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THE ENIGMA OF BUDDHISM: DUHKHA AND NIRVANA

“The scriptures are unalterable and the comments often enough merely express the commentator’s bewilderment.” F. Kafka

In the present note I wish to express, as a modern commentator, my own bewilderment about the notion of *duḥkha* or suffering, which is admittedly a very basic concept of the Indian religious traditions. It is well-known that the doctrine of *duḥkha* or universal suffering is an essential part of the central teaching of the Buddha. The four noble truths taught by the Buddha are: *duḥkha* (suffering, pain, anguish), origin or cause of suffering, cessation of suffering, and the Way. The *Yogasūtras* also talk of a similar model, which show that the model was simply unique to Buddhism. Vyāsa, for example, says while commenting upon *Yogasūtras* 2:15:

“Just as the medical science is a system of four items—disease or sickness, causes of sickness, health (cessation of sickness), and the medicine to cure, this *śāstra* is likewise a system of four: *samsāra* (suffering in the form of repetitious re-birth), causes of *samsāra*, its cessation (freedom) and the means for achieving the state of freedom.”

The model was obviously borrowed from the therapeutic of the medical science. Most religious/philosophical systems of ancient India agree that the world as it is nothing but *duḥkha* or suffering, and each *darśana* (philosophic world view) presents a Way (a prescription!) to avoid or transcend this *duḥkha*.

Now I shall express one by one my reasons for bewilderment as a commentator. First, what is *duḥkha*? What is so unique about suffering and pain that it should be given the status of the first Noble Truth? If *duḥkha* were the common suffering of

humanity (physical or psychological) then why do we need a Buddha to discover this truth for us? A.C. Danto has used his ingenuity to answer this question as follows:

Everyone in a way knows the first Noble Truth, but it took a virtual act of genius to see it as the sort of truth that the Buddha did. Everyone suffers. But not everyone knows that he suffers... What the Buddha recognised is that knowledge of fact can be a step towards its mitigation. The first, and in some ways the hardest, step for a certain sort of sick man to make is towards the knowledge that he *is* sick.

(Mysticism and Morality, p.68)

This answer does not seem satisfactory to me. For I think it smacks too much of a modern Freudian psychoanalytic model. I shall pass it without further comments here. Next I shall raise another set of questions. Why should everything be regarded as *duḥkha*? Why should even the happy moments or experience be called suffering or *duḥkha*?

In Buddhist texts such as the Visuddhimagga, three different aspects of *duḥkha* are mentioned. The first is called *duḥkha-duḥkha* under which all ordinarily unpleasant things and unhappy mental states are classified. The second group, called *viparināma-duḥkha* include every transitory object, even pleasant things and happy feelings. They are called *duḥkha* for they change and decay and do not stay long enough to impart happiness. At this level impermanence and *duḥkha* become co-extensive concepts. The third type of *duḥkha* is called *samskāra-duḥkha*, the most pervasive type of unhappiness. It is the realization of the essentially conditioned nature of our existence. Our entire psycho-somatic existence is called suffering from this point of view. For, to a man with wisdom, it appears to be a self-perpetuating imprisoned state dotted by craving, drive for pleasure, the agony of search, dissatisfaction and further craving, happening in cyclic order. In *Yogasūtra* 2:15, where it is declared that to a person with discernment everything is *duḥkha*, a similar three-fold classification of suffering has been made. It is interesting to see the *samskāra-duḥkha* is regarded there also as the most pervasive concept.

Duḥkha is sometimes explained by modern Buddhist scholars as a mental state born out of, probably, frustration due to the transcendence of objects of our craving. If this is accepted, *sukha* or happiness can also be deemed as *duḥkha*. But I think such an

interpretation refers only to the second category of *duḥkha* mentioned above. And Danto's characterization (see above) of *duḥkha* as a profound realization fits well such a second level interpretation of *duḥkha*. But an adequate explanation of the notion of *duḥkha* requires us to reach the third level—the notion of *samskāra-duḥkha*. An adequate explanation of *duḥkha* must encompass an adequate explanation of *nirvāna* both constitute a whole, and thus one cannot be understood or explained independently of the other.

Duḥkha as the first Noble Truth, is, thus neither physical suffering nor mental frustration, nor is it simply the obsession (or a state of paranoia) with the uncontrollable transcendence of our pleasures. It is a profound awareness—a realization that our existence is necessarily conditioned, *samsāra* in a prison-house. And thus, cessation of *duḥkha* implies that unconditioned state of freedom called *nirvāna*. The remark just made about *nirvāna* brings our discussion closer to an age-old controversy. And I am sure I will be charged with giving, perhaps inadvertently, a positive characterization of *nirvāna*. Let us formulate the controversy and see what lesson, philosophic lesson to be sure, we may derive from this controversy.

