

NIRVANA : SUNYATA : VJNAPTIMATRATA*

—NALINAKSHA DUTT

I

HINAYANA

In Buddhism, external world or phenomenal existence is *Samskrta* (constituted) while that which is beyond phenomena is *Asamskrta* (unconstituted)-*Nirvana*, *Sunyata* or *Vijnaptimatratata*.

1. Theravada (early Buddhism)

The conception of Nirvana, as found in the early Pali texts, agrees with that of the Madhyamika, while the Vaibhasikas and the Yogacaras differed slightly from it. In several places in the Pali Nikayas, Nibbana is described as unborn, unoriginated, unconstituted, undecaying, undying, free from disease, grief and impurity; it is the supreme end that is attained by best exertion. It has also been described as the highest perfection (*accanta-nittham*) achievable by the utmost exertion (*yogakkhemam*). It is extremely subtle and too difficult to comprehend or visualize.

The inconceivability of Nibbana is finely expressed in the Sutta-nipata, in a few stanzas, running thus:—

“Just as the flame of a lamp struck by a gust of wind disappears and cannot be traced, so also does a perfect saint freed from name and form, disappears without leaving any trace.

That which disappears is immeasurable, *i. e.*, infinite, and hence there are no words by which it can be spoken of. As it is bereft of all dhammas it goes beyond the range of conventional language.”¹

*निर्वाण- शुन्यता- विज्ञप्तिमात्रता ।

This article being set to type on exceptionally short notice diacritical marks could not be provided. Pali and Sanskrit words expressing categories and concepts are therefore set in Italic form; words like Bodhi, Hinayana and Mahayana are in Roman. Quotations and longer expressions are set in Devanagari script.

A statement similar in tone to the above-quoted stanzas was made by Anuruddha at the demise of Buddha. It is as following :—

“Like the extinguishing of a lamp,
Buddha’s mind became absolutely free.”²

Nibbana is absolutely separate and different from the world and its constituents. It is non-mental (*acetasika*) and wholly dissociated from mind (*citta-vippayutta*). The question of origin or non-origin does not arise in the case of Nibbana, because it is firm, eternal and changeless. It is the inconceivable transcendental reality.

A clear positive conception is found in the Udana, in which occurs the following statement :—

“O bhikkus, there is that space (*ayatanam*) where do not exist earth, water, fire and air; not spheres of infinite space, of infinite consciousness, of desirelessness, and of neither consciousness nor non-consciousness; neither this world nor next world; nor sun and moon, that, I say, is the end of suffering, (*i.e.*, Nibbana-dhatu), in which there is no coming, no going, no continuity, no decay and no origin; it is supportless, free from rebirth, and basisless.”³

Buddha was not an agnostic, neither did he keep anything secret, exoteric or esoteric. He had no *acariyamutthi*. He did visualize the Reality by attaining Bodhi (full enlightenment). He chalked out a programme of spiritual life to attain Bodhi, and he must have done it with a great object in view, which can never be eternal death or annihilation. His main difficulty was like the Upanisadic thinkers that the Reality could not be described in empirical terms. Buddha realized that Nibbana was inconceivable, and that any description of it would be conventional, and so he said that Nibbana the highest truth, could only be realized within one’s own self (*paccattam veditabbo vinnuhi = pratyatmyavedya*); it was inexpressible (*nippapanca*) and so no attempt should be made to describe it; it was so deep and subtle that it could not be communicated by one person to another. All that he could say about it was by negatives. In the *Mulapariyayasutta* of the

Majjhima Nikaya he said that no conception should be made of Nibbana nor of its attainment by any person as that would be admitting an entity and its relation to an individual. To say that it was either existing or non-existing would also be falling into the heresies of eternalism (*sassata*) or annihilationism (*uccheda*). Within these limitations, the form and nature of Nibbana had to be determined.

2. Sarvastivada.

The Sarvastivadins, being realists, though not naive materialists, have a slightly different conception of Nirvana. They recognize reality of seventy-five *dharmas*, of which seventy-two include both mental states and matter. They stoutly uphold Ksanikavada (theory of momentariness) and admit that these seventy-two *dharmas* are being reconstituted every moment and are always in a ceaseless dynamic state of flux or becoming. The remaining three *dharmas* are unconstituted (*asamskrta*) and as such they are reals and are not subject to change.

