

HUMANITY'S RELATION TO NATURE : IN BUDDHIST THOUGHT

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The principal distinguishing characteristic of the Buddhist view of man was seen by non-Buddhists in ancient India to be the denial of any permanent ego or eternal 'soul' among the basic constituents of personality. The early Buddhists were regarded as *anātmavādin* : those who deny the existence of an *ātman* impervious to change as the basis of the human individual. The first mark of all existing beings, according to the Buddha, is non-permanence (*anicca*). A human being comes into existence and passes out of existence and can be observed at all intervening stages as a flux of physical and mental events. More precisely, a human being is a complex entity which can be analytically resolved into five *skandhas* or groups of constituent elements. One of these, *rūpa* (the body) comprises all the physical constituents. The other four, which together constitute *nāma* are the mental aspects of individuality : sensations, perceptions, volitions and consciousness.

The Buddhist understanding of the whole phenomenal world can be summed up as (a) analytical, and (b) relational. This twofold approach is pursued in the Abhidharma literature. In order to understand relationships between 'phenomena' it is necessary to look below the level of what *appears* to be the case, and see the constituent elements in each phenomenon, so that a more refined appreciation of the relationship is obtained. First there has to be a rigorous analysis of both the physical and the mental complexes. This kind of analysis constitutes the first part of Abhidharma, and in its more advanced forms it identifies large numbers of *dharmāh* or elements of physical and psychical existence.

The second part of Abhidharma consists in the examination of the various possibilities of relationship which exist between them. For the Theravādin and the Sarvāstivādin schools these elements were fundamental and unvarying, and constituted the ultimate 'atoms' of physical and mental life. For the Sarvāstivādins in particular all these elements which they had identified were *real*, and *always exist*; hence the name of this school : those who affirm (*vādin*) that all (*Sarva*) elements always exist (*asti*).

The Sarvāstivādins thus appear to have reached the position where they regarded as absolute and unconditioned those elements into which it could be shown that the human 'person' could be analysed. This position is open to criticism in that having begun by adopting the Buddhist method of denying absoluteness to any element in human *individual* personality they later on abandoned this rigorous method of continual analysis of elements into further, finer elements. They had abandoned it, it seemed, at a quite arbitrary stage, ascribing a supposed absoluteness to the categories they had then reached. The critique of the supposed absoluteness of the human self had itself finished up by ascribing unconditioned and absolute status to the plurality of elements; (dharmāḥ) and a dogmatism about them which in principle was open to the same objections as had been the idea of the absolute human individual self.

The Sarvastivadins base their pluralism on the separateness of names and argue from their *meaningfulness* to the *reality* of the entities they stand for... [The Mahā Prajñāpāramitā Sāstra] points out that the presence of a name need not mean the actuality of the thing named, and the existence of the name does not mean at all the reality of the self being of the thing named¹ .

Nāgārjuna and the Mādhyamika school, from their critique of the incompleteness of the Sarvāstivādin analysis, took the Buddhist method of analysis beyond this arbitrary stopping place and argued for a more thorough and complete analysis. The Mādhyamika position has been described as consisting 'in the recognition that the complex system of personality is not absolute, that there is no element in it which for ever remains the same as well as that no element in the system of personal life ever perishes totally'.²

While denying any unconditioned and absolute nature to the individual person they, like Buddha, also affirmed that there was an 'eternal soul' beyond human individuality, that which is referred to by the Buddha in the words of Udana VIII.³ :

'Monks, there is a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded.

Monks, if that unborn, not-become, not-made, not-compounded were not, there would be apparently no escape from this here that is born, become, made, compounded.'

