

Phra Medidhammaporn (Prayoon Mererk): **Sartre's Existentialism and Early Buddhism**. Publisher: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 87/126 Tesabahl Songkroh Rd., Lard Yao, Chatuchak, Bangkok, Thailand. First published 1988, Second Edition 1995. 213 pages.

Anmeldt af *Egill Hedinn Bragason*, cand. psych., Island.

This book is based on a doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Delhi, India in 1985 entitled *A Comparative Study of the Non-egological Treatments of Consciousness in Sartre's Philosophy and Early Buddhism*. The author, Phra Medidhammaporn, is a Buddhist monk and Buddhist scholar in Thailand who studied in India. His book is an important contribution to bridging Eastern and Western philosophies with a focus on the old problem of the body-mind continuum and the question about the existence of a permanent self.

Jean-Paul Sartre was one of the most influential existentialists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His work has had a major influence on the development of modern philosophy. At the heart of Sartre's philosophy are a deep craving for freedom and a concomitant sense of responsibility, which are also characteristic of Buddhist thought. Sartre was influenced by Husserl and fascinated by phenomenology. *The Imagination* (1936) and *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1937) were among his best known books written in the phenomenological tradition. In them he discusses his ideas about the self, insisting that the self is not merely self-consciousness, but that it is "out in the world". In 1943 Sartre published *Being and Nothingness*, perhaps his most influential work where he states that consciousness is nothing, but that the self is on a journey to being something. Sartre's views regarding the self and the nature of consciousness are in many ways remarkably similar to the teachings of Buddhism.

*Sartre's Existentialism and Early Buddhism* is divided into three parts and contains five chapters. The first part focuses on selflessness in Sartre's existentialism, Sartre's rejection of the transcendental ego and the Sartrean conception of consciousness. Part two describes the Buddhist's rejection of the self and the Buddhist conception of consciousness. The third part is titled *Reflections and comparisons* and contains the main conclusions of the author. The book is written in a clear and uncomplicated language, which is fortunate, because its subject matter is complex. The author has structured the book in such a way that the reader is gradually led from a general introduction to Sartrean and Buddhist views about the nature of the ego and consciousness to the main questions the author tries to answer. Besides offering an excellent treatment of its main subject matter, the book is useful as an introduction to Sartre and to Buddhism.

This is both an interesting and a very special book. From the point of view of psychology the book is of a special interest. It is a contribution toward a clarification of the classic mind-body question and it forces the serious reader to consider the question about the essence of consciousness. This question involves the relationship between the existence of the self (ego) and the experiences of the self in the world. In other words, the question is how the individual can exist at the same time as a being in the world and also be a conscious observer of his world and his experiences. Phra Medidhammaporn presents a scholarly study of this issue that is fundamental to a philosophy of psychology. In doing so he draws many analogies between Husserl's phenomenology, Sartre's existentialism and Buddhist and Indian religious-

philosophical thought. Phra Medidhammaporn's book provides a key to understanding and clarifying basic psychological and philosophical concepts regarding consciousness in a readily understandable and uncomplicated way.

What is the essence of human consciousness? The answer to this basic question has profound implications for psychology and philosophy. From the time of Plato, essence has been said to precede existence. Sartre moves away from this statement by asserting that existence precedes essence and that there are two basic categories of being, "being-in-itself" (*être en-soi*) and "being-for-itself" (*être pour-soi*). Inanimate objects exist in the world as "being-in-itself" which is complete and unchanging. "Being-in-itself" is not created; it is without reason for being, and without connection with any other being. This kind of being is exhibited by natural things such as stones, furniture, houses, cars etc. but is not exclusive to inanimate objects because it is shared with humanity, which exists both in the realm of "being-in-itself" and "being-for-oneself." "Being-in-itself" is the only kind of being that exists in humanity before humanity confronts itself and decides what it wishes to be and gives itself essence. "Being-in-itself" is the being of the world without consciousness; "being-for-itself" is being with consciousness and meaningfulness.

