Continuity and Change of Human Personality and the World: A View from Theravada Buddhism

Asanga Tilakaratne*

Abstract

In this paper, continuity and change are discussed from a Buddhist point of view at two levels, individual and cosmic or inner and outer. In the first part of this discussion, continuity and change will be discussed as a characteristic of what is called 'constructed phenomena' which include reality in an all-encompassing sense, i.e., the world and human and non-human beings that inhabit it. The focus of this part of the discussion is cosmological or outer. Continuity and change at the individual level will be discussed next. Although the individual is included in the broad category of the constructed phenomena, in this discussion, it is treated separately for the significance attributed to it in Buddhist thought, in particular, in Buddhist soteriology. The discussion concludes that whereas continuity and change at the cosmological level is an endless process, at the level of individual human beings, there can be a point at which the process of change will not continue anymore or the process of continuity and change will no longer be applicable.

*Professor (Emeritus), Department of Buddhust Studies, University of Colombo.
tasanga8@gmail.com

The early discourses of the Buddha found in the Pali canon (tipiṭaka/tripiṭaka) and the later Abhidhamma literature which represents a systematic and philosophical analysis of the universe and the human being, will serve as the primary sources of this study.

Keywords: *Continuity, change, human personality, world, Buddhism*

Introduction

Considering a key characteristic in Buddhist thought, namely, that of not indulging in abstract thinking which is without reference to any experienced, or potentially experienced reality, it is understood that continuity and change too need to be discussed with reference to human experience. Keeping this broad perspective in focus, continuity and change may be discussed from a Buddhist point of view at two levels, individual and cosmic or inner and outer. In the first part of this discussion, continuity and change will be discussed as a characteristic of what is called 'constructed phenomena' which include reality in an all-encompassing sense, i.e. the world and human and non-human beings that inhabit it. The focus of this part of the discussion is cosmological or outer. Continuity and change at individual level will be discussed next. Although the individual is included in the broad category of the constructed phenomena, in this discussion it is treated separately for the significance attributed to it in Buddhist thought, in particular, in Buddhist soteriology. The conclusion of the discussion is that whereas the continuity and change at cosmological level is an endless process, at the level of individual human being there can be a point at which the process of change will not continue any more or the process of continuity and change will no longer be applicable. The early discourses of the Buddha found in the Pali

canon *(tipiṭaka/tripiṭaka)* and the later Abhidhamma (systematic and philosophical) analysis of the universe and the human being will serve as the primary sources of this study.

The Constructed Phenomena: That which continues and changes

When we reflect on the sphere in which continuity and change is understood in Buddhist philosophy, two terms emerge, *saṅkhāra* and *saṅkhata*, both originating from the same etymological root, saṅ+kṛ meaning, to form, to construct or to modify, the first, in noun form and the second, in past participle form, both variously rendered as formations, karmic formations, constructions, constructed phenomena, conditioned, or conditioned phenomena in the literature. Of the two, *saṅkhārā* is a key term in Buddhist thought occurring in several different contexts which, in a closer scrutiny, will prove to be connected. One such prominent use of the term is to refer to one among the five aspects that come together to make human personality, which are referred to as 'five aggregates' *(pañca-khandha),* namely, material form *(rūpa),* feelings *(vedanā),* perceptions *(saññā)*, formations *(saṅkhāra)* and consciousness *(viññāṇa)*. In this context, *saṅkhārā* is understood to refer to physical, verbal and mental formations. The following explanation occurring in the Majjhima-nikāya (the Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha), one of the early Buddhist collections, appear to be relevant to formations as an aspect of human personality which covers the sphere of human activity: "In-breathing and out-breathing…are the bodily formation; applied thought and sustained thought are the verbal formation; perception and feeling are the mental formation" (Bodhi, 2001 p. 399; *Majjhima-nikāya* I, 2002, p. 301). Another context where *'saṅkhārā'* occurs prominently is the doctrine

of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*/Pali or *pratītya-samutpāda*/Sanskrit) which is meant to explain the causally conditioned existence of beings, mainly, that of human being. According to this teaching, one's ignorance *(avijjā)* conditions one's *saṅkhāras* or volitional actions which, in turn, condition one's consciousness *(viññāṇa)* and the process altogether with twelve factors goes on to produce suffering as its end. The two contexts are connected and inseparable. The five aggregate analysis is meant to highlight the composite character of human personality without any abiding reality popularly known as soul. What human personality, in this analysis, is a combination of the acts of feeling, perceiving, constructing and cognizing centred on a particular physical form. The dependent origination analysis is meant to capture the inner process of how suffering arises (and ceases) in the course of one's response to the sensory stimuli. Formations, in this context, are understood to refer to the activities of body, speech or mind, which are open to be evaluated as wholesome, unwholesome or neutral (Nyanatiloka, 1987, p. 162). The third context where formations occur, broadest of the three, as referred to earlier, is the world including everything that constitutes it. "It occurs … in the sense of anything formed *(saṅkhata)* and conditioned, and includes all things whatever in the world" (Nyanatiloka, 1987, P. 163). In order to illustrate this, point we may refer to a discourse occurring among the gradual discourses of the Buddha in which he narrates a story of how this world with its huge mountains and oceans will be reduced to ashes when gradually Suns will be multiplied to seven.[1] The fact that the Buddha concluded his statement with the following words: "so impermanent are conditioned

1. For the complete discourse, see (Bodhi, 2012, pp. 1071-1075; Aṅguttara-nikāya IV, 1999, pp. 100-106).

phenomena, so unstable, so unreliable…" (Bodhi, 2012, p. 1073) gives us an idea of the vast context covered by the concept of *saṅkhārā* –constructed phenomena. This, we may call, the cosmological dimension of *saṅkhārā* and will discuss in some detail now.