Nevertheless, distinct from this unconditioned reality the Mādhyamikas affirm the relative and conditioned but nonetheless recognisable existence of the human person, even although it is a temporary existence. Venkata Ramanan in his exposition of Nāgārjuna puts it thus : the person is the self-conscious, self-determining principle. He works out a career for himself under the stress of the sense of the unconditioned. He is conditioned by the forces dormant in him. He confronts an objective reality which he perceives, understands and interprets. He works out for himself an organic system of events which is to give expression to the basic urge in him and he identifies himself with it. As identical with it, the person is an organism, and personality is an organisation, a way of being'.³

The position of the Mādhyamikas was seen by T. R. V. Murti as completing a dialectical process within Buddhist philosophy.⁴ It can also be seen as the *restoration* of that original analytical method which is clearly demonstrated in the Suttas and the Abhidhamma literature of the Pali canon.

In this central philosophical development of Buddhist thought the human individual is seen as a combination of *rūpa* and *nāma*, the physical elements and the mental elements. The physical elements are, in the philosophy of the Middle Way, analysable down to the minutest atoms. The demonstration by modern physicists of the nature of the atom, and its further breakdown into sub-atomic forms is a progression of analysis which is wholly in keeping with the Mādhyamika view.

So far as the non-human natural world is concerned the first stage of a analysis of physical nature was the identifying of four elements : earth, fire, air and water. It was recognised these four elements, or groups of atoms, were all present in different proportions in different physical entities. For example, in fire there is also something of earth, and air, and water. Fire depends for its existence on the object that it burns, and without this object of burning there is no fire. It is not an ultimate element. 'Fire is only a derived name and the thing designated is only a conditioned entity'.⁵

There is thus an inter-relation and interconnectedness of physical elements of all kinds across the whole of the physical world. In that the human individual is a combination of *rūpa* and *nāma* he is, with regard to *rūpa*, interconnected with all other physical elements. The Middle Way recognises the complex nature of human personality. The individual person is not *merely* a flux of mental and physical events. As the *Mahāprajñā pāramitā Śāstra* puts

it, 'the person is the self-conscious, self-determining principleHe works out for himself an organic system of events which is to give expression to the basic urge in him, and he identifies himself with it. As identical with it, the person is an organism, and personality is an organisation, a way of being'.⁶ An organisation can be formed, it can be maintained, and eventually it can be dissolved. No single element in an organisation need be regarded as eternal and absolute, as though without it the organisation could not exist at all, although, without it, it would be a different organisation.

The difference between the Buddhist view of the self, therefore, and some non-Buddhist views is that the former is *organismic*, whereas the latter are *substantialist*. The latter are those who hold to the notion of a *separate*, substantial, eternal entity within the individual called 'soul' as the ground of self. In this view the separateness of each soul applies both to its relations with other souls and also to the complex of mental and physical events with which it is thought to be somehow associated. Nevertheless it has also to be regarded, as (in some unexplained way) able to be the subject of action, and the experiencer of pleasure, pain and transmigration. The opposite view, however, the total rejection of any personal principle within the individual leads to what in Buddhist thought is also an error, namely that of negativism or nihilism. The Middle Way entails the recognition of the sense of personal being and of principle of self-determination, but does not allow that this is unconditioned, substantial and eternal. There is, in the Buddhist view, a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded, but clearly this is not the individual human person, or any other compounded and conditioned entity.

The relationship of humanity to nature according to the Middle Way can now be explored. The first point to be made is that the *Mādhyamika* view excludes the possibility of any absolutely dogmatic and eternalist statement concerning relationships between conditioned entities, such as human beings and the natural world. The latter is not seen as an alien realm, perennially hostile to man, and which it is his to conquer and subjugate, according to some eternal principle or right. Man recognises himself as continuous with the world of nature, both the human and non-human worlds being subject to the same conditioning and natural law.

