Anattā and *Nibbāna*

Egolessness and Deliverance

by

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Introduction

• This world, Kaccāna, usually leans upon a duality: upon (the belief in) existence or non-existence.
• Avoiding these two extremes, the Perfect One shows the doctrine in the middle: Dependent on ignorance are the kamma-formations.
• By the cessation of ignorance, kamma-formations cease.
(SN 12:15)

The above saying of the Buddha speaks of the duality of existence (atthitā) and non-existence (natthitā). These two terms refer to the theories of eternalism (sassata-diṭṭhi) and annihilationism (uccheda-diṭṭhi), the basic misconceptions of actuality that in various forms repeatedly reappear in the history of human thought.

Eternalism is the belief in a permanent substance or entity, whether conceived as a multitude of individual souls or selves, created or not, as a monistic world-soul, a deity of any description, or a combination of any of these notions. Annihilationism, on the other hand, asserts the temporary existence of separate selves or personalities, which are entirely destroyed or dissolved after death. Accordingly, the two key words of the text quoted above refer (1) to the absolute, i.e., eternal, existence of any assumed substance or entity, and (2) to the ultimate, absolute annihilation of separate entities conceived as impermanent, i.e., their non-existence after the end of their life-span. These two extreme views stand and fall with the assumption of something static of either permanent or impermanent nature. They will lose their basis entirely if life is seen in its true nature, as a continuous flux of material and mental processes arising from their appropriate conditionsa process which will cease only when these conditions are removed. This will explain why our text introduces here the formula of dependent origination (paṭicca-samuppāda), and its reversal, dependent cessation.

Dependent origination, being an unbroken process, excludes the assumption of an absolute non-existence, or naught, terminating individual existence; the qualifying term dependent indicates that there is also no absolute, independent existence, no static being per se, but only an evanescent arising of phenomena dependent on likewise evanescent conditions.

Dependent cessation excludes the belief in absolute and permanent existence. It shows, as well, that there is no automatic lapse into non-existence, for the cessation of relative existence too is a conditioned occurrence.

Thus these teachings of dependent origination and dependent cessation are a true doctrine in the middle, transcending the extremes of existence and non-existence.

Thinking by way of such conceptual contrasts as existence and non-existence has, however, a powerful hold on man. The hold is so powerful because this way of thinking is perpetually nourished by several strong roots deeply embedded in the

human mind. The strongest of them is the practical and theoretical assumption of an ego or self. It is the powerful wish for a preservation and perpetuation of the personality, or a refined version of it, that lies behind all the numerous varieties of eternalistic belief. But even with people who have discarded eternalistic creeds or theories, the instinctive belief in the uniqueness and importance of their particular personalities is still so strong that they take death, the end of the personality, to mean complete annihilation or non-existence. Thus the belief in a self is responsible not only for eternalism, but also for the annihilationist view, either in its popular unphilosophical form which regards death as the utter end or in materialistic theories elaborating the same position.

There are other contributory roots of these notions of existence and non-existence closely connected with the main root of ego-belief. There is, for instance, a linguistic root, consisting in the basic structure of language (subject and predicate, noun and adjective) and its tendency to simplify affirmative and negative statements for the sake of easy communication and orientation. The structural features of language and linguistic habits of simplified statements have exercised a subtle but strong influence on our way of thinking, making us inclined to assume that "there must be a thing if there is a word for it."

These one-sided views may also spring from emotional reasons, expressive of basic attitudes to life. They may reflect the moods of optimism and pessimism, hope and despair, the wish to feel secure through metaphysical support, or the desire to live without inhibitions in a materialistically conceived universe. The theoretical views of eternalism or annihilationism held by an individual may well change during his lifetime, together with the corresponding moods or emotional needs.

There is also an intellectual root: the speculative and theorizing propensity of the mind. Certain thinkers, people of the theorizing type (diṭṭhicarita) in Buddhist psychology, are prone to create various elaborate philosophical systems in which, with great ingenuity, they play off against each other the pairs of conceptual opposites. The great satisfaction this gives to those engaged in such thought-constructions further reinforces the adherence to them.

From these brief remarks, one will be able to appreciate the strength and variety of the forces which induce man to think, feel and speak in the way of these opposites: absolute existence or absolute non-existence. Thus the Buddha had good reason for saying, in our introductory passage, that people usually lean upon a duality. We need not be surprised that even Nibbāna, the Buddhist goal of deliverance, has been wrongly interpreted in the sense of these extremes. But rigid concepts of existence and non-existence cannot do justice to the dynamic nature of actuality. Still less do they apply to Nibbāna, which the Buddha declared to be supramundane (lokuttara) and beyond conceptual thinking (atakkāvacara).