The three *dharmas* are :

- (i) *Akasa* (space) which remains eternally the same and never causes obstructions to any object, and neither any object, say a building, bring about any change in it.
- (ii) *Pratisamkhya nirodha* denotes cessation of all possible unpurities resetting a being by means of perfect realization of the four *aryasatyas*, i.e., by supra mundane means (*lokottaramarga*). It is by positive effort that the cessation of impurities is effected.
- (iii) *Apratisamkhya-nirodha* also denotes all possible cessation of impurities of a living being. The cessation is effected not necessarily by knowledge of the four truths, i.e., *lokottaramarga* but by moral and meditational practices, which neutralize the causes giving rise to impurities (*klesas*). It is therefore also an effort but not directly aimed at neutralization of impurities.

Yasomitra has explained the two *nirodhas* in detail. He writes that the inflow of impurities is completely stopped (*nirodha*) by knowledge (*pratisamkhya*) of the four truths. It is the knowledge of four truths, that acts as a dam (*rhodabhuta*)

to the inflow of impurities into the mind of an Arhat. His object is to explain what "nirodha" means in such combinations as *anityata-nirodha*, *pratisamkhyā-nirodha* and *apratīsamkhyā-nirodha* and not the exposition of the highest truth, Nirvana, a synonym of which is Nirodha. What he intends to say is that worldly objects which have come into being (*dharmasthiti*) cease on account of the universal law of impermanence (*anityata-nirodha*); that inflow of impurities ceases when a person realizes the four truths (*pratisamkhyā-nirodha*), and that certain impurities of a spiritually advanced person cease for ever and will not re-appear even if he does not acquire knowledge of the four truths (*apratīsamkhyā-nirodha*). In these three compounded words, Nirodha refers to cessation of impurities and not to the Buddhist conception of Nirvana. Arhats acquire knowledge of the extinction of impurities (*ksaya-jñāna*) and realize that they would have no more rebirth (*anutpada-jñāna*). In other words they are assured of Nirvana. According to the Sarvastivadins, the three *asamskrta dharmas* are reals and not subject to change like the *samskrta-dharmas*. They have neither past nor future (*adhva vinirmukta*) they are ever present (*pratyutpanna*). Hence they cannot be obtained (*prāpti*) like other fruits of sanctification (*sramanyaphalas*). They have neither increase or decrease as with *Akasa*. They are realized by the perfects within themselves, as do they realize the fleeting nature of the constituted seventy-two *dharmas*. It is immaculated, and has no basis for its support. It is not a matter (*vastu*).

The Sarvastivadins conceive of Nirvana as a positive reality while the Theravadins speak of Nirvana in negative terms as it is inexpressible in words which belong to the phenomenal sphere.

II

MAHAYANA

According to the Madhyamikas, external world is unreal and is only a mental creation (*prapañca*) of the unenlightened; from this it follows that according to them, there is only one Reality, the Truth as is realized by the enlightened within one's own self, and everything else is a mere convention (*samvrti/vikalpa*). According to the Yogacarins, the external world is a mere expansion of mind of an individual (*svacittadrśya*). The Madhyamika conception of the Truth is nearly similar to that of the Theravadins, *viz* that it cannot be described

except by negatives. Nagarjuna's conception has been beautifully expressed in the following stanza :

“ That which is neither eschewed nor attained,
neither destructible nor eternal
has neither cessation nor origination
is called Nirvana.”⁴

From this stanza, it is evident that Nirvana is absolute monism devoid of all possible attributes. It is neither positive nor negative and is beyond the scope of words.

Along with this stanza another stanza should be quoted to comprehend what Nagarjuna had in mind :

“Whatever is the end or limit of Nirvana
is also the end or limit of the phenomenal world
not the minutest difference exists between the two.”⁵

Nagarjuna is emphatic in his assertion that worldly existence (Samsara) and Nirvana are identical inasmuch as conventional terms like limited (*antavan*) or unlimited (*anantavan*), or both limited and unlimited, neither limited nor unlimited, neither eternal nor destructible, neither both eternal and destructible or neither eternal nor non-destructible are equally applicable to both worldly existence (Samsara) and Nirvana. These four propositions and also a few others are also mentioned in the Nikayas. One of such indeterminables, repeatedly mentioned in the Pali Nikayas is as follows :

“Whether Tathagata after death exists or not exists,
or both exists or not exists or
both neither exists nor not exists.”⁶

These four propositions, Buddha said, are not maintainable and should be laid aside (*avyakata*) as all these are questions like what are the shape and colour of a sky flower or of the son of a barren woman. All these questions cannot arise with regard to the unchangeable reality or the Truth or about anything which has no existence whatsoever. Nagarjuna wants to establish that Samsara and Nirvana are both reals, and do not admit of any attribute. But, as a matter of fact, the two are distinguished by a common man (*prthagjana*) the unenlightened, who suffers from mental aberration. The enlightened, a Tathagata, has no such disability, and hence he does not distinguish between Samsara and Nirvana.

