NIRVANA: SUNYATA: VINAPTIMATRATA
—NALINAKSHA DUTT

I

HINAYANA

In Buddhism, external world or phenomenal existence is Samskata (constituted) while that which is beyond phenomenality is Asamskata (unconstituted)—Nirvana, Sunyata or Vijnaptimatrata.

1. Theravada (early Buddhism)

The conception of Nirvana, as found in the early Pali texts, agrees with that of the Madhyamika, while the Vaibhavakas and the Yogacaras differed slightly from it. In several places in the Pali Nikayas, Nibbana is described as unborn, unoriginated, unconstituted, undecaying, undying, free from disease, grief and impurity; it is the supreme end that is attained by best exertion. It has also been described as the highest perfection (accaanta-niitham) achievable by the utmost exertion (yogakkhemam). It is extremely subtle and too difficult to comprehend or visualise.

The inconceivability of Nibbana is finely expressed in the Sutta-nipata, in a few stanzas, running thus—

"Just as the flame of a lamp struck by a gust of wind disappears and cannot be traced, so also does a perfect saint freed from name and form, disappears without leaving any trace.

That which disappears is immeasurable, i.e., infinite, and hence there are no words by which it can be spoken of. As it is bereft of all dhammas it goes beyond the range of conventional language."

This article being set to type on exceptionally short notice diacritical marks could not be provided. Pali and Sanskrit words expressing categories and concepts are therefore set in italic form; words like Buddha, Hinayana and Mahayana are in Roman. Quotations and longer expressions are set in Devanagari script.
A statement similar in tone to the above-quoted stanzas was made by Anuruddha at the demise of Buddha. It is as following:—

"Like the extinguishing of a lamp,
Buddha’s mind became absolutely free.”

Nibbana is absolutely separate and different from the world and its constituents. It is non-mental (acetasika) and wholly dissociated from mind (citta-appanata). The question of origin or non-origin does not arise in the case of Nibbana, because it is firm, eternal and changeless. It is the inconceivable transcendental reality.

A clear positive conception is found in the Udana, in which occurs the following statement:—

"O bhikkus, there is that space (paraman) where do not exist earth, water, fire and air; not spheres of infinite space, of infinite consciousness, of desireless, and of neither consciousness nor non-consciousness; neither this world nor next world; nor sun and moon, that, I say, is the end of suffering (i.e., Nibbana-dhatu), in which there is no coming, no going, no continuity, no decay and no origin; it is supportless, free from rebirth, and basisless.”

Buddha was not an agnostic, neither did he keep anything secret, esoteric or esoteric. He had no acarajamati. He did visualize the Reality by attaining Bodhi (full enlightenment). He chalked out a programme of spiritual life to attain Bodhi, and he must have done it with a great object in view, which can never be eternal death or annihilation. His main difficulty was like the Upanisadic thinkers that the Reality could not be described in empiric terms. Buddha realized that Nibbana was inconceivable, and that any description of it would be conventional, and so he said that Nibbana the highest truth, could only be realized within one's own self (paccatam sedhadho cinnati = pratyahanvasuddha); it was inexplicable (upappanca) and so no attempt should be made to describe it; it was so deep and subtle that it could not be communicated by one person to another. All that he could say about it was by negatives. In the Mulaparigiyayasutta of the
Majjhima Nikaya he said that no conception should be made of Nibbana nor of its attainment by any person as that would be admitting an entity and its relation to an individual. To say that it was either existing or non-existing would also be falling into the heresies of eternality (saissata) or annihilation (ucchada). Within these limitations, the form and nature of Nibbana had to be determined.

2 Sarvastivada.

The Sarvastivadins, being realists, though not naive materialists, have a slightly different conception of Nirvana. They recognize reality of seventy-five dharmas, of which seventy-two include both mental states and matter. They stoutly uphold Ksaṇikāvada (theory of momentariness) and admit that these seventy-two dharmas are being reconstituted every moment and are always in a ceaseless dynamic state of flux or becoming. The remaining three dharmas are unconstituted (asamkhetra) and as such they are real and are not subject to change.

