35. Use your endeavour! No heedlessness! Practise the Doctrine of good practice! Whoever practises the Doctrine dwells happily in this world and the other.

36. Delight in heedfulness, O monks! Be of good conduct, O monks! With your thoughts well recollected, watch your minds!

37. Begin now! Come out! Harness yourself to the Doctrine of the Buddha! Rout the army of death as an elephant lays waste to a hut made of branches!

38. Whoever is free from heedlessness in this Discipline and Doctrine, by rejecting the round of rebirths will reach the end of suffering.

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NIBBĀNA AND ABHIDHAMMA

L. S. Cousins

The nature of nibbāna in the teaching of the Buddha was already a subject of discussion in ancient times. More recently it has been much debated both in modern Western scholarship and also in more traditional Buddhist circles. One issue which has recently been a focus for discussion is the ontological status of nibbāna. Is it some kind of metaphysical absolute? Or is it better seen as the mere cessation of suffering or even as a total ending of existence?

In the nikāyas

A definitive answer to this question cannot easily be found on the basis of the nikāya material. Some passages would seem to suggest that nibbāna refers initially to the destruction of defilements at the attainment of enlightenment but ultimately more particularly to the consequent extinction of the aggregates making up the mind and body complex at the time of death. Other passages can be used in support of the belief that nibbāna is some kind of absolute reality. Nevertheless it is evident that most relevant contexts in the Sutta-piṭaka are so worded as to avoid any commitment on this issue. This is clearly intentional.

Such a manner of proceeding has many parallels in early Buddhist thought. The most well-known example is probably the ten unanswered questions of Mahāskyaputta, but some other questions are treated in the same way in the *sutta*. The accompanying passages make it quite clear that the main reason for not answering these kinds of question is because they 'are not connected with the spirit, not connected with the letter, not belonging to beginning the holy life, (they) conduct neither to turning away, nor to passionlessness, nor to cessation nor to peace nor to higher knowledge nor to full awakening nor to nibbāna'. This of course is illustrated with the parable of the arrow which strongly suggests that answering such questions would only give rise to endless further questions. The attempt to answer them would take up too much time and distract from the urgent need to follow the path towards the goal.

Some scholars, notably K.N. Jayatilleke, have suggested that this was partly because no meaningful answer was possible. There
may be something in this, but the texts do not seem to go quite so far. More emphasis is laid on the need to avoid one-sided views, particularly eternalism and annihilationism. Acceptance of much ways of seeing things would become fertile soil for various kinds of craving which would themselves lead to further or more fixed views, thus creating or rather furthering the vicious circle of unhealthy mentality. Clearly this would defeat the very purpose of the Buddha’s teaching. The Buddhist tradition is very emphatic that Buddhists only teach what is conducive to the goal.

This is perhaps worth spelling out in a little more detail. If body and soul (jīva) are one and the same thing, then physical death entails annihilation of the individual. If however they are distinct (and unrelated?), then death does not necessarily entail individual extinction and personal immortality might be inferred. These views are not necessarily wrong. They are however partial and misleading; exclusive adherence to them will lead to trouble. The Buddha’s example of the blind men and the elephant (Sūtra 572) illustrates this perfectly. Each blind man correctly recounted his experience of some part of the elephant. Unfortunately each one wrongly generalized his experience and insisted on its unique validity. In the end they came to blows. In fact the elephant was much more than partial experience led each blind man to suppose.

Similarly in the Brahmajāla Sutta the majority of wrong views are based upon genuine meditation experience and knowledge, but this has been incorrectly interpreted and dogmatically asserted: ‘this is truth, all else is foolishness’. Only a minority of views are the products of reasoning. Without a basis in experience this too can only lead to obsession. If the existence or non-existence of the Tathāgata after death is not specified, this is surely to avoid the two alternatives of eternalism and annihilationism. If the Tathāgata were declared to exist after death, then the Buddhist goal is some kind of immortality. Such a view would lead to some form of craving for renewed existence – the very thing to be abandoned. If on the other hand the Tathāgata were stated to be non-existent after death, then either craving for non-existence – yet another obstacle – would arise or the motivation to follow the path would be eroded.

