

ARE JEEVANMUKTA AND BODHISATTVA IDEALS ASYMMETRICAL?

By 'freedom' we usually mean freedom from some undesirable state, such as freedom from hunger, poverty, slavery, external coercion or compulsion of mind and the like. In the context of Indian thought freedom is primarily taken to mean freedom from suffering or *duḥkha* arising out of ignorance or *avidyā*. *Tattvajñāna* or the knowledge of the truth is here regarded as a means for attaining freedom. Similarly throughout the history of Indian thought, barring only certain exceptions, freedom has been regarded as an ideal or a covetable state to be attained either through action, devotion or knowledge. Freedom as it is conceived in the Indian context (*mokṣa*) is considered to be the highest *puruṣārtha* or goal of life.

First of all it is to be noted that freedom in Indian thought is not necessarily a state to be attained hereafter, nor is it a state of other-worldliness which is to be attained by negating the worldly life altogether. Knowledge or illumination (*Jñāna*) instead of being merely a means of freedom is itself considered to be the goal for which every one should aspire only for its own sake in as much as freedom is supposed to consist in illumination itself. This is true of both the Vedantic and the Buddhist traditions in different ways, as illumination is viewed differently by them.

It has often been misunderstood that according to Sankara, Knowledge or illumination (*Jñāna*) is a mere means of freedom. But it is more appropriate to say that freedom, according to Sankara, is nothing but illumination (*Jñāna*). '*Srutayo Brahmavidyānāntaram mokṣam darśayanty madhye Kāryāntaram Vārayanti*', as Sankara would tell in his commentary on *Brahma-Sūtras*, 1—4. It is true that at places Sankara speaks of *Jñāna* as a means to liberation e.g. When he says '*Niḥśreyasaphalam tu Brahnavijñānam*' in his commentary on *Brahma Sūtra* 1-11, or when he says "*mokṣa-sādhanaṁ Jñānam*" in *Upadeśa Sahasrī*. But in all such cases it is a mere concession

to the popular way of expressing the idea, and moreover the context in which such statements are made should never be lost sight of. In the *Upadeśa Sahasrī*, for example, *Jñāna* as an instrument of freedom can only mean the bookish knowledge of Brahman or *vākyād vākyārthajñāna* obtained through *Śravaṇa* only which is to be firmly entrenched in the mind of the listener through *manana* and *nididhyāsana* finally culminating in *Brahmajñāna* in the sense of *Brahmāvagati* or the full comprehension of Brahman. And in the commentary on the first Sūtra, "*Athāto Brahma-Jijñāsā*", Śāṅkara being primarily interested in showing the difference in the fruits of *dharmajijñāsā* and *Brahmajijñāsā* naturally talks of *mokṣa* or *niḥṣreyasa* as the fruit of *Brahmajñāna* just to contrast it with worldly prosperity (*abhyudaya*) which is the fruit of *dharmajñāna*. As a matter of fact, however, there is nothing more to be aspired for beyond the comprehension of Brahman (*Brahmajñāna*) in Advaita Vedānta. Illumination or *jñāna* is freedom and in itself is bliss or *ānanda*. Where *jñāna* is used in Śāṅkara Vedānta as a mere means (*pramāṇa*) for the comprehension of Brahman (*Brahmāvagati*), as for example when Śāṅkara says *jñānena hi pramāṇena avagantumīṣṭam Brahma*, there *jñāna* to my mind should be taken to mean a mere word to word, bookish, understanding of Brahman from the Śāstra i.e., *vākyād vākyārtha jñāna*. In that sense alone *Brahmajñāna* and *Brahmāvagati* can be distinguished from each other, for otherwise *jñāna* in the sense of *aparokṣa jñāna* is certainly indistinguishable from *avagati*, and *Brahmāvagati* or *jñāna* in this context should mean an immediate and full comprehension of the nature of the real which constitute the *puruṣārtha* or the aim of man and is identical with freedom (*mokṣa*).

Regarding the nature of this illumination (freedom) and its impact on the day to day life of the man and the society, we come across a variety of description in the Indian Philosophical literature. According to some it is a state of delight where one forgets all worldly botherations and is lost in some sort of Divine contemplation; the worldly life is either forgotten altogether or is relegated to a secondary place in the life of a freeman (the *mukta*). But freeman, while alive (*jīvan mukta*, as he is conceived in Advaita Vedānta), is certainly not a recluse or a hermit flying away from or shunning the worldly life. Illumination is considered to be extremely relevant to the day to day existence of man and conduct in the society; it

is in no way antagonistic to or incompatible with normal day-to-day life of man.