'All Constructed Phenomena' or the Totality of Saṅkhāra: Cosmological Dimension

That all constructed phenomena are impermanent is universally referred to in the discourses of the Buddha. Although often such a statement has reference to one's inner experience, the external reality or the world without which one's inner experience will have no content is included in this category. All these forms of inner and outer phenomena, or the experience and its content, are included under constructed phenomena because, they are defined as 'things that have come to be owing to causes and conditions'. In the Buddhist understanding, everything in the world, excepting *nirvāṇa*, the only unconstructed phenomenon, is made of causes and conditions and hence constructed and dependent.

One way to refer to everything in the world is to refer to its material form *(rūpa)* or to matter with which it is made of. In the five-aggregate analysis, where *rūpa* occurs prominently, it refers to the physical aspect of the human being or human personality which is described in the discourses as "the four great elements and the form derived from the four great elements" (Bodhi, 2000, P. 895) and further characterized as "past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near" (Bodhi, 2000, P. 916). In the Abhidhamma we find a more comprehensive analysis of the material aspect of the human

personality, the four great elements and, in particular, "the form derived from the four great elements" analyzed into twenty-four all of which are associated with human being.

Matter or material form, however, has a much larger reference, namely, the external world that comes to our sensory perception or that lie beyond our immediate field of sensory perception. This expansion of the concept of materiality may be justified with reference to the above-mentioned characterization of aggregate of matter, in particular, as internal and external and far or near which seem to make a distinction between what is subjective and what is objective. As Karunadasa has shown (2015, pp. 14-15), however, these pairs of characteristics are understood as referring to the individual's experience of matter and not to matter directly. We have to look for other arguments. The fact that the objectivity of material form, or its existence independently of one who perceives it, is a basic assumption in the Buddhist path which provides a stronger justification for treating materiality as existing independently of human being and extending beyond its immediate reference in human personality, namely, the five aggregates[2].

The frequent references found in the discourses to the world, *loka*, has to be understood as indicative of the matter in this objective sense existing independent of human being. According to the Buddhist understanding, there are innumerable

2. Refer to Karunadasa (2015 pp. 165-166) on how matter is not in itself a fetter but it is one that productive of fetter which affirms the existence of matter independently of one who perceives it. The following canonical statement provides further support:
They are not sense pleasures, the world's pretty things:
Man's sensuality is the intention of lust.
The pretty things remain as they are in the world.
But the wise remove the desire for them (Bodhi, 2000. p. 111)

systems of world, referred to as *loka-dhātu*. The duration of these worlds or the systems of worlds is calculated in eons (kappa), the longest duration of time mentioned in the Buddhist literature. They evolve through four stages, dissolving and remaining in the state of dissolved, and evolving and remaining in the state of evolution. Each phase of this evolution persists for so many eons. The Buddha describes the innumerability of eons and the process of evolution of the world that takes place within such a long duration in the following words:

> Bhikkhus, there are these incalculable divisions of an eon. What four? The time during which an eon evolves, which cannot easily be calculated as 'so many years' or 'so many hundreds of years' or 'so many thousands of years' or 'so many hundreds thousands of years.'
>
> The time during which an eon remains in a state of dissolution, which cannot easily be calculated as … hundreds thousands of years.
>
> The time during which an eon evolves, which cannot easily be calculated as … hundreds of thousands of years.
>
> The time during which an eon remains in a state of evolution, which cannot easily be calculated as … hundreds of thousands of years.' (Bodhi, 2012. pp. 521-522; Aṅguttara-nikāya II, 1995, p. 142.)

The length of these countless eons are equally beyond imagination. The Buddha described the enormity of the length of the time of an eon by using the following similes:

> Suppose, …, there was a great stone mountain a yojana long, a yojana wide, and a yojana high, without holes or crevices, one solid mass of rock. At the end of every

> hundred years a man would stroke it once with a piece of Kasian cloth. That great stone mountain might by this effort be worn away and eliminated but the aeon would still not have come to an end. So long is an aeon.
>
> Suppose, …, there was a city with iron walls yojana long, a yojana wide, and a yojana high, filled with mustard seeds as dense as a topknot. At the end of every hundred years a man would remove one mustard seed from there. The great heap of mustard seeds might by this effort be depleted and eliminated but the aeon would still not have come to an end. (Bodhi, 2000, p. 654; Saṃyutta-nikāya II, 2000, pp. 181-821).

