

NIBBĀNA AND BRAHMAN

นิพพานและพรหมัน

Chinda Chandrkaew
จินดา จันทร์แก้ว

Abstract

The paper seeks to clarify some basic similarities and differences in the concept of liberation between early Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta. First, it discusses the relationship between these two schools of thought, and then proceeds to deal with the concept of Nibbāna and that of Brahman respectively.

It is pointed out that the Vedāntification of Buddhism is not warranted doctrinally or historically, though both these systems of thought have many basic ideas in common. Early Buddhism agrees with Advaita Vedānta as to the unreality of the Samsaric world and certain descriptions about the state of liberation. But Nibbāna is essentially not the same as Brahman in that the former is never stated to be the ground of the phenomenal world, as is in the case of the latter. Nibbāna is simply the ultimate goal for which we are striving.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ต้องการชี้ให้เห็นความคล้ายคลึงและความแตกต่างระหว่างโนทัศน์เรื่องความหลุดพ้นในพระพุทธศาสนาด้วยเดิมกับปรัชญาอีทุตະ เวทานตะ โดยแสดงความสัมพันธ์ระหว่าง 2 สำนักนี้ตลอดจนความหมายของนิพพานและพรหมันตามลำดับ

การทำให้พระพุทธศาสนาเป็นเวทานตะนั้นไม่มีหลักฐานทางคำสอนหรือประวัติศาสตร์ แม้ว่าทั้งสองสำนักจะมีโนทัศน์หล่ายอย่างร่วมกันก็ตาม พระพุทธศาสนาด้วยเดิมเห็นด้วยกับอีทุตະ เวทานตะในเรื่องความไม่เป็นความจริงแท้ของโลกสังสารวัฏ และลักษณะบางอย่างเกี่ยวกับภาวะของความหลุดพ้น แต่แก่นแท้ของนิพพานก็ไม่ใช่สิ่งเดียวกับพรหมัน เพราะนิพพานไม่มีลักษณะเป็นฐานของโลกปракาภารณ์ เช่น กรณีของพรหมัน นิพพานเป็นเพียงเป้าหมายสูงสุดที่ชาวพุทธแสวงหาเท่านั้น

Buddhism belongs to the Śramanic tradition in the ancient Indian systems of religion and philosophy. The birth of this religion and philosophy has created controversies amongst scholars eastern and western. According to Radhakrishnan,

there is no difference between the Upanisadic concept of Brahman and the Buddhist concept of Dharma. He says : "The Upaniṣads arrive at the ground of all things by stripping the self of veil after veil of contingency. At the end of this process

they find the universal self, which is none of these finite entities, though the ground of them all. The Buddha holds the same view, though he does not state it definitely.¹ Mrs.C.A.F.Rhys Davids holds that the original teaching of the Buddha is somewhat different from what has been existing in the Pali scriptures, which represent nothing but the monkish teachings². On the contrary, L.M.Joshi says : "No Upaniṣad text can be proved to be pre-Buddhist in date, and the partial agreement between the Buddha's teachings and those of the early Upaniṣad is due to the fact that these Vedic texts were composed between the age of the Buddha and that of Aśoka."³

It is true that there are many things common to both of them which have grown in the same spiritual and physical soil, and the Buddha had to make use of words and concepts prevailing in his time for the sake of communication and propagation. For example, the word "brahmacariya" literally means Brahma-faring of observing a certain rule to reach Brahma-world, but in the Buddhist context it implies a pure and sublime life. Hence, K.N.Upadhyaya observes that the similarities of the teachings are nothing more than the common stamp of the age, and both systems differ fundamentally in their views and their reactions take quite independent lines.⁴

Prof.Dr.H.von Glasenapp seems to hit the point when he says, "Nothing shows better the great distance that separates the Vedānta and the teachings of the Buddha than the fact that the two principal concepts of Upanishadic wisdom, Ātman and Brahman, do not

appear in the Buddhist text, with the clear and distinct meaning of a primordial ground of the word, core of existence, *ens realissimum* (true substance), or similarly."⁵ With these trends in view, we, thus, conclude that the Buddha as a child of his time was, to a certain extent, influenced by contemporary notions and expressions, but his vision and originality cannot be lost sight of.

In Hinduism, man, outwardly a psycho-physical being, is divine in essence. *Shankarācariya*, the great Hindu philosopher, identifies human self with Brahman, the Universal Self. So this soul is immortal, and constitutes his real being. Though man is divine in nature and he is endowed with such greatness, yet he is a victim of ignorance (avidyā), resulting in his attachment to the worldly things. And, as such, his round of rebirth is going on. But this ignorance is beginningless (*anādi*), and yet it is bound to come to an end. Here man can achieve his freedom from ignorance through knowledge. That is to say, he must have the direct experience of what is real and what is unreal.

The man's predicament runs like this: he, under the influence of ignorance, perceives his limiting adjuncts of body, feeling, mind, etc., as his real being. Now, he misses his real divine nature due to illusory vistas worked out by ignorance. No sooner does he realize his true nature as the world-soul or Brahman than his liberation (*mokṣa*) is attained. In liberation, man does not get anything new; he simply recognizes his true, original nature.

