

Notes on Dhamma :: Shorter Notes :: NIBBĀNA

See Itivuttaka II,ii,7 <Iti.38>.[12]

The opinion has been expressed (in the P.T.S. Dictionary) that nibb na is not transcendental. If by 'transcendental' is meant 'mystical', either in the sense of having to do with a (supposed) Divine Ground or simply of being by nature a mystery, then nibb na (or 'extinction') is not transcendental: indeed, it is anti-transcendental; for mystification is the state, not of the arahat (who has realized nibb na), but of the puthujjana (who has not).[a] For the arahat, all sense of personality or selfhood has subsided, and with it has gone all possibility of numinous experience; and a fortiori the mystical intuition of a trans-personal Spirit or Absolute Self—of a Purpose or an Essence or a Oneness or what have you—can no longer arise. Cf. Preface (m). Nor, for one who sees, is the nature of nibb na a mystery at all. When a fire becomes extinguished (nibbuta) we do not suppose that it enters a mysterious 'transcendental state': neither are we to suppose such a thing of the person that attains nibb na. See Majjhima viii,2 & PARAMATTHA SACCA [a].

But if 'transcendental' means 'outside the range of investigation of the disinterested scholar or scientist', then nibb na is transcendental (but so are other things). And if 'transcendental' means 'outside the range of understanding of the puthujjana'—though the dictionary hardly intends this[b]—, then again it is transcendental. Only this last meaning corresponds to lokuttara. (i) Existence or being (bhava) transcends reason (takka, which is the range of the scholar or scientist), and (ii) extinction (nibb na) transcends existence (which is the range of the puthujjana):

(i) There is no reason why I am, why I exist. My existence cannot be demonstrated by reasoning since it is not necessary, and any attempt to do so simply begs the question. The Cartesian cogito ergo sum is not a logical proposition—logically speaking it is a mere tautology. My existence is beyond reason.

(ii) I can assert my existence or I can deny it, but in order to do either I must exist; for it is I myself who assert it or deny it. Any attempt I may make to abolish my existence tacitly confirms it; for it is my existence that I am seeking to abolish.

Ye kho te bhonto samanabr hman sato sattassa ucchedam vin sam vibhavam paññ penti te sakk yabhay sakk yaparijegucch sakk yam yeva anuparidh vanti anuparivattanti. Seyyath pi n ma s gaddklabaddho dalhe thambhe v kh+le v upanibaddho tam eva thambham v kh+lam v anuparidh vati anuparivattati, evam ev'ime bhonto samanabr hman sakk yabhay sakk yaparijegucch sakk yam yeva anuparidh vanti anuparivattanti. Those recluses and divines who know the annihilation, perishing, and un-being, of the existing creature,—they, through fear of personality, through loathing of personality, are simply running and circling around personality. Just, indeed, as a dog, tied with a leash to a firm post or stake, runs and circles around that same post or stake, so these recluses and divines, through fear of personality, through loathing of personality, are simply running and circling around personality.

(Majjhima xi,2 <M.ii,232>) Cessation of 'my existence' (which is extinction—

bhavanirodho nibb nam Extinction is cessation of being.

[Anguttara X,i,7 <A.v,9>]) is beyond my existence. See ATAKK VACARA.

The idea of nibb na as the ultimate goal of human endeavour will no doubt strike the common man, innocently enjoying the pleasures of his senses, as a singularly discouraging notion if he is told that it is no more than 'cessation of being'. Without actually going so far (overtly, at least) as to hope for Bradley's Absolute ('It would be experience entire, containing all elements in harmony. Thought would be present as a higher intuition; will would be there where the ideal had become reality; and beauty and pleasure and feeling would live on in this total fulfilment. Every flame of passion, chaste or carnal, would still burn in the Absolute unquenched and unabridged, a note absorbed in the harmony of its higher bliss.' [Op. cit. (A.&R.), Ch. XV]),—without perhaps going quite so far as this, even a thoughtful man may like to expect something a little more positive than 'mere extinction' as the summum bonum. We shrink before the idea that our existence, with its anguishes and its extasies, is wholly gratuitous, and we are repelled by the suggestion that we should be better off without it; and it is only natural that the puthujjana should look for a formula to save something from (as he imagines) the shipwreck.[c]