In the early days, when knowledge of Buddhist teachings had just reached the West, most writers and scholars (with a few exceptions like Schopenhauer and Max Müller) took Nibbāna to be pure and simple non-existence. Consequently, Western writers too readily described Buddhism as a nihilistic doctrine teaching annihilation as its highest goal, a view these writers condemned as philosophically absurd and ethically reprehensible. Similar statements still sometimes appear in prejudiced non-Buddhist literature. The pendular reaction to that view was the conception of Nibbāna as existence. It was now interpreted in the light of already familiar religious and philosophical notions as pure being, pure consciousness, pure self or some other metaphysical concept.

But even Buddhist thought could not always keep clear of a lopsided interpretation of Nibbāna. This happened even in early times: the sect of the Sautrāntikas had a rather negativistic view of Nibbāna, while the Mahāyānistic conceptions of Buddha-fields (Buddhakṣtra), Primordial (ādi-) Buddha, Tathāgatagarbha, etc., favoured a positive-metaphysical interpretation.

It is, therefore, not surprising that modern Buddhist writers also sometimes advocate these extremes. In Buddhist countries of the East, however, there is now not a single Buddhist school or sect known to the writer that favours a nihilistic interpretation of Nibbāna. Contrary to erroneous opinions, voiced mainly by uninformed or prejudiced Western authors, Theravada Buddhism is definitely averse to the view that Nibbāna is mere extinction. This statement will be substantiated in the first main section of this essay.

For reasons mentioned earlier, it is not always easy to steer clear of those two opposite views of existence and non-existence, and to keep closely to the middle path shown by the Buddha, the teaching of dependent origination and dependent cessation. Until that way of thinking in terms of conditionality has been fully absorbed into the mind, constant watchfulness will be required to avoid slipping unaware into either eternalism or annihilationism, or coming too close to them. When discussing these questions, there is the danger one will be carried away by one's own arguments and counter one extreme by endorsing its opposite. Therefore, in the treatment of that problem, great caution and self-criticism is required lest one lose sight of the middle path.

The primary purpose of this treatise is to offer material for clearly demarcating the Buddha's doctrine of Nibbāna from both misinterpretations. Its intention is not to encourage speculations on the nature of Nibbāna, which are bound to be futile and may even be detrimental to the endeavour to attain it. The canonical texts elucidating the Four Noble Truths say that Nibbāna, the third truth, is to be realized (sacchikātabbaṃ); it is not to be understood (like the first truth), nor to be developed (like the fourth truth). We must also emphasize that the material presented here should not be used in a one-sided manner as an argument in favour of either extreme against the other. Each of the two main sections of this treatise requires the other for

its qualification and completion. It is hoped that the material from canonical and commentarial sources collected in these pages, by clarifying the position of Theravada, will at least reduce the points of conflict between the opposing interpretations.

I. The Nihilistic-Negative Extreme

Section 1

We shall first consider the basic work of post-canonical Theravada literature, The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga), compiled in the 5th century AC by the great commentator, Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa. This monumental work furnishes a comprehensive and systematic exposition of the principal Buddhist doctrines. It is derived from the Pali Canon and the ancient commentarial literature which partly incorporates material that may well go back to the earliest times of the teaching.

In this work, in Chapter XVI on the Faculties and Truths, in the section dealing with the third noble truth, we find a lengthy disquisition on Nibbāna. It is striking that the polemic part of it is exclusively directed against what we have called the "nihilistic-negative extreme" in the interpretation of Nibbāna. We cannot be sure about the reason for that limitation, since no explicit statement is given. It is, however, possible that the Venerable Buddhaghosa (or perhaps the traditional material he used) was keen that the Theravada teachings on that subject should be well distinguished from those of a prominent contemporary sect, the Sautrāntikas, which in other respects was close to the general standpoint of Theravada. The Sautrāntikas belonged to that group of schools which we suggest should be called Sāvakayāna, following the early Mahāyānist nomenclature, instead of the derogatory "Hīnayāna." The Theravādins obviously did not want to be included in the accusation of nihilism which the Mahāyānists raised against the Sautrāntikas. This might have been the external reason for the Visuddhimagga's emphasis on the rejection of the nihilistic conception of Nibbāna.

