

## PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATES IN ANCIENT INDIA AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE FORMATION OF EARLY BUDDHIST THOUGHT

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### ABSTRACT

Ancient India had been a focus of a highly philosophical argument where philosophers argued on the issues associated with morality, existence, destiny, and liberation. In the sixth century BCE, several philosophical schools have sprouted that disputed traditional religious beliefs and provided other explanations of karma, the soul, rebirth, and human agency. Buddha teachings as taught by Siddhartha Gautama evolved as a reaction to these intellectual debates and offered a unique philosophical view. The paper will focus on the philosophical climate of ancient India and discuss the concepts of the current Buddhist teachers like Purana Kassapa, Makkhali Gosala, Ajita Kesakambali, Pakudha Kaccaya, and Sanjaya Belattiputra and how these ideas contributed to the development of the early Buddhist thought. The paper puts emphasis on the way Buddhism rebuffed radical philosophical views and offered a moderate approach based on the Middle Way, ethical behavior, and dependent origination. It also argues about the significant role played by canonical literature especially the Pāli Tripiṭaka in the preservation and growth of early Buddhist philosophy.

**Keywords:** Early Buddhism, Pāli Tripiṭaka, Theravāda Buddhism, Ancient Indian Philosophy, Middle Way.

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### 1.INTRODUCTION

The ancient India was a significant hub of philosophies and spiritualism. The Indian subcontinent in the sixth century BCE was the time of dramatic intellectual change marked by the rise of many philosophical traditions and religious movements. The discussions between scholars, ascetics and teachers were based on the consideration of some primary questions about the essence of existence, the reason of human suffering, the issue of moral responsibility and the chances of liberation. Such philosophic debates resulted in the creation of a dynamic intellectual climate where new ideas and visions of reality were actively searched.

It is here in this historical and intellectual setting that Siddhartha Gautama was born and came to be known later on as the Buddha. He started teaching about a systematic course, which was intended to realize the essence of suffering and to free himself and herself after receiving enlightenment through profound meditation and reflection. His teachings sought answers to critical questions regarding the nature of human being, ethical behavior and building wisdom. The Buddha paid much attention to a pragmatic approach to spiritual evolution through ethical discipline, meditation, and the realization of the nature of reality.

During the early period of the Buddhist tradition, the teachings of Buddha could be shared orally by his disciples and followers. These teachings were maintained by monastic communities by recitation and memorization and so preserved through collective recitation and the continuity and correctness of the doctrine between generations. These teachings were later to be gathered over time into an organized body of canonical literature, the Pali Tripiaka which includes the Vinaya Piataka, Sutta Piataka, and Abhidhamma Piataka. These books form the oldest and the most directives sources of learning the philosophical basis of Buddhism.

Buddhism developed in a highly intellectual atmosphere whereby other Śramaana movements and individual philosophers challenged the prevailing religious beliefs and offered alternative answers to the problems of karma, rebirth, the nature of the self, and the way to find liberation. Philosophers like Purana Kassapa, Makkhali Gosala, Ajita Kesakambali, Pakudha Kaccayana, and Sanjaya Belattiputra had varied philosophical interpretations that led to the rich philosophical arguments that existed during the time. The teachings of the Buddha were created in a dialogue with these modern philosophical stances, sometimes to a critical assessment and also given a balanced alternative viewpoint to seeing human suffering and liberation.

This paper is limited to early Buddhist philosophy as recorded in the Pāli Tripiṭaka, the oldest canonical text of Buddhism held in the Theravada school. It is thus a question of doctrines and philosophical problems as manifested in the early Nikaya literature that the analysis does not continue to include what has occurred in the latter doctrines of Mahayana or Vedrayana schools.

Thus, the paper will examine the intellectual and philosophical landscape of antique India and discuss the influence of modern philosophical controversies on the evolution of the early Buddhism. Through the analysis of the teachings of the main teachers of the period and their engagement with the doctrines at the Pali canon, the research project will help to identify the philosophical backgrounds that contributed to the development of early Buddhism. The methodology of the work is based mainly on the doctrinal topics that are maintained in the

early Pali Nikayas and is explained in the framework of the entire intellectual context of the Śrama movements in ancient India.

## 2. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY BUDDHISM

The emergence of Buddhism has a close relationship with the life and teaching of Siddhartha Gautama who went on to be the Buddha. His birth place was Lumbini just near the Himalayan region and he led a luxurious life as a prince in his early life. But his experiences of old age, illness, death, and a roaming ascetic made him doubt the character of human existence and misery.

