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Nirvana and Metaphysical Experience

by Ismael Quiles, S.J.

In my study *Buddhist Philosophy* I arrived at the conclusion that the complex phenomenon of Nirvana, as described by Buddhist interpreters, is fundamentally a metaphysical experience. Of course, it is something more than a metaphysical phenomenon, but no doubt, this is the basic, and the most common basis of all descriptions and analyses of Nirvana amongst Buddhist mystics and philosophers.

In this paper, I am trying further to develop my analysis of Nirvana as metaphysical experience, pointing out some of the fundamental aspects of such an interpretation.

I

What is metaphysical experience?

First of all, let me explain briefly what I mean by "metaphysical experience." This is a relatively new denomination in western philosophical terminology. Although the reality is easy to find in many cases in the history of western philosophy, the terminology has been used only recently as a common expression accepted by many philosophers. The main difficulty was the idea of traditional scholastic philosophers, as well as those who worked within the frame of rationalism in modern times, who rather considered the level of metaphysics as the result of a process of abstraction, and therefore could not think in the terms of metaphysical experience.

Nevertheless, in our century, many European philosophers

tried to surpass the rational method and to approach the ultimate reality of things by means of experience; therefore they attempted the method of analysis of our human experiences as the best way for our first meeting with reality itself. In this sense, we can quote many contemporary philosophers, from Bergson up to the existentialists of the last decades, and, among scholastic philosophers, Maritain, Cornelio Fabro, E. Gilson and others. Now, the terminology "metaphysical experience" is commonly accepted.

According to the meaning of the expression generally recognized, we notice the following elements.

1) *Metaphysical*. This means the expression is related to the ultimate reality of things, which is beyond our phenomenal or sensory knowledge. When we say "metaphysical" we are talking about the last reality, the true profound reality of things. Therefore, we are looking also to the "ultimate Truth," the ultimate and most profound "Being" of this phenomenal world. So it is called simply "Being" or "pure Being."

2) *Experience*.

a) First, by experience we mean always some kind of *knowledge*, which makes us aware of something.

b) Second, this knowledge by experience is different from that by abstraction or reasoning. The former requires the object to be *present* to the knower. No experience can be possible without the presence of its object. Experience means an immediate or direct knowledge of its object.

c) Third, this knowledge by experience needs to be felt. It is not conceptual, theoretical or rational, but simply felt by the knower. The being of the knower is immediately and, so to say, existentially affected by the object, both becoming a kind of unity, as the former is in its being itself pervaded by the object.

For a better understanding of what the expression "Metaphysical Experience" means in current discourse to western philosophers, it will be useful to add some quotations.

In the *Xth International Congress of Philosophy* (Bruxelles 20–26, August 1953) one of the central themes was Experience and Metaphysics. Twenty-four papers were presented on this subject. Let us see how some of them understand the fact of

a metaphysical experience as the highest level of human experience.

A. de Conink, in his paper "Experience and Metaphysics" says: "Ainsi donc notre expérience comporte un aspect auquel nous ne nous intéressons ni dans notre connaissance journalière ni dans nos travaux scientifiques, et qui pourtant l'englobe totalement et sans lequel elle est impossible, savoir l'aspect «être». Or, c'est là l'objet propre de la métaphysique" (*Proceedings* Vol. IV, Louvain 1953, p.14).

More explicitly, D. G. Londhey points out the connection of human experience and Metaphysics: "Man is a Metaphysical animal. Metaphysics is concerned with the search after first and ultimate principles. Man cannot reach the ultimate principle by the way of the world, as it is the business of science to discover the principle of the world. To reach the ultimate Reality man must analyze his own experience and discover the ultimate ground and principle underlying his experience." (*Anatomy of experience, Ibid.*, p. 90.)

Wilhelm Weischedel makes an illuminating analysis in his paper "Wesen und Aufgabe der Metaphysischen Erfahrung" (Essence and Function of Metaphysical Experience). He carefully distinguishes three levels of experience: 1) *Common Experience*, through which we know the Beings (*Erfahrung von Seiendem*) of the external world, other men, and also ourselves; 2) *Religious Experience*, which is the encounter with God; 3) *Metaphysical Experience*, which is a higher experience of Being or things, because it is the encounter with the last reality which is the foundation of all beings (*Ibid.*, p. 121-122).

It seems that Western Philosophers are approaching in this way the conception of Buddhist Nirvana.

II *Nirvana Experience*

If we now consider Nirvana, we will find the very same elements we described when analyzing metaphysical experience. We do not say that with these elements we take account of the whole reality of Nirvana, but certainly we find that this is a kind of metaphysical experience.