On how many eons have elapsed and gone by, another way of highlighting the vast length of an eon, the Buddha says that it is not easy to count them as hundreds, or thousands or hundreds of thousands. He gives two similes to clarify his assertion. One is the simile of four disciples with the life span of one hundred years, living one hundred years and recollecting hundred thousand eons in each day, they would die after one hundred years with eons not recollected still remaining. The other is the simile of the grains of the sands of the entire Gangā river from its point of origin to the point at which it enters the see: as it is not easy to count the number of grains of sands, so is the number of eons (Bodhi, 2000, pp. 655-656).

Once one cycle consisting the four phases mentioned above is over, another would begin without any pause. The process will go on endlessly, thus making any concept of the end or termination of the world system meaningless. This process is described as natural, and does not need any creator (or a destroyer), divine or otherwise. The point is that all constructed

phenomena are impermanent and change and come to an end. But it is really not the end for from that point onwards, a new cycle of constructed phenomena starts evolving. In the well-known 'Discourse on Knowing the Origin' the endless process of continuity and change has been described in the following manner:

> There comes a time, … when, sooner or later after a long period, this world contracts [dissolves]. At a time of contraction [dissolution], beings are mostly born in the *Ābhassara Brahma* world. And there they dwell, mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous, moving through the air, glorious – and they stay like that for a very long time. But sooner or later, after a very long period, this world begins to expand [evolve] again. At a time of expansion [evolution], the beings from the *Ābhassara Brahma* world, having passed away from there, are mostly reborn in this world. Here they dwell, mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous, moving through the air, glorious – and they stay like that for a very long time.
>
> At that period, … there was just one mass of water, and all was darkness, blinding darkness. Neither moon nor sun appeared, no constellations or stars appeared, night and day were not distinguished, nor months, and fortnights, no years, or seasons, and no male and female, beings being reckoned just as beings. And sooner or later, after a very long period of time, savoury earth spread itself over the waters where those beings were. … [and the process goes on] (Walshe, 2012. pp. 409-410; Dīgha-nikāya III, 1976, pp. 80-98).

This account, in the form of a myth, is meant to highlight the non-static dynamic character of the world, a manifestation of matter, which is none other than a *saṅkhārā*.

This ever-changing character of the constructed phenomena, world in this context, is referred to in the teaching of the Buddha as 'impermanence' *('anicca')*. When in the discourses the conditioned reality is described as being manifested in three characteristics, namely, arising, ceasing and the change of what exists[3] they refer to impermanence which is tantamount to change. The term *'vipariṇāma'* which refers to change but etymologically means evolution and occurring in stock phrases that describe the nature of constructed reality and as one of the three modes of suffering (*vipariṇāma-dukkha* - suffering caused by change) (Walshe, 2012. p. 484; Saṅgīti-sutta, Dīgha-nikāya III, 2006, p. 216). captures the changing aspect even better. The world or the constructed phenomena as cosmological manifestation, continues and evolves in this manner without absolute termination.

Continuity and Change of the Individual within Saṃsāra

Although the individual and his/her *saṃsāra* may clearly be treated under the constructed phenomena the reason for a separate discussion is the utmost significance attributed to the release from suffering in the teaching of the Buddha. The following statement of the Buddha reiterates this position: "Bhikkhus, both formerly and now what I teach is suffering and the cessation of suffering"

3. Bhikkhus, there are these three characteristics that define the conditioned. What three? An arising is seen, a vanishing is seen, and its alteration while it persists is seen. These are the three characteristics that define the conditioned. (Bodhi, 2012, p. 246).
   These three should not be confused with the well-known teaching, three characteristics reality *(ti-lakkhaṇa)*, impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and no-self, all three applying to all constructed phenomena and only the last applying to the unconstructed phenomena, namely, *nirvāṇa.*

(Bodhi, 2001, p. 234; Majjhima-nikāya I, 2002, p. 140). As the Buddhist hermeneutical tradition has amply demonstrated[4] any aspect of the teaching of the Buddha ultimately has relevance to the understanding of and making an end to human suffering. Hence the need to discuss this aspect of constructed phenomena on its own.

Suffering refers to that of the individual, and an unenlightened ordinary human being experiences suffering by undergoing the repeated cycle of being born, getting old and finally dying, the process which popularly called *saṃsāra.* Although *saṃsāra* is spoken of as if it is an abstract concept, it is defined with reference to the individual who is caught up in it. In the well-known Visuddhimagga (Paññābhūmi-niddesa), Buddhaghosa defines *saṃsāra* in the following manner: "The endless chain of aggregates – of elements, of bases too; that carries on unbrokenly – Is what is called 'the round of births' (Ñānamoli, 1956. p. 626). This analysis highlights the fact that *saṃsāra* is understood with reference to a particular assemblage of aggregates, elements and bases, namely, the individual in Buddhist understanding. In laying emphasis on the unbrokenness of the process this statement seems to capture the idea of continuity.

The following account given by a modern authority takes later Abhidhamma characterization too into consideration:

> 'Round of rebirth', literally 'perpetual wandering', is a name by which is designated the sea of life ever restlessly heaving up and down, the symbol of this continuous

4. The two texts, Nettippakaraṇa and Peṭakopadesa, treated in the Burmese tradition as belonging to the tipiṭaka itself, and the entire Pali commentarial tradition based on the principles developed in these two texts bear evidence to this.

