

## Meditation and Action: Problematic Polarities A Piece of *Prthagajana* Logic

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Meditation plays a great role in the Buddhist scheme of life. Not only is *dhyāna* a *pāramitā*, one is exhorted to practice it as a part of moral life. We have considered the importance of *smṛti* and *samprajanya* as prerequisites of a virtuous life. The *bodhisattva* vow is said to be altruistic but a *bodhisattva's* altruism is no ordinary benevolence, it is defined by Śāntideva as *bodhicittam jagaddhite*. (III. 23) At no stage of the ethical path, a *bodhisattva* is supposed to lose sight of the aim of attaining bodhi, or attaining the status of a *buddha* and a *buddha* is recollected in tranquility, the autological status of the mind in bodhi is so very unique that nothing appears to exist for it, a propos of *dharmā nairatmya* or *śūnyesu dharmesu*. (IX. 152) So does it seem at the first flush. But it may turn out to be mistaken a view on a later consideration.

Mahāyāna sources are quite clear that the path to full Buddhahood takes a longtime. The reason for following it is compassion. The two motivations for ethico-religious practice are outlined: the motivation of wishing to attain freedom from suffering for all, and from that motivation embracing the long path to Buddhahood. This is quite definitive of Mahāyāna. And it may be endorsed by *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, together with *Bhāvanākrmas* of Kamalaśīla and Atiśa's *Bodhipathapradīpa*. They are unanimous as regards the possibility of altruism, locating it as they do in the actual revolutionary event which occurs in a *bodhisattva's* mind, and even which is a fundamental switch in orientation from self-concern to concern for others, to compassion. It is called the arising of *bodhicitta*, and it is not without a reason that the crucial event is praised in glowing terms. Śāntideva devotes an entire chapter for the purpose.

All this may be in order. There could be no sense in

doubting the universal salvation commitment so undeniably present in the Mahāyāna discourse. But one may feel somewhat philosophically uneasy concerning the cognitive mode called *prajñāpāramitā*, the perfection of wisdom or the wisdom of the Sugatas, *sugatāna prajñā*.

How are we to understand *prajñā*? To give a general definition, *prajñā* is a subtle process which presupposes both an intuitive grasp of the reality and a high degree of awareness with no emotional support or attachment. But a *prthagajana* may raise the point about logical consistency, if, by *dhyāna* is meant a gradual decrease of emotional and cognitive activity, how is relationship or connection between *dhyāna* and *prajñā* to be explained. Enstatic meditation or *śamatha* and observational concentration, *vipaśyanā* have been present since early Buddhism, and Śāntideva too speaks of the two. (VIII. 4) Are we to take *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* as being in a state of balance and harmony? The former is cognitive, while the latter is tinged with mysticism. Is the marriage of the two a happy one?

The poles of canonical Buddhist ethics or even spirituality, are detachment or *upeksā* on the hand, and caring for others, *karuṇā*, *dayā* or *anukampā* on the other. For Mahāyāna, the two are *śūnyatā* and *karuṇā*. The actual relation— psychological and doctrinal—between them is not simple as it may appear. Early Buddhism regards sympathy *karuṇā* as an important virtue, but does it regard it's an inevitable outflow of any liberating experience? Is there not a certain tension between liberation as *detachment* and as *involved* in activity for the sake of others? Does Mahāyāna ideal of universal salvatory nuances bring the tension to an end? The *samādhi* of *śūnyatā* is so transphenomenal that it is potent

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to lead directly to the attainment of Buddhahood. How does it compromise the salvific career of a *bodhisattva*? Doesn't he have to counterbalance the *samādhi* of *śūnyatā* by cultivating benevolence or compassion with regard to all living beings? A *bodhisattva* may have the *samādhi* of *śūnyatā* as a far-off regulative ideal, but does he experience it as a psychological reality? If it be argued that the meditative ecstatic state *includes* compassion and normal behaviour, then the inclusion cannot be analytic. Given Śāntideva's distinction between *gantukāma* and *gantuh* (I. 15-16), the underlying tension between the two poles remains unsolved. One might argue that *prajñā-pāramitā* includes all perfections; even then the question persists whether we see it as a psychological reality or a doctrinal ideal.

There is another dimension of the issue. How can one in *samādhi*, which definitionally excludes all types of entities, characteristics and mental orientation, *simultaneously* feel compassion and friendliness towards all living beings? How is it possible to fuse *dhyāna* with *prajñā*. I am aware of the immense difficulty of the question. Any attempt to answer question will land us in the field of the philosophy and psychology of religion. Even if an answer, let alone a certain one, may not be possible, the question will, nevertheless, satisfy a basic human need to discuss such propositions not only in terms of their occurrence, but also in relation to truth-values. After all, these propositions admittedly try to say something about the essence of reality and human mind. Do we have to deal with the task of accommodating two basically incompatible practices, i.e., enstatic states and active social involvement? Or do we have to deal with spiritual modes and states which cannot be known and assessed by means of our normal epistemic categories? The latter solution can be envisaged as forthcoming. But, after all, deluded *prthagjanas*, to which I undoubtedly belong, have no right to pass judgments on such lofty states which they cannot experience. The only alternative is to become *bodhisattvas* ourselves. As far as our normal understanding of psychological states as well as the basic requirements of logical consistency goes, it is hard to believe that one can experience *simultaneously* states of gradual decrease and eventual cessation of all discursive and emotional functions, on the one hand, and intense mental, verbal and bodily activities for the salvation of the sentient beings, on the other. It could be that the Mahāyāna move is meant to portray the exalted ideal of a *bodhisattva*'s messianic mission rather than a psychological reality. Shall we say that a *bodhisattva* dwells in the concentrations of emptiness, singleness without realizing them? This may be the problematic of the *bodhisattva* ideal. Does the realization of the reality-

limit or *bhuta-koti*, as *paramārtha* is said to be, ensure or annual altruism or any social concern.