The three dharmas are:

(i) Akasa (space) which remains eternally the same and never causes obstructions to any object, and neither any object, say a building, bring about any change in it.

(ii) Pratisamkhya nirodha denotes cessation of all possible impurities resettling a being by means of perfect realization of the four appasayatas, i.e., by supra mundane means (loketaramarga). It is by positive effort that the cessation of impurities is effected.

(iii) Apratisamkhya-nirodha also denotes all possible cessation of impurities of a living being. The cessation is effected not necessarily by knowledge of the four truths, i.e., lokaṭaramarga but by moral and meditation practices, which neutralize the causes giving rise to impurities (kilesas). It is therefore also an effort but not directly aimed at neutralization of impurities.

Yasomitra has explained the two nirodhas in detail. He writes that the inflow of impurities is completely stopped (nirdha) by knowledge (pratisamkhya) of the four truths. It is the knowledge of four truths, that acts as a dam (rhadabba)
to the inflow of impurities into the mind of an Arhat. His object is to explain what "nirodha" means in such combinations as amayasa-nirodha, pratisamkhya-nirodha and apratisamkhya-nirodha and not the exposition of the highest truth, Nirvana, a synonym of which is Nirodha. What he intends to say is that worldly objects which have come into being (dharmasthiti) cease on account of the universal law of impermanence (amaya-sa-nirodha); that inflow of impurities ceases when a person realizes the four truths (pratisamkhya-nirodha), and that certain impurities of a spiritually advanced person cease for ever and will not re-appear evan if he does not acquire knowledge of the four truths (apratisamkhya-nirodha). In these three compounded words, Nirodha refers to cessation of impurities and not to the Buddhistic conception of Nirvana. Arhats acquire knowledge of the extinction of impurities (kaya-jnana) and realize that they would have no more rebirth (anupadaprayana). In other words they are assured of Nirvana. According to the Sarvastivadins, the three asamkrat dharma are real and not subject to change like the samkrita dharma. They have neither past nor future (adhava sthirmukta) they are ever present (pratyupapanna). Hence they cannot be obtained (prapañca) like other fruits of sanctification (pramamphala). They have neither increase or decrease as with Akasa. They are realized by the perfects within themselves, as do they realize the fleeting nature of the constituted seventy-two dharmas. It is immaculated, and has no basis for its support. It is not a matter (nasti).

The Sarvastivadins concieve of Nirvana as a positive reality while the Theravadins speak of Nirvana in negative terms as it is inexpressible in words which belong to the phenomenal sphere.

II

MAHAYANA

According to the Madhyamikas, external world is unreal and is only a mental creation (prapanca) of the unenlightened; from this it follows that according to them, there is only one Reality, the Truth as is realized by the enlightened within one's own self, and everything else is a mere convention (smriti/sakalpa). According to the Yogacarins, the external world is a mere expansion of mind of an individual (naticchaksya). The Madhyamika conception of the Truth is nearly similar to that of the Theravadins, eiz that it cannot be described
except by negatives. Nagarjuna’s conception has been beauti-
fully expressed in the following stanza:

"That which is neither eschewed nor attained,
neither destructible nor eternal
has neither cessation nor origination
is called Nirvana."

From this stanza, it is evident that Nirvana is absolute
monism devoid of all possible attributes. It is neither positive
nor negative and is beyond the scope of words.

Along with this stanza another stanza should be quoted to
comprehend what Nagarjuna had in mind:

"Whatever is the end or limit of Nirvana
is also the end or limit of the phenomenal world,
not the minutest difference exists between the two."

Nagarjuna is emphatic in his assertion that worldly exis-
tence (Samsara) and Nirvana are identical inasmuch as conven-
tional terms like limited (antatva) or unlimited (anantatva), or
both limited and unlimited, neither limited nor unlimited, neither
eternal nor destructible, neither both eternal and destructible or
neither eternal nor non-destructible are equally applicable to both
worldly existence (Samsara) and Nirvana. These four pro-
positions and also a few others are also mentioned in the Nikayas.
One of such indeterminables, repeatedly mentioned in the Pali
Nikayas is as follows:

"Whether Tathagata after death exists or not exists,
or both exists or not exists or
both neither exists nor not exists."