As to the positive-metaphysical view, the Venerable Buddhaghosa perhaps thought it sufficiently covered by the numerous passages in the Visuddhimagga dealing with the rejection of the eternity-view and of a transcendental self. However that may be, even nowadays Buddhism, and Theravada in particular, is quite often wrongly accused of nihilism. It is therefore apposite to summarize here the arguments found in the Visuddhimagga, followed (in Section 2) by additions from the commentary to that work. [1] Many passages from the suttas relevant to a rejection of nihilism are quoted in both these extracts, making it unnecessary to deal with them separately.

In the aforementioned chapter of the Visuddhimagga, the argument proper is preceded by a definition of Nibbāna. The definition uses three categories usually employed in commentarial literature for the purpose of elucidation:

Nibbāna has peace as its characteristic. Its function is not to die; or its function is to comfort. It is manifested as the signless [without the "signs," or marks, of greed, hatred and delusion]; or it is manifested as non-diversification.

In the argument proper, the Venerable Buddhaghosa first rejects the view that Nibbāna is non-existent, holding it must exist as it can be realized by practising the path. The adversary, however, while admitting that Nibbāna is not non-existent, still insists on a negative understanding of the nature of Nibbāna. He argues first that Nibbāna should be understood simply as the absence of all the factors of existence, i.e., the five aggregates. Buddhaghosa counters this by replying that Nibbāna can be attained during an individual's lifetime, while his aggregates are still present.

The adversary then proposes that Nibbāna consists solely in the destruction of all defilements, quoting in support of his contention the sutta passage: "That, friend, which is the destruction of greed, hate and delusion that is Nibbāna" (SN 38:1).

Buddhaghosa rejects this view too, pointing out that it leads to certain undesirable consequences: it would make Nibbāna temporal, since the destruction of the defilements is an event that occurs in time; and it makes Nibbāna conditioned, since the actual destruction of the defilements occurs through conditions. He points out that Nibbāna is called the destruction of greed, hate and delusion in a metaphorical sense: because the unconditioned reality, Nibbāna, is the basis or support for the complete destruction of those defilements.

Venerable Buddhaghosa next deals with the negative terminology the Buddha uses to describe Nibbāna. He explains that such terminology is used because of Nibbāna's extreme subtlety. The opponent argues that since Nibbāna is attained by following the path, it cannot be uncreated. Buddhaghosa answers that Nibbāna is only reached by the path, but not produced by it; thus it is uncreated, without beginning, and free from aging and death. He then goes on to discuss the nature of Nibbāna more explicitly:

• The Buddha's goal is one and has no plurality. But this (single goal, Nibbāna) is firstly called "with result of past clinging left" (sa-upādisesa) since it is made known together with the (aggregates resulting from past) clinging still remaining (during the Arahat's life), being thus made known in terms of the stilling of defilements and the remaining (result of past) clinging that are present in one who has reached it by means of development. But secondly, it is called "without result of past clinging left" (anupādisesa) since after the last consciousness of the Arahat, who has abandoned arousing (future aggregates) and so prevented kamma from giving result in a future (existence), there is no further arising of aggregates of existence, and those already arisen have disappeared. So the (result of past) clinging that remained is non-existent, and it is in terms of this non-existence, in the sense that "there is no (result of past) clinging here" that that (same goal) is called "without result of past clinging left." (See It 44.)

Because it can be arrived at by distinction of knowledge that succeeds through untiring perseverance, [2] and because it is the word of the Omniscient One, [3] Nibbāna is not non-existent as regards its nature in the ultimate sense (paramatthena nāvijjamānaṃ sabhāvato nibbānaṃ); for this is said: "Bhikkhus, there is an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an unformed". (Ud 73; It 45)

Section 2

Taking up the last quotation, the commentary to the Visuddhimagga (Paramatthamañjūsā), [4] written by ācariya Dhammapāla (6th century) says:

By these words the Master proclaimed the actual existence of Nibbāna in the ultimate sense.* But he did not proclaim it as a mere injunction of his [i.e., as a creedal dogma], saying "I am the Lord and Master of the Dhamma"; but, in his compassion for those to whom intellectual understanding is the highest that is attainable, he also stated it as a reasoned conclusion in the continuation of the passage quoted above (Udāna 73): "If, bhikkhus, there were not the unborn, etc., an escape from what is born, etc., could not be perceived. But because, bhikkhus, there is an unborn, etc., an escape from what is born, etc., can be perceived."

