

Buddhism as Philosophy

An Introduction

MARK SIDERITS

Published in the UK by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Great Britain

Published in North America by
Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
Indianapolis/Cambridge

Buddhist Ethics



4.1

The Buddha claims that the supreme goal for humans is nirvāna. We saw in Chapter 2 that this claim is based on the notion that only by becoming enlightened can we hope to permanently escape existential suffering. But it was unclear at that point whether there is anything more to being enlightened than just being without suffering. Is nirvāna pleasant? Is it a state of happiness? The early Buddhist texts are silent on this

point. We saw, though, that this might be part of a strategy to get around the paradox of liberation. Now that we have a better understanding of the Buddhist doctrine of non-self, we might be able to resolve some of these issues.

You will sometimes encounter the claim that Buddhist nirvāna is ineffable, that it simply cannot be described or understood, it can only be experienced. If this were right, then there would be no point in our asking what nirvāna is like. If we were trying to decide whether to seek it ourselves or not, we would be stuck. We would have to simply take the word of those who have attained it that it is supremely valuable. We would have to embark on the path without knowing where it went. But this claim is based on a misunderstanding of certain early Buddhist texts, such as the following:

Thus have I heard.

... Vaccha the *śramana* spoke to the Blessed One as follows:

‘How is it, Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the arhat exists after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?’

‘No, Vaccha. I do not hold that the arhat exists after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false.’

‘How is it, Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the arhat does not exist after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?’

‘No, Vaccha. I do not hold that the arhat does not exist after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false.’

‘How is it, Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the arhat both exists and does not exist after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?’

‘No, Vaccha. I do not hold that the arhat both exists and does not exist after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false.’

‘But how is it, Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the arhat, neither exists nor does not exist after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?’

‘No, Vaccha, I do not hold that the arhat neither exists nor does not exist after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false.’

‘Vaccha, the theory that the arhat exists after death is a jungle, a wilderness, a puppet-show, a writhing, and a fetter, and is coupled with misery, ruin, despair, and agony, and does not tend to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, knowledge, supreme wisdom, and nirvāna . . .

‘Vaccha, the theory that the arhat neither exists nor does not exist after death is a wilderness, a puppet-show, a writhing, and a fetter, and is coupled with misery, ruin, despair, and agony, and does not tend to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, knowledge, supreme wisdom, and nirvāna.

‘This is the objection I perceive to these theories, so that I have not adopted any one of them.’

‘But has Gotama any theory of his own?’

‘The Tathāgata, O Vaccha, is free from all theories; but this, Vaccha, the Tathāgata does know: the nature of rūpa, and how rūpa arises, and how rūpa perishes; the nature of sensation, and how sensation arises, and how sensation perishes; the nature of perception, and how perception arises, and how perception perishes; the nature of the predispositions, and how volition arises, and how

volition perishes; the nature of consciousness, and how consciousness arises, and how consciousness perishes. Therefore say I that the Tathāgata has attained deliverance and is free from attachment, inasmuch as all imaginings, or agitations, or false notions concerning a self or anything pertaining to a self have perished, have faded away, have ceased, have been given up and relinquished.'

'But, Gotama, where is the monk reborn who has attained to this deliverance for his mind?'

'Vaccha, to say that he is reborn would not fit the case.'

'Then, Gotama, he is not reborn.'

'Vaccha, to say that he is not reborn would not fit the case.'

'Then, Gotama, he is both reborn and is not reborn.'

'Vaccha, to say that he is both reborn and not reborn would not fit the case.'

'Then, Gotama, he is neither reborn nor not reborn.'

'Vaccha, to say that he is neither reborn nor not reborn would not fit the case ...'

'Gotama, I am at a loss what to think in this matter, and I have become greatly confused, and the faith in Gotama inspired by an earlier conversation has now disappeared.'

'Enough, O Vaccha! Be not at a loss what to think in this matter, and be not greatly confused. Profound, O Vaccha, is this doctrine, recondite, and difficult of comprehension, good, excellent, and not to be reached by mere reasoning, subtle, and intelligible only to the wise; and it is a hard doctrine for you to learn, who belong to another sect, to another faith, to another persuasion, to another discipline, and sit at the feet of another teacher. Therefore, Vaccha, I will now question you, and answer as you think right. What do you think, Vaccha? Suppose a fire were to burn in front of you; would you be aware that the fire was burning in front of you?'

