

NIRVANA AND TIMELESSNESS

The teachings of the Buddhist canon are extremely complex and subtle. They are often highly unexpected. And yet there is a certain simplicity about them. Nowhere is this more apparent, strange to say, than in the doctrine of *nirvāna*.

What, after all, is *nirvāna*? It is a cooling off, a quenching of the fire of *tanhā*: but above all it is liberation. It is the *jivanmukti* and *mōksa* of Buddhist tradition. But with regard to liberation we must always ask: From what and to what? On the latter point, the "to what", the Theravāda can be said to be embarrassingly silent, till we grasp the point: to that I shall come a little later. But as to the "from what" there is an embarrassment of riches of description. Consider the whole notion of *dukkha*, the theory of impermanence, the grand panorama of re-birth, the psychology of Buddhism, and so on. Still all that can be from one angle reduced to a single thought: impermanence. So we have the polarity or dialectic—impermanent existence and (on the other hand) liberation. I believe that the analysis of impermanence is the essentially brilliant contribution of the message of the Buddha. For what does it mean in depth?

First, it explodes substances, as commonly understood. Solid trees and lively women dissolve into swarms of events, themselves utterly shortlived. The world is a moving, evanescent *pointillisme*—Seurat gone cinematic. So the outer world of solidity begins to melt and to go hazy, dancing in a new metaphysical perspective. So the inward. My solid self, such as it is, likewise dissolves in Humean speckles of experience, perceptions, impressions. Impressionism thereby becomes alarmingly inward. It is the *Pointillisme* of the soul.

Or do I make it all sound too attractive? The impressionists, the masters of the evanescent, made it lovely in its way: but we should not forget that Buddhism emphasizes how we get entangled in what we see and handle. Suffering and dissatisfaction accrue from grasping the glories of the world, even when seen

theoretically as being evanescent. Still, the essence is to do with the evanescence, so let us pursue the theme of impermanence, from which (permanently) we may be liberated (in nirvāna).

The doctrine of impermanence raises, as we have seen, problems about ordinary common sense. Things are not what they seem to be. Further, it suggests—a strong Buddhist theme—that conventional language is misleading: it talks of solid tables rather than swarms of micro-tables. Being misleading, it distracts from liberation. So we are led to a convergence from metaphysics and language towards a common goal.

In its most developed form the concept of impermanence involved a theory of virtually instantaneous atomic events, a remarkably sophisticated account of the physical world amazingly congruent with modern science. But here we are stepping over the bounds of the canon itself. However, certainly the seeds of that conception were contained in the earlier teachings. And it indicates two main aspects of impermanence as seen in Buddhist perspective. These are respectively the ideas that things are compounded and that entities are short-lived. On the first point: Buddhism offers a method of analysis—a way of breaking things up into their constituent parts. This serves, among other things, as an aid to meditation, for it allows us to “see through” the gross world about us and indeed within us. By contrast therefore liberation is uncompounded, simple. On the second point, everything turns out in effect to be made up of events. An event is localizable, and it carries a temporal marker. It has a where and a when. By contrast therefore liberation is nowhere and timeless.

Of course, to say it is nowhere is to say, in Western jargon, that it transcends the spatio-temporal cosmos, even the highest and most refined heavens of the Buddhist cosmological imagination. Nirvāna is not nowhere in the sense in which unicorns are nowhere. Yet here we come to a problem about the timelessness of nirvāna and perchance also about its being nowhere. For apart from the fact that nirvāna is liberation from impermanence, it seems to be the liberation of *someone*. For example the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* describes the last days of the Buddha in relation to his decease and so “final” nirvāna. Here, let us pause for a moment to remind ourselves of an important distinction concerning nirvāna. It is the distinction between nirvāna “with substrate” and “without substrate”. Substrate is in effect psycho-physical organism. Thus nirvāna with substrate is when the

individual realizes in his own experience his liberation. Let us say that it takes place at the age of thirty and he lives on till he is eighty. This is, so to say, the period of nirvāna with substrate. Then at his decease we have nirvāna without substrate.