This is the meaning: if the unformed element (Nibbāna), having the nature of being unborn, etc., did not exist, no escape from the formed or conditioned, i.e., the five aggregates, could be perceived in this world; their final coming-to-rest (i.e., cessation) could not be perceived, could not be found or apprehended, would not be possible. But if right understanding and the other path factors, each performing its own function, take Nibbāna as object, then they will completely destroy the defilements. Therefore one can perceive here a getting-away, an escape from the suffering of existence in its entirety.

Now, in the ultimate sense the existingness of the Nibbāna-element has been demonstrated by the Fully Enlightened One, compassionate for the whole world, by many sutta passages, such as "Dhammas without condition," "Unformed dhammas" (see Dhammasaṅgaṇī, Abhidhamma Piṭaka); "Bhikkhus, there is that sphere (āyatana) where neither earth•" (Udāna 71); "This state is very hard to see, that is to say, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all substance of becoming" (DN 14; MN 26); "Bhikkhus, I shall teach you the unformed and the way leading to the unformed" (SN 43:12) and so on; and in this sutta, "Bhikkhus, there, is an unborn • " (Udāna 73) •

The words "Bhikkhus, there is an unborn, an unmade, an unformed" and so on, which demonstrate the existingness of Nibbāna in the ultimate sense, are not misleading because they are spoken by the Omniscient One, like the words "All formations are impermanent, all formations are painful, all dhammas (states) are not self" (Dhp vv. 277–79; AN 3:134, etc.).

*If Nibbāna were mere non-existence, it could not be described by terms such as "profound [deep, hard to see, hard to comprehend, peaceful, lofty, inaccessible to ratiocination, subtle, to be known by the wise]," etc.; or as "the unformed, [the cankerless, the true, the other shore]," etc.; [5] or as "kammically neutral, without condition, unincluded [within the three realms of existence]," etc. [6]

Section 3

The references to sutta-texts, quoted in the extracts from the Visuddhimagga and its commentary, make it quite clear that the Buddha declared Nibbāna to be an attainable entity and did not conceive it as the mere fact of extinction or cessation. All negatively formulated statements on Nibbāna should be understood in the light of the sutta passages quoted here, and do not admit an interpretation contradictory to these texts. Any forced or far-fetched interpretation of them will be contrary to the whole straightforward way of the Buddha's exposition.

If we have spoken above of Nibbāna as an "entity," it should be taken just as a word-label meant to exclude "non-existence." It is used in the same restricted sense of a linguistic convention as the emphatic words in the Udāna: "There is an unborn•"; "There is that sphere where neither earth•." It is not meant to convey the meaning of "existence" in the usual sense, which should be kept limited to "the five aggregates or any one of them." Nibbāna is indescribable in the strictest sense (avacanīya).

Our extracts from such an authoritative work as the Visuddhimagga show how emphatically the Theravada tradition rejects a nihilistic conception of its highest ideal, Nibbāna. This fact may perhaps help to remove one of the points of controversy among modern writers and Buddhist schools: the prejudice that Theravada, or even the Pali Canon, advocates "annihilation" as its highest goal.

There is, however, another principal point of difference in the interpretation of Buddhism, and of the Pali Canon in particular, which is likewise closely connected with the conception of Nibbāna. It is the question of the range of validity, or application, of the Anattā doctrine, i.e., the doctrine of impersonality. This doctrine, we maintain, applies not only to the world of conditioned phenomena, but also to Nibbāna. As far as the denial of its application to the latter falls under the heading of the "positive-metaphysical extreme," it will be treated in the following sections.

II. The Positive-Metaphysical Extreme

Section 4

In India, a country so deeply religious and philosophically so creative, the far greater danger to the preservation of the Dhamma's character as a "middle way" came from the other extreme. It consisted in identifying, or connecting, the concept of Nibbāna with any of the numerous theistic, pantheistic or other speculative ideas of a positive-metaphysical type, chiefly with various conceptions of an abiding self.

According to the penetrative analysis in the Brahmajāla Sutta (DN 1), all the diverse metaphysical and theological views concerning the nature of the self, the world and a divine ground from which they might come, arise from either of two sources: (1) from a limited and misinterpreted meditative experience (in which we may also include supposed revelations, prophetic inspirations, etc.), and (2) from bare reasoning (speculative philosophy and theology). But behind all these metaphysical and theological notions, there looms, as the driving force, the powerful urge in man to preserve, in some way, his belief in an abiding personality which he can invest with all his longings for permanence, security and eternal happiness. It is therefore not surprising that a number of present-day interpreters of Buddhismperhaps through the force of that powerful, instinctive urge for self-preservation and the influence of long-cherished and widely-held viewsadvocate a positive-metaphysical interpretation of Nibbāna and Anattā. Some of these sincerely believe themselves to be genuine Buddhists, and possess a genuine devotion towards the Buddha and a fair appreciation of other aspects of his teaching. We shall now look at these views.

