philosophy or rather a hedonistic philosophy with no ethical import. Contrary to the common trope regarding Carvakas as being unethical is that they were not just ethical but also humanistic. According to Dale Riepe (1961), he says, “It may be said from the available material that Carvakas hold truth, integrity, consistency, and freedom of thought in the highest esteem” (p. 75-76). That they regarded truth, integrity, and consistency follows from their analysis of knowledge, since truth is unlikely to be found in the sacred scriptures, it is to be found elsewhere because truth is to be arrived at, and therefore, they believed that it is only through direct perception that one could arrive at truth. They rejected inference (*anumāna*) and testimony (*Śabda*). Integrity consists in following knowledge obtained through sense perception against the threats of powerful priesthood following the authority of the *Śruti*. This integrity was greater than the founder of any school. The role of religion was detrimental to ethical life. According to Carvaka, religion is something that is perpetuated by knaves to get a livelihood from fools; religion represents a lack of critical thought. Sacred scriptures are a scandalous mishmash of contradictions reconciled by a tricky and conniving group of commentators. Carvaka was the first true system of philosophical

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<sup>3</sup> The classification of the distinction between *āstika* and *nāstika* as pointed out by Andrew Nicholson is a culmination of the long tradition about the discourse of the ‘other’ in Indian philosophy. The *nāstikas* who are referred to as the ‘non-believers’ were earlier referred to as ‘*avaidikas*’ standing for those who opposed the Vedas and rejected Brahmanical tradition. The *nāstikas* also refer to ‘outsiders’, as opposed to *astikas* who are the insiders. Refer to Andrew.J.Nicholson, Unifying Hinduism.

naturalism *philosophy* by affirming that all beings and events in the universe (whatever their inherent character may be) are natural, so they are governed by natural laws.

The earliest forms of Buddhism and Jainism also have roots in materialism and naturalism (*svabhāvavāda*). These traditions were the first anti-religious traditions in the world and the beginnings of philosophy in the form of skepticism against orthodoxy can be traced back to them. These traditions also marked the beginnings of a scientific outlook of the world, in attempting to understand the phenomenon and natural processes occurring in the world in terms of causal theory, and through the application of natural laws. In this paper, I am particularly concerned with the earliest forms of Buddhist materialism which allowed for the position of an anti-essentialist (*nivabhāva*) conception of the world and of the human being. The Buddhist metaphysical interests were not about conceptualizing an underlying human nature through the positing of a universal fixed essence but rather on finding out the underlying conditions which make human existence possible. This anti-essentialist position of the *nāstika* traditions entails an alternative to the homogenized, holistic, static, deterministic representation of human nature as is posited by the Brahmanical traditions. Essentialism is used by dominant, hegemonic traditions to support categories such as caste, class, and race by providing them some kind of fixed universal unchanging essence.

### **Buddhist Materialism and anti-essentialism (*nivabhāva*):**

Buddhist materialism is based on the idea that mind arises in dependence on the body, both ‘mind’ and ‘body’ do not have an independent existence possessing some kind of ‘substance’<sup>4</sup> or ‘essential nature’. This essential nature is what is termed as *svabhāva*. The notion of *svabhāva* or *sabhāva* [Pāli] is primary within the wider context of the Dhamma theory<sup>5</sup> and its underlying process philosophy<sup>6</sup>.

The term *svabhāva* or *sabhāva* (Pali) is first introduced in the Sunnakatha of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (Path of discrimination) of the Theravada Buddhist tradition (Roakin, 2005, p. 87-89). The opening passage, describes a scene where Ananda, referring to the alleged claim that “The world is empty” (*Sunno loko ti*) asks Buddha to explain in what sense is the world empty.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Substance’ in philosophy are things that exist in their own right, they have an ultimate existence. Philosophers believe the universe is made of two entities ‘substance’ and ‘modes’. ‘Modes’ are the different ways in which things appear to us, ‘substance’ are the way things are, hence, this distinction is based on a more fundamental distinction between ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’. ‘God’, ‘Soul’ and other metaphysical entities are substances, they may be either ‘divisible’ or ‘indivisible’.