Some of the misconceptions associated with the idea of freedom (*mukti*) are subjected to trenchant criticism by Vidyaranya in *Pancadaśī*. Enlightenment does not make one unfit for worldly transactions, otherwise it would be a kind of illness which of course it is not. Knowledge of truth is not something like the disease of consumption which makes one incapable of normal dealings. The idea is that illumination does not affect our normal life in any way. There is no difference between the ignorant and the enlightened as regards their activity or abstention from activity from the point of view of the body, senses, mind and intellect. *Pancadaśī* is quite clear on the point that freedom does not consist in being like sticks and stones abstaining from food etc., it takes a pragmatic view of the whole issue. The man who is attached to objects is troubled by the world, happiness is enjoyed by one who is not attached. Therefore if one wants to be happy he should give up attachment, and that is all.

While discussing the concept of freedom in Indian thought one should be careful in interpreting certain well-known statements of treatises like *Bhagvad Gītā*, e.g., *Uddāsīnavadāsīno* etc. As *Pancadaśī* has very aptly remarked "*Ajñātvā Śāstra hṛdayam mūḍho vaktyanyathānyathā*"; the foolish who does not understand the essence of the scriptures expresses his opinions in varieties of ways. That the enlightened is not forgetful about the world, that illumination does not destroy duality, that it only makes one realise the self as real and the world as unreal only in a specific sense is clear from the following passage of *Pancadaśī*, "*Ātmādhireva vidyeti vācyam na dvaitavismṛtiḥ*".¹ Vidyaranya caricatures the idea that illumination consists in forgetfulness of the world of duality by pointing out that inanimate objects like pots should in that case be half-enlightened in as much as they do not have any knowledge of duality. *Pancadaśī* is rather very clear on the point that the knower of truth fulfils his worldly duties well, as they do not conflict with his knowledge. In order to perform the worldly activities, according to *Pancadaśī*, it is not essential that the world should be taken as ultimately real.

The enlightened person is not a conjurer; he does not conjure any thing out of existence nor does he bring about anything into existence by his illumination or insight. In the words of Wittgenstein, we may say in a sense "Philosophy leaves every thing as it is"² What are required for doing normal activities in the world are the means such as mind, speech, body and external objects and these are not made to vanish by enlightenment. So why can the enlightened not engage himself in worldly affairs? Therefore, as knowledge of truth does not affect the means such as the mind etc., the enlightened person is able to do worldly activities like ruling a country, study of logic or engaging in agriculture. The enlightened one, like an expert conversant with two languages, knows both the bliss of Brahman and the worldly joys and does not see any conflict between the two. The idea of freedom (*mukti*) as something mystical and other-worldly is thus entirely ruled out by *Pancadaśī*. It is as if some one has mastery over two different languages; as there is no incongruity here similar is the case with one having illumination continuing to be conversant with the worldly affairs. This dispels once and for all the deeprooted misconception about Indian thought that in freedom (*mukti*) one is transferred as it were from the mundane existence to a supramundane plane of Reality so that the worldly awareness is gone for ever. Enlightenment consists in mastering a technique and this has no conflict with our normal awareness. What is important to note in this connection is that the enlightened person is not affected or disturbed by the pleasure or pain caused by *prārabdha*; thus and only in this sense he is a freeman. The only difference between the enlightened who is free and the unenlightened who is in bondage is that the former remain undisturbed and patient through all his afflictions caused by *prārabdha* whereas the latter is impatient and suffers on account of this. This is how and this is the sense in which the metaphysical concept of freedom in Indian thought, instead of remaining confined to the conceptual level alone, is seen to have a definite bearing on our practical day to day life. Attainment of freedom (*mukti*) by no means makes one other-worldly or merely contemplative, transcending and thereby becoming totally unfit for, the day-to-day affairs of the world. Though undergoing similar experience or engaged in similar activities it is freedom from misery that characterises the enlightened whereas the unenlightened continues to be subject to misery.

