

NIRVANA: A STATE OF PERFECTION
(Buddhist vision of the ultimate Good)

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Nirvana literally means «going out» or «extinguishing» as a flame. The state of Nirvana is analogous to the lamps in successive lighting, to the rebirth and to *karma* (deeds). The *Arhat* (the Perfected Only) by uprooting the craving eliminates the fuel that feeds the flame in order to reach the end which is to achieve the state of perfection, that is, of no rebirth. Nirvana is beyond evil. It is the one preoccupied thought that the aspirant has which is to enter the Path that leads to Nirvana. The true goal of all beings is the cessation of becoming, that is, a state of Perfection.

Nirvana is described as a vast ocean, impregnated with one flavor of salt. It is the farther shore, the island, the endless immortal state, the *summum bonum*. It is better than any existence, however pleasant. It is deliverance and deliverance is good and the only good to hope for.

The Old Wisdom School developed the view of Nirvana as the ultimate reality which stands outside the sensory world of illusion and ignorance, a world inextricably interwoven with craving and greed. It is the supremely worthwhile goal of the Buddhist life. It is very much akin to the philosophical notion of the Absolute and not easily distinguished from the notion of God among the more mystical theologians and philosophers. *Nirvana* is absolutely good, and *Dharma* is absolutely true in the sense that they are good and true unquestionably without any argument, and in all circumstances. By its very definition, the Absolute has no relation to anything. At the same time the idea of salvation implies that there is some kind of contact or fusion between the unconditioned and the conditioned.

Concerning the Absolute, nothing can be said about it at all, nor can anything be done about it. All efforts to know the Absolute are useless. Nevertheless, during a considerable part of the way to salvation, some idea of the Absolute is valuable when used as a form or standard by which one measures the value and width of our experiences. It is characteristic of the Old Wisdom School that it stresses the transcendence of the Absolute, its complete difference from anything which we do or can experience in or around us. (Mahayana later corrected this one-sidedness by emphasizing the impermanence of the unconditioned).

This School approaches ultimate reality by the *Via negativa* which is a mystical contemplative way to participate in the Godhead. Nirvana is unthinkable and incomprehensible. The transcendence of the Unconditioned means that it was approached as the total negation of the things of this world as we know them. The revulsion to all conditioned things is supposed to open our eyes more and more to the true nature of the Unconditioned. The self becomes extinct and the Absolute remains. All the ideas about the Absolute which form the basis of meditation turn out to be a provisional framework which is discarded once the house is completed.

The Mahayan (Greater Vehicle) Buddhist school emphasizes also non-duality. For them, perfect *gnosis* abolishes all dualities: the object does not differ from the subject. Nirvana is not distinguished from the world; existence is not apart from non-existence.

Nirvana in its practical aspects is essentially ethical and can be described as cessation of becoming. The psychological aspect of salvation is essentially to be released from individuality. For that reason we find the following Eight Stations of Deliverance of the Eightfold Path. They are: 1) right understanding; 2) right purpose (aspiration); 3) right speech; 4) right conduct; 5) right vocation; 6) right effort; 7) right alertness; 8) right concentration.

The emancipation is from the «I» - self reference; that is, nothing of oneself is left in the person. It is the freedom from becoming, from desire, from lust, from hate, from infatuation and ultimately from rebirth.

Concerning the state after death, Gautama refused to answer; he condemns any speculation that is unedifying. The analogy that he gives is that when a flame goes out, it disappears. There is no form or matter because the conditions of existence stop and so any discussion ceases. He sometimes compares it to the birds in the air: they are hard to follow because they leave no trace in the air. Nirvana is Nothing and yet Everything. It seems that Nirvana is with substrata and without substrata. One state is while one is a saint (*arhat*) and still alive and the other state is following one's death. The «with substrata» is that the mental

and physical state constitute him an individual, but the «without substrata» is a doctrinal problem as Gautama (as said above) refused to answer as to what happens after death. However, the Buddha insisted there is a transcendent state of Nirvana.

Mahayana (Great Vehicle) views Nirvana as Absolute, that is, «suchness» or «void» constituting the inner essence of phenomena. The Absolute is identified with the «Truth» of Buddha. To attain Nirvana is to be identified with Buddha. This school also developed the idea of Bodhisattva, the saint who sacrifices himself for the sake of the living beings. The Bodhisattva replaces the ideal saint (*arhat*) of the Hinayana Buddhism (Lesser Vehicle). The Bodhisattva postpones his Buddhahood in order to show illumination and bring other beings to Nirvana. Ultimately they become Buddhas in full enjoyment of Nirvana.

When we use the term «God» in the religious context, it has at least three meanings:

1. personal God: creator of the universe;
2. Godhead: impersonal or supra-personal;
3. a number of Gods or of angels not clearly distinguished from God.

The second view of God is a mystical understanding of divinity, that is, we can speak of Nirvana as Godhead. The mystical tradition of oriental thought understands the attribute of Nirvana as the impersonal, absolute reality. It is true that Nirvana has no cosmological functions, that this is not God's world but a world made by our greed and stupidity. It is also true that through their attitude the Buddhists express a more radical rejection of the world in all its aspects, an attitude found among many mystical philosophies. At the same time, they avoid theological riddles such as how to combine an omnipotent and all-loving God with the existence of a great deal of suffering in the world. The Buddhist religion never made a statement such as «God is love». Nirvana is described as: –permanent, stable, immovable, deathless, imperishable, ageless, unborn, unbecome–, and, in positive terms as: –power, happiness, bliss, the secure refuge, the place of unassailable safety, shelter–, that is: –the real Truth and Supreme Reality, the Good, the Supreme goal, the one and only consummation of our life and the eternal, hidden and incomprehensible Peace. Buddha, as the personal embodiment of Nirvana, becomes the object of all those emotions which we call religious. A tension existed between the Bhaktic (devotional) and Gnostic approach to religion which is always regarded as the more true understanding of truth.

For Buddhism, God is Nirvana and not the nameless supraessential one, elevated above goodness itself. It is the absolute No-thing which is above all existence. The mystics speak of the superluculent darkness of silence and the

necessity to leave behind the senses and the intellectual operations and all things known by senses and intellect. We must deny everything about the Absolute in order to penetrate into the sublime ignorance which is in reality the highest knowledge. Through the negative way we come to the ultimate reality. Ultimate end of man is participation in the Godhead. The mystics reconcile two aspects of the Supreme: the Absolute One, that is, without distinctions and attributes, and the personal God who knows, loves and freely chooses. That is, they distinguish between the Supreme in itself and the Supreme in relation to creatures.

While the former is the Godhead in its utter transcendence of all created being and its categories, the latter is His manifestation to man in terms of the highest categories of human experience. They refer to God or the One as ineffable, as is evident in the theology of Plato's *Parmenides*. Plato says the Good is beyond language, nameless and unknowable. For the great neo-Platonist, Plotinus, the One is Absolute Unity. The multiple cannot exist by themselves but the One can. The One is the source of all reality but not the contrary. The One is self-sufficient and Perfect—and is incomprehensible. The end of all things is to return to God. No being can know Him as He is. Ignorance is the highest knowledge. God is the Absolute Good and supabeing.

Godhead according to the mystical tradition compared with Nirvana in the Buddhist view reveals a great similarity in that both are transcendent, good and the end of everything. The goal is attainment of Nirvana, or, in the case of mysticism, participation in Godhead. The ultimate reality is the Supreme Goodness and Eternal Bliss which the Buddhist *arhat* ultimately attains.