

NAGARJUNA ON THE CONCEPT OF MORALITY

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The word 'moral' has its origin in the Latin word 'mores' (morals) which means customs or tradition, habits etc. Hence, morality is concerned with the behavioural life of man. Initially morality meant those behaviours of people which gave them progress, success and stability in social life. Social progress, led to social good and, in due course, these qualities were recognised as virtues, as they were conducive to social good. The determining factors of those virtues were later on absorbed and formalized, and those virtues did not remain restricted to a particular society but to the whole of human race.

In Indian context such virtues are not connected in the course of their development to the mundane world but also to the spiritual and supernatural. The progress of an individual is incomplete without the progress of the society and morality lay, according to the Indian tradition, not in striving for one's own progress, prosperity and happiness but in the progress, prosperity and happiness of all, that is the entire society and mankind.

Sarve'pi sukhinah santu sarve santu nirāmayah I

Sarve bhadraṇi pashyantu mā kaścit dunkhamāpnuyāt II

However, the congruity between individual and society is the presupposition of morality. Every society tends towards some ideal, some end. The distinctive feature of Indian philosophy and thereby of Indian society is that it is a synthesis of spiritual insight into the fundamental unity of the cosmos and encourages a practical pluralistic outlook with regard to

the social and ethical aspects of human life. Therefore, the segregation of morality and metaphysics has not been possible even in the heterodox systems in India. This is for the simple reason that the human mind cannot rest content with the sceptic or agnostic attitude. It cannot shut itself up in isolation from the whole or Reality, and attempt to lead an ideal life, without at the same time deciding whether the purpose of life tallies with the purpose of the universe or not. Buddha himself accepted the law of Karma and the possibility of mokṣa both of which are metaphysical concepts. The doctrine of karma is based on the universal ethical principle which is at the root of the world and its evolution. The silence of Buddha in these matters, though pragmatic, was perhaps responsible for the nihilistic attitude adopted by later Buddhism. Therefore the discussion of morality in the *Mādhyamika Śūnyavāda* would be justified only against the backdrop of its Metaphysics.

METAPHYSICAL BACKGROUND

The crux of *Śūnyavāda* is that there is nothing in the phenomenal world which has any essence or nature (svabhāva) of its own. Therefore, there is nothing mental or non-mental which is real. The universe is *śūnya* or void of reality. Behind this phenomenal world there is a reality which is not describable by any character either mental or non-mental. The real nature of objects cannot be ascertained by the intellect and, therefore, cannot be described. There is no truth, no essence in all phenomena that appear.¹ As the phenomena have no essence they are neither produced nor destroyed, they really neither come, nor go. They are really appearances.

Śūnya, according to Nagarjuna, does not mean a 'nothing' or an 'empty void'. *Śūnya* essentially means Indescribable (*avāchya* or *anābhilāpya*) as it is beyond the four categories of the intellect. It is Reality which ultimately transcends existence, non-existence both and neither. It is neither affirmation, nor negation, nor both, nor neither. Empirically it means relativity (*pratitya-samutpāda*) which is phenomena (*samsāra*), absolutely it means Reality (*tattva*) which is release from plurality (*nirvāṇa*). The world is indescribable because it is neither existent nor non-existent, the Absolute is Indescribable because it is transcendental, and no category of intellect can adequately describe it. Everything is *śūnya*, appearances are *Svabhāva-śūnya* or devoid of ultimate reality, and Reality

is *Prapancha śunya* or devoid of plurality. Thus *Śunya* is used in a double sense. It means relative as well as the Absolute. It means *Samsāra* as well as *Nirvāṇa*. *Śunyā*, therefore, does not mean 'void', on the other hand it means 'devoid' - appearances devoid of Ultimate Reality and Reality devoid of plurality.

Undoubtedly, Nagarjuna conceives the apparent world as unreal or *śunya*. By real is meant any entity which has a nature of its own (*svabhāva*) which is not produced by causes (*akritaka*) and which is not dependent on anything else (*paratara nirapeksa*)² The real is independent uncaused being (*Aśunyam.....apratityasamutpānam*).

The world of experience is bound by the relations of subject and object, substance and attribute, actor and action, existence and non-existence, origination, duration and destruction, unity and plurality, whole and part, bondage and release, relations of time, relations of space, and Nagarjuna examines everyone of these relations and exposes their contradiction.³

Nagarjuna's theory seems to require us to abandon the whole scheme of values as an illusion. When everything becomes unreal, good and evil are also unreal, and we need not strive to attain the state of *nirvāṇa* and free ourselves from miseries which do not exist.