> process of ever again and again being born, growing old, suffering and dying. More precisely put, *Saṃsāra* is the unbroken chain of fivefold *Khandha*-combinations, which, constantly changing from moment to moment follow continuously one upon the other through inconceivable periods of time. Of this *saṃsāra*, a single lifetime constitutes only a tiny and fleeting fraction;… (Nyānatiloka, 1987, p. 160).

Saṃsāra is usually characterized as very long. The well-known statement articulating this character is the following: "This *saṃsāra* is without discoverable beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving" (Bodhi, 2000, p. 651). In addition to asserting that the beginning of the *saṃsāra* cannot be discerned, discourses go into great details to highlight its inconceivable length. In fact, the instances we referred to above on the length of an eon occur in this context in order to describe the enormous length of *saṃsāra.* Unlike eons and worlds or world systems which are countless, *saṃsāra* is always referred to in singular form indicating that ultimately *saṃsāra* is each individual's *saṃsāra.* Discourses go into even further details to drive this point home. The following points are elaborated in the discourses: (i) Pile of bones one would leave behind in the course of the *saṃsāra* will be as large as the mount Vepulla. (ii) The stream of blood one would have shed when one was beheaded in the course of *saṃsāra* is more than the water in the four great oceans. The stream of blood one would have shed when one was beheaded as a cow, as a buffalo, as a sheep, as a goat, as chickens and as a pig, as a deer, as a burglar, as a highwayman, and an adulterer is more than the water in the four great oceans. (iii) It is not easy to find a being who in this long

course has not previously been one's mother, father, brother, sister, son or daughter (Bodhi, 2000, pp. 651-657).

A superficial reading of these discourses would cause the impression that *saṃsāra* is something that exists independently of particular individuals or beings. Perhaps the discourses refer to *saṃsāra* in this manner taking into consideration that the samsaric existence is shared by all living beings. Accordingly, although the abstract concept of *saṃsāra* may seem justifiable there cannot be a *saṃsāra* independently of those beings who roam in it. Therefore, the *saṃsāra* is always one's particular cycle of *saṃsāra,* and hence the reference to *saṃsāra* in the singular form, as mentioned above.

As we saw in the above discussion (Visuddhimagga definition of *saṃsāra*) an individual is an intermixture of physical and mental factors classified variously as aggregates, elements and bases, three ways of characterizing existence of beings in early discourses. According to the aggregate-analysis a (human) being is made of five aggregates, namely, the material form, feeling, perception, (karmic) formations, and consciousness. In the analyses by way of elements and bases, this same constitution is given with somewhat different emphasis. In the analysis by way of elements, a human being is made of eighteen elements, namely, the elements of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind (the six internal sensory faculties); elements of visual form, sound, smell, taste, touch and mental phenomena (their objects); and consciousness associated with the six faculties mentioned above (the element of eye consciousness etc.). In the analysis by way of bases, a human being is composed of the six bases of inner faculties, namely, the base of eye etc. and the corresponding

external objects such as the base of visual form etc. The main purpose of these three ways of analyzing human existence is to show that there is nothing over and above these phenomena all of which are inseparably interconnected , in particular, to show that there is nothing to be identified as enduring soul or self *(ātma)* in any being including human beings. As far as the discussion of continuity and change is concerned, these analyses highlight that the distinction, popular in philosophical discussions, between unchanging substance and changing qualities is not accepted in Buddhist thought.

These aggregates, elements and bases with which human being is made of themselves are impermanent and changing. In the doctrine of dependent origination, the human personality is referred to by the term *'nāma-rūpa'* (name and form, mind-matter or mentality-materiality) which is understood as referring to psychological and physical aspects human being. The discourses define this combination in the following words:

> And what, bhikkhus, is name and form? Feeling, perception, volition, contact, attention: this is called name. The four great elements and the form derived from the four great elements: this is called form. Thus, this name and this form are together called name-and-form (Bodhi, 2000, p. 535; Saṃyutta-nikāya II, 2000, pp. 3-4).

In the five aggregates analysis, feeling, perception, karma formations and consciousness come under mentality and physical form comes under materiality. The analyses in terms of elements and bases too have to be in this manner.

The human personality that comes within the broader concept of 'constructed phenomena' is subject to the three

characteristics common to all such phenomena, namely, arising, destruction and 'alteration while it exists' (change) (Bodhi, 2012, p. 246. See note 6 above.). These three characteristics featured in the discourses have been greatly elaborated in the later Abhidhamma works by making use of the concept of moment *(khaṇa)* which was newly developed to measure the existence of mind and matter in relation to each other. According to this view, i.e. theory of moments, the duration of the existence of mind and matter is measured by moments. Following the characterization given in the discourses, the mental and material phenomena were understood as undergoing this process without an end. There is, however, a difference between the length of the existence of mental and physical phenomena: mind is extremely fast whereas matter is less so.