In the spirit of the middle way, the following refutation of the positive-metaphysical extreme is also meant to guard against any metaphysical conclusions which may be wrongly derived from our rejection of nihilism in the first part of this essay. In the reverse, that first section may serve to counter an excessive “defence-reaction” against the metaphysical views to be treated now.

The positive-metaphysical extreme in the interpretation of Nibbāna consists in the identification, or metaphysical association, of a refined or purified self (attā) with what, in the context of the respective view, is held to be Nibbāna. Two main types of the metaphysical view can be distinguished, as the preceding paragraph already implies.

(1) The assumption of a universal and unitary (non-dual and non-pluristic) principle with which a purified self, one thought to be liberated from the empirical personality, either merges, or is assumed to be basically one. These views might differ in details, according to their being influenced either by Theosophy, Vedānta or Mahāyāna (the latter, with varying degrees of justification). [7]

(2) The assumption that the transcendental “selves” of the Arahats, freed from the aggregates, enter Nibbāna, which is regarded as their “eternal home” and as “the only state adequate to them.” Nibbāna itself is admitted to be non-self (anattā), while the Holy Ones (Arahats) are supposed to retain “in Nibbāna” some kind of individuality, in a way unexplained and unexplainable. This view is, to our knowledge, advocated in such a way only by the German author Georg Grimm and his followers.

Section 5

(a) Common to both views is the assumption of an eternal self supposed to exist beyond the five aggregates that make up personality and existence in its entirety. The supposition that the Buddha should have taught anything like that is clearly and sufficiently refuted by the following saying alone:

Any ascetics or brāhmans who regard manifold (things or ideas) as the self, all regard the five aggregates (as the self) or any one of them. (SN 22:47)

This textual passage also excludes any misinterpretation of the standard formulation of the Anattā doctrine: "This does not belong to me, this I am not, this is not my self." Some writers believe that this formula permits the conclusion that the Buddha supposed a self to exist outside, or beyond, the five aggregates to which the formula usually refers. This wrong deduction is disposed of by the statement of the Buddha quoted above which clearly says that all the manifold conceptions of a self can have reference only to the five aggregateseither collectively or selectively. How else could any idea of a self or a personality be formed, if not from the material of the five aggregates and from a misconception about them? On what else could notions about a self be based? This fact about the only possible way whereby ideas of a self can be formed was expressed by the Buddha himself in the continuation of the text quoted above:

There is, bhikkhus, an uninstructed worldling.• He regards corporeality as self, or the self as possessing corporeality, or the corporeality as being within the self, or the self within corporeality (similarly with the four mental aggregates). [8] In this way he arrives at that very conception "I am."

Further it was said: "If there are corporeality, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness, on account of them and dependent on them arises the belief in individuality • and speculations about a self" (SN 22:154, 155).

(b) If the words "I," "ego," "personality" and "self" should have meaning at all, any form of an ego-conception, even the most abstract and diluted one, must necessarily be connected with the idea of particularity or separateness with a differentiation from what is regarded as not "ego." But from what would that particularity or differentiation be derived if not from the only available data of experience, the physical and mental phenomena comprised by the five aggregates?

In the Majjhima Nikāya sutta called "The Simile of the Snake" (MN 22), it is said: "If, monks, there is a self, will there also be what belongs to self?" — "Yes, Lord." — "If there is what belongs to self, will there also be 'My self'?" — "Yes, Lord." — "But since a self and self's belongings cannot truly be found, is this not a perfectly foolish doctrine: 'This is the world, this the self. Permanent, abiding, eternal,

immutable shall I be after death, persisting in eternal identity'?" — "It is, Lord, a perfectly foolish doctrine?" [9]

The first sentence of that text expresses, in a manner as simple as it is emphatic, the fact pointed out before: that the assumption of a self requires also something belonging to a self (attaniya), i.e., properties by which that self receives its distinguishing characteristics. To speak of a self devoid of such differentiating attributes, having therefore nothing to characterize it and to give meaningful contents to the word, will be entirely senseless and in contradiction to the accepted usage of these terms "self," "ego," etc. But this very thing is done by those who advocate the first of the two main-types of the "positive-metaphysical extreme": that is, the assumption of a "great universal self or over-self" (mahātman) supposed to merge with, or be basically identical with, a universal and undifferentiated (nirguṇa) metaphysical principle which is sometimes equated with Nibbāna. Those who hold these views are sometimes found to make the bold claim that the Buddha wanted to deny only a separate self and that in none of his utterances did he reject the existence of a transcendental self. What has been said before in this section may serve as an answer to these beliefs.