First, evidently Nirvana deals with the Ultimate Reality of things, that is the true Being of things. The Buddhist goal is to reach the Ultimate Truth, the Ultimate Reality, which is the real Being which underlies all changing phenomena, all differences and all multiplicity of things which we see in this material world. This is indeed a metaphysical target, as we have seen before. All Buddhist teachers, starting from the Buddha, talk about the Ultimate Truth, the Ultimate Reality of all things, as the goal of Nirvana. *What this Reality consists of is a further question*, but certainly to reach the *Ultimate Reality* of human existence was clearly preached as Nirvana, meaning liberation from the burden of human suffering.

We may observe this in the earlier Buddhist teachings, in the classic masters and in contemporary scholars. That Nirvana is a "special knowledge," which can be also called intuition, wisdom, *prajñā* or *jñāna*, belongs to the first teachings of Buddha in his First Sermon: "It is insight, which leads to wisdom, which conduces to calm, to knowledge, to the *sambodh*, to Nirvana."¹

Doubtless, the monk Gautama is teaching his personal experience, and therefore asks his first disciples to call him "Buddha."

This personal experience of Gautama was the most sacred tradition in early Buddhism. Although Āśvaghoṣa's *Buddha-carita* is a poem with much poetical imagination, it reveals the essence of the experience of Buddha under the Bodhi-tree.

Gautama longs for the truth of this human life. First he learns the stages of "contemplation" from the Sage Ārāḍa². He sees that they do not give him the true knowledge of Reality.

Then "seeking to know the true distinction," which means the higher knowledge, "he went to the hermitage of Udraka, but he gained *no clear understanding* from his treatment of the soul."³ He always looks for transcendent knowledge, "clear understanding," which reaches the essence of reality. This is a metaphysical knowledge.

After failing in his goal, Gautama is joined by five mendicants in his asceticism, and decides to find by his own effort the truth by means of a profound meditation (that is to say, "introspection," "intuition," *prajñā*, *jñāna*, all of which are a kind of knowledge, which European philosophers would call *metaphysical*).

Aśvaghoṣa goes on in chapters XII and XIII using expressions which all mean metaphysical experience: "higher wisdom";⁴ "in his longing to become a Buddha" or illuminated;⁵ "higher wisdom";⁶ "perfect knowledge";⁷ "he was on the point of attending perfect knowledge";⁸ Kāla, the Nāga king, says to Gautama, "Thou shalt certainly today become a Buddha";⁹ Gautama is called "a lamp of knowledge";¹⁰ the tree is called "the tree of Knowledge" (Bodhi-tree)¹¹ etc.

The Book XIV¹² contains the description of Nirvana. It is a clear account of a special act of knowledge, which is attained by "the great master of meditation . . . longing to know the supreme end."¹³ It is an intuition of the totality of reality: "Then by that divine perfectly pure sight, he beheld the whole world as in a spotless mirror."¹⁴ And when finally "the all-knowing Bodhisattva"¹⁵ discovered the four sacred truths, "he knew all as it really was."¹⁶ The poet completes the process with these words: "Thus he, the holy one, seated there on his seat of grass at the root of the tree, pondering by his own efforts, attained at last perfect knowledge."¹⁷ The same Bodhisattva declares solemnly: "I have here attained perfect wisdom."¹⁸

Let us consider some of the classical doctrines, for instance, the conception of *ālaya-vijñāna* of Asaṅga. Ultimate reality is pure mind or pure consciousness (*viśuddhavijñāna*) and to realize it is the Buddhist goal. "The own nature (*svabhāva*) of the knowledge-receptacle (*ālaya-vijñāna*) is a knowledge which is the sum of all seeds (*sarrahijaka*). All existences in the triple world and all destinies (*gati*) are the result of this knowledge."¹⁹ In this manner the intuition of this ultimate Reality (*viśuddhavijñāna*) gives the perfect knowledge or Nirvana and the description of attaining it reveals that it is the kind we have called "metaphysical experience."

Now can we resort to a modern western scholar, whose study on Nirvana is based on a profound knowledge of classic texts and history of Buddhism. Th. Scherbatsky, in *The conception of Buddhist Nirvana* gave us the following description:

"The Buddhist Saint is supposed, in a moment of mystic illumination, suddenly to perceive the whole construction, with its gross and mystic worlds, as vividly as if it were a direct sense perception. As a psychological process it is equally taught in Hinayāna and in Mahāyāna, but its content, the picture which

reveals itself at this moment, is quite different in both systems. It corresponds to their theoretical parts, to the system of pluralism which is taught in Hinayāna, and to the monist view which is the central conception of Mahāyāna, as will be seen later on."²⁰

It is easy to find in this analysis of Nirvana all elements belonging to what we described as "metaphysical experience," "mystic intuition," "mystic illumination," "to perceive the whole construction . . . as vividly as if it were a direct sense perception." We can apply to metaphysical experience what Scherbatsky says of Nirvana as "the path of illumination" (*dr̥ṣṭi-mārga*), which for Scherbatsky is "sudden and momentary."

