

## Teachings of the Six Heretics

The Pāli Suttapiṭaka provides information about six philosophers contemporary to the Buddha. Their life stories and teachings are not always given in details. However, the Sāmaññaphala Sutta of the Dīghanikāya gives considerable details about these six teachers. Generally, they are known in the Buddhist tradition as six heretical teachers. Except Nigaṇṭhanātaputta all the other five teachers were Akiriyavādins, those who did not accept the efficacy of kamma. The six heretical teachers are:

- i. Pūraṇakassapa
- ii. Makkhaligosāla
- iii. Ajitakesakambala
- iv. Pakudhakaccāna
- v. Nigaṇṭhanātaputta
- vi. Saṅjayabelatṭhaputta

According to the Sāmaññaphala Sutta they were famous and well-known teachers at the time of the Buddha. The Sutta describes their qualities as follows. “...*saṅghī ceva gaṇī ca gaṇācariyo ca nāto yasassī titthakaro sādhusammato bahujanassa rattaññū cirapabbajito addhagato vayoanupatto*”. The meaning is: “... who has many followers, a teacher of many, who is well-known, renowned, the founder of a sect, highly honoured by the multitude, of long standing, long-since gone forth, aged and venerable”.

According to the Sāmaññaphala Sutta, before visiting the Blessed One, King Ajātasattu had visited these six heretical teachers and asked them a question about a visible reward here and now as a fruit of the homeless life. However, all of the six teachers had explained to him about the fundamental teachings of them instead of giving a direct answer for his question. After listening to them the King became displeased but neither applauding nor rejecting their views he had left them without showing his displeasure. Therefore, the king said to the Buddha: “Thus, Lord, Pūraṇa Kassapa, on being asked about the present fruits of the homeless life, explained non-action to me. Just as of on being asked about a mango he were to describe a breadfruit-tree, or on being asked about a breadfruit-tree he were to describe a mango...”

The doctrines proclaimed by these six heretical teachers can be summarised here. Pūraṇa Kassapa as an Akiriyavādin taught a doctrine of non-action (akiriyavāda). His basic premise is that any intentional action is incapable of bearing fruit, so he advocated inefficacy of action. As he advocates, there is no result for any good or bad action. Therefore, there is no distinction between moral or immoral action. If one were to do any immoral action such as killing, stealing, committing adultery, telling lies etc. and any good action such as giving dāna, observing sīla etc. there is no any result. This is a kind of materialistic view. He teaches: “If one were to go along the

south bank of the Ganges killing, slaying, cutting or causing to be cut, burying or causing to be burnt, there would be no evil as a result of that, no evil accrue. Or if one were to go along the north bank of the Ganges giving and causing to be given, sacrificing and causing to be sacrificed, there would be no merit as a result of that, no merit would accrue. In giving, self-control, abstinence and telling the truth, there is no merit, and no merit accrues”.

The next heretic is Makkhali Gosāla who advocated a teaching of determinism or fatalism (niyativāda) or the theory of non-causation (ahetuvāda). As he teaches there is no reason for beings to be purified or defiled, it happens without reason. He further teaches: “There is no self-power or other power, no human power, no strength, no force, no vigour or exertion. All beings, all living things, all creatures, all lives is without control, without power or strength, they experience the fixed course of pleasure and pain through the six kinds of rebirth.” He also talks millions of births, various types of kamma, various births, paths, occupations, thousands of wanderers, nāgas, etc. Just as a ball of string when thrown runs till it is all unraveled, so fools and wise run on and circle round till they make an end of suffering. Human effort can do nothing. There is ambiguity in his teaching.

Then comes Ajitakesakambala, a materialist, who taught a doctrine of annihilation (ucchedavāda). He held a ten-fold wrong view which is found in the Sutta as follows. No results of giving or sacrifices, no fruits of good or bad deeds, there is no this world or next world, there is no mother or father, there are no spontaneously arisen beings, there are in the world no ascetics or Brahmins who have attained perfection through practice. He also taught that the human being is composed of four great elements, and when one dies the earth part reverts to earth, the water part to water, the fire part to fire, the air part to air, and the faculties pass away into space. They accompany the dead man with four bearers and the bier as fifth, their footsteps are heard as far as the cremation-ground. There the bones whiten, the sacrifice ends in ashes. It is the idea of a fool to give this gift: the talk of those who preach a doctrine of survival is vain and false. Fools and wise, at the breaking-up of the body, are destroyed and perish, they do not exist after death. This is a theory of total annihilation.

Pakudha Kaccāyana also a materialist and he did not accept the efficacy of kamma. Whatever bad kamma one does such as killing there is no such act which is called killing. This is because the human body is composed of seven substances that cannot be destroyed by any means. What are these seven substances? They are: the earth body, the water body, the fire body, the air body, pleasure, and pain and the life-principle. These seven are not made or of a kind to be made, uncreated, unproductive, barren, false, stable as a column. They do not shake, do not change, obstruct, one another, nor are they able to cause one another pleasure, pain, or both. He further taught that there is neither slain nor slayer, neither hearer nor proclaimer, neither knower nor causer of knowing. And whosoever cuts off a man’s head with a sharp

sword does not deprive anyone of life, he just inserts the blade in the intervening space between these seven bodies.

As the teachings of the Nigaṇṭhanātaputta fourfold restraintment is given in the Sutta. What are these four? He is curbed by using cold water (*sabba-vāri-vārito*), endowed with sīla or discipline (*sabba-vāri-yuto*), restrained from all restraints (*sabba-vāri-dhuto*), and free from bondages and enlightened (*sabba-vāri-phuṭo*). These fourfold discipline is not very clear and scholars translate this in different ways. However, we are following the commentarial explanation here. Compare to the teachings of other five heretics, only one point of Nigaṇṭhanātaputta is given in the Sutta.

The last teacher is Saṅjayabelāṭṭaputta who was a skeptic. His theory is given as eel-wriggling theory or *amarāvikkhepavāda*. This is also called *saṃśayavāda* or skepticism. Saṅjaya answered to the question of King Ajātasattu as follows. “If you ask me: ‘Is there another world?’ if I thought so, I would say so. But I don’t think so. I don’t say it is so, and I don’t say otherwise. I don’t say it is not, and I don’t not say it is not. If you ask: ‘Isn’t there another world?’ ... ‘Both?’ ... ‘Neither?’ ... ‘Is there fruit and result of good and bad deeds ...?’” He answered for all these questions following the same pattern. In this way, he replied by evasion. The *Brahmajāla Sutta* and the *Sandaka Sutta* explain that they did not give a direct answer to any question due to fear of committing the act of telling lies (*musāvāda bhayā*) and clinging into defilements (*upādāna bhayā*), falling into debate with others (*anuyoga bhayā*), and due to folly (*momuhattā*).

When we look into these answers given by six heretics, it’s very strange that why they did not directly answer the King’s question without beating around the bush. However, the teachings of six heretics basically represent four theories, materialism, naturalism, skepticism, and Jainism. The Buddha rejected their teachings since five of them, except Jaina Mahāvīra, believed materialism or nihilism. The teaching of Jaina Mahāvīra was also rejected by the Buddha due to some unacceptable reasons such as the teaching of jīva, which is a kind of ātma, extreme practice of self-mortification, and its extreme belief of past karmic determinism (*pubbekatahetuvāda*).