Sartre's project in his early work was to show that consciousness provides the meaning of the world in terms of "being-for-itself" which is the very essence of consciousness. "Being-for-itself" is the characteristic of humanity that is basic to individual freedom. This freedom is not absolute, but it is complete and allows people to make choices. "Being-for-itself" is based on three processes: interrogation, destruction and negative judgement. The basis of all understanding of "being-for-itself" results from negation. Interrogation is a form of non-being that presupposes a lack of knowledge. This lack of knowledge prompts people to ask questions that may be answered in either the negative or the positive. If the question is answered in the negative, then a form of non-being exists as one option of being has been eliminated. Similarly if the question is answered in the positive a different form of non-being exists as the individual now realizes what is not in existence. Destruction or the disorganization of objects also reveals knowledge because humanity must exist to identify the order or form that are destroyed during destruction. This does not mean that destruction does not occur without the existence of humanity, but in a very strict sense destruction requires order that only humanity may provide. Negative judgement is defined as the denial of the existence of possibilities based on observations of the natural world. Since interrogation, destruction and negative judgement continually reveal non-being, being is the background for the non-being, which we experience. A being must exist to generate this non-being and that being is "being-for-itself" or humanity. Reality ceases to exist when "being-for-itself," which orders all things, ceases to exist. It is human consciousness that introduces non-being to the world and therefore defines the world. Without humanity witnessing the world around itself, the division and organization that the world around us seems to possess ceases to exist because this order is imposed by our minds. Human consciousness has the ability to create non-being and this form of negation, according to Sartre takes place in all forms of knowledge.

Negation and non-being are a source of the emptiness that Sartre argues is the very essence of human consciousness. Consciousness is purely subjective according to Sartre, and from consciousness is derived the existence of non-being that defines all objects in human experience. People or "being-for-itself" defines the world by a process of negation and every

judgement made by humans is a form of negation. Human consciousness is a form of non-being that is derived from the negation of the self. Since humanity is outside of "being-in-itself" it is free to determine its course through the world it creates. Humanity is free because "Being-for-itself" is freedom. Man is free because as soon as the individual becomes conscious of himself he becomes responsible for all of his actions.

In his book Phra Medidhammaporn shows that for Sartre, consciousness is the negation of being because it introduces a split into the "being-in-itself." This happens whenever people become conscious *of* something, then this consciousness is implicitly conscious of itself as *not being* that thing. Furthermore, consciousness is said to be nothingness for the reason that all being happens on the side of its objects. Consciousness is a total emptiness, because the entire world is outside it. It is the nihilation of a particular being, and therefore has only a borrowed existence. Sartre does not view consciousness as a "logical concept formulated through speculative reasoning." Nothingness for him is an experiential concept that is derived from our experiences. The discovery of consciousness as nothingness takes place as a result of interrogation and negative judgement processes. It is this point that brings Sartre close to the teaching of Buddhism.

Phra Medidhammaporn emphasizes that Buddhism denies the existence of the self and this point can be related to Sartre's philosophy of existence and consciousness. In Pali the word *anatta* refers to non-self, non-ego and non-substantiality. In the Upanishads (a part of the Vedic books, a collection of metaphysical treatises written in Sanskrit and Pali) the word "atman" means *the self* in a broad sense. In various contexts, Atman can mean life in general, the principles of life, the soul, and the intellect. "Atman is what remains when everything that is not the self is eliminated. The self, therefore, is a residue which is left after all physical and mental constituents of a man's personality are analyzed". - The ultimate state of the self cannot be known or explained, and can only be referred to as *Turiya*. *Turiya* and *Atman* cannot be known in any ordinary sense but must be realized through meditation.

Phra Medidhammaporn points out interesting similarities between the doctrine of Atman and Husserl's views regarding the *transcendental ego*. Sartre rejected the existence of a transcendental ego understood as a permanent subject of experiences, and the Buddhists rejected the doctrine of the Upanishads about the nature of *Atman*. According to Husserl, the transcendental ego always remains the same, it is *the continuous background of changes in the stream of experience*. The transcendental ego and the *Atman* have in common that they continue to exist after all other physical and mental phenomena have been explained and analyzed, because they are really the precondition that must exist in order for this analysis to take place. According to Husserl the transcendental ego cannot be described any more than the *Atman* can be described. The transcendental ego and the *Atman* are the "Absolute Being" and for the writers on the Upanishads the phenomenal world is an illusion (*maya*) and therefore the world has no "being-in-itself."

Phra Medidhammaporn concludes that Sartre's philosophy and Buddhism have in common that consciousness is emptied of the permanent self and that *freedom of consciousness* is the highest goal in life. It is this awareness that motivates consciousness to become something that it is not. To make this possible, the empirical self is created, but its creation is based on ignorance. The empirical self is an object among other objects and therefore a phenomenal thing appearing in the form of time. It is the self, which belongs to the natural order of the

world and is subject to the limitations of space and time, in contrast to the transcendental self, which is the "real" self. Sartre argued that it was possible to liberate consciousness from the empirical self by pure reflection, and in this way man would become free. The Buddha preached that the major source of suffering in the world was to identify consciousness with the (empirical) self. Pure and wise attention and meditation is the only way to attain a life of freedom, which is the same as freedom of consciousness. Human consciousness can only become free from the empirical world by a process of *radical conversion*. After such a conversion, man will become free from the suffering that results from the vicissitudes of the world.