Daizets T. Suzuki has been one of the most outstanding Buddhist scholars in the last decades. He has studied Buddhist Zen Satori from different points of view: historical, religious, psychological, psycholanalytical, philosophical. Of course, his approach to Nirvana is many-sided and sometimes paradoxical. But certainly he emphasizes much more the onto-psychological reality of Nirvana and in my opinion his description or interpretation is very near or practically the same as that which I describe as metaphysical experience, that is to say, is a special knowledge (illumination), immediate (non-conceptual), of Being (Ultimate Reality or Truth). According to him, Nirvana is no more than a state of consciousness (knowledge), by which in fact we transcend relativity, that is, the world of birth and death (Being).²¹ And to emphasize the philosophical and metaphysical aspect of Nirvana, Suzuki furnishes this description, which completely fits what I call "metaphysical experience": "Satori is no doubt incommunicable, but it is not any sort of transport. If it is, it will be a mere psychological phenomenon and cannot have any deeper import. But it really is what stands at the basis of every philosophical system. It thus has a metaphysical connotation."²² These last statements synthesize the essence of Satori as a metaphysical experience.

La Vallée Poussin, in his *Nirvana*, clearly reduces it to a "correct act of attention," that is "enlightenment," which will cut out the roots of desire.²³ It seems to fit Suzuki's description.

But let us quote another expressive passage from Suzuki, which shows once more that Nirvana is a special profound act of "living knowledge": "Satori is generally translated as 'en-

lightenment,' but 'awakening' may be a better term. . . . But as long as Satori explores and reveals the deepest and darkest recesses of consciousness which have hitherto escaped our ordinary inspections or introspections, it is enlightenment."²⁴

And finally let us give the interpretation of Satori which Suzuki attributes to the Sixth Patriarch: "This state of mind is echoed by Eno, the Sixth Patriarch, when he tells us to realize 'no-mind,' 'no-form,' 'no-abiding,' and further advises us 'to keep Tao' (i.e. *prajñā*) ever flowing with no obstructions."²⁵

We understand *prajñā* as Suzuki here uses it to mean not the simple act of knowledge (*jñāna*) but a "special act of knowledge" much more profound, rich and steady, which attains the bottom of Reality itself. A kind of vital-intuition-introspection of our profound reality and in it the pure Being; that is what I call, with other Western philosophers, a metaphysical experience.

Notes

1. Mahāvagga, S.B.E. XIII, I, 6 17-18 y *Dhamma-cakkappavattana* S.B.E. XI, n. 4.

2. Aśvaghōṣa, *Buddha-carita* XII, 1-81. Translated by E. B. Cowell, S.B.E., *Buddhist Mahāyāna Texts*, vol. 49.

3. *Ibid.*, XII, 82.

4. *Ibid.*, XII, 59.

5. *Ibid.*, XII, 97.

6. *Ibid.*, XII, 102.

7. *Ibid.*, XII, 102.

8. *Ibid.*, XII, 113.

9. *Ibid.*, XII, 115.

10. *Ibid.*, XIII, 63.

11. *Ibid.*, XIII, 65.

12. As is well known, the last four chapters of the Sanscrit text were written by a Nepalese author, Amṛitānanda in 1830. He seems to have had an imperfect copy of this part of the original Sanscrit, and also Tibetan and Chinese translations, but in some parts is very independent (E. B. Cowell, *Introduction* p. XI). But Amṛitānanda's terminology regarding Nirvana is faithful to Books XII and XIII.

13. *Ibid.*, XIV, 1.

14. *Ibid.*, XIV, 8.

15. *Ibid.*, XIV, 64.

16. *Ibid.*, XIV, 65.

17. *Ibid.*, XIV, 66.

18. *Ibid.*, XIV, 79.
19. *Asanga-Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* (La Somme du Grand Vehicule) Edition of Tibetan and Chinese text, with French translation by E. Lamotte. Louvain, Bibliothèque du Museon, T II chap. I, 21, p. 38.
20. *The conception of Buddhist Nirvana*, Leningrad 1927, p. 16.
21. *Zen and Japanese Buddhism*, Tokyo, 1956, p. 17.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 48-49. And follows: "It is a new view of life and of the universe that must be felt."
23. *Nirvana*, p. 86, cf. pp. 75-76.
24. *O.c.*, p. 47-48.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 27.