The Buddha’s silence makes very good sense in this light.

Provided that is that the immense strength of these two types of viewpoint and their associated craving is recognized. For the Buddhist they are understood as pervading and distorting in one direction or the other all our normal modes of thought. Provided also that the path set forth by the Buddha is seen not so much as an alternative way of salvation comparable to others but more as a deliberate attempt to reduce the spiritual life to its bare essentials and to trim away everything redundant. The Buddha therefore teaches only what is necessary without making any attempt to satisfy intellectual curiosity where this would not be profitable. So it is emphasized that the Tathāgata does not teach things which are true but serve no useful purpose or may even create obstacles for the hearer.

The account of nibbāna given in the nikāyas is clear and cogent. Much can be said in praise of nibbāna to encourage the seeker, especially if it is in the form of simile or metaphor. Such we find frequently. But there must be nothing so concrete as to encourage attachment or dogmatic convictions. Beyond this the Buddha did not wish to go. The nikāyas never depart wholly from this position. Passages which can be used to support a ‘metaphysical’ interpretation do not do so unambiguously. Nor is nibbāna ever unequivocally depicted as total annihilation. What we find are hints and suggestions, but never enough to undermine the fundamental aim.

The apparent ambiguity is not carelessness or inconsistency. It is not that ‘the ancient Buddhist tradition was not clear on the nature of Nirvāṇa’. Rather it was quite clear that it did not wish us to be too clear! Nor is it that ‘Nirvāṇa had several meanings, and...was variously interpreted’. Such a view does not see the interconnectedness and internal consistency of the Buddhist dhamma. The apparent ambivalence here arises centrally by the force of the dialectic of early Buddhism. If that dialectic is understood, the ambiguities and silences appear profoundly integral to the Buddha’s message of salvation.

Nībbaṇa in the Abhidhamma-piṭaka

Whereas the sūtra material on the subject of nibbāna is often cited and has been the source of much controversy, it does not appear that abhidhamma material is so well-known. There may then be some value in drawing attention to certain aspects. The abhi-
Dhamma position is already clearly formulated in the Dhammasadgani (Dhs), the first and no doubt oldest work in the Abhidhamma-pitaka. The term nibbana is not used in the main body of Dhs which prefers the expression asakkhatā dhātu. This is usually translated as 'unconditioned element', i.e. that which is not produced by any cause or condition. Presumably this would mean 'that which is independent of relatedness'.

This interpretation of the term is supported by the Nikkhepa-kaṇḍa, in which the Mātikā couplet - asakkhatā/asakkhatā - is explained as equivalent to the previous couplet - sappaccaya/sappaccaya, i.e. conditioned/unconditioned. The first term in each case is explained referring to the five aggregates. So far the unconditioned element is different to the five aggregates. From this point of view something asakkhatā exists in relation to other things as part of a complex of mutually dependent phenomena.

The use of the term asakkhatā dhātu probably derives from the Bahudhātukasutta, where it is one of a series of explanations as to how a monk is dhītakara. Dhs usually translated by 'element' seems always to refer to a distinct sphere of experience: visible object is experientially distinct from auditory object, from organ of sight, from consciousness of sight, etc.; earth is distinct from water, etc.; pleasant bodily feeling from unpleasant bodily feeling, etc.; sense-desire from aversion, etc.; sense-objects from form or the formless. Likewise the unconditioned and the conditioned are quite distinct as objects of experience. Usually the analysis into dhātu is intended to facilitate insight into non-self. Presumably the purpose here is to distinguish conceptually the unconditioned element of enlightened experience in order to clarify retrospective understanding of the fruit attainment (phala-samyojana).

Asakkhatā occurs occasionally on its own in the nikāyas. The most conspicuous occasion is in the Asaṅkhata-sanyutta (S IV 359-68), where it is defined as the destruction of passion, hatred and delusion. In this context it is clearly applied to the Third Noble Truth. In the Aṅguttara-nikāya (I 152) the three unconditioned characteristics of the unconditioned are that 'arising is not known, ceasing is not known, alteration of what is present is not known'. These are opposed to the equivalent characteristics of the conditioned. In the Cūḷavedallasutta of the Majjhima-nikāya (I 300) the Noble Eightfold Path is declared to be conditioned.