The relationships between self-conscious living beings, and between these and non-selfconscious living beings are seen within the context of the inter-relatedness of all the entities which constitute the universe.⁷ It has to be emphasised that the most important affirmation of the Middle Way is that undivided being is ultimate reality, eternal and unconditioned. But immediate,

conditioned inter-relatedness in Samsāra is understood in terms of the mundane truth of *pratītya samupāda* (conditioned or dependent origination). There is thus in the Middle Way a vision of the entire world as a grand system where all specific entities are inter-related, and where also it is possible to be aware of being in one's ultimate nature not divided from the Undivided. This requires that *understanding* and *practice* go hand in hand, and reinforce each other. The Middle Way is concerned to emphasise the harmony of Wisdom (*Prajñā*) and Compassion (*karuṇā*). These are the positive qualities of which ignorance (*moha*) and greed and hate (*lobha-dosa*) are, respectively, the negatives. Compassion, as the practical expression of wisdom, has to receive as much emphasis as wisdom; compassion will be informed by wisdom, and wisdom will be enhanced by compassion, according to the Mādhyamikas.

Thus, to return to what has been said concerning the essential inter-relatedness of all the entities or 'organisations' which constitute the entire universe, the *practical* outcome of this vision is that seeing things in this light, the wayfarer will recognise that each should be allowed to exist as it is, without impairment or violence or injury to its nature or growth. Whatever diminishes, by however little, the awareness that every entity's ultimate nature is not divided from the Undivided is to be avoided. It is important, that is to say, not to try to live at the cost of others in such a way that *alienation* will be strengthened. It is important *not* to try to extinguish the other in order to live oneself. Allowing others to live, we ourselves also live more fully. To cherish fully the claims of compassion and to cherish fully the sense of the limitless are one and the same.

The aim of Buddhist life is, therefore, to live in the fulness of being, to share increasingly in the larger whole, assessing adequately the mysterious nature of the forces within one's self and in the world around. It is not a solitary life, where one tears oneself off from the rest of the world, but rather the opposite. It is life as sharing, and sharing by understanding the nature of things. It is based on the affirmation that no entity is self-contained, a *suabhava* completely unrelated to the rest. And this is certainly affirmed of human nature. There is, therefore no *special* need to relate human nature to non-human nature (that is, the 'natural world' of Western terminology) since the whole system of thought and practice is one of universal inter-relatedness.

By way of a brief footnote to the body of this paper it may be added that abundant illustrations of this sense of the inter-relatedness of humanity and the non-human world can be found in the Sutta Piṭaka of the Pali canon, especially in the Jātakas, as well as in the Sanskrit *Prajñāpāramitā*

texts. In the Kūṭadanta Sutta the Buddha deprecates a system of sacrifice which entails large scale destruction of vegetation and animal life (D. I. 127-141); he commends the non-violence of the bee ('like roving bee its honey gathering and hurting naught' D III. 188); he speaks of the immorality of destroying the branches of a tree under whose shade one has been sitting (Jat. V. 240 f.), and so on, and so on, such examples being too numerous to be cited.

Notes —

1. K. Venkata Ramanan, *Nāgārjuna's Philosophy*, Indian Edition 1971, p. 80 2. Ramanan, *Op. cit.* p. 226. 3. *Op. cit.* p. 231 4. T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 1955. Although like many scholars in this field I owe much to Murti's book I do not find his 'dialectical' interpretation convincing: on p. 58, however, he recognises that the 'earlier phase of Buddhism, with its rejection of substance and uncritical erection of a theory of elements was clearly a *preparation* [emphasis added] for the fully critical and self-conscious dialectic of Nagarjuna'. This second, fully critical stage is characterised as *nairātmya*, the denial of all categories and doctrines, *ātmā* as well as *anātmā*. Ramanan uses Chinese material which was not available to Murti. 5. *Mahā-Prajñāpāramitā Śāstra*, 358 6. Ramanan, *Op. cit.* p. 231 7. The paragraphs that follow owe much to personal discussion between the author and Professor Venkata Ramanan. This paper could justifiably be presented as having a joint authorship, but for the fact that I cannot ascribe to my colleague the deficiencies which this paper also undoubtedly exhibits.

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