CONTOURS OF MORALITY

We cannot live taking life to be an illusion. It seems quite impossible to base moral life on a detected illusion. Though the miseries are unreal when judged by the absolute standard, they are real so far as our present existence is concerned. To one who has realised the *paramārtha* there is no problem at all. For he has reached *nirvāṇa*, but those who are entangled in the world have to work. Morality is not jeopardised, since the course of illusion is irresistible to all on earth. The illusion is so vital to human life that the distinction of good and evil remains unaffected whatever might happen to it in the higher condition. Nagarjuna recognized two kinds of truth, absolute and empirical. "The teaching of Buddha relates to two kinds of truth, the relative or conditional truth and the transcendent absolute truth."⁴ By means of this distinction the otherwise insoluble contradiction between absolute nihilism and ethical life is avoided. While the higher leads to *nirvāṇa*, only

through the lower can the higher be reached.⁵

The theory of *Śūnyavāda* thereby is twofold - it is a philosophy of phenomenon as well as a philosophy of noumenon. They (*Śūnyavādins*) assert that Buddha's teachings indicate directly two orders of experience - the apparent and the transcendent. The apparent order is the non-substantial (*anātmā*) and transient (*anitya*) twelvefold process (*dvādaśbhāvachakra*) involving process from a basic ignorance to birth, death and rebirth, ending with suffering and sorrow (*jarāmaraṇa*). The transcendent experience (*nirvāṇa*) is the freedom from the apparent transient orders and basic ignorance, realised by following a triadic discipline of *śīla* (conduct), *samādhi* (concentration) and *prajñā* (insightful experience). The entire process is a practical method of purification. Buddha's teachings relates to two aspects of truth-the empirical and the absolute. The first is *Samvṛti* or *Vyavahāra*, the second is *Pāramārtha*. Those who do not know these two standpoints cannot understand the teaching of the Buddha.⁶

Samvṛti is a sort of covering. It hides the real truth. It is a workable reality, a practical make-shift, a necessary compromise. In the end it is no truth at all. But this can be realised from the absolute standpoint only. Though this distinction is a distinction within and by finite thought itself, yet it has got to be transcended. Intellect must be transformed into Spiritual experience. But his distinction is quite valid in the phenomenal sphere. The empirical cannot be condemned by its own logic. A dreamer, while he is dreaming, cannot condemn his own dream. Pure negation is an impossibility. It necessarily presupposes affirmation. Even an illusion, a mirage, a dream, a reflection as such exists. Appearances are not to be utterly condemned because it is only through the lower that we can go to the higher. The truth of the lower order is only a stepping-stone to the attainment of the higher. The nature of *nirvāṇa* experience which takes one beyond ordinary experience cannot be described. It can only be suggested negatively with the help of words which describe our common experience. Nagarjuna, therefore, describes *nirvāṇa* with a series of negatives, thus: "That which is not known (ordinarily) not acquired anew, not destroyed, not eternal, not suppressed, not generated is called *nirvana*".⁷ As with *nirvāṇa*, so also with the Tathāgata or one who has realised *nirvāṇa*. His nature also cannot

be described.

In his *Ratnāvali*, Nagarjuna says that just as a learned grammarian may teach even the alphabets, similarly Buddha taught according to the capacity of his disciples. To the ordinary people he taught affirmation so that they may avoid all evil deeds. To the mediocres he taught negation so that they may realize the unreality of the ego. Both these are based on duality. To the best he taught the blissful *Śunya*, the deeper truth terrible to the fools but kind to the wise.⁸ Nagarjuna condemns nihilism (*nāstikya*) by saying that negation leads to hell, affirmation leads to heaven and non-dual truth which transcends affirmation and negation, good and evil, heaven and hell is called Liberation by the wise.⁹ From the absolute standpoint we have no thesis, no morality, no intellect, because they are all grounded in Pure knowledge (*bodhi*), the Reality.