In the Aṅguttara-nikāya (I 34) the Path is called the highest of conditioned dhammas, but nibbana (plus synonyms) is declared to be the highest when conditioned and unconditioned things are taken together.

It is, however, the verbal form corresponding to the much more frequent saṅkhāra, asaṅkhāra is an activity which enables something to come into existence or to maintain its existence - it fashions or forms things. So something which is saṅkhāra has been fashioned or formed by such an activity, especially by volition. The reference is of course to the second link in the chain of Conditioned Co-origination. The succeeding links refer to that which is saṅkhāra, i.e. fashioned by volitional activity (from this or a previous life). Since this amounts to the five aggregates, the whole mind-body complex, it is virtually equivalent to the meanings given above.

The Nikkhepa-kaṇḍa (Dhs 180-234) gives a surprising amount of information about nibbana in its explanation of the Mātikā. Before setting this out, it may be helpful to point out that the twenty two triplets which commence the Mātikā embody a definite conceptual order. The first five clearly concern the process of rebirth and the law of kamma. Then follow two connected with jhāna, after which are nine triplets concerning the path (magga). The final six seem to relate especially to nibbana. This is not accidental. The intention is certainly to indicate an ascending order. This is perhaps more clear if set out in full, but in the present context I will confine myself to tabulating the information given concerning the unconditioned element only in the Nikkhepa-kaṇḍa expansion of the triplets, listed in numerical order.

Asaṅkhata dhātu and the abhidhamma triplets

1. It is indeterminate i.e. not classifiable as skilful or unskilful action. Here it is taken with purely resultant mental activity, with kiriya action particularly that of the arahat who does what the situation requires and with all matter.

2. Is not classified as linked (sampayutta) with feeling i.e. not in the intimate connection with feeling which applies to mind. Here it is taken with feeling itself and with matter.
3. is neither resultant nor giving results
   Here it is taken with kiriya action and matter.

4. has not been taken possession of and is not susceptible of
   being taken possession of
   i.e. it is not due to upadana in the past nor can
   it be the object of upadana in the present – the refer-
   ence is of course to Dependent Origination. Here
   it is taken with the Paths and Fruits.

5. is not tormented and not connected with torment
   i.e. not associated with saññicitta nor able to lead
   to such association in the future. Here again it
   is taken with the Paths and Fruits.

6. is not with vitakka and vicara
   i.e. not in the close association with these activities
   which applies to mind. Here it is taken with matter,
   the mentality of the higher jhana and pure sense
   consciousness.

7. is not classified as associated with joy, happiness or equipoise
   i.e. not in the close connection with one or other
   of these which applies to the mind of the jhanas,
   paths or fruits. Here it is taken with matter, some
   feeling, painful tactile consciousness and aversion
   consciousness.

8. is not to be abandoned either by seeing or by practice
   i.e. not eliminated by one of the four paths. Here
   it is taken with everything which is not unskilful
   including matter.

9. is not connected with roots to be abandoned by seeing or by
   practice
   i.e. similar to the preceding triplet

10. leads neither to accumulation nor dispersal
    i.e. does not take part in any kind of kamma activity
    whether skilful or unskilful not even the dispersive
    activity of the four paths. Here it is taken with
    resultant mental activity, kiriya action and matter.

11. is neither under training nor trained
    i.e. distinct from supermundane consciousness. Here
    it is taken with matter and all mentality in the three

12. is immeasurable i.e. superior both to the very limited
    mind and matter of the sense spheres and to the less
    restricted mind of the form and formless levels.
    Here it is taken with supramundane consciousness.

13. is not classified as having a small object, one which has
    become great or one which is immeasurable
    i.e. the unconditioned element does not require any
    object (Graṃmanas) in contrast to mentality which re-
    quires an object in order to come into being. Here
    it is taken with matter.