Is *nirvāna*, the *nirodha-satya*, a positive state or a negative state? I shall show, at least from one point of view that any, one who formulates such a question is already a guilty party. For the Buddha himself would have forbidden us to formulate such questions. This is indeed implied by the Buddha's treatment of the *avyākṛta* questions. Most Buddhist texts would say that *nirvāna* is neither positive nor negative and that we do not have to decide this question at all. But the matter does not really end there as testified by the controversy for over two-thousand years! I shall divide the issue roughly into three components.

First, we have to face the logical problem. We will have to decide whether the description "neither positive nor negative" makes any real sense. If "positive" and "negative" are regarded as contradictory pairs then we will have to sacrifice at least the law of Excluded Middle in order to allow "neither positive nor negative" as a feasible characterization of *nirvāna*. And this will require, as I have argued elsewhere, a modification in our standard or classical notion of negation. But, perhaps, this is not an odd claim, for we have come to recognize multiple-valued logical systems where the problem of redefining negation has been successfully tackled. Just as we recognize with regard to some propositions, in the case of *nirvāna* also the question of positive or negative does not arise.

We face a further logical problem when it is denied emphatically that *nirvāna* is nothingness or mere negation. For such denial usually implies that *nirvāna* is something. We are in fact led into the second, i.e., ontological problem, in this way. *Nirvāna* may be posited as an ontological reality even if we disallow its characterization as either positive or negative. Or to put the matter in another way, *nirvāna* can be said to be an ineffable reality which transcends (in the sense of 'surpass') the process of categorization as positive or negative. But to a good Buddhist, even this position will be unsatisfactory. For *nirvāna* is usually regarded as deontologizing of the self. And it is hard to see how such a concept can be claimed to be an ontological reality. As a good Buddhist, I would advise every one to resist all such attempts at the ontological reduction of *nirvāna*.

The third problem can best be called "the Theological problem". This problem arises if we regard, as we must under certain circumstances, Buddhism to be a religion. While I am fully aware that there is no *theos* in Buddhism, I use the term "theological" on the basis of what I venture to call the process of extrapolation. If Buddhism is a religion, it must share some common feature that is supposed to characterize religion in general, Man's religious belief seems to be founded upon the assumption that our earthly existence, our *duḥkha* experience, is not all that there is. For there must be another, a better, mode of existence, a possible cessation of the perpetual *duḥkha* experience. Religion in this sense seems to be born out of man's resentment against the existing state of affairs and yearning for something different. Modern historians of religion agree that there is, in almost every religion, an implicit distinction of the sacred and the profane. Using a very liberal interpretation, one can say that Buddhism as a religion implies a provisional distinction between *duḥkha* and its *nirodha* (cessation), between *samsāra* and *nirvāna*. To put it in another way, our *duḥkha* existence, which is conditioned existence, gains its meaning and significance only when viewed against the backdrop of unconditioned *nirvāna*.

Thus, if Buddhism is a religion, we can posit *nirvāna* as the intended or intentional object of the Buddhist Way, Buddhist religious practices or eightfold path. The intentional object need not be an ontological entity (F. Brentano called it 'intentional inexistence') much in the same way 'unicorn' need not refer to an ontological entity in the expression "he is hunting a unicorn". Notice that with regard to such intentional objects, there is a sense in which one can say that the question of their being exist-

ent or non-existent, positive or negative, *bhāva* or *abhāva*, does not arise. This seems to me a less mystical interpretation of *nirvāna*, for we can thus make good sense of the essential doctrine of the Buddha, the four Noble Truths, or the eightfold path. The Buddhist religious practices, meditation etc. may thus be viewed as being aimed at the intentional goal, *nirvāna*, that does not actually exist. There is a distinction between our thinking (meditating) about *nirvāna* or cessation of *duḥkha*, and our thinking about nothing. In the former case we are intentionally related to an object (which happens to be an intentional object that does not exist) in the latter case we are not. In the first case we have a thought (which may be meant for "killing all thoughts"), in the second case we have none. And it is a characteristic of our intentional attitudes that, they are, more often than not, directed towards non-actual objects.

I make the above comment in full awareness of the fact that Nāgārjuna examined and rejected the concept of four Noble Truths and *nirvāna* in *Mādhyamika-Kārikā*, chs. 24 and 25. Buddhism, as it is reflected in the emptiness doctrine of Nāgārjuna, appears to me not as religion, but a philosophy of religion. And, as a good Buddhist I would accept Nāgārjuna's philosophic interpretation wholeheartedly. But my above comment is conditional upon our acceptance of Buddhism as a religious tradition.