The experiences led him to reject the worldly life and pursue the spiritual truth by means of meditation and philosophical contemplation. Having spent years of ascetic life and reflection, he reached the point of enlightenment when he was sitting, contemplating under the Bodhi tree. This enlightenment equipped him with deep knowledge on the reasons of suffering and the ways of escaping the suffering.



**Figure 1:** Historical Development and Spread of Buddhism in Ancient India

The main teachings of the Buddha are based on the Four Noble Truths and they reveal that suffering exists, it occurs due to desire, it is possible to be conquered and the path that would bring to the elimination of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path. Such teachings gave a systematic way on how human sufferings could be explained and how practical advice could be given to how one could achieve liberation.

After his enlightenment, the Buddha spent a number of decades going around the north of India, preaching his philosophy, and leading people to spiritual development. His followers were able to keep his teachings in memory through the oral recitation that became the foundation of the Buddhist canonical literature.

The earliest systematic statement of the teaching of the Buddha is preserved in early Buddhist philosophy transmitted in the Pali version known as Tripiṭyaka. The earliest Theravada Buddhism thought is based on the canonical books of Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka and Abhidhamma Piṭaka. These are the writings that document the initial teachings, moral codes and philosophical explanations that defined the early community of Buddhists. Thus, the current research will pay particular attention to the philosophical concepts that can be traced to the Pali canonical tradition which represents the first stratum of the Buddhist intellectual history.

### **1. INTELLECTUAL CLIMATE OF ANCIENT INDIA**

The rise of Buddhism took place in an open intellectual and spiritual atmosphere that defined the ancient Indian society in the sixth-century BCE. It was the time when a great number of philosophical traditions were created to explain the core features of the human existence, moral duty and spiritual freedom. The co-existence of different religious and philosophical opinions formed a rich environment of searching and discussing. This kind of atmosphere encouraged the scrutiny of the existing beliefs and provoked the development of new philosophical positions that responded to the ethical and metaphysical issues of the era.

#### **3.1 Philosophical Environment of the Sixth Century BCE**

The intellectual activity of the era when Buddhism was developed was quite high. Various philosophers and religious educators came up with different theories on existence, morality and nature of the universe. This atmosphere provided the rise of heated discussions which influenced the evolution of Indian philosophy.

A number of philosophical schools opposed the Vedic ceremonies and stressed on personal spiritual investigation. There were wandering philosophers and ascetic teachers who travelled all over the territory distributing their doctrines and philosophic dialogues with other philosophers. These debates gave rise to an active intellectual culture in which philosophical ideas were constantly debated, refined and interpreted.

#### **3.2 Major Philosophical Questions and Debates**

The key points of discussion were the character of karma, the soul, its possibility to be reborn, the influence of fate and the way to attain freedom. The various schools of philosophy came up with different interpretations of these concepts which made the intellectual world very rich. These arguments did not only influence the way of thinking of philosophy but also gave rise to the development of other religious and spiritual movements.

**Table 1:** Major Philosophical Questions and Debates in Ancient India

Philosophical Issue	Central Question	Major Viewpoints in Ancient India
Karma and Moral Action	Do human actions produce ethical consequences?	Some teachers rejected moral causation, while others emphasized ethical responsibility and karmic results.
Nature of the Soul	Does an eternal soul or self-exist?	Some traditions believed in a permanent soul, whereas others denied its existence or permanence.
Rebirth and Afterlife	Does life continue after death?	Several philosophical schools supported rebirth, while materialist thinkers rejected the idea of life after death.
Role of Destiny	Is human life controlled by fate or individual effort?	Deterministic philosophies emphasized destiny, while other traditions highlighted personal effort and moral choice.
Path to Liberation	How can humans escape suffering and attain liberation?	Different schools proposed asceticism, ritual practices, philosophical knowledge, or ethical living as the path to liberation.

### 3.3 Emergence of Buddhist Thought within the Intellectual Context

The Buddha formulated his own teachings within this environment and was able to interact with the available philosophical ideas. His philosophy answered most of the questions that were posed by the contemporary thinkers and provided new insights into the reasons behind suffering and the way to attain spiritual freedom.

The Buddha did not just follow some of the existing doctrines, but he critically evaluated the philosophical perspectives that were in existence and came up with a middle path that focused on ethical behavior, meditation and wisdom. This was to form the basis of early Buddhism philosophy and set Buddhism apart among other philosophical schools of ancient India.