14. as refined i.e. superior both to the inferior
    mentality associated with unskilfulness and to the
    medium quality of the remaining aggregates in the
    three levels. Here it is taken with supramundane
    consciousness.

15. is without fixed destiny i.e. does not involve a definite
    kamma result. Here it is taken with everything except
    the four paths and certain kinds of unskilfulness.

16. is not classified as having the path as object, as connected
    with path roots or as having the path as overlord
    i.e. does not have an object. Here it is taken espe-
    cially with matter.

17. is not classified as arisen, not arisen, going to arise
    i.e. classification in these terms is inappropriate
    for the unconditioned element which cannot be viewed
    in such terms – it is non-spatial. Here it is classi-
    fied on its own.

18. is not classified as past, future or present
    i.e. it is non-temporal. Here again it is classified
    on its own.

19. is not classified as having past, future or present objects
    i.e. it does not have an object. Here it is taken
    with matter.

20. is not classified as within, without or both
    i.e. it is not kamma-born. However the Atthakathā-
    kanda of the Dhs, which gives further comment on the
    Mātikā, traditionally attributed to Sāriputta, adds
here that nibbāna and inanimate matter (anindriya-baddhārūpa) are without whereas all other dhammas may be within or without or both. Probably it is following Vibh 115 which classifies the Third Truth as without. The difference is perhaps due to an ambiguity in the terminology. Without can be taken in two ways: a) without = the within of other people; b) without = everything which is not within. Nibbāna cannot be 'within' as it is not kamma-born.

21. is not classified as having an object which is within or without or both
i.e. it does not have an object. Here it is taken with matter.

22. cannot be pointed out and does not offer resistance
i.e. it is quite different to most matter and by implication can only be known by mind. Here it is taken with mentality and some very subtle matter.

In general the Mātikā couplets do not add much to our understanding of nibbāna. One point however is worth noting. The first three couplets of the Mahāntara-duka are merely a different arrangement of the four fundamentals of the later abhidhamma: citta, cetasika, rūpa and nibbāna. Taking this in conjunction with the explanation of the triplets summarized above, we can say that the Dhammasaṅgani makes very clear that the unconditioned element is quite different to the five aggregates - at least as different from the aggregates as their constituents are from one another.

The unconditioned is not matter, although like matter it is inactive from a kammic point of view and does not depend upon an object as a reference point. It is not any kind of mental event or activity nor is it the consciousness which is aware of mind and matter, although it can be compared in certain respects with the mentality of the paths and fruits. The Dhammasaṅgani often classifies paths, fruits and the unconditioned together as 'the unincluded (aparītāpānā)', i.e. not included in the three levels. Later tradition refers to this as the nine supremamundane dhammas. The unincluded consciousness, unincluded mental activities and unconditioned element are alike in that they are not able to associate with upādāna or with any kind of torment (kleśa), they are all 'immeasurable' and they are all 'refined'. The unconditioned element is unique in that it is not classifiable in terms of arising or as past, present or future. suggestively, however, it may be reckoned as nāma rather than rūpa. This does seem to suggest some element of underlying idealism of the kind which emerges later in the Viśṇuśāstra.

In other Abhidhamma works

The description given in the Dhammasaṅgani is followed very closely in later canonical abhidhamma texts. The Vibhaṅga, for example, gives the identical account in its treatment of the truths, taking the third truth as equivalent to the unconditioned element. The Dhātukathā does likewise. Some of this material can also be found in the Patthāna which sometimes deals with nibbāna as an object condition. The Patimambhidā-magga, which contains much abhidhammic material although not formally in the Abhidhamma-pitaka, also treats the third truth as unconditioned. Equally, however, it emphasizes the unity of the truths: 'In four ways the four truths require one penetration: in the sense of being thus (tathātā), in the sense of being not self, in the sense of being truth, in the sense of penetration. In these four ways the four truths are grouped as one. What is grouped as one is a unity. A unity is penetrated by one knowledge - in this way the four truths require one penetration.'