This idea of the relative difference of the duration of the existence between mind and matter is supported by the early discourses. In discussing the nature of mind and matter the Buddha said the following: "Bhikkhus, I do not see even one other thing that changes so quickly as the mind. It is not easy to give a simile for how quickly the mind changes" (Bodhi, 2012. p. 97; Aṅguttara-nikāya I, 1999, p. 10). Relative to the mind, matter was considered lasting longer. This characterization that was described in general terms in the discourses was given a more precise articulation later by means of theory of moments according to which mind exists for a moment, called 'thought moment *(citta-khaṇa)*, which is made of three sub-moments, those of arising *(uppāda)*, persistence *(ṭhiti)* and dissolution *(bhaṅga)* which are "said in the commentaries to be of inconceivably short duration and to last no longer than the billionth part of the time occupied by a flash of lightening" (Nyanaponika, 1970,

p. 41). These thought moments do not arise in isolation; they arise in a series which is called 'thought process' *(citta-vīthi)*. A perceptual process, for example, lasts seventeen of such moments. It happens in the following manner. When it is not experiencing any object, mind is in a state called 'life continuum (or the continuity of consciousness) *(bhavaṅga)*, understood as "the foundation or condition of existence, as the sine qua non of life, having the nature of a process" (Nyanatiloka, 1970, p. 33). When an object comes to the mind through the sensory doors, the *bhavaṅga* process gets disturbed and the process of perceiving starts to take place. It goes through seventeen thought moments identified as: (i) continuity of consciousness *(bhavṅga)* (ii) excitation of *bhavaṅga (bhavaṅga-calana)* (iii) sense-door consciousness *(pañcadvāra-āvajjana*), (iv) eye-consciousness *(cakkhu-viññāṇa)*, (v) acceptance of the object *(sampaṭicchana)*, (vi) investigation of the object *(santīraṇa),* (vii) determining the object *(votthapana),* (viii) – (xv) seven series of impulsion *(javana),* (xvi-xvii) and the registering consciousness *(tadārammaṇa)*. At the completion of the process, the mind returns to *bhavaṅga* from where it arises again and would keep this process going in that manner as long as external or internal objects keep coming.

The matter, the other aspect of human personality, too is characterized as existing through three moments of arising, persistence and dissolution. The difference, however, is that one such moment of material existence is equal to seventeen thought moments referred to above. In other words, when matter passes one moment with three sub-moments mind has passed seventeen moments with each having three sub-moments (Bodhi, 1993, pp. 156-157). According to the Abhidhamma analysis, there

are twenty-eight types of matter, four out of which are called primary *(mahābhūta rūpa)* and the remaining twenty-four as dependent or secondary *(upādāya rūpa)*. Within this twenty-four are included four phases of matter, namely, the production of matter *(upacaya)*, its continuity *(santati)*, its decay *(jaratā)* and its impermanence *(aniccatā)*. These four phases are basically nothing other than the three characteristics of formations or constructed phenomena *(saṅkhārā)* mentioned above, namely, (to repeat), arising, dissolution and change (of what exists) manifested in ordinary human (or any other form of) life as birth, ageing, disease and death *(jāti, jarā, vyādhi, maraṇa)*.

This analysis of human personality highlights that an individual is nothing but a psycho-physical process that continues depending on conditions and that there is nothing in the form of an imperishable soul that persists through *saṃsāra*. This is continuity and change at a very subtle level which cannot be one's everyday experience. Nevertheless, it appears that the later Abhidhamma scholars carried their analysis to this extreme state for a soteriological purpose because, according to the Buddha, it is the belief in an enduring essence (atta/ ātma) in early Buddhist and Indian parlance) that serves as the basis for one's attachment to the world, the main cause of suffering.

Notwithstanding that the individual does not have an enduring metaphysical entity or soul, he roams in the *saṃsāra* passing from one form of existence to another without stop till he attains *nirvāṇa*. How does this happen? In particular, in the absence of any enduring agent how does the process of rebirth take place, or who is it that is reborn? What ultimately matters here in the Buddhist understanding of reality is not a denial of

human being or his moral responsibility but how Buddhism understands the human being. The Buddhist teaching of no-self plays a key role here[5]. The fact that there is no soul in human beings has not been a problem for Buddhists to talk about moral agents and their continued existence through the long *saṃsāra*. If there is a perplexity about this way of treating the subject in the discourses, it is a result of not making a clear distinction between two ways of teaching (or using language) by the Buddha.