### 4. PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATES AND CONTEMPORARY TEACHERS

These were the days of several prominent philosophers and religious teachers. Their teachings were the embodiment of a variety of philosophical points of view which were also involved into the philosophical debate of ancient India.



**Figure 2:** Influential Philosophers and the Fundamental Principles of Their Philosophical Thought

Some of the most prominent teachers included Purana Kassapa, Makkhali Gosala, Ajita Kesakambali, Pakudha Kaccayana and Sanjaya Belattiputra. These philosophers made their own explanations of human existence, and the type of reality.

#### **4.1 Purana Kassapa and the Doctrine of Non-Action**

A popular religious educator was Purana Kassapa who spread the doctrine of non-action, which is commonly called Akriyavada. As per this doctrine, human action has no morality and it does not affect the fate of the soul.

According to him, killing, charity or ethical behaviour are all actions that yield no spiritual fruits. His philosophy of soul dictates that soul is not subjected to human behavior. This perception denied the classical belief of karma and questioned the religious principles of most religious communities.

This doctrine was strongly condemned by the Buddha who stressed that deliberate actions are very important in future experience. The teachings of Buddhism emphasize that moral activities have karmic effects that affect the current and future lives.

#### **4.2 Makkhali Gosala and Determinism**

The founder of the sect of Ajivaka is Makkhali Gosala and his teaching was a doctrine of resolute determinism called Niyativada. This philosophy determines that all the occurrences in the universe are as a result of destiny or fate.

Gosala was sure that nothing is possible when a human effort tries to change the course of life despite the fact that all things are controlled by an impersonal principle of the cosmos. His doctrine shows that all living things go through an unchangeable cycle of rebirths and that they all liberate themselves at some point no matter the nature of their actions.

This is the deterministic perspective that the Buddha did not accept but instead believed that human effort is a major contributor to spiritual development. Buddhism stresses on the significance of ethical behavior, meditations, and wisdom as the ways of changing one life and eliminating suffering.

### **4.3 Ajita Kesakambali and Materialism**

Ajita Kesakambali was a philosopher with the idea of a materialistic view of the world. He maintained that human beings only consist of physical components like earth, water, fire and air.

These elements according to his doctrine break up at the time of death and thus there is no continuity of consciousness and rebirth. He denied the existence of immortal soul and the moral implications of actions.

This materialistic attitude criticized the spiritual teachings of most of the modern traditions. Buddhism on the contrary adhered to the belief that actions possess moral implications and that consciousness is perpetuated owing to the chain of rebirth until one is liberated.

### **4.4 Pakudha Kaccayana and Eternalism**

The Pakudha Kaccayana presented a philosophic idea that relies on seven components that are eternal, which are earth, water, fire, air, pleasure, pain and the soul. These elements according to his doctrine are eternal and immutable.

He stated that these aspects exist in isolation and do not interrelate with each other. Therefore, acts do not actually have an impact on other beings since they entail the mere re-shuffling of these long standing substances.

Buddhism philosophy disputed this theory, by highlighting the dependent origination. Based on this principle, every phenomenon is caused by interdependent causes and conditions and not by independent eternal elements.

### **4.5 Sanjaya Belattiputra and Philosophical Skepticism**

Sanjaya Belattiputra was a philosophical school that was based on skepticism and agnosticism. He adopted an attitude of doubt rather than affording certain answers to metaphysical questions.

Describing the life after death, or what the soul is and what happens after committing a wrong or good deed, his responses were evasive and focused on what human beings do not know.

Albeit this method served to emphasize the difficulty of philosophical investigation, the Buddha suggested a more practical approach that was aimed at gaining an insight into suffering and developing ethical and mental control.

## **5. INFLUENCE ON EARLY BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY**

### **5.1 Rejection of Extreme Philosophical Positions**

The refusal to accept extreme positions that prevailed in the intellectual discussions of the ancient India was one of the greatest contributions made by early Buddhist philosophy. A number of modern philosophical traditions had radical interpretations about the destiny, moral responsibility, and the nature of existence.

Other teachers refused to acknowledge the effects of human actions as ethical and maintained that moral behavior did not impact on the afterlife. Some others advanced the strict determinism, arguing that human life was completely governed by the fortune and that individual efforts did not play any actual role in defining the fate of a person. The materialists' philosophers denied the concept of rebirth and continuity of spirit by the claim that human beings consisted of physical elements alone.

