

# Rahul Sankrityayan and His Contribution to Indian Buddhism: With Special Reference to the Teaching and Philosophy

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**Abstract:** *Rahul Sankrityayan's contributions to Indian Buddhism included historical investigation, textual analysis, translation, and distribution. Being a polyglot and a passionate traveller, he made difficult trips throughout Tibet, India, Nepal, and Central Asia to recover long-lost Buddhist texts, many of which were kept in monastic libraries. Written in Pali, Sanskrit, and Tibetan, these writings offered crucial insights into the development of Buddhism's doctrine and its historical dissemination throughout the Indian subcontinent and beyond. In addition to enhancing Buddhist studies in India, his attempts to bring these writings back to the country brought attention to the historical ties between India and its neighbours. Sankrityayan, a fervent supporter of social change and rationality, saw Buddhism as a progressive ideology that promoted ethics, equality, and reason. His works made Buddhist philosophy more widely available by exposing readers to its humanistic and scientific facets. In addition, his thorough translations and commentary on Buddhist texts gave academics reliable and thorough materials for researching early and Mahayana Buddhism. In addition to his scholarly accomplishments, Rahul Sankrityayan dedicated his life to reviving a tradition that significantly influenced Indian culture. This paper examines his contributions and interpretations of Buddhist teachings and philosophy.*

**Keywords:** The Four Noble Truths, Prañīyasamutpāda, Three Marks of Existence

## INTRODUCTION

Known as the "Father of Indian Travelogue," Rahul Sankrityayan was a prolific author, historian, and Buddhist scholar. The comprehension and resurgence of Buddhism in India have been greatly aided by his ceaseless exploration of ancient Buddhist writings and sites. On April 9, 1893, Rahul Sankrityayan was born Kedarnath Pandey in the Uttar Pradesh village of Kanaila near Azamgarh. He studied a variety of religious books as a result of his early life's search for knowledge. The contributions made by Sankrityayan to Buddhist studies are diverse. He is renowned for his translations of important Buddhist writings, his efforts to recover old manuscripts, and his in-depth study of Pali and Sanskrit Buddhist texts. Sankrityayan took the name "Rahul" after the son of the Buddha, and he dedicated his life to studying and spreading Buddhism. His varied travels throughout India, Tibet, and other parts of Asia were intended to unearth ancient Buddhist texts and learn from their traditions. He was critical of the marginalisation of Buddhism in Indian historical narratives and worked to rectify this by exploring original Buddhist sources. He also wrote extensively on Buddhist literature, identifying and analysing significant texts that had long been ignored by academics. His work was essential to understanding the evolution of Buddhist thought and its spread throughout Asia. In particular, his trips to Tibet led to the recovery of Buddhist writings. He was instrumental in delivering Buddhist scriptures to India, as many of them were lost in India but were preserved in Tibet. These texts shed light on early schools of Buddhism, such as the *Vajrayāna* and *Mahayāna*. Finding Sanskrit translations of Buddhist writings was his most significant contribution to Indian Buddhism, Tibetan translations were preserved in these writings, which had been lost to Indian study for generations.

## CORE TEACHINGS OF BUDDHISM INTERPRETED BY RAHUL SANKRITYAYAN

Under the direction of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, Buddhism began in the fifth century BCE. Scholars, monks, and reformers have preserved, extended, and interpreted its ideas over the years. One of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century was Rahul Sankrityayan, who not only studied Buddhist writings but also considered how they may be applied in contemporary life. His writings contributed to showcasing Buddhism's depth of thought and applicability to modern Indian society. He also highlighted how Buddhism has influenced Indian art, architecture, and political philosophy, among other aspects of the country's cultural and social milieu. The groundwork for contemporary Buddhism studies in India was established by Sankrityayan's unearthing of Buddhist scriptures. Sankrityayan interpreted Buddhist teachings in a way that was based on reason and science. The following philosophical facets of Buddhism were highlighted by him.