Accordingly, the discourses of the Buddha or his utterances have been classified as those whose meaning is explicit (or direct) *(nītattha)* and those whose meaning requires interpretation (or indirect) *(neyyattha)* discourses (Bodhi, 2012, p. 151) (Aṅguttara-nikāya I p. 60). Having referred to this distinction the Buddha further says that those who confuse these two modes of discourses misrepresent him. The direct discourses are the utterances of the Buddha in which he directly denies the existence of any metaphysical soul. The indirect discourses are those in which the Buddha refers to individuals and agents as if they truly exist. Such discourses need to be understood or interpreted as not referring to any enduring soul but as referring to individuals and agents as understood in a non-substantial sense. This distinction has been greatly elaborated in later Buddhist philosophy including Abhidhamma as conventional (sammuti/ samvṛti) and absolute (paramattha/paramārtha) corresponding respectively to indirect and direct modes of teaching[6]. What is implied is that, when the Buddha refers to people as if they are

5. For a comprehensive discussion on the Buddhist concept of no-self, refer to (Karunadasa, 2013, Chapter 4).
6. See Nāgarjuna's Mulamadhyamakākarikā, Chapter 24 (2001, p.150) on the crucial role of this distinction in interpreting the teaching of the Buddha.

moral agents or doers of various deeds, he does not mean an enduring and permanent entity but complex processes made of causes and condition which in themselves are processes dependently originated and hence subject to change[7].

The discourses explain this process of repeated birth and death in broad outlines whereas the Abhidhamma goes into minute details referring to moments of consciousness, referred to above. According to the discourses beings are repeatedly born in the *saṃsāra* determined by their good and bad (*puñña* and *pāpa*) or skillful and unskillful (*kusala* and *akusala*) actions[8]. On being asked as to why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior, short-lived and long-lived, etc. the Buddha lays emphasis on the crucial role of karma in the process by following words: "Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions, they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior" (Bodhi, 2001, p. 1053). The Buddha further explains this with reference one's good or bad (moral or immoral) actions: those who kill, wound or harm living beings, consequently, are born after their death 'in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell.' Those who adopt the opposite behavior by abandoning killing living beings and by living gently, kindly and compassionately toward all living beings will, after their death, be born in a happy destination, in the

7. See (Jayatilleke, 1963, p. 362) for a discussion on these two types of discourses from a philosophical point of view.
8. Both these categories basically refer to physical, verbal or mental actions performed either with the states of mind defiled by desire, anger and delusion *(lobha, dosa, moha)*, in which case they are bad or unskillful, or not defile by them and consequently good or skillful.

heavenly world[9]. This basic belief associated with the continuity of human existence is assumed in all Buddhist traditions and teachings. The very first two stanzas of the Dhammapada, one of the most well-known collections of the sayings of the Buddha, articulate this view in the following words:

> Mind is the forerunner of (all evil) states. Mind is chief; mind-made are they. If one speaks or acts with wicked mind, because of that, suffering follows one, even as the wheel follows the hoof of the draught-ox. Mind is the forerunner of (all good) states. …If one speaks or acts with pure mind, because of that, happiness follows one, even as one's shadow that never leaves (Narada, 1993, p. 1-5).

The doctrine of dependent origination *(paṭicca samuppāda)*, referred to above, is understood as a more 'technical' explanation of this *samsāric* process of the being. Traditionally this explanation is understood as involving past, present and future forms of existence of beings who roam in the *saṃsāra*. Accordingly, Buddhaghosa, the great commentator of the Pali canon, groups the twelve aspects of the dependent origination theory into past causes and present results, present causes and future results (Ñaṇamoli, 1956, p. 669). In this theory, constructions *(saṅkhārā)*, as we have seen already, refer to physical, verbal and mental karma formations which are good, bad or neutral and condition the consciousness of the being who is ready to be reborn after his present death.

The discourses do not mention much on how rebirth takes place except for affirming the belief that all beings who have not

9. See (Bodhi, 2001, pp. 1053-1057) for the complete exposition ('The Shorter Exposition of Action). For the original Pāli version, refer to Cullakammavibhaṅga-sutta, Majjhima-nikāya III, 1994, pp. 202-206.

realized *nirvāṇa* are liable to be reborn. One rare occurrence, though, is found in the collection of the middle length discourses[10] according to which, in order for the embryo to descend, three factors have to come together, namely, the union of the mother and the father, mother's being in season and the presence of a "being driven on by the mechanism of *kamma*" (Bodhi, 2001, p. 1234). This account suggests that the birth of a particular being to particular parents takes place according to that person's good or bad karma or behavior. The Abhidhamma goes into further details by making use of the idea of *bhavaṅga* or the life-continuum which serves as the connecting point of the dead person's last thought moment, 'departing consciousness' *(cuti-citta)* with the first thought moment of the person being born, the relinking consciousness *(paṭisandhi-citta)*. The *bhavaṅga* process thus started with the new person is conditioned by the *bhavaṅga* process of that person's previous existence. It is said that the *bhavaṅga* between the death and the birth has as its object the good and bad actions committed by the person which determine his new life. The new life characterized by the birth of a new *bhavaṅga* process thus determined by *karma* can be in one of the six modes of existence at celestial, demi-gods', human, animal or hellish spheres or at the sphere of hungry ghosts[11]. It is held that the *bhavaṅga* process begun at birth persists through one's entire life only to be changed, negatively or positively, at the next birth.

---

10. The greater discourse on the destruction of craving (Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya-sutta, Majjhima-nikāya I, 2002, pp. 256-271; Bodhi, 2001, pp. 349-361)
11. Karma being a vast field in Buddhist thought covering such details as what is karma, how does it function, how does it produce effects, where and when does it produce effects etc. cannot be dealt with adequately in this context. For details, refer to entries on *kamma* by D.J. Kalupahana and Asanga Tilakaratne in Encyclopaedia of Buddhism (Vol.VI, 1996, pp.108-121) published by the Government of Sri Lanka.