<sup>5</sup> The Dhamma theory is the foundational principle on which the Buddhist philosophy rests. According to the Dhamma all the phenomena of empirical existence are made up of a number of elementary constituents, the ultimate realities behind the manifest phenomena. These elementary constituents, the building blocks of experience, are called dhammas. The Dhamma also represents the teachings of the Buddha.

<sup>6</sup> Process philosophy as a discipline, deals with the notion of ‘change’, with ‘becoming’. The Early Abhidhamma philosophy was concerned with the notion of change and impermanence and with analysis of the process of conscious experience while the later Vinaya texts were concerned not with processes but events and analysis of ‘momentariness’.

In response Buddha affirms the claim that “the world is empty of the self or what belongs to self”. Then he goes on to explain what exactly it is that is empty of self or of what belongs to self, enumerated in terms of the six sense faculties (*salayatana*, sense, touch, smell, visible object, mental object) along with their appropriate sense objects, the 12 *ayatanas* (includes the six internal sense basis and the six external sense basis) and their corresponding modalities of cognitive awareness, thus referring to a total of eighteen dhatus or sense objects. Then Buddha goes on to list various type of states of being empty, one of which is empty in terms of change (*viparinamma sunnam*) his reply as to what is empty in terms of change is:

Born materiality is empty of *Sabhava* (*Sabhavena sunnam*); disappeared materiality is both changed and empty. Born feeling is empty of *sabhava*; disappeared feeling is both changed and empty..Born conceptualization...Born volitions...born consciousness...born becoming are all empty of *sabhava*; disappeared becoming is both changed and empty. This is ‘empty of change’.

Here, the phrase *Sabhavena Sunnam*, means the predication of the world as being empty of an underlying nature. It means the totality of human experience is devoid of an enduring substance or of anything which belongs to such a substance, because this totality is dependent on many and various conditions, it is of the nature of being subject to continuous change of origination and dissolution. In its broad sense of the term, *Sabhava*, corresponds to *Pakati* (Sanskrit *prakrti*) which is essentially a non-philosophical, non-technical term without any metaphysical bearing. *Pakati* denotes a regularity with which things normally occur in nature, a normal custom or innate predisposition of persons, the order of occurrences in the environment, or that which is common to all or shared by all. *Pakati* is employed with reference to the innate character - virtuous or bad - of people, to the inborn capacities of sense-perception or the strength of the body, or when a habit becomes so natural that one performs it automatically and effortlessly. This is the everyday non-conceptual understanding of the term *sabhava*.

Buddhist materialism<sup>7</sup> moves away from the “substance-essence” ontology of the West to a phenomenological understanding of human experience<sup>8</sup>. It understands matter as a range of sensory experiences rather than as a constitutive substance or causal force. While remaining consistent with its doctrine of no-self (*anātma*) it not only rejects the idea of a persistent self and soul but also of a substance and essence behind all “things” (Cho, 2014). For Mādhyamika philosopher Nāgarjuna, all things including us' ‘person/s’ are empty of *svabhāva*, all things

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<sup>7</sup> Buddhism does not consider matter as ontologically real substance. Instead, matter as a kind of phenomenological event, as a way in which things appear to us in experience.

<sup>8</sup> Phenomenology in philosophy is a study of consciousness and experience. The many similarities between phenomenology or rather the phenomenological method and Buddhism have been extensively dealt with by many recent scholars. Both phenomenology and Buddhism give importance to consciousness from a first-person perspective. Buddhism affirms that consciousness arises in dependency on the body and physical process, and it does not have some status of transcendental metaphysical entity. While in Brahmanism consciousness is given an eternal, metaphysical status.