Sankrityayan saw the Dhamma as a philosophical framework for understanding human suffering and attaining liberation rather than as a religion. He emphasised the Buddha's focus on firsthand experience and empirical observation. Sankrityayan promoted Buddhism as a means of social change, greatly influenced by the Buddha's rejection of caste and social hierarchy. According to Rahul Sankrityayan, Buddhism is a philosophical and spiritual revolution with a foundation in humanism, rationalism, and ethical pragmatism. He respected the Buddha's rejection of speculative metaphysics, caste systems, and ritualistic practices—all of which he saw to be characteristics of dogmatic religiosity. The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, which are at the heart of the Buddha's teachings, provided Sankrityayan with a practical framework for resolving human suffering and achieving freedom with self-effort and mindfulness without the need for supernatural intervention. Sankrityayan emphasised Buddhism's sociopolitical aspects in his writings, presenting it as a system that contested the long-standing injustices of his era. The *Four Noble Truths*, *The Eightfold Path*, and the *Three Marks of Existence*, are the three major pillars of Buddhist philosophy. The clarity and applicability of Rahul Sankrityayan's interpretations of these fundamental lessons are remarkable.

#### THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS AND EIGHTFOLD PATH

Sankrityayan explored the Four Noble Truths' psychological and societal facets. He saw suffering as a universal human condition made worse by social systems rather than just an individual experience. He promoted societal changes as a means of achieving cessation and highlighted the importance socioeconomic circumstances play in the origin of misery. According to Sankrityayan, the Four Noble Truths are social and psychological truths as well as religious doctrines. According to Sankrityayan, pain is a universal experience that results from socioeconomic inequality, political oppression, and personal wants. This is known as *Dukkha* (pain), or the realisation that existence is full of suffering. For *Samudaya* (Origin of Suffering), or the knowledge that attachment and desire are the root causes of suffering, he broadened the concept of *tanha* (hunger) to encompass exploitation and greed in society. For him *Nirodha* (Cessation of Suffering), or the understanding that suffering can end through the Eightfold Path's *Magga* (Path to Cessation) as a way to put an end to suffering, Madhya Asia ka Itihas ("History of Central Asia") is one of Sankrityayan's historical writings that highlight the transience of ideas, cultures, and civilisations. Sankrityayan frequently maintained that intellectual emancipation required an understanding of impermanence. His understanding of *dukkha* (suffering) in a socio-economic framework was shown in his support for socialism and criticism of capitalism exploitation. Sankrityayan made a connection between structural injustices and the Buddhist idea of suffering, highlighting how exploitation and financial aspirations result in society *dukkha*. He saw Buddhism as a way to alleviate the suffering brought on by social and economic inequalities as well as a spiritual journey. Sankrityayan examined *anâtman* in his philosophical writings in the context of existential philosophy and contemporary psychology. He argued against the idea of a permanent self and in favour of a dynamic view of identity that is influenced by past events, culture, and experiences. According to Sankrityayan, the Eightfold Path could be used as a guide for moral behaviour in modern society and was not just

limited to monastic rituals. Sankrityayan reinterpreted the Eightfold Path which consists of right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration as a manual for transforming individuals and society. For example, he emphasised the significance of moral work and denounced exploitative economic systems. Sankrityayan interpreted this as a call to action against injustice, stressing hands-on involvement in the world. Sankrityayan connected the requirement for adaptability and the ever-evolving socio-political environments to the idea of impermanence (*Anicca*). He saw the lack of a definite self as a rejection of discrimination in Non-Self (*Anatta*) based on caste, class, and other factors. While reiterating the universality of Suffering (*Dukkha*), he proposed that systemic solutions can result from knowledge of its sources. Rahul claims that although the Buddha disapproved of materialistic living, he did not support excessive fasting. According to Rahul, the Buddha had a more gregarious demeanour, maintained Buddhism's social acceptance throughout his life, and managed unpleasant confrontations with Brahmins throughout that era. He also added that Buddha did not say anything about the economic exploitation of the poor people in his time because if he had done so, it would have gone against the merchant class and the merchant class was helpful in the expansion of Buddhism.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE DOCTRINE OF PRATÎTYASAMUTPÂDA