Now nirvāna with substrate seems to be somewhere and somewhen. It appears to be located in an individual and to be achieved at a certain time. This raises the uneasy question as to who, if anyone, is liberated. In one sense no one is—there is no self, no person, to be liberated. Still, in plain and conventional language a nameable, locatable person is the one who has gained nirvāna, as is evident from some of the poems of the *Theragāthā*. So one can ask, "In what circumstances, and when, did you attain nirvāna?" So mysteriously nirvāna can be both timeless and given a date. Is this not a contradiction? Perhaps, but there is a sort of solution to the paradox—a solution which itself may serve to throw light on why it is that we so often feel unconsciously impelled to hypostatize nirvāna, to make it into a kind of *thing*, albeit a transcendent one. The solution comes from reflecting on impermanence and its contrast. Impermanence boils down the solidities, the fats of the world so to speak, into the fluid of events, and the steam of consciousness. The world is a vast compound of events: we likewise are complexes of events.

Now just as doctrines of transcendence (and for that matter creation) which conceive of the world as an arrangement of substances conceive of the Transcendent as a sort of super-substance, so a doctrine which sees the world as events will see nirvāna as a transcendent Event. It is a timeless Event. This may be thought to be *obscurum per obscurius*. But at least it brings out that nirvāna is not a *thing*, but more like a state of affairs. That is why nirvāna cannot be personal, creative, etc. To say that it is transcendent is to say that it does not belong to the cosmos within which entities are impermanent, soulless, unsatisfactory. Yet because it is impermanent it does not follow that it cannot be perceived. Indeed it is quite common in the Pali writings to hear of nirvāna being "seen", "touching" and so forth. Obviously this is not ordinary seeing. It is a kind of gnosis.

But this gives us an impulse to think of it as a thing out there, admittedly in the transcendent nowhere. Its being a permanent Event, something not sharing the imperfections of the events in which we are universed or indeed form a sub-current, can fool us into making it substantial. But the attack on substances of all kinds is at the heart of the Buddhist metaphysical

analysis. Even when the Mahāyāna, through the doctrine of *sūnyatā*, comes close to postulating an underlying, pervasive something, it turns out to be a nothing, a Void. It is ultimate unreality. So the temptation to hypostatise *nirvāna*, must be resisted. Yet there is a manner in which *nirvāna*, though no thing, is "there" to be perceived.

So it is that the grasping of *nirvāna* can be dated, even if *nirvāna* itself is timeless. The situation of the saint is reminiscent of Vaughan's line "I saw Eternity the other night".

I have said that the seeing is a kind of gnosis. Not for nothing does that Greek term relate to Pali *ñāna* and Sanskrit *jñāna*. There is an analogy to intellectual discovery in the attainment of *nirvāna*. It involves seeing through the world as hitherto received, and so seeing into its amazing fluid structures undreamed of in the ordinary transactions of life. Still, typically (though not quite universally in the literature), *nirvāna*'s attainment is not just gnosis. It is also a consequence of meditation, and in particular the *jhānas*. The "seeing" of the *amatam padam*, the immortal place under which *nirvāna*'s nature is figured, is a sort of mysticism. It is a contemplative vision, the eye being as it were turned inward. This is very evident in the detailed descriptions of the *jhānas*. Let us not, incidentally, fail to see their centrality in Buddhist meditational experience, for at the very point of death the Buddha himself went through them, so the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* tells us. (Could any one have known what went through the Buddha's mind at any time let alone at this last speechless time of his earthly existence? Never mind. The presumption that his mind was so to say leaping nimbly among the subtle stages of meditation is a tribute to the vital character, the loaded significance, of the *jhānas*.)

