

In Memoriam: David J. Kalupahana, Ph.D. (1933-2014)



***DAVID KALUPAHANA AND  
THE FIELD OF EARLY BUDDHISM***

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I had known Professor David Kalupahana for over fifty years. David, his wife Indrani, my wife and I were undergraduates at the same time at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya. He was, of course, senior to us. David and I lived in the same hall of residence and used to meet frequently at breakfast and dinner. Even as an undergraduate David evinced a great interest in Buddhism and philosophy. I recall one of his earliest articles that he sent to the students' magazine was on the idea of causality in Buddhism an idea which was to be comprehensively explored in his magnum opus. Many of us knew instinctively that he would end up as a university professor; what we did not know then is that he would emerge as a foremost scholar in the world of early Buddhism. He initially studied Pāli, Sanskrit and Philosophy and later specialized in Pāli. This prepared him well for his subsequent work in Buddhist philosophy.

After obtaining his B.A and M.A from the University of Ceylon, he was admitted to the University of London, where he pursued his Ph.D; in London, he studied classical Chinese and Tibetan as well. His Ph.D dissertation was on the concept of causality in Buddhism and was later published as an influential book.

In 1972, David was offered a position in the Department of philosophy at the University of Hawai'i and he remained there until his retirement. He quickly became a full professor and Chairman of the Department. During his long academic career Kalupahana wrote over twenty scholarly books dealing with such topics as Buddhist concept of causality, principles of Buddhist psychology, Buddhism and ethics, Buddhism and law and history of Buddhist philosophy. Many of these works proved to be extremely consequential.

To my mind, one of the greatest achievements of Prof. Kalupahana as a Buddhist scholar was his ability to redefine the field of early Buddhist philosophy by extending its discursive boundaries and directing investigative thought-lines in important new directions. He sought to push early Buddhist thought beyond itself by daring acts of re-imagining and re-interpretation. Kalupahana reacted against the normal tendency to see Theravada Buddhism as restricted, narrow and hide-bound; he pointed out that it was indeed complex, many-sided, multi-focal and possessed great accommodative powers. Let me cite a few examples from his writings which illustrate this point.

David translated Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* with a substantial critical introduction. In it he argued that this text, which is regarded as representing the high watermark of Mahāyāna thinking in India, can be usefully situated within the axiomatics of early Buddhism. Far from deviating from the tenets of early Buddhism, it was a return to them. Similarly, he translated the Buddhist text the *Dhammapada* with an important critical introduction. In it, he contended that this work represents the meeting of cultural and religious cross-currents operative in India at the time. He advanced the notion that The *Dhammapada* was a considered response to the venerable Hindu text the *Bhagavadgītā*. This went against the dominant view which was that that each of the verses gathered in the *Dhammapada* was deployed by the Buddha as a privileged theme of a given discourse.

Prof. David Kalupahana's desire to fashion early Buddhism into a site of exciting interchange and contestation of meaning can be seen in the way he initiated dialogues with celebrated Western philosophers such as William James and Wittgenstein. It was David's firmly held conviction that a strong pragmatic impulse coursed through early Buddhism, and according to him, this is borne out by the fact that the Buddha rejected metaphysics, absolutism and essentialisms of any form or kind. Here, he saw certain parallels with William James' thought. His point was not, that there was a perfect congruence between the thought of the Buddha and William James, but there are sufficient points of affinity to warrant instigating a dialogue, clearing a theoretical space for further inquiry. Similarly, he took the idea of suffering (*dukkha*) which is so central to Buddhism and compared with some notions of early Wittgenstein which revolved round notions of human will and ethical imagination.

David Kalupahana was a close and acute reader of Pāli texts. Indeed, this was one of his indubitable gifts. He paid great attention to etymology (*nirutti*). His analyses of Buddhism are securely anchored in Pāli texts and the intricate verbal structures they contain. All his essays are full of Pāli words, and the central theme-words of his essays are often imaginative semantic re-interpretations. The importance of etymology in philosophical inquiry has been long established by thinkers such as Nietzsche; in more recent times Roger Ames and David Hall have underlined its importance in relation to Confucian studies. Kalupahana's analytical works are underwritten by an etymological cartography and they are driven by a hermeneutic of semantic legitimacy.