The doctrine of *Pratîtyasamutpâda* where "*Samutpâda* means appearance or arising (*pradurbhâv*) and *Pratîtya* means after getting (Prati + i + ya); combining the two we find, arising after getting (something)."<sup>2</sup> *Pratîtyasamutpâda* translated as the dependent origination, or dependent arising. One was destroyed, which led to the creation of another known as *Pratîtyasamutpâda*. This idea holds that everything in the world depends on a variety of factors and causes and that nothing is unique. The doctrine has various examples of descriptions. In *Majjhima-nikâya*, the Buddha says,

*I will teach you the Dhamma: that being present, this becomes; from the arising of this, this arises. That being absent, this does not become; from the cessation of that, this ceases.*<sup>3</sup>

The idea is known as the *Madhyam-Pratîpâd* (the middle path) because it stays away from the two extremes nihilism, which holds that something can be destroyed without causing any harm, and eternalism, which holds that something lives forever regardless of circumstances. Regarding *Pratîtyasamutpâda*, Rahul Sankrityayan asserts that everything has *Pratîtya* (conditions), and that this differs from the causal theories proposed by other philosophers. He claims that when one dies or is destroyed, it signifies the beginning of the second. *Pratîtya* refers to the circumstances of human existence. According to the *Mahâprajñâpâramitâ-Sâstra* there are four types of *Pratîtya*:

1. The direct cause (*Hetu-pratîtya*),
2. The equal and immediate antecedent (*Samânântara-pratîtya*),
3. The condition of the item (*Âlamabana-pratîtya*),
4. The governing condition (*Adhîpati-pratîtya*).<sup>4</sup>

Buddha invented the great and comprehensive theory of *Pratîtyasamutpâda*, to express it. The numbers of *Pratîtyasamutpâda* are 12 called '*Twelve Nidâna*'. Sankrityayan believed that *Pratîtyasamutpâda* is the base of philosophies of the Buddha and it is the key to understanding his philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

## THE THREE MARKS OF EXISTENCE IN BUDDHISM

Rahul Sankrityayan frequently addressed fundamental Buddhist teachings in his philosophical investigations, such as the “Three Marks of Existence” (*Tri-Lakṣaṅa*): suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anitya*), and non-self (*anātman*). Sankrityayan explored these ideas in depth via his varied writings and scholarly endeavours, placing them in the perspective of social, cultural, and historical contexts. There was a Relationship to the “Three Marks of Existence”. *Anatta* is one of the Three Marks of Existence (*tilakkhaṇa*), alongside: impermanence (*Anicca*) unsatisfactoriness or suffering (*Dukkha*). Together, these reflect the transient and conditioned nature of reality. According to the Buddha, what is commonly regarded as “self” is a collection of five impermanent and interdependent aggregates (*Pañcakkhandha*) like:

1. **Form (*Rūpa*)** – Physical body and material form.
2. **Feeling (*Vedanā*)** – Sensations, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.
3. **Perception (*Saññā*)** – Recognition and interpretation of objects.
4. **Mental Formations (*SaEkhārā*)** – Volitional activities and habits.
5. **Consciousness (*Viññāṇa*)** – Awareness and cognitive processes.