Two points appear to hold out a sort of promise on the horizon:

i) There should be no doubt about the fact that Buddhist ethics is soteriologically oriented, and it cannot also be denied that the fundamental inspiration for the Buddhist moral life is concern for others, and, it is no less true as well that morality is not a means to an end but an end in itself. It is not a means to enlightenment but a *part* of enlightenment. There is a possible hermeneutics favouring what may be called the transcendency thesis. It could be taken to say that in the state of final *nirvāṇa* ethical predication and evaluation become problematic, since there is the absence of an identifiable moral subject. There are even arguments supporting ontological discontinuity between ethical perfection and enlightenment. The Parable of the Raft in *Majjhima-Nikāya* is often interpreted to mean that the attainment of *nirvāṇa* involves the transcendence of both good and evil. The image of fording a stream by a raft or boat is common enough in the early Buddhist canonical discourse. But the question is: are *śīla* along with *samādhi* and *prajñā* are part of the further shore, or are they to be left behind on the near side after enlightenment? It remains also to note if the Raft Parable is to be invoked to support epistemological or ontological positions rather than ethical ones. Transcendence of ethics does not seem to be thrust of the Parable. On the contrary the further shore is to be identified with moral perfection. One should take into serious account the context in which the Parable occurs, and be sensitive enough to the metaphor of the shores: *Aṅguttara-Nikāya* (V. 232 and 253) leaves no one in doubt that the further shore symbolizes the *practice* of the Eightfold Path and not its abandonment. The Buddha's remarks at the end of the Raft Parable should be understood not in the general sense that his ethical teachings are to be transcendent, but as a critique of a particular wrong attitude towards his teachings. As for the thematic issue, it sounds absurd as suggestion that Buddhahood could be an achievement which is morally neutral. It is analytically false to regard enlightenment as transcendent to ethics.

ii) What does it mean to follow the Eightfold Path? It is true that the Path involves a journey. But it is more true to say that it brings about a transformation rather than effecting a movement or relocation. The linearity of the Path could be understood in a metaphorical sense. The Path describes dimensions of human good, rather than listing stages meant to be passed through and left

behind. To follow the Path is to participate in those values or excellences which are constitutive of enlightenment, namely, *śīla* and *prajñā*. The Path is to be followed in the sense of cultivating moral and intellectual virtues. *Nirvāṇa* then could be the perfection of those virtues and not an ontological shift or sorteriological quantum leap. The beginning and the end are to be in the same continuum, or else the process could never begin at all. The Buddha said (*Digha-Nikāya*, ii. 223), just as the Ganga and the Yamuna merge and flow along united, so too do *nirvāna* and the path.

Buddhism speaks of two sets of values, moral and intellectual, actional and cognitive. There are no alternatives as between *jñāna* and *karma-yoga* in the present context. Any one-sidedness could be incomplete, unbalanced and could fall short of perfection. The ethics is to be sorteriological, and the sorteriology ethical. It is a bilateral strategy for perfection. Between a Buddha, a *bodhisattva* and a *prthagajana*, the difference, profound though it may appear, could be one of degree, *nirvāṇa* marks the fulfillment of human potential, not its transcendence. If it were in any sense transcendent, then the Buddha would have passed beyond the possibility of ethical predication and become a moral zero. On the contrary, he referred to himself as rooted in *adhiśīla* (*Digha-Nikāya*, i. 174). Far from being incompatible, ethics and soteriology in Buddhism, there appears an integral and inalienable relationship between moral goodness and enlightenment.

There is then the question concerning the soteriological status of *brahma vihāras*. How much do they contribute to the soteriological goal? Are the intentions of *brahama vihāra* relevant of it? Are they not conducive to furthering

one's progress on the path to enlightenment? Were they not originally thought of as one sufficient means for attaining enlightenment itself? One recent argument favours such a view and has much that is commendable about it. The *brahma-viharas* are states of meditation and have their importance within the Buddhist theoretical framework. It is through working with and one on the mind that Buddhism considers one can bring about the transformation in seeing required in order to bring to an end the forces generating suffering and rebirth. One uses the still, calm mind to investigate how things really are. Calming the mind is the first requirement, *samatha*, and then one discovers with a calm mind how things are really, *vipāśyanā*. When calming and insight are linked the mind has the strength and orientation to break through to a deep transformative understanding of how things truly are. The point about the *brahma-viharas* is that they close the gap between the things as appear to be and the way they actually are, and one may now hope that the actional state of existence could thus be linked with the liberating gnosis. *Samyak Samādhi* is significantly enough a stage of the Eightfold Path. Or what may be said in other terms is that the actional and the meditational are not given diversely. To borrow and adapt Kant's phraseology, one should always be *acting from the conception* of the way things actually are, and also go on realizing it in experience in a graduated mode. This is a call to the *prthagajana*.

**Note:** The term *bhūta-koti* occurs in the *Astasāhśrika-prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra*, and it is used as the absolute truth or *paramārtha*. See Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*, p. 410. And Conze, *Materials for a Dictionary of the Prajñāpāramitā Literature*, p. 308.

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