Those views which we have assigned to the second category take an opposite view. They insist on the separate existence of liberated, transcendental selves within the Nibbāna-element. However, their advocates leave quite a number of issues unexplained. They do not indicate how they arrive at the idea of separateness without reference to the world of experience; and they fail to show what that separateness actually consists in and how it can be said to persist in the Nibbāna-element, which, by definition, is undifferentiated (nippapañca), the very reverse of separateness.

Both varieties of individuality-belief wish to combine various conceptions of self with the Buddhist teaching of Nibbāna. They are, at the very outset, refuted by the philosophically very significant statement in the discourse on the "Simile of the Snake," implying that "I" and "mine," owner and property, substance and attribute, subject and predication are inseparable and correlative terms, which, however, lack reality in the ultimate sense.

Section 6

The two main-types of a positive-metaphysical interpretation of Nibbāna can be easily included in a considerable number of false views mentioned, classified and rejected by the Buddha. A selection of applicable classifications will be presented in what follows. This material, additional to the fundamental remarks in the preceding section, will furnish an abundance of documentation for the fact that not a single eternalistic conception of self and Nibbāna, of any conceivable form, is reconcilable with the teachings of the Buddha as found in their oldest available presentation in the Pali Canon.

(a) In the Saṃyutta Nikāya (SN 22:86) we read: “Do you think, Anurādha, that the Perfect One (tathāgata) is apart from corporeality (aññatra rūpā) • apart from consciousness?” [10] — “Certainly not, O Lord.” — “Do you think that the Perfect One is someone without corporeality (arūpī) • someone without consciousness?” [11] — “Certainly not, O Lord.” — “Since the Perfect One, Anurādha, cannot, truly and really, be found by you even during lifetime, is it befitting to declare: ’He who is the Perfect One, the highest being • that Perfect One can be made known outside of these four possibilities: The Perfect One exists after death • does not exist • exists in some way and in another way not • can neither be said to exist nor not to exist’?” — “Certainly not, O Lord.”

This text applies to both main-types of view which assume a self beyond the aggregates. It should be mentioned here that the commentary paraphrases the words “the Perfect One” (tathāgata) by “living being” (satta). That is probably meant to show that the statements in the text are valid not only for the conventional term “the Perfect One” but also for any other terms designating an individuality.

(b) Since the concept of a self is necessarily linked with that of an ownership of qualities and possessions (see 5b), both main-types come under the following heading of the twenty kinds of individuality-belief (sakkāya-diṭṭhi; see 5a).

He regards the self as possessing corporeality as possessing
• feeling perception
• formations
• consciousness.

This applies, in particular, to the second main-type advocated by Georg Grimm, who expressly speaks of the five aggregates as “attributions” (“Beilegungen”) of the self. It does not make any difference here that these “attributions” are regarded by Grimm as “incommensurate” to the self and as capable of being discarded. What matters is the fact that such a relationship between the self and the aggregates is assumed, and this justifies the inclusion of that view in the aforementioned type of individuality belief.

(c) From the “Discourse on the Root Cause” (Mūlapariyāya Sutta; MN 1) the following categories apply to both types: “He thinks (himself) different from (or beyond) the four material elements, the heavenly worlds, the uncorporeal spheres; from anything seen, heard, (differently) sensed and cognized; from the whole universe (sabbato).” To the second type are applicable the views: “He thinks (himself) in Nibbāna (nibbānasmiṃ maññati) or as different from nibbāna (nibbānato maññati).” That is, he believes the liberated self which is supposed to enter the Nibbāna element to be different from it.

(d) In the sutta "All Cankers" (Sabbāsava Sutta; MN 2) the following instances of unwise and superficial thinking (ayoniso manasikāra) are mentioned and rejected:

Six theories about the self from which the following are applicable here: "I have a self" and "By the self I know the self." [12]

Sixteen kinds of doubt about the existence and nature of the self, with reference to the past, present and future, e.g., "Am I or am I not?", "What am I?", "Shall I be or not?", "What shall I be?"

Hereby any type of speculation about an alleged self is rejected.