These four propositions, Buddha said, are not maintainable
and should be laid aside (asagata) as all these are questions
like what are the shape and colour of a sky flower or
of the son of a barren woman. All these questions cannot
arise with regard to the unchangeable reality or the Truth
or about anything which has no existence whatsoever. Nagar-
juna wants to establish that Samsara and Nirvana are both
reals, and do not admit of any attribute. But, as a matter
of fact, the two are distinguished by a common man (arthaiguna)
the unenlightened, who suffers from mental aberration. The
enlightened, a Tathagata, has no such disability, and hence
he does not distinguish between Samsara and Nirvana.

To establish this thesis Nagarjuna has drawn support from
the original sayings of Buddha.
Nagarjuna expresses his conception of the Truth by the word "Sunnyata" which is applicable to both Samsara and Nirvana. By Sunnyata, he means that the Truth is devoid (Sunyaz) of all attributes, even of sat (existence) as it would imply a negative (asat) to which according to Nagarjuna there is no corresponding object or being.

Nagarjuna was a philosopher of dialectics. In his works he assailed all possible views of the non-Madhyamikas by his dialectics. Buddha was not a dialectician, but he also did not give any indication about the conception of Nirvana or Tathagata (one who has attained Nirvana). All that he said about it is that it was an end of all impurities (kilesa) of which the roots were attachment, hatred and delusion (tiga, dvesha and moha) as also an end of beliefs in the existence of soul (anakupadesit) in the efficacy of ritualistic observances (sila vrataparamasa) and doubts about the teaching of Buddha (vacikata). Whenever he was questioned about the beginning or end of existence, about finiteness or infinity of the world, about eternity or non-eternity of the world, or about the existence or non-existence of son or about the nature of Tathagata after his Parinirvana he remained silent, saying only, that the problems were indeterminable. Nagarjuna, being a dialectician, had recourse to dialectics to assail all these problems and to establish that all of them were untenable from the Buddhist conception of the ultimate Truth. Nagarjuna’s views therefore can be regarded as the true interpretation of the doctrine of early Buddhist: the Theravada (Sthaviravada).

YOGACARA

The Yogacarin conception of the Truth is similar to that of Nagarjuna inasmuch as the Yogacarins also relegate to the non-existent all positive and negative statements generally used in relation to the phenomenal objects and beings as also to the terms like skandhas, dhata, agatas, pratitya samutpada, svamanyaphala and nirvana.

In the Lankavatara (p.189-190) a Tathagata (one who has realized the Truth) is described thus: One who knows that the Truth or the Reality is neither permanent nor impermanent, neither effect nor cause, neither constituted nor unconstituted, neither intellect nor intelligible, neither characterized nor characteristics, neither signifiable nor significated, neither conglomeration of elements nor anything
different from such conglomeration, neither designable nor designation, neither identical nor different, neither both together nor not both together beyond all logical discussions. It is only a word (nī ṣah) which is unoriginated, consequently undeceying; that which is undeceying is similar to space (akāsa) but space is neither effect nor cause and hence it is supportless (niralambha) and that which is supportless is beyond all possible speculations.7