As far as the ethical aspect of freedom is concerned, it is to be noted that the enlightened one is in a definitely advantageous position to do good to the society without any attachment whatsoever and the life of a *jīvanmukta*, though in itself beyond good and evil, can thus be conducive to the social welfare. In any case, there cannot be any question here of his life being one of unbridled licentiousness like that of a debauch. His life is a life of detachment alright, but at the same time the world can benefit immensely by his teachings. As an Ācārya he can be source of unfailing guidance to the erring humanity. That is why an enlightened person is described by Śāṅkara as both '*Vimuktasanga*' and '*Sadāpāradayāmbudhama*'.³ Ācārya Śāṅkara is very clear about the life and conduct of such men of wisdom, the enlightened ones, There are great souls, says Śāṅkara, calm and magnanimous, who do good to others as does the spring (*vasantavallokaḥ hitam carantaḥ*)⁴, and who having themselves crossed this dreadful ocean of birth and death, help others also to cross the same, without any motive whatsoever. Here the words '*Vasantavallokaḥ hitam carantaḥ*', doing good to the world like spring, refer to the spontaneous goodness of the enlightened. It is indeed a pity that this spontaneous goodness of the freeman in the context of Indian thought has not been sufficiently highlighted, while the freeman's (*jīvanmukta*'s) life has been depicted as one of sheer moral indifference and callousness by those who are alienated from Indian thought and culture in some way or the other.

The free man in the Buddhist tradition is also one who is free from attachment, free from strong likes and dislikes. "*Grāhiḥ teṣāṃ na vidyante yeṣāṃ nāsti priyāpriyam*", says the *Dhammapada*. *Tasmāt prāṇī na tāmicchhet icchato jāyato bhayaṃ*", Says *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Freedom is achieved through the realisation of *Śūnyatā* according to one of the most important trends of the Buddhist thought. In *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā* it is explicitly pointed out that "*Śūnyatāiva nirvāṇakāraṇam*", "*Śūnyatāiva bodhimārgaḥ iti sthitaḥ*", This is true of the entire Mādhyamika tradition, of course.

The asymmetry in the Vedantic tradition of the *Jīvanmukta* and the Buddhist tradition of *Bodhisattva* to which I would like to draw the attention of the learned scholars is as follows. Inequality is there every where, manifest on all sides to even a casual abserver, and is a matter of day to day experience, So to say. Equality comes

with enlightenment only which makes one free. A wiseman who is established in *Brahman* is also established in equanimity as well as equality. The wise (*pandit*) would look on a Brahmin endowed with learning and culture, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a parish with an equal eye (*samadarśinaḥ*), says the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The mortal plane is conquered by those whose mind is established in equality (*Sāmya*), for *Brahman* is free from blamish and is equally there every where, and the wise men are established in *Brahman*.⁵ *Aṣṭavakra Gītā* similarly speaks of a person having self-knowledge being equally disposed to all. "*Sa eva dhanya atmaññāḥ sarvabhāveṣu samah*". Equality however, is inculcated in quite a different way in the Buddhist treatises like *Bodhicaryāvatāra* although here also it is a question of enlightenment. Here it is based on realising the similarity of our pleasure-pain-experience. "When both myself and others are similar in that we wish to be happy and do not want to suffer in any way, what then is so special about me? Why should I strive for my happiness alone? Why should I protect myself and not others?"⁶ asks Śāntideva. I should dispel the misery of others because it is suffering just like my own, and I should benefit others because they are sentient beings just like myself.⁷ The realisation of similarity leads to an altruistic form of life. There is no absolutistic ontology, no ontology of *Brahman*, involved here. The comprehension of *Śūnyatā* alone leads to cessation of suffering here, "*Śūnyatā duḥkhasamanī*",⁸ but this *Śūnyatā* which is emphasised is nothing but *niḥsvabhāvatā* (essencelessness) and is not meant to be adhered to as a metaphysical doctrine.⁹ The argument advanced for viewing others as equal is quite simple and straightforward. It is based on our ordinary, day-to-day, experiences of *sukha* (pleasure) and *duḥkha* (pain), that is all. That is why in the *Dhyānapāramitā* chapter of *Bodhicaryāvatāra* we are asked first of all to make an effort to meditate upon the equality between self and others. We are asked to protect all beings as we do ourselves because we are all equal in wanting pleasure and not wanting pain.¹⁰ The sense of equality arising out of the deliberations upon our day-to-day experience of pleasure and pain makes us concerned for others as we are concerned for ourselves. This typically empirical approach of *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is asymmetrical in so far as it is not based on any absolutistic metaphysics of Advaitic *Brahman* as is the case with a *Jīvanmukta*.

