



Buddhist Paralogic and the Limits of Binary Thought

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Abstract

This paper examines the nonbinary logical structures found in Buddhist philosophy and compares them with modern nonclassical logical systems. Classical Western logic is founded upon binary oppositions: true/false, being/nonbeing, self/other. Buddhist thought, particularly within the Madhyamaka tradition, challenges these distinctions through relational ontology and paradoxical reasoning. The Buddhist logical method known as the *catuṣkoṭi* (tetralemma) permits four logical possibilities rather than two: true, false, both, and neither. This paper argues that Buddhist paralogic is not irrational but trans-rational — a system designed to address the limitations of conceptual thought when applied to ultimate reality. Connections are explored between Buddhist logic, paraconsistent logic, quantum theory, and dialectical philosophy.

Introduction

Western logic since Aristotle has largely operated under the principle of binary distinction:

- a proposition is either true or false,
- a thing either exists or does not exist,
- contradiction is impossible.

This structure became foundational to:

- mathematics,
- science,
- law,
- and metaphysics.

Buddhist philosophy developed a radically different approach. Rather than treating contradiction as merely error, many Buddhist traditions viewed conceptual oppositions themselves as incomplete representations of reality.

Reality, in this framework, is:

- relational,

- interdependent,
- impermanent,
- and empty of fixed essence.

Thus, ordinary binary categories may fail at the deepest ontological level.

The Tetralemma (Catuskoti)

One of the most distinctive forms of Buddhist reasoning is the tetralemma:

1. A is true
2. A is false
3. A is both true and false
4. A is neither true nor false

This fourfold structure exceeds classical binary logic.

Symbolically:

$$A, \neg A, A \wedge \neg A, \neg(A \vee \neg A)$$

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The tetralemma was used extensively by Nagarjuna, founder of the Madhyamaka school.

For Nagarjuna, ultimate reality (*śūnyatā*, or emptiness) cannot be fully captured by conceptual categories.

Emptiness and Relational Being

A central Buddhist claim is that things lack independent self-existence.

This doctrine is called:

- *anatta* (non-self),
- or *śūnyatā* (emptiness).

Emptiness does not mean nonexistence. Rather, it means: nothing exists independently or permanently.

A tree depends upon:

- soil,
- sunlight,
- water,
- atmosphere,
- time,
- and observers.

Thus, identity is relational rather than absolute.

In this framework, binary distinctions become unstable:

- self/other,
- existence/nonexistence,
- permanence/change.

Reality is process rather than substance.

Contradiction as Insight

In classical logic, contradiction signals failure.

In Buddhist paralogic, contradiction may reveal the inadequacy of conceptual thinking itself.

For example:

the self both exists and does not exist.

Conventionally:

- persons exist,
- language functions,
- identity operates socially.

Ultimately:

- no permanent self can be found.

Thus, two apparently contradictory descriptions operate at different levels.

This resembles modern distinctions between:

- classical and quantum descriptions,
- observer and system,
- local and global truth.

Comparison with Modern Nonclassical Logic

Modern logic has independently developed systems resembling Buddhist reasoning.

Paraconsistent Logic

Paraconsistent logic allows contradictions without total collapse.

In classical logic:

$$(P \wedge \neg P) \rightarrow Q$$

A contradiction implies everything.

Paraconsistent systems reject this principle.

This parallels Buddhist tolerance for paradox without abandoning rationality.

Fuzzy Logic

Fuzzy logic replaces binary truth with degrees of truth.

Truth becomes continuous rather than absolute.

This resembles Buddhist rejection of rigid conceptual boundaries.

Quantum Logic

Quantum systems resist classical binary description.

Particles behave as:

- wave and particle,
- localized and delocalized,
- determinate and indeterminate.

Some philosophers have compared quantum complementarity to Buddhist nondualism.

However, the comparison should not be overstated:

physics is mathematical; Buddhism is existential and phenomenological.

The Middle Way

Buddhism often describes itself as the "Middle Way."

This does not merely mean moderation.

It means avoiding extremes such as:

- eternalism,
- nihilism,
- absolute being,
- absolute nonbeing.

Nagarjuna argued that reality is:

- neither existent,
- nor nonexistent,
- nor both,
- nor neither.

This is not simple skepticism. It is an attempt to transcend the limitations of conceptual dualism.

Language and the Failure of Categories

Buddhist paralogic suggests that language itself creates artificial divisions.

Words separate reality into:

- subject/object,
- cause/effect,
- true/false.

But lived reality may be fundamentally continuous and relational.

Thus paradox arises because language imposes fixed categories upon dynamic processes.

This insight resembles later work by:

- Ludwig Wittgenstein,
- Martin Heidegger,
- and post-structuralist philosophy.

Conclusion

Buddhist paralogic challenges the assumption that binary logic exhausts reality.

The tetralemma demonstrates a form of reasoning in which:

- contradiction may be meaningful,
- identity is relational,
- and truth depends upon perspective and level.

Rather than rejecting logic entirely, Buddhist philosophy expands logical possibility beyond binary opposition.

Modern developments in:

- paraconsistent logic,
- quantum theory,
- and systems theory

suggest that classical true/false distinctions may describe only a limited domain of experience.

Buddhist paralogic therefore remains philosophically relevant not merely as religious doctrine, but as a sophisticated investigation into the limits of thought itself.