including us do not have an independent, inherent essence but we only exist in dependence or in relation to other things. The concept of emptiness (*sūnya*), central to the Mahāyana Buddhism, was elaborated by Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna took great pains to show that the view that the things we perceive are that which we conceive, to the extent that they exist at all, inherently originates as an innate misapprehension and is not a product of sound philosophical inquiry. That is, we naively and pre-theoretically take things as substantial. So, all this talk about an underlying essence, about ātman, Brahman is delusional and also the root cause of suffering. To say that a thing lacks essence is not to say that the thing does not exist. So, for a table to exist is not dependent on the table itself, or on purely non-relational characteristics but depends on us as well. The table is not a table but an aggregate of five objects, the four sticks surmounted by a slab of stick wood about to be carved. It is also to say that that table depends for its existence on its parts, on its causes, and its material and so on, it has no independent existence apart from them, its existence is only nominal or conventional (Nāgārjuna and Garfield, 1995). So, the table is a purely arbitrary slice of space-time chosen by us as a referent by a single name and not demanding on its own recognition and a philosophical analysis to reveal its essence. Similarly, with regard to human nature there is no essential human nature independent of the social, and material conditions that characterize human existence<sup>9</sup>. The Brahmin *svabhāva*, is used to establish an essential self (*ātman*) with a fixed nature and the continuity of soul and also to attribute an eternal, unchangeable status and authority to their scriptures (*śruti* and *smṛti*).

Essentialism also has a long tradition in western philosophical thought. Plato was the first to posit the idea that all things have an essence, an idea or a form. This continues with Aristotle who argues that all things or objects have an essence which makes it what it is and not any other thing. Such a view assumes that things are both independent of each other and indivisible which is a view that is fundamentally flawed with regard to the nature of most things. The idea of a table exists only in our mind and not in the table itself. Unlike the essentialists (*svabhāvavādins*) the Buddhist emphasis was not on finding an underlying human nature or some grand metaphysical reality but rather on observing human experience, and analyzing it for practical purposes such as alleviating suffering, particularly suffering caused due to mental delusions and distortions. For the Buddha this mental delusion or distortion is due to the lack of understanding or ignorance of the true nature of reality. Reality for Mādhyamikas is of two kinds - a conventional or nominal reality (*samvṛti*) and an ultimate (*parāmartha*) reality. When we ask if a phenomenon exists, what we mean to ask is does it 'exist' inherently or independently of its attributes by virtue of having an essence, but according to the doctrine of emptiness (*sūnyavāda*), all phenomena are devoid of attributes and do not exist independently, the reality is impermanent (*annica*), interdependent (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), and devoid of existence (*sūnya*), this is the true nature of all things.

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<sup>9</sup> Dialectical Materialism of Marx, like Buddha, conveys that the philosophical analysis of the human condition was central to positing a humanist philosophy and not an investigation into human nature and essence. Both are founded on moral principles rather than some metaphysical project on human nature.



### **Svabhāva vs Nisvabhāva:**

According to Samkhya, *svabhāva* is associated with *prakṛti*, where *prakṛti* is the original or primary substance or nature from which everything else follows. It is the inherent capacity of *prakṛti*. This notion of *svabhāva* then gets replaced in the Brahmanical texts such as the Bhagavad Gita to mean the inherent nature or capacity of ‘persons’. *Svabhāva* is then used as a distinguishing quality which differentiates one varṇa from the other. Varṇa here is a generic term used to refer to the four castes, the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. According to Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 18, Verse 41:

*brāhmaṇa-kṣhatriya-viśhām śhūdrāṇām cha parantapa*

*karmāṇi pravibhaktāni svabhāva-prabhavair guṇaiḥ*

These castes are differentiated based on their intrinsic qualities (*svabhāva*) and on their *gunas*. So, a human being for the Brahmin is a composite of one’s natural or inherent tendencies (*svabhāva*) and the three *gunas* (Rajas, Tamas, and Sattva)<sup>10</sup>. It is not difficult to understand why such a positing of a human being or ‘self’ is problematic and even flawed at several levels. There is no epistemic, ontological, or even scientific basis for the existence of inherent qualities or essences, and even if they did they cannot be observable nor proven. The Brahmin *svabhāva* seems to be more concerned with attributing or fixing inherent qualities to human beings rather than attempting to understand a more fundamental question “what it means to be human or a ‘person’?”.