(e) In the Brahmajāla Sutta (DN 1) the theories about a self are specified as to their details. Those, however, who advocate the two main-types of the positive-metaphysical extreme, with which we are here concerned, generally avoid or reject detailed statements on the nature of Nibbāna and the self. But if they assume an eternal and transcendental self, it must be conceived as being passive, motionless and immutable. For any active relationship to the world would involve an abandonment of the transcendental state assumed. Therefore both main-types fall under the eternalist view, characterized and rejected in the Brahmajāla Sutta as follows: "Eternal are self and world, barren, motionless like a mountain peak, steadfast like a pillar."

(f) The rejection of any belief in a self (as abiding or temporarily identical), and of the extremes of existence and not-existence, cannot be better concluded than by quoting the continuation of the saying that forms the motto of this treatise:

For him, Kaccāna, who considers, according to reality and with true wisdom, the origination of (and in) the world, there is not what in the world (is called) "non-existence" (natthitā). For him, Kaccāna, who considers, according to reality and with true wisdom, the cessation of (and in) the world, there is not what in the world (is called) "existence" (atthitā). This world, Kaccāna, is generally fettered by propensities, clingings, and biases. But concerning these propensities, clingings, fixed mental attitudes, biases and deep-rooted inclinations, he (the man of right understanding) does not come near, does not cling, does not have the mental attitude: "I have a self" (n'adhiṭṭhāti attā me'ti). He has no doubt or uncertainty that it is suffering, indeed, that arises, and suffering that ceases. Herein his knowledge does not rely on others. In so far, Kaccāna, is one a man of right understanding. (SN 12:15)

III. Transcending the Extremes

If we examine the utterances on Nibbāna in the Pali Canon, we find that it is described (or better: paraphrased) in both positive and negative terms. Statements of a positive nature include designations like "the profound, the true, the pure, the permanent, the marvellous," etc. (SN 43); and such texts as those quoted above (see

Section 2), “There is that sphere •”; “There is an unborn •,” etc. Statements in the form of negative terms include such definitions of Nibbāna as “the destruction of greed, hate and delusion” and as “cessation of existence” (bhava-nirodha). If the Buddhist conception of Nibbāna is to be understood correctly, one will have to give full weight to the significance of both types of utterance. If one were to quote only one type as a vindication of one’s own one-sided opinion, the result would be a lop-sided view.

To the utterances of positive character we may ascribe the following purposes: (1) to exclude the nihilistic extreme; (2) to allay the fears of those who are still without an adequate grasp of the truths of suffering and anattā, and thus shrink back from the final cessation of suffering, i.e., of rebirth, as if recoiling from a fall into a bottomless abyss; (3) to show Nibbāna as a goal capable of attainment and truly desirable.

The emphatic “There is” that opens the two well-known texts on Nibbāna in the Udāna, leaves no doubt that Nibbāna is not conceived as bare extinction or as a camouflage for an absolute zero. But, on the other hand, as a precaution against a metaphysical misinterpretation of that solemn enunciation “There is • (atthi),” we have that likewise emphatic rejection of the extremes of existence (atthitā) and non-existence (natthitā).

But even those utterances on Nibbāna which are phrased positively, include mostly negative terms too:

“There is that sphere where there is neither earth • neither this world nor the next, neither coming nor going.”

“There is an unborn, an unbecome •.”

“I shall teach you the unformed • the profound • and the way to it. What now is the unformed • the profound? It is the destruction of greed, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion.”

These texts, combining positive and negative statements, illustrate our earlier remark that both the positive and the negative utterances on Nibbāna require mutual qualification, as a precaution against sliding into an extremist position.

Negative utterances are meant to emphasize the supramundane and ineffable nature of Nibbāna, which eludes adequate description in positive terms. Our language is basically unsuited for such description, since it is necessarily related to the world of our experience from which its structure and terms are derived. Therefore the positive statements in the suttas cannot be more than allusions or metaphors (pariyāya desanā). They make use of emotional values intelligible to us to characterize experiences and reactions known to those who have trodden the path to the Pathless.

Though for the reasons mentioned above they have great practical value, they are evocative rather than truly descriptive. Negative statements, however, are quite sound and legitimate in themselves. They relate Nibbāna to the world of experience only by negations. The negating method of approach consists in a process of eliminating what is inapplicable to Nibbāna and incommensurate with it. It enables us to make much more definite and useful statements about the supramundane state of Nibbāna than by the use of abstract terms, the positive character of which can be only metaphorical. Negative statements are also the most appropriate and reverential way to speak of that which has been called "the marvellous" (acchariya) and "the extraordinary" (abbhuta).