To establish this thesis Nagarjuna has drawn support from the original sayings of Buddha.

Nagarjuna expresses his conception of the Truth by the word "Sunyata" which is applicable to both Samsara and Nirvana. By Sunyata, he means that the Truth is devoid (Sunya) of all attributes, even of *sat* (existence) as it would imply a negative (*asat*) to which according to Nagarjuna there is no corresponding object or being.

Nagarjuna was a philosopher of dialectics. In his works he assailed all possible views of the non-Madhyamikas by his dialectics. Buddha was not a dialectician, but he also did not give any indication about the conception of Nirvana or Tathagata (one who has attained Nirvana). All that he said about it is that it was an end of all impurities (*klesas*) of which the roots were attachment, hatred and delusion (*raga, dvesa* and *moha*) as also an end of beliefs in the existence of soul (*satkayadrsti*) in the efficacy of ritualistic observances (*sila vrataparamarsa*) and doubts about the teaching of Buddha (*vicikitas*). Whenever he was questioned about the beginning or end of existence, about finiteness or infinity of the world, about eternity or non-eternity of the world, or about the existence or non-existence of soul or about the nature of Tathagata after his Parinirvana he remained silent, saying only, that the problems were indeterminable. Nagarjuna, being a dialectician, had recourse to dialectics to assail all these problems and to establish that all of them were untenable from the Buddhist conception of the ultimate Truth. Nagarjuna's views therefore can be regarded as the true interpretation of the doctrine of early Buddhism: the Theravada (Sthaviravada).

YOGACARA

The Yogacarin conception of the Truth is similar to that of Nagarjuna inasmuch as the Yogacarins also relegate to the non-existent all positive and negative statements generally used in relation to the phenomenal objects and beings as also to the terms like *skandhas, dhatus, ayatanas, pratitya samutpada, sramanyaphalas* and *nirvana*.

In the Lankavatara (p.189-190) a Tathagata (one who has realized the Truth) is described thus: One who knows that the Truth or the Reality is neither permanent nor impermanent, neither effect nor cause, neither constituted nor unconstituted, neither intellect nor intelligible, neither characterized nor characteristics, neither signifiable nor signification, neither conglomeration of elements nor anything

different from such conglomeration, neither designable nor designation, neither identical nor different, neither both together nor not both together beyond all logical discussions. It is only a word (*vak*) which is unoriginated, consequently undecaying; that which is undecaying is similar to space (*akasa*) but space is neither effect nor cause and hence it is supportless (*niralambya*) and that which is supportless is beyond all possible speculations.⁷

In another passage of the Lankavatara (p. 105) space (*akasa*) has been mentioned as allied to the horns of a hare, or son of a barren woman which though non-existent are talked about by the foolish. Perhaps the author wanted to indicate that the Truth being absolutely attributeless is beyond all possible descriptions including even the attributes given to Nirvana by the Hinayanists. Two of the Hinayana attributes are *animitta* (signless) *yath abhutartha* which according to the Lankavatara (p. 200) is also a mental creation (*vikalpa*). The truth, the real Nirvana, can be realized only by one within his own self through transformation (*paravrtti*) of mind and mental states.⁸ The term "Sunyata" used in the early Mahayana texts as also by Nagarjuna is interpreted in the Lankavatara (p. 200, 202) as denoting the unreality of the phenomenal beings and objects. It is void not only of attributes but also of origination.⁹ Sunya or the Truth of the Yogacarin is non-originating and non-existent.¹⁰ The term "*tathata*" also has been interpreted in this text (p. 153) as beyond the range of mind (*citta-vinirmuktam*) and has been equated to attributelessness (*sunyata*) and to extreme end (*koti*) of existence. In the Trimsika (25) Vasubandhu explains "*tathata*" as "sameness at all times" (*sarvakalam tatha bhavat*) and with this particular meaning, he is prepared to accept "*tathata*" as an alternative term for *vijnaptimatrata* which according to Vasubandhu is the proper term for the Truth or the Reality. It should be noted that this term has nothing to do with *vijnanam* of a constituted being.