According to this analysis the continuity of a being in his or her cycle of existence, i.e. *saṃsāra,* is not totally negative or positive in nature. Beings 'obstructed by ignorance, shackled by craving' roam in various pleasurable or woeful states and spheres depending on their good or bad physical, verbal and psychological behavior. The life span of celestial and hellish spheres is said to be too long in extreme pleasure or in extreme woe that one cannot expect for much improvement. From that perspective, to be born as a human being, whose life span is neither too short nor too long, allows for opportunities for further improvement. Accordingly, it is held that only a human being is capable of making an end to suffering by realizing *nirvāṇa*, making thereby an end to continuity and change.

Nirvāṇa: the unconditioned (asaṅkhata)

From what is conditioned or the conditioned phenomena we move on to *nirvāṇa*, the ultimate goal of Buddhist way of life, which is unconditioned and has characteristics opposite to those of *saṃsāra*. As we saw in the earlier discussion, continuity and change were considered to be the characteristics of the constructed phenomena. The unconditioned (asaṅkhata) has been defined in the following words: "Bhikkhus, there are these three characteristics that define the unconditioned. What three? No arising is seen, no vanishing is seen, and no alteration while it persists is seen. These are the three characteristics that define the unconditioned" (Bodhi, 2012, P. 246). In another instance we find an answer given by the Buddha for a question raised, apparently, having the unconditioned reality in mind:

Question:
From where do the streams turn back?
Where does the round no longer revolve?
Where does name and form cease,
Stop without remainder?
Answer: Where water, earth, fire and air,
Do not gain a footing:
It is from here that the streams turn back.
Here that the round no longer revolves;
Here name-and-form ceases,
Stops without remainder. (Bodhi, 2000, p. 103)

The expression 'round no longer revolves' seems to have direct reference to the phenomenon of continuity in *saṃsāra* which is called 'round' or 'circle' (*vaṭṭa*) in the sense that beings caught up in it roam endlessly. This statement refers to *nirvāṇa*, the final goal, [though it is not mentioned by name] and is contrasted with the existence in the material world made of the four great elements, earth, water, heat and air, which are liable to arise, to dissolve and to perish. This character of *nirvāṇa* is further emphasized in a dialogue the Buddha had with a celestial being named Rohitassa. He queries:

> Is it possible, venerable sir, by traveling to know or see or to reach the end of the world, where one is not born, does not age, does not die, does not pass away, and is not reborn?
>
> The Buddha answers:
>
> As to that end of the world, friend, where one is not born, does not age, does not die, does not pass away, and is not reborn – I say that it cannot be known, seen, or reached by traveling. (Bodhi, 2000, p. 157)

The soteriological character of the ultimate Buddhist answer, how the Buddha would bring back the whole 'cosmological' problem to the sphere of the individual, becomes clear in what the Buddha asserts as the summing up of his response to Rohitassa's query:

> Friend, I say that without having reached the end of the world there is no making an end to suffering. It is, friend, in just this fathom-high carcass endowed with perception, and mind that I make known the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world.
>
> The world's end can never be reached – By means of traveling [through the world]
>
> Yet without reaching the world's end – There is no release from suffering. (Bodhi, 2000, p. 158)

In this context, the term 'world' has been used in two different senses, the physical world which does not have an end that human beings can reach by traveling, indicating thereby a limitation of being human or even being celestial, and the experienced world which is within one's reach and which alone, in the Buddhist way of thinking, has meaning to human beings.

Another way to understand how *nirvāṇa* marks the end of the continuity and change is to understand how *karma* functions within one's life. We discussed earlier how beings roam in the samsara enjoying or suffering results *(vipāka)* as determined by the good and bad nature of those actions. Actions become bad *(pāpa)* when they are caused by the three unwholesome roots, namely, desire *(lobha)*, anger *(dosa)* and delusion *(moha)*. Actions become good *(puñña)* when they are motivated by the

three wholesome roots, absence of desire *(alobha)*, absence of anger *(adosa)* and absence of delusion *(amoha)*. These actions have the capacity to produce results by way of causing re-birth in blissful or woeful states and subsequent series of results to those beings who are thus re-born. So long as one keeps on performing such actions (or, in traditional parlance, 'accumulates good and bad actions') one's *samsāric* existence continues.