On the other hand, the notion of *nisvabhāva*, is completely opposed to the very idea of things or entities or phenomena possessing an inherent, independent *svabhāva*. Unlike the Brahmins, the Buddhist analysis of *svabhāva* is to ontologically and empirically disprove that things, entities, events are devoid of any inherent, essential, independent existence or *svabhāva*. So, the Buddhist conception of the ‘self’ and that of a ‘person’ is completely opposed to the Brahmanical conception. The Buddhist doctrine of no-self or anātman, is translated as ‘no-self’, ‘no-ego’, ‘no-soul’. In Buddhism everything is conditioned, subject to impermanence (*anitya, anicca*) so the question of a self-subsisting entity such as *ātman* posited by the Brahmin does not exist. The living being is an aggregate of the five skandhas which are the building blocks of existence, the physical body (*rūpa*), physical sensation/feeling (*vedana*), sensory perception (*samjñā*), which is the act of discriminating and labeling our various experiences; disposition (*samskāra*) which refers to our conditioned experiences, and consciousness (*viññāna*) refers to the act of being aware which is necessary to experience anything at all. This being is in a constant state of flux, each preceding

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<sup>10</sup> According to the *astika* or orthodox traditions, the entire universe is composed of matter, both animate and inanimate objects are composed of the three *gunas*: rajas, tamas and sattva. Rajas is characterized by passion, activity, movement, Sattva is characterized by goodness, calmness, harmony, and Tamas by ignorance, inertia, and laziness. Each individual is predominantly either one of the three *gunas*. These *gunas* are taken to be innate and intrinsic. So, in the hierarchical, hereditary caste structure the Brahmana is inherently *sattvika*, the Ksatriya and the Vaishya is predominantly rajasic, and the shudra is predominantly tamasica.

skandhas giving rise to subsequent skandhas (Sarao, 2004, p. 82-84). This goes on momentarily, and unceasingly in the present and will continue into the future until the true nature of reality is realized and liberation (*nirvana*) is attained. So, what we call or experience as a 'person' (*pudgala*) is nothing more than an ever-changing combination of the aggregates and there is nothing which is persisting throughout. Hence the Buddhist conception of person or individual is materialist. Just like a chariot which is nothing but a combination of its various parts and which disappears when the different parts are pulled apart, so also what we call the 'person' or the 'individual' disappears with the dissolution of the skandhas. The 'person' or the 'individual' in a constant state of becoming, the 'person' or 'human being' is nothing but a process which is constantly changing, so the idea of a 'personal identity', which is the identity of a person overtime is delusional (Giles, 1993), due to the misunderstanding or ignorance of reality.

### **Metaphysical and Ethical Implications of a No-Self (*anātma*)**

In the absence of a self, for the question as to who experiences feelings, or pain, Buddha says that it is the wrong question to ask, the question is not who is the one who experiences or the experiencer but rather what are the conditions which make the experience possible. For instance, what are the conditions which make 'feeling' occur? The response is 'contact' which reiterates the conditioned nature of all experiences and the absence of a permanent self (*anātman*). The entire universe is made up of a bundle of elements or forces (*samskāras*) which are in a constant state of flux, which is also what materialism states. All phenomena (*dhamma*) are arisen dependently; when this exists that also exists, when this ceases that also ceases. So, in this sense according to Buddhist materialism the individual is entirely phenomenal, governed by the laws of causality, and lacking any extra-phenomenal self or essential nature. At the level of everyday existence or conventional reality the human being is a concrete being, not a transcendental self, performing its duties, whose personality evolves, grows and constantly changes, achieving perfection through practice and will. At the level of the ultimate reality is the realization that this 'person', 'individual' characterized by 'personhood' is only a mental, sense-based construction of our imagination and nothing more. This is completely in line with our contemporary understanding of 'self' and 'identity', our selves are constructed through the appropriation of various aggregates which allows one to recognize the body as mine, thought as mine, dispositions as mine, values as mine, but this appropriation and narration of life is not done in isolation, we narrate and construct each other constantly, as Nietzsche (Nehamas, 1985) and others have pointed out through the hermeneutical act that is the social life (Hutto, 2008). Neither are we completely determined nor completely autonomous in this activity of creating our life and identity. Our identities are complex, fluid, and negotiated, marked by virtue of being identified by the three universal characteristics of impermanence, interdependence, and the absence of any self (Dasti & Bryant, 2014).