It seems that the terms like Nirvana, Sunyata and Tathata used in early Mahayana are accepted by the Yogacarins with a certain amount of reservation. The Truth or the Reality is nonexistent (*nishvabhava*) and inexpressible (*nisprapanca*). It is realizable only within one's own self.¹¹ In conclusion it may be stated that the conception of the ultimate Truth according to the Theravadins, the Madhyamikas and the Yogacarins is almost identical, but it is designated differently as Nirvana, Sunyata and Vijnaptimatrata.

NOTES

1. अच्ची यथा वातवेगेन खित्तो
अत्थं पलेति न उपेति संखं ।
एवं मुनी नामकाया विमुत्तो
अत्थं पलेति न उपेति संखं ॥

अत्थङ्गतस्स न पमाणमत्थि
येन नं वज्ज तं तस्स नत्थि ।
सब्बेसु धम्मेषु समूहेसु
समूहता वादपथा पि सब्बे ति ॥

Sutta-nipata 1074/6

2. पज्जोतस्स एव निब्बानं विमोखो
चेनसो अहू ति ।

Dighanikaya II, p. 157

3. अत्थि, भिक्खवे, तद् आयतनं यत्थ नेव पठवी न आपो न तेजो
न वायो न आकासानञ्चायतनं न विञ्जाणानञ्चायतनं न आकिञ्चञ्जायतनं न नेवसञ्जा-
नासञ्जायतनं नायं लोको न परलोको न उभो चन्दिमसुरिया, तद् अहं भिक्खवे,
नेव आगतिं वदामि न गतिं न ठितिं न चुतिं न उपपत्तिं अप्पत्तिट्ठं अप्पवत्तं
अनारम्मणं एव तम् एसेवन्तो दुक्खस्सा ति ।

Udana 71

4. अप्रहीणमसम्प्राप्तमनुच्छिन्नमशाश्वतम् ।
अनिरुद्धमनुत्पन्नम् एतन्निर्वाणमुच्यते ॥

Madhyamaka Karika XXV, 3

cf. पुनरपरं महामते महापरिनिर्वाणमप्रहीणासम्प्राप्तितो
अनुच्छेदाशाश्वतो नैकार्थतो नानार्थतो निर्वाणमित्युच्यते ।

Lankavatara p. 99

5. निर्वाणस्य च या कोटिः, कोटिः संसरणस्य च ।
न तयोरन्तरं किञ्चित् सुसूक्ष्ममपि विद्यते ।

Madhyamaka Karika XXV, 20

6. होति तथागतो परं मरणा ?
नो होति तथागतो परं मरणा ?
होति च न होति तथागतो परं मरणा ?
न होति न न होति च तथागतो परं मरणा ?

Dighanikaya, I, p. 59

7. यद्वि न नित्यं नानित्यं न कार्यं न कारणं न संस्कृतं नासंस्कृतं न बुद्धिर्न बोद्धव्यं न लक्ष्यं न लक्षणं न स्कन्धा न स्कन्धेभ्योज्यं नाभिधेयं नाभिधानं नैकत्वान्यत्वोभयत्वानुभयत्व-सम्बद्धं तत् सर्वप्रमाणविनिवृत्तं यत् सर्वप्रमाणविनिवृत्तं तद् वाक्मालं सम्पद्यते यद् वाक्मालं तद् अनुत्पन्नं यद् अनुत्पन्नं तद् अनिरुद्धं यद् अनिरुद्धं तदाकाश-समम् आकाशं च न कार्यं न कारणं यत् न कार्यं न कारणं तन्निरालम्ब्यं यन्निरालम्ब्यं तत् सर्वप्रपञ्चातीतं यत् सर्वप्रपञ्चातीतं स तथागतः ।

Lankavatara pp. 189-90

8. तत्र निर्वाणमिति यथाभूतार्थस्यानदर्शनं विकल्प-चित्त-चैत-कलापस्य परावृत्तिपूर्वकं तथागत-स्व-प्रत्यात्मार्यज्ञानाधिगमं निर्वाणमिति वदामि ।

Lankavatara, p. 200

9. न जातु शून्यया शून्या किं त्वनुत्पाद-शून्यया ।

Lankavatara, p. 202

10. तस्माच्छून्यमनुत्पन्नं निःस्वभावं वदाम्यहम् ।

Lankavatara

11. प्रत्यात्म गतिकम्, प्रत्यात्म गति-गोचरं प्रत्यात्म-वेद्यं ।

= पञ्चत्तं वेदितव्यं विञ्जहि ।