

Title: Light in the Buddhist Philosophical Tradition
Author: Rev. Dr. Wadinagala Pannaloka
Affiliation: Department of Buddhist Philosophy, Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

Abstract

Light is inseparable from life in the universe. Thus, many branches of human study have been devoted to this subject. Buddhism, a religious-philosophical system, has also discussed various aspects of light. One of the traditions of Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, produces its textual tradition in the Pali language, a Middle Indic dialectic. Inside Pali literature, the treatment of light as a phenomenon has been presented in relation to two dimensions: the physical and the spiritual. The first section of this paper is devoted to understanding the nature of light as a physical phenomenon. The Pali terms *aloka*, *obhasa*, *abha* and *teja* offer meanings to light. Conceptually, the physical aspect of the world (both sentient beings and physical objects) is analysed under the term ‘*rupa*’ (translated as matter or body). Matter is composed of four elements: earth, water, heat and wind. Light is mainly associated with heat (*teja*) and every physical entity is a combination of all four elements. The Buddhist analysis of matter is undertaken, not for the sake of physical scientific analysis but, as a way of explaining the psycho-physical complex from which the human being is composed through the synergistic workings of several factors. Furthermore, this section will introduce the idea that light is not a ‘substance’ that exists individually, but that it depends on other elements. In Buddhist cosmology, the first beings on earth came down from a world of radiant beings (*abhassaraloka*). The aliens on earth lost their light in the body as desire grew in the mind. The use of light in meditation practice is also extremely important and the second part of this paper will examine how light is used by meditation practitioners and discuss the appearance of light during meditation. The last section is dedicated to discussing the use of light as a metaphor for wisdom. The Buddhist tradition maintains the view that Buddha (enlightened being) is the ‘light bringer to human-kind’ (*ukkadharomanussanam*). This statement is made against the backdrop of the ordinary human condition in which human experience, under the influence of psychological factors such as greed, hatred and ignorance, is perceived as darkness. The role of an enlightened person is to break through this darkness. Buddhism provides a gradual path to the attainment of wisdom, or “light”. The “light of wisdom” surpasses all other forms of physical light from such entities as the sun and the moon. The “light bringer” is not only beneficial to him or herself but also to the entire humanity. Treating light within the Buddhist texts in these two ways, namely as a physical dimension and as a metaphor for wisdom, Buddhism has produced a theory in which “light” can be seen as an interdependent phenomenon. The main objective in Buddhist philosophy is the attainment of inner enlightenment (cognitive clarity), the highest achievement possible for a human being.

Keywords: Buddhism, light, physical light, wisdom, darkness, spirituality, meditation