The Buddha was very critical of these teachings and believed that these two radicalities could not be used as answers to what suffering is and how one can be liberated. The early Buddhist philosophy was thus against nihilistic and deterministic stands and placed emphasis on morality, self-efficacy, and wisdom.

### **5.2 The Concept of the Middle Way**

One of the most important principles of early Buddhism philosophy is the idea of the Middle Way that is considered a middle way to the spiritual development. The Buddha was a severe ascetic before he achieved enlightenment but later came to understand that excessive self-denial made the body weak and unable to think. Meanwhile, a good life with a luxurious style also did not allow real spiritual understanding.

The Middle Way is opposed to self-indulgence and over asceticism and it advocates a middle way life founded on ethical behavior, meditation and wisdom. The given strategy is a viable way to overcome suffering and get liberated.

### 5.3 Karma and Moral Responsibility

The notion of karma was also re-defined by the early Buddhist philosophy in the framework of modern philosophical discussions. There were traditions which denied the moral implications of actions, and deterministic opinions, which proposed that all was predestined in fate.

Buddhist teachings, on the contrary, focus on the fact that karma has close connection to deliberate actions. Greed, hatred, and ignorant actions have negative outcomes and compassionate, giving, and understanding actions have positive outcomes. This insight emphasizes the role of moral accountability and personal initiative in spiritual growth.

### 5.4 Dependent Origination and the Principle of Causality

Dependent origination is another main principle of Buddhist philosophy since it states that all phenomena have certain causes and conditions. Based on this principle, ignorance and craving are some of the conditions that lead to suffering. When these conditions are eliminated, sufferings are eliminated.

This doctrine confronts philosophical beliefs that have eternal substances or predestination. Rather, Buddhism introduces reality as a process that is in motion influenced by interrelated causes and circumstances and proves that liberation can be achieved by changing the causes of suffering.

**Table 2:** Influence of Contemporary Philosophical Doctrines on Early Buddhist Thought

Contemporary Doctrine	Main Idea	Buddhist Response	Resulting Buddhist Principle
Doctrine of Non-Action	Moral actions have no consequences	Emphasis on intentional ethical conduct	Karma as moral causation
Deterministic Philosophy	Human life is controlled by destiny	Recognition of personal effort and responsibility	Ethical agency
Materialistic Philosophy	No rebirth or spiritual continuity	Affirmation of rebirth	Moral continuity
Eternalistic Philosophy	Reality consists of fixed elements	Rejection of static metaphysics	Dependent origination

Skeptical Philosophy	Suspension of judgment	Practical focus on suffering	Experiential philosophy
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### **5.5 Ethical Practice and Spiritual Development**

Early Buddhism is based on ethical behavior, meditation, and wisdom as the basis of spiritual growth. These teachings are articulated in the form of the Noble Eightfold Path that comprises of right understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

Ethical discipline and meditation allow people to develop the sense of impermanence, suffering, and non-self. This combined way is an effective way of overcoming suffering and finding liberation.

### **5.6 Building a Philosophical Balance Framework.**

By interacting with the modern philosophical discourses, Buddhism created a moderate intellectual tradition that focused on moral duty and experience. Buddhist philosophy did not concentrate on speculative metaphysics; instead, it focused more on practical ways of ending suffering.

It is this moderate position which enabled the early Buddhist philosophy to find the answer to some of the most basic questions about human existence and provide an organized way out of the spiritual chains.

## **6. CANONICAL LITERATURE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF BUDDHIST THOUGHT**

The maintenance and propagation of the teachings of the Buddha was very instrumental in the shaping of the Buddhist philosophy. Following the death of Buddha, his disciples aimed at preserving the teachings of Buddha so that they would be able to keep guiding the future generations. The monks in the monastic community used their own method of teaching and learning because no one was allowed to use writing as a tool of expanding their religious knowledge, so the initial teaching process was conducted through recitations and memorization. This oral tradition guaranteed continuity and authenticity of the teachings of Buddha over a few centuries.

With time, these teachings were collected in a systematic set of books referred to as the Tripitaka, translating as three baskets. These sutras were the initial literature of Buddhism, which acted as the main source of authority on Buddhism teaching among the followers of

Buddhism. The Tripitaka is historically further split into 3 major parts, the Vinaya Pitaka, the Sutta Pitaka and the Abhidhamma Pitaka. These eleven sections have their own roles of preserving and explaining the teaching of the Buddha and helped a lot in the seeking of the philosophical development of Buddhism.