Another way in which David sought to widen the perimeters of Buddhist thinking is by challenging conventional wisdoms. In this endeavor, he incurred the hostilities of certain sections of the public. He was fully aware of this fact. As he once remarked, 'analysis of early Buddhist doctrines without adopting a Hīnayānist or Mahāyānist perspective has led me to some unpopular views regarding the nature of early Buddhism.' Let us, for example consider the concept of nirvana. Most Buddhists see it as transcendental and beyond verbalization. Kalupahana thought otherwise. He sought to unsettle its transcendental referent and point out through an analysis of intersection discourses on epistemology, psychology and axiology that it signified the ultimate achievement of freedom. Freedom, he reminded us, was the capacity of human beings to realize their full potential. It is interesting that he translated nirvana as freedom. He sought to deconstruct the timeless certitudes of metaphysics and point out that they were human constructions.

This was a line of thought I remember discussing in London when we were graduate students. In his book *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, published in 1975, he made the following remark regarding the idea of nirvana: 'It is a state of perfect mental health (*aroga*), of perfect happiness (*parama sukha*), calmness or coolness (*sītibhūta*), and stability (*āneñja*) etc. attainable in this life, or while one is alive.' This line of thinking was developed in interesting trajectories by his students and colleagues. Clearly, Kalupahana sought to eliminate some of the metaphysical sedimentations that had begun to weigh down early Buddhist thought. This is not to say that he abandoned metaphysics totally. No one does. In his exegeses of rebirth (*punabbhava*) for example, he draws significantly on metaphysical thinking. I think Immanuel Kant got it right when he said that, 'we shall always return to metaphysics as to a beloved, one with whom we have had a quarrel.'

Another area in which Prof. David Kalupahana labored to go beyond conventional thinking is the domain of language and communication. He felt that the Buddha saw and valorized language as being more than a tool of communication. It was a rich and complex cultural practice. According to the Buddha, language can most profitably be understood as a social practice inflected by convention and imperatives agreed upon by the people who use it. It is not divinely-ordained or iron-clad. Indeed it evolves and changes in accordance with the flow of conventions. In Buddhist literature there are copious references to agreement among the users (*sammuti*) and the practice of users (*voḥāra*). Consequently, the idea of language as a product of social interaction is central to Buddhism.

In his later years, he sought to extend this idea further by seeking to construct a concept of interactive context. The last conversation I had with David was a few months before his illness. Knowing my interest in communication, he told me of his idea of interactive context. He spoke enthusiastically of some of Donald Davidson's ideas of truth conditions of statements, linguistic events, partiality towards behaviorism, linguistic idealism, holism and the interplay between the physical and mental. These inclinations of Davidson had the effect of urging Kalupahana to think in newer ways about language and communication. This interactive context toward which he was reaching, highlights Davidson's idea of signs gaining their life in being situated in contexts and the idea that there is no final context – context of all contexts. Donald Davidson, to be sure, is not the first name that comes to mind in discussing Buddhist thought, but I can understand David Kalupahana's interest in this line of thought. He even made reference to the interplay of semantics and pragmatics and the privileging of inference over reference in Robert Brandom's work and promoting new ways of thinking about language, meaning and use. These ideas were inchoate and were in their embryonic form; unfortunately, he did not have the time or opportunity to develop them fully as he succumbed to his illness.

David Kalupahana, then, was an innovative thinker who re-vitalized Buddhist thinking. In addition, he was a devoted husband, loving father and grandfather, caring brother, a devoted member of the Sri Lankan community in Hawai'i. In all these roles, he fulfilled his obligations with exemplary grace and understanding. He endeavored to lead a life guided by Buddhist humanism. Indeed, the idea of Buddhist humanism is central to his work; it glows through his writing. His journey of spiritual self-definition is marked by signposts that are distinctly Buddhist humanistic in outlook. At a time, when under the influence of post-structuralism and post-modernism, humanism has been reduced to a smear-word, a term of disparagement, Kalupahana sought to rescue the term from its cruel fate by displaying its relevance to the pulse modern times. His desire was to pluralize the term by underlining the fact that there are not one but many humanisms such as Buddhist and Confucian humanism.

David loved to engage people in conversation – not just academics alone. He had a great capacity to listen, and he carried over this gift to his scholarly work as well. He had a remarkable ability to listen to texts whether it was the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* or the *Dhammapada*. He was able to spot when a text is celebrating or hiding behind language or being evasive. His ability to listen to the Pāli language and uncover its subtleties was inspiring. Heidegger, it is important to recall, stressed the importance of listening to language because language is constitutive of meaning and nothing happens outside language. Indeed, we operate within a linguistic universe.