The four ways are each expanded. One example may suffice: 'How do the four truths require one penetration? What is impermanent is suffering. What is impermanent and suffering is not self. What is impermanent and suffering and not self is thus. What is impermanent and suffering and not self and thus is truth. What is impermanent and suffering and not self and thus and truth is grouped as one. What is grouped as one is a unity. A unity is penetrated by one knowledge - in this way the four truths require one penetration.'

This of course is the characteristic teaching of the Theravāda school that the penetration of the truths in the path moments occurs as a single breakthrough to knowledge (ekābhijñāsaya) and not by separate intuitions of each truth in different aspects. We find this affirmed in the Kathāvatthu, but the fullest account occurs in the Pāṭakopadesa which gives similes to illustrate simultaneous knowledge of the four truths. One of these is the simile of the rising sun: 'Or just as the sun when rising accom-
of the unconditioned and in their understanding of the nature of knowledge of the four truths the Theravādin abhidhamma opts for a far more unitive view than the Sarvāstivādin. This is certainly due to what Bureau calls 'la tendance mystique des Theravādin'. We may say that the Theravādin abhidhammatikas retained a closer relationship to their original foundation of meditative experience.

A unitary view of the truths has been interpreted in terms of 'sudden enlightenment', but it has not often been noticed that it involves a rather different view of the relationship between nibbāna and the world. This is significant. The view of nibbāna set forth in the Dhammasaṅgani appears to be in other respects common to the ancient schools of abhidharma. The Sarvāstivādin Prakaraṇapāda, for example, has much of the same material. It seems clear that although lists of unconditioned dharmas varied among the schools to some extent, they were all agreed that there were unconditioned dharmas and that the unconditioned dhara(s) were not the mere absence of the conditioned. Only the Sautrāntikas and allied groups disputed this last point. It seems clear that their position is a later development based upon a fresh look at the Sūtra literature among groups which did not accord the status of authentic word of the Buddha to the abhidharma literature.

The Dhammasaṅgani account is perhaps the earliest surviving abhidhammic description of nibbāna. It is certainly representative of the earlier stages of the abhidhamma phase of Buddhist literature. Of course some of the nīkāya passages cited above appear to suggest a very similar position. Very likely some of these were utilized in the composition of the Dhammasaṅgani, but this is not certain. At all events both are the products of a single direction of development giving rise to the abhidhamma. We may suggest that this represents a slightly more monist conception of nibbāna as against the silence of most of the suttas. Nevertheless such a position was at least implicit from the beginning.

J.R.G. Carter has drawn attention to the frequent commentarial identification of the word dhama as catusaccadhama (dhama of the four truth) and navavidha lokuttara dhama (ninefold supranundane dhama). Here again a close relationship between nibbāna and the five aggregates or between nibbāna and supranundane mentality is implicit. What emerges from this is a different kind of model
to those often given in Western accounts of Buddhism which seem to suggest that one has to somehow leave samāra in order to come to nibbāna. Such language is peculiar in relation to a reality which is neither spatial nor temporal. No place or time can be nearer to or further from the unconditioned.

It can perhaps be said that the supranormal mentality is somehow more like nibbāna than anything else. Compare, for example, the simile of Sakka in the Maha-Covinda-sutta: 'Just as the water of the Ganges flows together and comes together with the water of the Yamuna, even so because the path has been well laid down for disciples by the Lord, it is a path which goes to nibbāna, both nibbāna and path flow together.' Nevertheless nibbāna is not somewhere else. It is 'to be known within by the wise'.

In this fathom-long sentient body is the world, its arising, its ceasing and the way leading thereto.

Bareau has shown that the Theravāda abhidhamma retains an earlier usage of the term samahāra as uniquely referring to nibbāna. The other abhidhamma schools are in this respect more developed and multiply the number of unconditioned dharmas. Inevitably this tended to devalue the term. So much so that the Mahāyāna tends to reject its application to the ultimate truth. Bareau is surely right to suggest that there is a certain similarity between the original unconditioned and the emptiness of the Mādhyamika. To a certain extent the Mahāyāna reaction is a return to the original position if not completely so.