Moreover, there is a positive emphasis in the *Bodhisattva* tradition on the alleviation of the suffering of others even at the cost of one's personal comfort. *Karuṇā* is the deciding factor here. "*Karuṇāparatantratayā paraduḥkhaḍuḥkhinaḥ sarvaduḥkhāpaharaṇāya yatnaḥ*", says Prajñākaramati.¹¹ If by one person's suffering the suffering of many would be destroyed, surely kindhearted people would accept it for the sake of themselves and others. In this context the example of *Bodhisattva* Supuṣpacandra, who sacrificed himself and allowed himself to be harmed by the king for the eradication of the misery of many is cited by Śāntideva.¹² Hence an altruistic temper permeates the conduct of *Bodhisattva*, which to all outward appearance may be similar to the spontaneous goodness of a *Jīvanmukta*. What is important to note here is that even *mokṣa* or liberation for one's ownself is not valued for its own sake by the *Bodhisattva*. Freedom of the *Bodhisattva* is primarily altruistic, not self-centric. There being *Parārthaikāntā tṛṣṇā* or longing only to do good to others, one does not care for one's own liberation, and there can be no question of indulging in self-conceit or wonder on account of this either. "*Ataḥ parāṭham kṛtvāpi no mado na ca vismayaḥ*."¹³ Doing good to others is spontaneous on the part of the *Bodhisattva* as it is in the case of a *Jīvanmukta*. In this sense there is similarity no doubt, but there is also asymmetry in so far as there is a goal of freedom for mankind as a whole in one case, whereas there is an emphasis on the achievement of one's own freedom in the other. Both *Jīvanmukta* and *Bodhisattva* would work undoubtedly for the benefit of mankind as a whole. *Bodhisattva* has no metaphysical axe to grind, nor is he interested in his own freedom so much as he is interested in the freedom of mankind.

Śāntideva's following remarks need a special mention in this connection as they are very significant and illuminating. "Will not the ocean of joy that would be there when all become free," asks Śāntideva, "be sufficient for me? What am I to do with my liberation alone?" "*Mucyamāneṣu sattveṣu yete prāmodya sāgarah, Taireva nanu paryāptam mokṣenarasikena kim*".¹⁴ The altruistic element is thus fully explicit in the *Bodhisattva* ideal, though at the same time it cannot be said to be entirely absent in the ideal of the *Jīvanmukta*, for altruism is ingrained in some form or the other in both of them. What makes all the difference, however, is that *mokṣa* is denounced in favour of an altruistic form of life in the *Bodhisattva* ideal which

is further devoid of any commitment to the absolutistic ontology of *Brahman*. All this needs to be pointed out over and over again even at the risk of repetition because the tendency to mix them up has been equally strong.

In spite of all that has been said and done to reduce *nirguna Brahman* to *Sūnya* in certain quarters, *Sūnyatā*, I am afraid, cannot be regarded as a substitute of *Brahman* in the Buddhist context. The asymmetry therefore in both these traditions regarding their ideas of enlightenment, freedom and equality needs special mention in view of the persistent tendency to undermine this typical asymmetry in favour of some imaginary identity in the minds of those who would put Buddhism and Vedānta in one single basket for all practical as well as theoretical purposes.

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NOTES

1. *Pancadaśī* VII, 186.
2. *Philosophical Investigations*, 124.
3. *Viveka cūḍāmaṇī*, 486.
4. *Ibid.*, 37.
cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, 12.4, "Sarvabhūta hite rataḥ".
5. cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, 5.18 and 19. cf. also Śāṅkara Bhāṣya, "Samam ekam avikriyam Brahma draṣṭum śīlam yeṣāṃ te paṇḍitaḥ samadarśinaḥ" (5.18) and "Yeṣāṃ Sāmye sarvabhūteṣu Brahmaṇi Samabhāve Sthitam niscalibhutam manah antahkaram"'. (5.19)
6. cf. Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 8.95 and 96.
7. *Ibid.*, 8.94, "Mayānyaduḥkham hantavyam duḥkhatvādātmaduḥkhavat, Anugrāhyā mayānyepi sattvatvādāmasattvavat."
8. *Ibid.*, 9.56.
9. cf. Prajñakaramati *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā*, 9.34, "Sūnyatāyāmapī

nābhinivesāḥ kartavyaḥ".

10. Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 8.90, "Parātmamasamatāmādaubhāvayedeṇvādarāt, samaduḥkhasukhāḥ sarve pālāṇīyā mayātmavāt".
11. Prajñākaramati, *Bodhicaryāvatārapanjikā*, 8.103.
cf. also *Ibid.*, 9.1, "Yathābhūtaḍarsīno Bodhisattvasya sattveṣu mahākaruṇā pravartate".
12. Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 8.106.
13. *Ibid.*, 8.109.
14. *Ibid.*, 8.108.

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