David Kalupahana was regarded as an elder statesman of the Sri Lankan community in Hawaii and many looked up to him for guidance and leadership. During the last six or seven years of his life, he acted with the detachment of mature wisdom and at times smiled gently at the foibles of some of us. The image that comes to my mind here is one from the *Dhammapada*.

Having climbed up to the mansion of wisdom,

As one standing atop a hill,

He looks at those on the ground below.

Prof. Kalupahana died on January fifteenth with his wife Indrani by his side. He would indeed be sorely missed by his family, relatives, friends, members of the Sri Lankan community in Hawai'i and the fraternity of philosophers and Buddhist scholars in Hawai'i, Sri Lanka and the rest of the world.

May he attain the bliss of Nirvana.

### ***A LETTER IN MEMORY OF***

#### ***Professor David Jinadasa Kalupahana (1936-2014)***

Asanga Tilakaratne

It is with a deep sense of sadness that we received the message of the passing of Professor David J. Kalupahana. Professor Kalupahana lived a life devoted to Buddhist studies. In addition to being a dedicated teacher, he was a researcher and writer with enormous energy. Even after his retirement from active university teaching he kept on producing works on Buddhist philosophy and attending seminar and conferences on Buddhist studies in various parts of the world. His passing is a loss to the Buddhist academic world.

Professor Kalupahana was a former head of the department of philosophy, University of Hawai'i where he served as a professor from 1972. Prior to joining the University of Hawai'i he taught at the Pāli and Buddhist Studies Department, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. Professor Kalupahana graduated from University of Peradeniya in 1959 with a degree in Pāli, Sanskrit, and philosophy, and subsequently received his PhD from University of London.

Professor Kalupahana was one of the leading interpreters of the early Pāli Buddhist tradition and Nagarjuna. A salient feature of Professor Kalupahana's interpretation of the early Pāli Buddhist tradition was that it represented a form of empiricism with pragmatic tendencies. He devoted much of his academic energy to establish this approach to Buddhist philosophy. He interpreted both early *Mādhyamika* and *Yogācāra* along similar lines.

Professor Kalupahana was an untiring researcher and writer who has had many publications on various aspects of Buddhist philosophy. Based on his doctoral research he published *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (1975). His work, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy* (1973), won admiration of students of Buddhism as a concise

statement of the history of Indian Buddhist philosophy. In *Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way* (1986), Professor Kalupahana presented a new way of interpreting Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhama-kakarikā*. The last of his major contributions to the study of Buddhism was his two-volume *Sourcebook on Buddhist Philosophy* (2008), a substantial work that runs to almost one thousand five hundred pages.

A striking feature of Professor Kalupahana's academic life is that he believed in what he taught. His life-long interest, Buddhist philosophy, was something much more than an academic discipline for him. It had deep existential meaning. This conviction made him defend and passionately argue for what he taught. In Professor Kalupahana's life his principles featured more prominently than individuals or institutes.

Professor Kalupahana was a very warm personality who went out of his way to recognize and respect people. I know that he had an abiding sense of oneness with his senior and contemporary colleagues at Hawai'i such as Win Nagley, Eliot Deutsch, and Roger Ames, to name but a few. We were pleasantly surprised and deeply touched by his magnanimity when he dedicated three of his more recent works to Sanath Nanayakkara, his contemporary at University of Ceylon (later Peradeniya University), P.D. Premasiri, emeritus professor of Buddhist philosophy, Peradeniya University, and myself, who had been his graduate students at Hawai'i. In my entire stay in Hawai'i, Professor Kalupahana's place with Indrani's ever-present hospitality was my second home.

On behalf of all the relatives, friends, colleagues and students in Sri Lanka including Sanath Nanayakkara, P.D. Premasiri, and my own family with Menaka and Lahiru, let me take this opportunity to convey our oneness to Indrani, Chandrika, Nandana and Milinda.

Finally: Professor Kalupahana believed that nirvana, the highest good taught in Buddhism, is freedom from all forms of unpleasantness in life. He not only endorsed it for others, he himself set it as his own goal in life. May he achieve his goal: freedom from suffering!

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