In the Ud na (viii,3 <Ud.80>) nibb na is spoken of by the Buddha in these terms:

Atthi bhikkhave aj tam abhktam akatam asankhatam, no ce tam bhikkhave abhavissa aj tam abhktam akatam asankhatam na yidha j tassa bhktassa katassa sankhatassa nissaranam paññ yetha. There is, monks, a non-born, non-become, non-made, non-determined; for if, monks, there were not that non-born, non-become, non-made, non-determined, an escape here from the born, become, made, determined, would not be manifest.

'Such a positive assertion of the existence of the Unconditioned' it is sometimes urged 'must surely imply that nibb na is not simply annihilation.' Nibb na, certainly, is not 'simply annihilation'—or rather, it is not annihilation at all: extinction, cessation of being, is by no means the same thing as the (supposed) annihilation of an eternal 'self' or soul. (See Majjhima xi,2, above.) And the assertion of the existence of nibb na is positive enough—but what, precisely, is asserted? In the Asankhata Samyutta (i,1 & ii,23 <S.iv,359&371>) we read

Yo bhikkhave r gakkhayo dosakkhayo mohakkhayo, idam vuccati bhikkhave asankhatam/nibb nam; destruction, monks, of lust, of hate, of delusion—this, monks, is called (the) non-determined/extinction.

and we see that, if we do not go beyond the Suttas, we cannot derive more than the positive assertion of the existence here of the destruction of lust, hate, and delusion. And this is simply a statement that to get rid, in this very life, of lust, hate, and delusion, is possible (if it were not, there would be no escape from them, and therefore—Anguttara X,viii,6 <A.v,144>—no escape from birth, ageing, and death). And the arahat has, in fact, done so.

But if, in our stewing minds, we still cannot help feeling that nibb na really ought, somehow, to be an eternity of positive enjoyment, or at least of experience, we may ponder these two Sutta passages:

Tisso im bhikkhu vedan vutt may , sukh vedan dukkh vedan adukkhamasukh vedan , im tisso vedan vuttam kho pan' etam bhikkhu may , Yam kiñci vedayitam tam dukkhasmin ti. Tam kho pan'etam bhikkhu may sankh r nam yeva aniccatam sandh ya bh sitam...

Vedan Samy. ii,1 <S.iv,216> There are, monk, these three feelings stated by me: pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling, neither-unpleasant-nor-pleasant feeling—these three feelings have been stated by me. But this, monk, has been stated by me: 'Whatever is felt counts as unpleasure (suffering)'. That, however, monk, was said by me concerning the impermanence of determinations... (See Vedan Samy. i,9, quoted at A NOTE ON PATICCASAMUPP DA §17.)

yasm S riputto etad avoca. Sukham idam vuso nibb nam, sukham idam vuso nibb nan ti. Evam vutte yasm U yasmantam S riputtam etad avoca. Kim pan'ettha vuso S riputta sukham, yad ettha n'atthi vedayitan ti. Etad eva khv ettha vuso sukham, yad ettha n'atthi vedayitam.

Anguttara IX,iv,3 <A.iv,414> The venerable S riputta said this:—It is extinction, friends, that is pleasant! It is extinction, friends, that is pleasant! When this was said, the venerable Ud yi said to the venerable S riputta,—But what herein is pleasant, friend S riputta, since herein there is nothing felt?—Just this is pleasant, friend, that herein there is nothing felt.