### **6.1 Formation of the Buddhist Canon**

After the death of the Buddha, the early Buddhists realized that it was necessary to systematize his teachings. The monks combined their teachings in councils which were recited and organized together. Such recitations were meant to make sure that the teachings were correct and similar throughout the emerging Buddhist fraternity.

At these meetings, the sayings of the Buddha and the regulations of the way of life of the monks were memorized, and put into systematic collections. Collective recitation of doctrine served to preserve consistency and curb falsehoods of the doctrines. It was the task of the monks who had specialized in commemoration and recitation of specific parts of the teachings to pass the same to the subsequent generations.

Oral transmission of the Buddhism teachings took a lot of several centuries before the texts were put in written form. This procedure led to the establishment of a rich canon culture that did not only maintain the teachings of the Buddha but also early interpretations and philosophical debates in the community of Buddhists.

### **6.2 THE STRUCTURE OF THE TRIPITAKA**

The Tripitaka is at the heart of the Buddhist canonical literature and gives an in-depth account of the teachings of Buddha and the formative years of Buddhist philosophy. All three of its sections deal with an individual facet of the Buddhist tradition.

#### **6.2.1 Vinaya Pitaka: The Discipline of the Monastic Community**

The Vinaya Pitaka is the code and guideline of behavior of monks and nuns in Buddhist monastic world. These are rules that were introduced by the Buddha as a reaction to certain circumstances that have occurred in early Sangha, or the monastic order.

Vinaya Pitaka is meant to promote peace and order among the monks. It gives ethical standards of conduct, dispute resolving procedures and laws of everyday monastic life. There are also narratives in the text to give an explanation of the situations that some of the rules came into existence.

By means of these regulations the Vinaya Pitaka guaranteed the stability and integrity of the Buddhist tradition of monasticism. Its focus on moral discipline and societal unity aided in

establishing a well-organized context where the monks and the nuns could fully commit themselves to spirituality and philosophical research.

### **6.2.2 Sutta Pitaka: Discourses of the Buddha**

Sutta Pitaka is also one of the most significant parts of the Buddhist canonical literature because it comprises the discourses of the Buddha and his close disciples. These teachings cover numerous issues, both relating to ethical behavior and meditation methods, philosophical principles, and instructions to both monastic and laypeople.

Discourses in the Sutta Pitaka are frequently in a form of dialogue where the Buddha is answering questions put to him by disciples, philosophers or by the masses. In these talks, the Buddha presents some of the most important ideas like the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, impermanence, non-self, and suffering.

Sutta Pitaka is generally classified into various collections that group the teachings depending on the length, theme, or number. These lists were used to aid in memorization and recitation among the early Buddhists.

Besides the teaching of philosophies, Sutta Pitaka also gives an idea of what was happening in the historical and social contexts in which Buddhism was established. The interactions created in these writings display the use of Buddha addressing the philosophical discussions of the day and how he responded to the intellectual issues of his era.

### **6.2.3 Abhidhamma Pitaka: Philosophical and Psychological Analysis**

The abstractest and philosophical element of the Buddhist canon is the Abhidhamma Pitaka. Although the teachings in the Sutta Pitaka are given in the form of a narrative and dialogue, the teaching in the abhidhamma Pitaka is given in systematical explanations of the underlying fundamental principles of the Buddhist philosophy.

The section is based on the analysis of mental and physical phenomena. It divides various conditions of consciousness, analyses the connections between mental events, and clarifies the principles of nature of existence.

The intellectual basis of future developments in Buddhist philosophy and psychology was given through the analytical methodology of the Abhidhamma Pitaka. It also led to the development of advanced systems of philosophies in the various Buddhist traditions.

### **6.3 Transmission and Preservation of the Pāli Canon**

The Buddha was passed on through the Pāli traditions of the Theravada school, which preserved the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddhists had an initial phase in which the teachings were passed orally by the monastic fraternity. The discourses of the Buddha were

memorized and recited by monks in unison so that the teachings were preserved without errors and changes over the generations. This is an oral form of transmission which was a very well organized structure where various groups of monks would learn specific segments of teaching in detail.