The *samsāric* existence, characterized by suffering, is discontinued at *nirvāṇa*, and that too is associated with one's actions characterized by the three wholesome roots referred to above. In order to solve the apparent puzzle posed by the twin role of wholesome roots in causing re-birth in blissful states in samsara and causing the discontinuation of *saṃsāra* we have to note a distinction between good *(puñña)* and wholesome *(kusala)* actions. The former, though based on wholesome roots, are motivated by the desire for blissful continuation in the *saṃsāra.* Consequently, those who perform such actions are repeatedly born into blissful states, nevertheless, within *saṃsāra.* An example for such an action is to make a donation *(dāna),* the most popular mode of performing 'meritorious deeds' in Buddhist societies, with the hope of securing a blissful rebirth which, in the ideal sense, is nothing other than the samsāric existence. The latter, the wholesome roots (*kusala*), on the contrary, when performed in their pure state become conducive to eliminate defilements including the desire which is identified as the key factor in samsāric existence and hence samsāric suffering. This distinction is not applicable in the same manner to bad *(pāpa)* and unwholesome *(akusala)* actions for both are caused by unwholesome roots. Accordingly, when one realizes nirvāna, one does not perform either bad or unwholesome actions; nor does one perform good actions in the sense of rebirth-producing

actions, and performs only wholesome actions which do not cause rebirth, even blissful rebirth. Consequently, an arahant, the person who has attained the nirvanic goal, is described as "one who has transcended both good and evil" (Narada, 1993. p. 41), and such person's life has been described as 'possessing [all] wholesome states' (adapted from Bodhi, 2001. p. 725; Majjhima-nikāya II, 2004, p.116). It goes without saying that, when one reaches this level of abandoning both types of actions that lead to re-birth, such persons, arahants, do not have a rebirth. In Abhidhamma terminology, it is possible to say that arahants do not have a relinking consciousness after their last departing thought moment. For this reason, their passing away is not referred to as 'death' *(maraṇa)* which is used with regard to ordinary people, but as 'complete extinguishment' *(parinibbāna)*, 'like the extinguishment of a lamp' (Sutta-nipāta, 1965, pp. 41-42). And it is here that 'the round no longer revolves.'

Conclusion

The foregoing should have shown that continuity and change are not treated as abstract concepts in Buddhism, and that there is much in it, in particular, in its theories of reality and liberation (ontology and soteriology), that involve continuity and change. The soteriological emphasis of the discussion of impermanence in Buddhism can be discerned in recurring statements in which it is tied with the other two characteristics of reality. "It is from the fact of impermanence that, in most texts, the other two characteristics, suffering *(dukkha)* and not-self *(anatta)* are derived" (Nyanatiloka, 1970, p. 14). The quasi-logical presentation of this matter[12] ultimately leads to a practical

12. *Yad anicca*ṃ *tam dukkha*ṃ*; ya*ṃ *dukkha*ṃ *tad anattā* (Saṃyutta-nikāya III, 2001, p. 22) What is impermanent is suffering. What is suffering is nonself (Bodhi, 2000, p. 869)

soteriological conclusion as illustrated in the following dialogue of the Buddha with his disciples in the Alagaddūpama-sutta:

> Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is material form [applies to other four aggregates too] permanent or impermanent? - Impermanent venerable sir. Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness? – Suffering, venerable sir. – Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self? No, venerable sir. (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi 2001, p. 232; Majjhima-nikāya I, 2002, p. 138)

Upon arriving at this conclusion, the Buddha's advice to his disciples is to give up that which does not belong to them (*yaṃ na tumhākaṃ taṃ pajahatha*, ibid, p. 140).

Since this discussion is based on the Pali canonical and post-canonical literature, what was said on continuity and change are basically what we can gather from those sources. The general picture developed here, however, in particular about *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, is shared by all Buddhist traditions, namely, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions alike. A possible exception to this general picture might be certain East Asian Buddhist traditions which promote as the final destination the concept of a blissful Pure Land *(Sukhāvatī)* where the Buddha with immeasurable span of life *(amita+āyush)* and immeasurable illumination *(amita+ābha)* resides.

Such differences aside, there is an overarching moral significance of continuity and change shared by all Buddhist traditions. That is the idea of changeability, an extension of the idea of change, of human being for better or for worse. Both the ideas of change and changeability are predicated on the

unique Buddhist idea of *anātma* or the absence of enduring and unchanging soul. It is this fundamental idea in Buddhism that makes a moral universe possible. In all probability this is what the great Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna wished to establish by his concept of emptiness *(śūnyatā)*. But that is another theme to be discussed.

Reference

All references to Pali texts are to Pali Text Society (PTS), London editions.

Ñanamoli, Bhikkhu. (1956). *The Path of Purification.* A. Semage. (*The Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa).

Ñanamoli, Bhikkhu, & Bodhi, Bhikkhu. (1995/2001). *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*: *A translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Wisdom Publications.

Bodhi, Bhikkhu (Ed.). (1993). *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*. Buddhist Publication Society.

Bodhi, Bhikkhu. (2000). *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*: *A translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Wisdom Publications.

Bodhi, Bhikkhu. (2012). *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*: *A translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya*. Wisdom Publications

Jayatilleke, K.N. (1963). *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*. George Allen and Unwin.

Karunadasa, Y. (2013). *Early Buddhist Teachings: The Middle Position in Theory and Practice.* Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong.

Karunadasa, Y. (2015). *The Buddhist Analysis of Matter*. The University of Hong Kong, Centre for Buddhist Studies.

Narada Thera. (1993). *The Dhammapada: The Pali Text and Translation*. The Corporate Body of the Buddha Foundation.

Walshe, Maurice. (2012). *The Long Discourses of the Buddha.* Wisdom Publications.