Footnotes:

[a] Cf. 'De qui et de quoi en effet puis-je dire: "Je connais cela!" Ce coeur en moi, je puis l'éprouver et je juge qu'il existe. Ce monde, je puis le toucher et je juge encore qu'il existe. Là s'arrête toute ma science et le reste est construction. Car si j'essaie de saisir ce moi dont je m'assure, si j'essaie de le définir et de le résumer, il n'est plus qu'une eau qui coule entre mes doigts. Je puis dessiner un à un tous les visages qu'il sait prendre, tous ceux aussi qu'on lui a donnés, cette éducation, cette origine, cette ardeur ou ces silences, cette grandeur ou cette bassesse. Mais on n'additionne pas des visages. Ce coeur même qui est le mien me restera à jamais indéfinissable. Entre la certitude que j'ai de mon existence et le contenu que j'essaie de donner à cette assurance, le fossé ne sera jamais comblé. Pour toujours je serai étranger à moi-même. ...Voici encore des arbres et je connais leur rugueux, de l'eau et j'éprouve sa saveur. Ces parfums d'herbe et d'étoiles, la nuit, certains soirs où le coeur se détend, comment nierai-je ce monde dont j'éprouve la puissance et les forces? Pourtant toute la science de cette terre ne me donnera rien qui puisse m'assurer

que ce monde est à moi.' --- A. Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Gallimard, Paris 1942, pp. 34-5. ('Of whom and of what in fact can I say "I know about that!" This heart in me, I can experience it and I conclude that it exists. This world, I can touch it and I conclude again that it exists. All my knowledge stops there, and the rest is construction. For if I try to grasp this self of which I am assured, if I try to define it and to sum it up, it is no more than a liquid that flows between my fingers. I can depict one by one all the faces that it can assume; all those given it, too, by this education, this origin, this boldness or these silences, this grandeur or this vileness. But one cannot add up faces. This same heart which is mine will ever remain for me undefinable. Between the certainty that I have of my existence and the content that I strive to give to this assurance, the gap will never be filled. Always shall I be a stranger to myself. ...Here, again, are trees and I know their roughness, water and I experience its savour. This scent of grass and of stars, night, certain evenings when the heart relaxes;—how shall I deny this world whose power and forces I experience? Yet all the science of this earth will give me nothing that can assure me that this world is mine.') A more lucid account by a puthujjana of his own predicament could scarcely be desired. This situation cannot be transcended so long as what appears to be one's 'self' is accepted at its face value: 'this self of which I am assured', 'this same heart which is mine'. The paradox (Marcel would speak of a mystery: a problem that encroaches on its own data)—the paradox, att hi attano n'atthi (His) very self is not (his) self's. (More freely: He himself is not his own.)

(Dhammapada v,3 <Dh.62>), must be resolved. This necessarily rather chromatic passage, which does not lend itself kindly to translation (though one is provided), makes the overtone of despair clearly audible. Needless perhaps to say, this despair marks the extreme limit of the puthujjana's thought, where it recoils impotently upon itself—and not by any means his normal attitude towards the routine business of living from day to day. [Back to text]

[b] The dictionary merely says that nibbana is not transcendental since it is purely and solely an ethical state to be reached in this birth. But this is altogether too simple a view. As pointed out in *KAMMA*, an understanding of the foundation of ethical practice is already beyond the range of the puthujjana, and ultimately, by means of ethical practice, the arahat completely and finally transcends it. Nibbana is an ethical state inasmuch as it is reached by ethical practice, but inasmuch as that state is cessation of ethics nibbana is transcendental. (It must be emphasized, lest anyone mistake this for a kind of antinomianism, that the arahat is in no way exempted from observance of the disciplinary rules of the Vinaya. How far he is capable of breaking them is another question. See *Anguttara* III,ix,5-7 <A.i,231-4> & IX,i,7&8 <iv,369-72>.) [Back to text]

[c] Jaspers, with the final and inevitable ruin of all his hopes, still reads his temptation to despair in a positive sense—we are able, he concludes, 'in shipwreck to experience Being' ('...im Scheitern das Sein zu erfahren.' --- K. Jaspers, *Philosophie*, Springer, Berlin 1932, Vol. iii, p. 237). But the Suttas are less accommodating. See *Majjhima* iii,2 <M.i,136-7> for an account of the eternalist's unrelieved angst in the face of subjective non-being (ajjhataṃ asati paritassan) upon hearing the Buddha's Teaching of extinction. He apprehends annihilation, despairs, and falls, beating his breast, into confusion. But not so the ariyas vaka. [Back to text]