This oral tradition was used to transmit the teachings even several centuries after the death of the Buddha. Common recitations were done by the monastic society to ensure the originality and precision of the doctrine. These recitations were significant in protecting the philosophical and ethical teachings of the Buddha and to avert the misinterpretation or the change of the teachings.

The Pali Tripiṭaka was later made written in Sri Lanka in the first century BCE under the rule of King Vattagamani Abhaya. This great achievement was made because there was a fear that the oral tradition may be under threat by political instability and famine. The monastic community preserved the discourses of the Buddha, its monastic rules and philosophical studies by putting them in writing, which guaranteed the durability of these teachings.

The preserved version of the Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka and Abhidhamma Piṭaka made the Pali canon the authoritative version of early Buddhism teaching. Such writings formed the main basis of understanding and learning Buddhism in the Theravada school of thought. They were also a critical intellectual paradigm whereby the early Buddhist philosophy was comprehended, interpreted, and passed.

Conservation of the Pali canon was a key to keeping the early Buddhist teaching faithful, and also keeping the Theravada intellectual tradition alive. The Pali Tripiṭyaka is even now the textual authority of note over scholars and practitioners who wish to learn the original Buddha teaching in philosophy.

#### **6.4 Role of Canonical Literature in the Development of Buddhist Philosophy**

The canonical texts that survived in the Pāli Tripiṭaka had a pivotal influence in defining the earliest philosophical doctrines of Buddhism. In the Theravada intellectual tradition, the texts were the main source of interpretation of the teachings of the Buddha and a means of comprehending the doctrinal basis of the early Buddhist thought. The teachings that were present in the Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka, and Abhidhamma Piṭaka were studied, interpreted and systematized by monastic scholars and practitioners and led to the creation of a coherent philosophical system based on the earliest canonical sources.

The Pali canonical sources were not only a compilation of the discourses of the Buddha but they also served as the main source of the intellectual growth of the early Buddhist philosophy.

By studying, memorizing and interpreting these texts, monastic scholars were able to maintain the doctrinal purity of the teachings of the Buddha as well as refining them with a philosophical meaning.

The fact that the teachings were preserved in the Pali canon enabled the early Buddhist community to still have continuity with the initial teaching, but it slowly evolved with systematic explanations of ethical conducts, meditation techniques and philosophical principles. Through this, the canonical literature gave the intellectual platform on which early Buddhism philosophy could develop and keep the teachings of the historical Buddha firmly intact.

### **6.5 Significance of Canonical Texts for Buddhist Intellectual Tradition**

Canonical literature has not just been important in Buddhism due to its historical value in safeguarding the teachings of the Buddha. These writings are still necessary sources of philosophical consideration, moral teachings, and spiritual disciplines.

The Tripitaka was able to structure the teachings into systematic groups, enabling the philosophical knowledge of early Buddhism to be learned, understood and overcome to a new generation. The canonical books also contributed towards continuity of the doctrines and gave room to the development of the philosophy in the Buddhist tradition.

Through this, the Buddhist canonical literature served as a central influence in forming the intellectual tradition of the Buddhist philosophy and still has an impact on Buddhist studies and practice in contemporary world.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The ancient Indian philosophical arguments were very instrumental in the evolution of the early Buddhist philosophy archived in the canonical tradition of the Pali language. The philosophical atmosphere of the sixth century BCE was marked with the existence of various philosophical educators who suggested various definitions of morality, causation, fate, and the nature of the self. The Buddha created a unique philosophical formulation that overcame the shortcomings of these current perspectives through a critical analysis of the teachings of his contemporary doctrines of Purana Kassapa, Makkhali Gosala, Ajita Kesakambali, Pakudha Kaccayana, and Sanjaya Belattiputra. The early Buddhist doctrine stressed ethical behavior, awareness, and wisdom as the key factors to defeat suffering and achieve freedom. The principle of the Middle Way gave a moderate way to spiritual growth as it disregarded the two extremes of asceticism and philosophical views which included radical skepticism, strong determinism, and moral nihilism.

The paper shows that early Buddhist philosophy was not a phenomenon that came into existence in a vacuum but it evolved with the other intellectual traditions of ancient India. These philosophical arguments played an instrumental role in the development of some major teachings that were stored in the Pāli Tripiṭaka, such as: karma, moral accountability, and reliant origination. Consequently, it follows that early Buddhist thinking is a systematic and pragmatic philosophical reaction to the religious and intellectual problems of the period that provided a consistent way to lead an ethical life and achieve spiritual liberation.

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