And what does the observation that mystical contemplation is central to *nirvāna* add to our understanding of Buddhist liberation? One frequently repeated motif in the description of the cloud of unknowing, the dazzling obscurity and bright void of the interior vision, is that the vision is not like eyesight, where subject and object are entrenched in the experience. The duality of ordinary perception seems to disappear. This is one reason why theistic mystics can encounter trouble: they for sincere but perhaps not too reflective reasons abolish the gulf between awesome God and puny devotee. They even seem to claim unity with the divine and so a blasphemous divinity. It is unfortunate that persecutions, as with al-Hallaj, have sometimes resulted. Mysti-

cism could be seen as dangerous. Be that as it may, the contemplative failed, in his inner brightness and gnostic vision, to see the subject-object distinction. *Ātman* was one with *Brahman*. Yet such an interpretation could scarcely fit the Buddhist case: there was no Thing for the non-soul to be one with. All this implies that the *arhat* or saint in "seeing" *nirvāna* becomes it. Or not he, nor his soul, for these are in flux, and compounded, disappearing entities. Still, sticking to conventional speech, the saint identifies with *nirvāna*. That liberation is timeless. At one level the saint does not experience time (how could he when the experience is undifferentiated, not complex, not outer?). At another level, what he experiences is transcendent and so outside space and time.

The analysis of impermanence and of its opposite, the permanent Event, together with the recognition of the quality of contemplative experience, lead to the following conclusion—that the saint who gains final *nirvāna* replaces a set of impermanent states, stretching back indefinitely into the past, over a virtual infinity of lives, with a permanent Event. And what of the period when there is substrate? In a way it is like the permanent and impermanent coexisting in his consciousness in parallel. In another way it is doubtless like what Catholic tradition has referred to as the "fore-taste of the beatific vision".

Can all this be affirmed without contradiction? Some people have had difficulty with the idea of the attainment of liberation when there is no permanent self to attain it. But not for nothing has the Buddhist tradition itself affirmed that there is no one treading the way. There is of course, as we have seen, a conventional sense in which the saint who attains *nirvāna* can be named and identified. But the radical application of the whole conception of the insubstantiality of things means that the self is eliminated—both metaphysically and (hopefully) existentially: for the destruction of the ego is, so to say, the beginning of wisdom. That there should be no one who reaches *nirvāna* is not a contradiction. For the idea represents a radical reappraisal of attitudes and concepts. Let me illustrate it with an analogy.

Suppose we believe that trees have selves, and are purposive entities. Then I might say that the eucalyptus tree in my garden has reached beyond the neighbouring rhododendron. It does not destroy language or thought if I revise my whole attitude, abandon any previous theory of trees, and affirm "No being has reached beyond the rhododendron, but the eucalyptus is taller than the rhododendron".

Nor is it contradictory to conceive of nirvāna, though "achieved", as timeless, any more than it would be to treat God, though creative, as outside space.

There is at least one further question. If being beyond time is valuable, why? Is impermanence such a disadvantage? In a way it is cheering, for I can have today's good and tomorrow's and so on—without impermanence such repetition could not occur. Is timelessness a symbol of something supreme? It is hard to offer opinions on these matters, beyond making the following, perhaps elementary, observations.

First, what we have we wish to hold. Permanent satisfaction is an ideal. The evanescence of achievements, possessions, relationships, pleasures—such evanescence has much to do with *dukkha*, dissatisfaction, illfare. So the permanent Event is liberating from such illfare. Second, timelessness is a symbol of immortality. Nirvāna means no more death: its condition is no more birth. (Here of course we have a problem, as to the causative influence of timeless transcendent nirvāna on the world—but the question is wrongly put: you have to kill the forces of rebirth and redeath before you can see nirvāna). Third, the mystical perception of the timeless is like reaching a mountain-peak: from there the landscape below—ordinary life in effect—can be viewed with aplomb and equanimity, not to mention breadth of vision. The timeless illuminates the temporal.

It might be argued that the Theravadin teaching about nirvāna would only make sense if we believe in rebirth. Perhaps so. Yet most of my previous attempt to unravel the Buddhist experience of liberation and timelessness has not depended upon the presupposition of rebirth. I mention the matter only because the Westerner's crisis about God is being echoed by the Eastern crisis concerning reincarnation. That is why arguments and evidences about reincarnation are unusually frequent in these latter days. Myself, I would adopt rebirth as a heuristic device, perchance, as it helps to contextualise Buddhist nirvāna. But here I go beyond analysis to constructive dialogue. If my analysis has been simplistic, I hope it also has been simplifying.