None of these aggregates is the self; they are constantly changing, arising, and ceasing. The doctrine of *anatta* is closely tied to the concept of dependent origination (*Patīca Samuppāda*), which explains how phenomena arise due to conditions and cease when those conditions change. Since all phenomena are interdependent, no independent, eternal self exists. According to Sankrityayan the Buddha taught *anatta* as a means to overcome attachment and craving (*tanhā*), which are the roots of suffering. Realizing the truth of non-self leads to the cessation of clinging and ultimately to *nirvāṇa*, the liberation from the cycle of birth and death (*samsāra*). So, the Philosophical and Practical Implications of this theory are: Ethical Living means to understanding *anatta* fosters compassion and reduces ego-driven actions, as one realises the interconnected nature of beings, Meditative Practice means insight meditation (*vipassanā*) focuses on observing the impermanent and non-self-nature of thoughts, emotions, and sensations, and Freedom from Suffering means realizing *anatta* leads to detachment from material possessions, relationships, and even one's body and mind, breaking the cycle of craving and aversion. Sankrityayan's views on the Three Marks of Existence combine contemporary ideas with classic Buddhist teachings. Sankrityayan extended traditional Buddhism's emphasis on individual freedom from the circle of suffering to encompass social and political change as a means of achieving emancipation for all. His fusion of Buddhism with Marxism demonstrates his progressive view, in which the realisations of suffering, impermanence, and non-self-serve as instruments for social change.

The Doctrine of Anatta, according to Sankrityayan, was a groundbreaking concept in Indian philosophy. It criticised philosophical essentialism and stood in direct opposition to the *Vedic* and *Upanishad's* ideas of an eternal self (*Ātman*). He admired how the Buddha's teaching dismantled the notion of a permanent, unchanging self, arguing instead for a dynamic, interdependent existence

based on the aggregates (*khandhas*).<sup>1</sup> Sankrityayan valued *Anatta's* factual and logical basis because he was a rationalist. He emphasised that the religion urged people to break free from metaphysical illusions and critically analyse their experiences. According to him, denying a permanent self was consistent with scientific materialism, which rejects the idea of transcendental beings and concentrates on observable things.

The Buddhist teachings were viewed by Rahul Sankrityayan as instruments for societal change. He felt that society may progress towards equality and the well-being of all by dismantling individualism and the ego. His interpretation of *Anatta* as a critique of hierarchical systems originating from the self-centred ideologies of caste and class was made possible by his Marxist leanings. Sankrityayan asserts that *Anatta* offers a structure for conquering *dukkha*, or suffering. One can achieve release (*nirvāṇa*) by letting go of attachments and aversions after seeing that there is no intrinsic self. He urged individuals to use the idea in their daily lives to lessen conflicts and cravings, emphasising its practical consequences over academic metaphysics. He maintained that contemporary theories of psychology and neuroscience, which contend that the self is a construct rather than an innate entity, are consistent with the theory. He maintained that Buddhism promotes a spirit of inquiry and scepticism and highlighted the factual and experiential components of its teachings. In his book, “Darshan-Digdarshan,” he states that “Buddha's teachings are not based on dogma but on direct experience and rational inquiry”.<sup>2</sup>

## THE SOUL THEORY

There is no space for the soul in Buddhism, according to the no-materialism teaching, and the Buddha strongly disagreed with the *ātman* hypothesis. However, this does not imply that he was a materialistic person. Rahul Sankrityayan claims that the Buddha rejects the idea of the soul or *atman* and instead views materialism as the same as his *Brahmacharya* and *Samādhi*.<sup>3</sup> He says that *anitya*, *dukkha*, and *anātman* are basic concepts of Buddhism. According to him, the Buddha separated the idea of the soul into two parts:

1. *Rūpi*, or material
2. Non-material or *Arūpi*.