A similar situation occurs with the peculiarly Theravāda position of a single breakthrough to knowledge. So far as I know, it has not been pointed out how much nearer this is to the position of the early Mahāyāna than to the Valbhāsika viewpoint. The Theravāda does not reify dharmas to anything like the extent found in the Sarvāstivāda abhidharma. Nor does it separate samāra and nibbāna as dualistic opposites; knowledge of dakkha i.e. samāra and knowledge of its cessation i.e. nibbāna are one knowledge at the time of the breakthrough to knowing dhamma.

To summarize the kind of evolution suggested here: we may say that the main force of the nīkāyas is to discount speculation about nibbāna. It is the summum bonum. To seek to know more is to manufacture obstacles. Beyond this only a few passages go. No certain account of the ontological status of nibbāna can be derived from the nīkāyas. It cannot even be shown with certainty that a single view was held. By the time of the early abhidhamma the situation is much clearer. The whole Buddhist tradition is agreed that nibbāna is the unconditioned dhamma, neither temporal nor spatial, neither mind (in its usual form) nor matter, but certainly not the mere absence or cessation of other dharmas. The uniformity of this tradition is certainly a strong argument for projecting this position onto the nīkāyas and even for suggesting that it represents the true underlying position of the suttas.

In North India where the Sarvāstivāda abhidharma eventually established a commanding position, the term dhamma came to be interpreted as a 'reality' and given some kind of ontological status as part of a process of reification of Buddhist terms. Nirvāṇa then tends to become a metaphysical 'other', one among a number of realities. In the South, at least among the Theravādins, dhamma retains its older meaning of a less reified, more experiential kind. It is a fact of experience as an aspect of the saving truth taught by the Buddha, but not a separately existing reality 'somewhere else'.

So the four truths are dhamma. Broken up into many separate pieces they are still dhamma. As separate pieces they exist only as parts of a complex net of relations apart from which they cannot occur at all. This is samsāra. Nibbāna alone does not exist as part of a network. Not being of temporal or spatial nature it cannot be related to that which is temporal or spatial - not even by the relation of negation! Nevertheless it is not somewhere else. Samsāra is much more like a house built on cards than a solid construction. Only ignorance prevents the collapse of its appearance of solidity. With knowledge nibbāna is as it were seen where before only an illusory reality could be seen.

Notes

For other views see: K.N.Jayatilleke Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge,

2 The ten unanswered questions are put by the Mahākāyatā at M I 426ff., by Uțiyā at A V 191ff., by Puṇṭhāna at D I 187ff., and by Vacchagotā at S IV 355ff. Four of them are discussed by Sārīputta and by an unnamed bhikkhu at S II 222ff. and A IV 68ff. A much larger list is treated in the same way at D III 135ff., while a whole section of the Sāmyutta-nīkāya (IV 374-403) is devoted to these questions. Of course, this kind of expansion and variation is exactly what is to be expected with the mnemonic formulæ of an oral tradition. The issue is being looked at from various slightly different angles.


5 Not only do Dīnās have a canonical commentary appended to it. It is also quite evident that it is presupposed by the other works of the Abhidhamma-piṭaka (except Puggal-paṭhamā). Of course, the material which has been incorporated into the Viśhāla may be older than Dīnaśī, but in its present form it is younger.

6 Dīnaś 192-3.

7 M III 63 from here it has been included in the lists of the Dasuttarasutta (D III 274).

8 Bareau is wrong to suggest that the Viśhāla contradicts this, since the Viśhāla definition of nāma is in the context of paṭiccasamuppāda, which automatically excludes the unconditioned element.

9 e.g. Vibh 112-5; 404ff.

10 Dīnaśī 9 and passim.

11 Paṭṭī II 105.

Bareau, op. cit., p.31.

16 Ibid., p.253.

17 Ibid., pp.47-61.


19 D I I 273.

20 D I I 91; PTC gives twenty-four nīkāya references cv aṅgika.

21 S I 62; A I I 48,50.


23 Closely related schools of the Viśhajavādin group probably adopted the same position, but it was completely rejected by the Pudgalavādin and Sāravālīvādin groups. The Mahānāṃghikas appear to have adopted a compromise (see Bareau Les sectes bouddhiques du Petit Vehicule, Saigon 1955, p.62).