The aim of the ethics of Buddhism is the highest stage of the *Bodhisattva*. The *Bodhisattva* is one who must give up egoism altogether and rise above anger, hatred and error to gain the virtues of conviction, compassion, benevolence and disinterestedness. The crux of Buddhist ethics is that spiritual perfection, which consists in a harmonious life, alone can lead the aspirant to rise above the antinomies of pleasure and pain, heat and cold, joy and sorrow, and loss and gain. In this respect Buddhism agrees with the concept of *Sthitaprajñā*, or stable intellect of the *Bhagavadgītā* which is a unique ethical ideal. The purpose of referring to it here is that Buddhism is at one with the orthodox as well as the heterodox schools of Indian philosophy (except *Carvāka*) in the assertion that there is no possibility of attaining *Mokṣa* unless a person has first reached the empirical state of equilibrium and equipoise, *Jīvanmukti*.

RADICAL MORALITY

The distinctive feature of morality in *Śūnyavāda* is that it is for the first time in the history of Indian philosophy that man-made distinction of caste, creed and sex were overlooked. Quite in the spirit of early Buddhism ethical humanism and the characteristic of universalism were stressed upon. Buddha's mission was to extend the blessings of salvation to all mankind. Hence the *Śūnyavādins* asserted that each and every man, rich or poor, male or female, monk or householder, or even a low caste man could attain

nirvana by the practice of virtue and devotion to Buddha. The moral ideal is to attain *Bodhisattvahood*. The word *Bodhisattva* literally means "one whose essence is perfect knowledge", meaning thereby "a Buddha designate" or a man destined to become a Buddha in this or in some future life.

The ideal of *Bodhisattva* is positive enough. It is associated with the doctrine of *parivarta* or turning over the ethical merit to the advantage of others. When once *nirvāṇa* is attained all earthly relations come to an end. A *Bodhisattva*, out of the abundance of his love for suffering humanity stops short of nirvana. The *Śūnyvādins* believe that no man lives to himself alone. The good or evil of one affects the whole. Hence a *Bodhisattva* would be the best guide for his brethren who under stress and sorrow are languishing for a personal guide. Thus he (*Bodhisattva*) could lead others towards true way of knowledge. The practical way of attaining spiritual experience has been suggested in various ways. These are four meditations (*dhyāna*), three *samādhis* and ten stages of *Bodhisattvahood*. The principles of moral life have been recognised as *dāna* (charity), *vīrya* (fortitude), *śīla* (morality) *śānti* (patience) and *dhyāna*. Faith and *bhakti* has also been stressed upon. As Nagarjuna says in his commentary on the *Prajñāparamita*, "Faith is the entrance for the ocean of the laws of the Buddha and knowledge is the ship on which one can sail in it."¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Thus we conclude that freedom from the conflict of the phenomenal world has been projected the highest goal of a human being in the *Mādhyamika* School. The goal is to be one with the Reality. This stage has been called *Nirvāṇa*. The route to *nirvāṇa* is through knowledge. It has been stressed upon prominently that the knowledge of the truth, that is the reality can be attained only through the path of morality. Hence this school pays equal stress upon action as well as freedom.

The ideal is to attain the state where one is untainted and unaffected by action and not the cessation of action. A man who has been able to attain *Bodhisattvahood* continues to perform his works but without selfish interest. It is a state of passionlessness. Although work is the prime activity for a householder, he too is free to aim the position of *Bodhisattava*. The

idea of brotherhood of men and respect for all living things, and the prevention of cruelty to animals are the specific features of morality in this theory. Caste and all superficial distinctions have been broken down. The same appeals are made to all men, and the same goal is set before them. The goal is the infinite, tranquil, eternal felicity. It is a state of passionlessness. After the extinction of ignorance a state of perfect mental calm may be reached.

NOTES

1. *Mādhymikāvṛiti*, quoted in S. N. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi, 1922. Vol. I, pp. 140-141.
2. Nagarjuna, *Mādhymika Kārikā*, XV, p. 2.
3. See Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1962, Vol. I, pp. 645 ff.
4. Nagarjuna, *Mādhymika Sūtras*, chap XXIV
5. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 658.
6. *dve satye samupāshṛitya Buddhām dharmādeshana lokasamvṛtisatyāncha, satyāncha paramarthataḥ ye nayor na vijanānti vibhagam satyayor, dvayoh. te tattvam na vijananti gambhiram Buddhashāśane - Mādhymika - Kārikā*, XXIV, pp. 8-9.
7. *Mādhymika - Śāstra*, chap. XXV, Karika 3.
8. Nagarjuna, *Ratnāvali*, IV, pp. 95-96.
9. *Ibid.* I, p. 45.
10. *Prajñāparamita*, quoted in Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, Vol I, p. 603.

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