Every *Satkāya* was divided into *sānta* and *ananta*, and he was referred to as both. They are both *anitya* and *nitya*. According to the Buddha, in order to achieve the true nature of knowledge, *satkāya* or *ātma* (soul) must be destroyed.<sup>4</sup> The Buddha disagreed with the idea that the soul is natural. According to *Majjhima-Nikāya's Cūḷa-saccaka-Sutta*, the five *Skandha* are *Anātmanā* or No-soul. According to atheist thought, both the soul and God have no place in Buddhist philosophy. Buddhism forbids that kind of thinking because God is seen as the world's creator. If God is *Pratitya-samutpāda*, he can be a component of Buddhist philosophy. However, it is equally true that he cannot be God if he is a dependent origination.<sup>5</sup> Few Indian and Western academics claim that the Buddha pre-approved many of the doctrines found in the *Upanishads* by remaining silent, despite the fact that Rahul Sankrityayan acknowledges that the Buddha has not explained God as well as he has explained the no-soul theory. Examples of the Buddha's atheism are found in the *Majjhima-Nikāya's Brahma-Nimantānika-Sutta* and the *Digha-Nikāya's Tevijjā-Sutta*. Rahul Sankrityayan demonstrated that there were actually four notions (*Trilaksana*) that were popularised in Buddhism: *Dukkha-vāda*, *Anitya-vāda*, and

*Anātmavaad*. The final of these four was *Anishwaryavāda*. Regarding just three ideas put forth by the intellectuals, he claims that denying the soul theory therefore instantly rejects the theory of God, so it is not required to state God's name separately. Regarding the few matters, the Buddha remained silent. Rahul Sankrityayan asserts that this does not imply that he agreed with those things. He claims that the Buddha was silent on ten topics, which can be broken down into three categories:

#### **Lōka or world**

1. The world is eternal
2. The world is not eternal
3. The world is (spatially) infinite
4. The world is not (spatially) infinite

#### **The unity of the organism-body**

1. The being imbued with a life force is identical with the body
2. The being imbued with a life force is not identical with the body

#### **The state after *Nirvāna***

1. The *Tathāgata* (a perfectly enlightened being) exists after death
2. The *Tathāgata* does not exist after death
3. The *Tathāgata* both exists and does not exist after death
4. The *Tathāgata* neither exists nor does not exist after death.

These 10 unexpressed things of the Buddha are listed in the *Majjhima-Nikāya* of Pali canon's *Cula-Malunkiyovāda Sutta* and *Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta*. According to Rahul, it was clear that the founder of *Pratītyasamutpada* should be encouraged to think independently.<sup>1</sup> The Buddha was opposed to the idea of omniscience. In response to Vatsa Gotra's question, '*Is Gautama Omniscient?*' the Buddha stated that he does not believe in omniscience and that it is incorrect for anyone to refer to him as such.<sup>2</sup> Rahul Sankrityayan defines the concept of *nirvāna* given by the Buddha. According to him the *Nirvāna* means extinguishing the conditional *desires* just like a flame of a lamp.<sup>3</sup> Rahul Sankrityayan asserts that the Buddha did not describe what an enlightened person will experience after passing away. Buddhism holds that if there is no soul, then a soul can find happiness after death. The meaning of the word itself was part of the state after *nirvāna*.<sup>4</sup> Overall, we can also say that Rahul Sankrityayan divided the Buddha's philosophy into four main theories.

1. No-God ship Theory,
2. No-soul Theory,
3. Do not accept any text as a proof: use of intellectuality, and
4. Do not believe the life flow is limited to the same body.<sup>5</sup>

Rahul says that the first three theories separated Buddhism with another religion and gave relief to human beings from subordination while the last or fourth theory separated it from Materialism and a beautiful way to make the future hopeful for a person and for increasing his virtue.<sup>6</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

Rahul Sankrityayan's unique contribution applies in his scientific and rational interpretation of Buddhist teachings. He emphasised empirical analysis and comparative study of Buddhist texts in languages such as Pali, Sanskrit, and Tibetan. Rahul Sankrityayan compares both on different points of views then he concluded that both have the same attitude on different aspects of Buddhism like, supporting the four noble truths, the eight-fold path, and 'karmic retribution'. Sankrityayan rejected supernatural elements associated with Buddhism, focusing instead on its practical and ethical dimensions. For him, Buddhism was not a religion of rituals but a philosophy of liberation, advocating for equality, education, and human dignity. He addressed modern issues such as inequality, environmental degradation, and mental health. His rationalist approach aligns with contemporary movements advocating mindfulness and ethical governance.

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