Negative ways of expression have another important advantage. Statements like those defining Nibbāna as "the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion" indicate the direction to be taken, and the work to be done to actually reach Nibbāna. And it is this which matters most. These words on the overcoming of greed, hatred and delusion set a clear and convincing task which can be taken up here and now. Further, they not only point to a way that is practicable and worthwhile for its own sake, but they also speak of the lofty goal itself which likewise can be experienced here and now, and not only in an unknown beyond. For it has been said:

If greed, hatred and delusion have been completely destroyed, insofar is Nibbāna visible here and now, not delayed, inviting inspection, and directly experienceable by the wise. (AN 3:55)

That visible Nibbāna has been lauded by those who attained to it as an unalloyed and inalienable happiness, as the highest solace, as the unspeakable relief of being freed from burden and bondage. A faint foretaste of it may be experienced in each act of joyful renunciation and in moments of serene detachment. To know oneself, if but temporarily and partially, to be free from the slavery of passions and the blindness of self-deception; to be master of oneself and to live and think in the light of knowledge, if but for a time and to a limited extent—these are truly not "mere negative facts," but the most positive and elevating experiences for those who know more than the fleeting and deceptive happiness of the senses.

"There are two kinds of happiness, O monks: the happiness of sense-pleasures and the happiness of renunciation. But the greater of them is the happiness of renunciation" (AN 2:64).

Thus these seemingly negative words of the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion will convey to the thoughtful and energetic a stirring positive message: of a way that can here be trodden, of a goal that can here be reached, of a happiness that can here be experienced.

That aspect of a lofty happiness attainable here and now should, however, not be allowed to cover for us the fact that the attainment of Nibbāna is the end of rebirth,

the cessation of becoming. But this end or cessation in no way involves the destruction or annihilation of anything substantial. What actually takes place is the ending of new origination owing to the stopping of its root-causes: ignorance and craving.

He who sees deeply and thoroughly the truth of suffering is “no longer carried away by the unreal, and no longer shrinks back from the real.” He knows: “It is suffering, indeed, that arises, it is suffering that ceases.” With a mind unswerving he strives after the deathless, the final cessation of suffering—Nibbāna.

The Holy Ones know it as bliss:
the personality’s cessation;
Repugnant to the worldly folk,
but not to those who clearly see.

What others count as highest bliss,
the Holy Ones regard as pain;
What those regard as only pain
is for the Holy Ones sheer bliss.

(Sn vv. 761–62)

Notes

1. The extracts from both works have mainly been taken, with a few alterations, from Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli's translation (see Note on Sources). Explanatory additions by this writer are in brackets, those by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli in parentheses.

2. Comy.: This is to show that, for Arahants, Nibbāna is established by their own experience.

3. Comy.: For others it is established by inference based on the words of the Master.

4. The paragraphs beginning with * are translated by the author of this essay; those without, by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (taken from the notes to his translation of the Visuddhimagga).

5. These are some of the altogether 33 designations of Nibbāna in SN 43:12-44.

6. This refers to Abhidhammic classifications in which Nibbāna is included, occurring, for instance, in the Dhammasaṅgaṇī.

7. The theosophical variant, is, e.g., represented by neo-Buddhist groups in Britain and elsewhere which otherwise have done good work in introducing Westerners to Buddhist or to their conception of it. The Vedantic influence is conspicuous, e.g., in the utterances of well-meaning Indians, among them men of eminence, maintaining the basic identiey or similarity, of the Vedantic and Buddhist position concerning ātman. This is, by the way, quite in contrast to opinion on that subject, expressed by the great classical exponents of Vedanta. See Vedanta and Buddhism by H. v. Glasenapp (Wheel No. 2)

Mahayanistic influence may be noticeable in some representatives of the former two variants. But also in the Mahāyāna literature iteslef, the positive-metaphysical extreme is met with in varying degrees. Ranging from the Madhyamika scriptures where it is comparatively negligible, up to the Yogāvacara school where Asaṅga uses even the terms mahātma and paramātma in an approving sense (see Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṅkāra-śāstra and Asaṅga's own commentary.).

8. These are the twenty kinds of individuality-belief (sakkāya-diṭṭhi).

9. See The Discourse on the Snake Simile, tr. by Nyanaponika Thera (Wheel No. 47/48).

10. I.e., outside the aggregates taken singly.

11. I.e., outside the aggregates as a whole.

12. Pali: attanā'va attānaṃ sañjānāmi. This refers to Vedantic conceptions. Quite similar formulations are found already in the Saṃhitās, the pre-Buddhist Upanishads, and later in the Bhagavadgītā.