From an ethical perspective, in the absence of a self or when the illusion of the permanent, continuing self is realized, it leads to the development of more compassion or *karuna* for oneself,



others, and to all other sentient beings. Compassion requires the wisdom to realize that we are all part of the greater whole and are interdependent and connected to that whole. Compassion is the realization of the truth that suffering is universal. Suffering is an undeniable fact of human existence and this is captured perfectly by the statement made by Buddha “One thing I teach: is suffering and the end of suffering, it is just ill and the ceasing of ill that I proclaim”.<sup>11</sup> When we understand our own mind, our thoughts, the qualities of the mind, and being we end our own suffering. States of anger, guilt, hatred lead to suffering, when we get fixated on any one of these states we get deceived or deluded into believing that these are fixed states and attribute it to ourselves. But these states are constantly changing, it is in the nature of things that things change, everything comes and goes as conditions arise and change. The Buddhists more than metaphysicians or philosophers were foremost psychologists because of their primary interest in the human mind and states of consciousness, experience, subjectivity and the individual. They understood that while there was outward suffering which may be beyond one’s control, a strong, cultivated mind free from any kind of afflictions could withstand and overcome all kinds of suffering of oneself and of the other.

## Conclusions

Philosophy like history has often been presented in texts as having elite, aristocratic beginnings as if it was only the elites who engaged with philosophical enquiry and its practice. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, had aristocratic backgrounds and there are many more examples in the modern period as well such as Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell, Nietzsche and so on. But studies have shown that this is not necessarily the case, philosophy and philosophical enquiry begins with questioning faith and religious dogmas using rationality, logic and reason to question the validity of religious and belief claims. This task was carried out not by elites but by ordinary people who questioned the dominant orthodoxy and it began with the separation of ‘spirit’ from ‘matter’. So, materialism was one of the first philosophies, even preceding idealism, while the elites were interested in the world of ‘forms’, ‘ideals’ and ‘utopia’, the ordinary people were interested in the problems of the everyday life, and this-worldly existence, for the ordinary people the real world was composed of matter and of things which came into existence, transformed then decayed, decomposed and dissolved. The *Śramaṇas*, which roughly translates as ‘one who toils, labors and exerts themselves’, who were later termed as *nāstikas* or non-believers were the first philosophers. Materialism began with the *Lokāyata/Carvāka*, the first of the *nāstika* schools, and then transforms itself into a more systematic form in Buddhism and the other heterodox traditions, although Buddhist themselves would be opposed to being called materialists to the extent we understand materialism in the ordinary sense of the term. Buddhist materialism is distinct from western materialism in that they do not claim or affirm that matter is the fundamental ontological entity or that everything is reducible to matter but rather that they reject both ‘mind’ and ‘matter’ as distinct

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<sup>11</sup> [www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/beliefs/purpose.htm](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/beliefs/purpose.htm)

entities having a substance or possessing an ‘essence’. ‘Mind’ and ‘matter’ are not objects or entities but different kinds of experiences.

The Buddhists conception of ‘mind’, ‘matter’, ‘person’ and their understanding of reality as something which lacks an inherent essence or quality (*svabhāva*) is unique and distinct from other essentialist traditions such as Brahmanism and also the dominant Western philosophical tradition based on a ‘substance-essence’ ontology and/ or through positing of a fixed essential human nature or characteristic which distinguishes the ‘self’ from ‘other/s’’. The Buddhist understanding of reality as characterized by impermanence (*anicca*), interdependence (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), and lacking in essence (*sūnya*) informs their ethics and morality. Without a self (*anātma*), there is no ‘other’ or ‘I’, ‘mine’ vs. ‘you’, ‘they’, without these mental constructions there is only compassion (*karuna*). The function of compassion is to extinguish the very idea of the self which is selflessness. Compassion along with selflessness, and the understanding that no one thing exists spontaneously all on its own (interdependence/interbeing) and that everything is in relation to every other thing is the core of Buddhist ethics.

**Acknowledgements:** An earlier version of this paper was presented in the weekly talk series hosted by The Shared Mirror (14 November, 2020).

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