Therefore, it is clear that liberation is the eternal nature of the soul and it is the matter

of self-realization. The analogy of seeing a rope as a snake is the case in this point. The rope is there as a rope but we see it as a snake because of many a factor involved such as light, our eye-sight and so on. Likewise, *Brahman*, the supreme Self, is one and the same as our soul but because of ignorance we think otherwise. In this connection, *Shankarācariya* employs a parable : a prince is brought up by a hunter since his birth. As soon as he is told about his identity, his royal status, he simply rediscovers his true nature, his princehood. In the same manner, a man attaining liberation at the dawn of right knowledge simply rediscovers his true nature, his Brahmanhood.⁶

Apart from this, the nature of Brahman cannot be described in terms of any category. This is because it is the whole, the totality of things, the Absolute, which is transcendent. For the man in the street, Brahman is everything and everything is Brahman whose nature is existence (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*) and bliss (*ānanda*). In short, it is the ground of the world.⁶

Now, we come to the concept of *Nibbāna* in early Buddhism. The key note to understand the process by which to attain this liberation is to search for the discourses (*suttas*) that give us some vital clues to it. The Buddha's pithy exhortation to *Bāhiya Dāruciriya* in the *Udāna* is extremely significant: "*Then, Bāhiya, thus must you train yourself: 'In the seen there will be just the seen; in the heard, just the heard; in the sensed just the sensed; in the cognized just the cognized.'* That is how, O *Bāhiya*, you must train yourself. Now, then, *Bāhiya*, in the seen there will be to you just the seen-----just the cognized, then you will have no 'thereby'; when you have no 'thereby', then, *Bāhiya*, you will

*have no 'therein'; as you, *Bāhiya*, will have no 'therein', it follows that you will have no 'here' or 'beyond', or 'midway-between'. That is just the end of suffering (dukkha).*⁸

Here, we should observe what is going on without interpolating it, so to speak. This is because things are simply or merely *signs* or symbols, but they become significant when being evaluated by our mental tendencies based on *papanca* (conceptualization) characterised by *tanhā* (craving), *māna* (conceit) and *ditthi* (views). One who succeeds in doing this has truly comprehended things as they really are so that he no longer thinks in terms of them (no thereby; no therein). As a matter of fact, he has transcended the superimposition of concepts, words and the like. In short, he has attained the Goal.⁹

Now, it is extremely important to claim that sense-experience is the root-cause of creating the dichotomy of subject and object relationship and thereby dominating the entire concepts of the world and its existence. In other words, the birth of the subject, the self (*attā*) is responsible for the misunderstanding of things as they really are. This is why the Buddha asks *Bāhiya* to observe his sense-experience as it occurs without being involved in the process. When things are seen in their correct perspective, namely, impermanence (*aniccatā*), suffering (*dukkhatā*) and insubstantiality (*anattatā*), the concepts thereof are naturally dissolved in the consciousness of those realizing them. That is, things are relative, depending on somethings else, and thus have no entity of their own. The Buddha, when asked about *Bāhiya*'s destiny after death, utters the following stanza thus :

"When water, earth, fire, air no footing find,

There shine no stars, no sun is there displayed,
There gleams no moon; no darkness there is seen.
So when the sage, the brahmana, by wisdom
Of his own self hath pierced (unto the truth),
From form and no-form, pleasure-and-ill he's freed."¹⁰

Then it is quite clear that Nibbāna cannot mean other than the extinction of all elements of experience which constitutes our concepts of things. It is the removal of what is wrongly perceived, and there lies Nibbāna. There is no destruction of

anything, no the charge of annihilation either.

So far as the general characteristics of liberation in both systems is concerned, similarities between them are noted such as perfection, peace, bliss and, of course, freedom from the cycle of birth and death. But the big gulf that cannot be bridged over is that Nibbāna is not the primordial ground of the world in the sense of Brahman : that out of which everything comes and to which everything returns, which, to and extent, renders this ultimate end unstable as it used to happen. Nibbāna simply is the ultimate Goal in which the totality of *dukkha* comes to an end.

Notes

1. Quoted in N.N.Bhattcharyya, *Buddhism in the History of Indian Ideas* (New Delhi : Manohar, 1993), p.44
2. Ibid., p.38
3. L.M.Joshi, *Studies in the Buddhistic Culture of India* (Delhi : Motilal Banarsidass, 1967), p.xviii.
4. K.N.Upadhyaya, *Early Buddhism and the Bhagavadgita* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971), p.94
5. Prof.Dr.H.Glasenapp, *Vedanta and Buddhism* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1960), p.6.
6. Br̥hmaṇyaka-Upaniṣad-bhāṣya, II, I, 20.Cited in A.G. Krishna Warrier, *The Concept of Mukti in Advaita Vedānta* (Madras : University of Madras), 1961, p.474.
7. Ātma-Bodha, verses 54ff. Cited in Chinda Chandrkaew, *Nibbāna, The Ultimate Truth of Buddhism* (Bangkok: Mahacula Buddhist University), 2525, p. 123.
8. Udāna.p.8. Compare to Aṅguttara-Nikāya II, pp.24-25 where it echoes the same tone.
9. Bhikkhu Nāṇananda, *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhism* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971), p.28.
10. Udāna, p.9.