In another passage of the Lankavatara (p. 105) space (akāsa) has been mentioned as allied to the horns of a hart, or son of a barren woman which though non-existent are talked about by the foolish. Perhaps the author wanted to indicate that the Truth being absolutely attributeless is beyond all possible descriptions including even the attributes given to Nirvana by the Hinayanaists. Two of the Hinayana attributes are animitta (signless) jñī ṣaḥ abhutartha which according to the Lankavatara (p. 200) is also a mental creation (skāla ṣa ṣa). The truth, the real Nirvana, can be realized only by one within his own self through transformation (parināma) of mind and mental states.8 The term “Sunyata” used in the early Mahayana texts as also by Nagarjuna is interpreted in the Lankavatara (p. 200, 202) as denoting the unreality of the phenomenal beings and objects. It is void not only of attributes but also of origination.6 Sunya or the Truth of the Yogacarins is non-originating and non-existent.9 The term “tathata” also has been interpreted in this text (p. 153) as beyond the range of mind (citva-vinirmuktam) and has been equated to attributelessness (sunya ta) and to extreme end (kṣī ṭi) of existence. In the Trimūla (25) Vasubandhu explains “tathata” as “sameness at all times” (sarvakālam tatha bhavat) and with this particular meaning, he is prepared to accept “tathata” as an alternative term for vijnaptimatrata which according to Vasubandhu is the proper term for the Truth or the Reality. It should be noted that this term has nothing to do with vijnana of a constituted being.

It seems that the terms like Nirvana, Sunyata and Tathata used in early Mahayana are accepted by the Yogacarins with a certain amount of reservation. The Truth or the Reality is nonexistent (nī ṣaḥ āthau) and inexpressible (nirāpāpa). It is realizable only within one’s own self.10 In conclusion it may be stated that the conception of the ultimate Truth according to the Theravadins, the Mahayamikas and the Yogacaras is almost identical, but it is designated differently as Nirvana, Sunyata and Vijnaptimatrata.
NOTES

1. अस्फुटि भः वाः वाः प्रेक्षित्वेत् विलिः
   अः प्रेक्षित न उपेर्दि संवेन।
   एवं सुनृति नामशयस्य विद्युस्तो
   आः प्रेक्षित न उपेर्दि संवेन॥
   अत्रज्ञातस्य न प्रायााँभिः
   वेन न नञ्जः ततो नतिः।
   सकेतु दशमहमः सद्युभूषष्याः
   सुमहात वापप्पा वि सवेन फः॥

   Sutta-nipata 1074/6

2. पञ्चोदस्सम् वि विन्यासां वियोगोऽ
   वेनंसः अः फः॥

   Dighanikaya II, p. 157

3. अःतिः, विस्तरे, तहू आस्तत्वं वास्ते नेत्र रन्ति न अःतिः न वेनोऽ
   व बास्ते न बाधाकावस्तृतस्य न बाधाकावस्तृतस्य न बाधाकावस्तृतस्य
   न बाधाकावस्तृतस्य नास्ति तेन लोकोऽ न पालोऽ न उसोऽ चन्द्रमृणे, तहू आस्ते
   विस्तरे, नेत्र आस्तत्वं वास्ते न अः तिः न वेनं उपेर्दि अःतिः अन्तः
   अवमस्ति एव तव लो阔सः नार्दनकः वि॥

   Udana 71

4. अर्घ्यन्तवऽवास्तृतस्य भगवानस्य ।
   अनिश्चितकः ाः चलिहैर्याः॥

   Madhymaka Karika XXV, 3

   cf. पुनर्चर्िपर्िएकाः वहाँतिः समर्थ्याः भिभाः
   अन्यौन्नेत्राः नादोऽन्नेत्राः नानतिः न निर्देशिताः॥

   Lankavatara p. 99

19
5. निर्विशेषतः च य भोजितः, भोजितः संबन्धशयः ।

6. होति तथागतो एवं मरणा ?

Madvamati Karika XXV, 20

6. होति तथागतो एवं मरणा ?

7. गद्ध न गद्ध नानीं न कार्यं न कारणं न संकल्पं नामसंकल्पं न बुद्धिः

8. तव निश्चितमित्र यथासाधृतसंयोगं विचलोपनेत्र-वैत-कल्याणं

9. न कालं गुणवत्ता गूढः फक्त लक्षणस्वरूपाः

10. यथाशुचिस्वतप्रतिभं निष्क्रियाय वस्त्रस्वरूपं

Lankavatara, pp. 189-90

Lankavatara, p. 200

Lankavatara, p. 202

11. अयान्य गणिनः, प्राययत्स निर्व-शोकं श्रायतेऽवेदः

-Lन्तर्यं विद्विषादः किशुकृतं ।

Lankavatara