'Gotama, if a fire were to burn in front of me, I should be aware that a fire was burning in front of me.'

'But suppose, Vaccha, someone were to ask you, "On what does this fire that is burning in front of you depend?" What would you answer, Vaccha?'

'Gotama, if someone were to ask me, "On what does this fire that is burning in front of you depend?" I would answer, Gotama, "It is on fuel of grass and wood that this fire that is burning in front of me depends."'

'But, Vaccha, if the fire in front of you were to become extinct, would you be aware that the fire in front of you had become extinct?'

'Gotama, if the fire in front of me were to become extinct, I should be aware that the fire in front of me had become extinct.'

'But, Vaccha, if someone were to ask you, "In which direction has that fire gone: east, or west, or north, or south?" what would you say, O Vaccha?'

'The question would not fit the case, Gotama. For the fire which depended on fuel of grass and wood, when that fuel has all gone, and it can get no other, being thus without nutriment, is said to be extinct.'

'In exactly the same way, Vaccha, all rūpa by which one could predicate the existence of the arhat, all that rūpa has been abandoned, uprooted, pulled out of the ground like a palmyra-tree, and become non-existent and not liable to spring up again in the future. The arhat, O Vaccha, who has been released from what is styled rūpa, is deep, immeasurable, unfathomable, like the mighty ocean. To say

that he is reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is not reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is both reborn and not reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is neither reborn nor not reborn would not fit the case.

‘All sensation ...

‘All perception ...

‘All volition ... All consciousness by which one could predicate the existence of the arhat, all that consciousness has been abandoned, uprooted, pulled out of the ground like a palmyra-tree, and become non-existent and not liable to spring up again in the future. The arhat, O Vaccha, who has been released from what is styled consciousness, is deep, immeasurable, unfathomable, like the mighty ocean. To say that he is reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is not reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is both reborn and not reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is neither reborn nor not reborn would not fit the case.’ [M 1.483–88]

It should be clear how passages like this might lead some to think that the state of *nirvāna* is ineffable. First we find the Buddha denying that any of the four possibilities listed by Vaccha correctly describes the situation of the arhat after death. Then he says that this situation is ‘deep’ and ‘immeasurable’. Since logic suggests that one of the four possibilities would have to be true,¹ the conclusion seems inescapable that the Buddha is calling *nirvāna* something that transcends all rational discourse. But now that we understand the distinction between the two truths we can see why this would be a mistake. As the example of the fire makes clear, the Buddha’s four denials all have to do with the fact that any statement about the enlightened person lacks meaning at the level of ultimate truth.

When a fire has exhausted its fuel, we say that it’s gone. Where has it gone? The question makes no sense. For the extinguished fire to have gone somewhere, it would have to continue to exist. The question presupposes that the fire continues to exist. Yet the question still seems to be meaningful. Since we are saying something about the fire – that it is extinguished – must there not be a real fire that we are talking about? How can you talk about something that is utterly unreal? And since this real fire is not here in front of us, must it not be somewhere else? When we encounter this sort of paradoxical situation, it is useful to stop and ask about the nature of the words we are using. How does the word ‘fire’ actually function? Consider the situation

¹Logic actually seems to suggest that there are only two possibilities, not four. There are a number of so-called disputed questions where the Buddha considers four possible answers: P, not P, both P and not P, and neither P nor not P. This general form or scheme is called the tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭi*). But logic seems to limit us to just a dilemma: either ‘P’ is true, or else it is false, in which case ‘not P’ is true. Scholars have disputed whether the presence of the third and fourth possibilities in this scheme indicate that Buddhists use some kind of alternative logic. One plausible answer is that the logic is standard. The third possibility (both P and not P) is meant to cover cases where ‘P’ is ambiguous, so that it could be said to be true in one sense but false in another. And the fourth possibility is meant to cover cases where there genuinely exists some third possibility besides those of ‘P’ and ‘not P’.

where we say we kept the fire burning by adding more fuel. Here we are talking as if there is one enduring thing, the fire, that first consists of flames from kindling, then later consists of flames from logs, then still later consists of flames from new logs. This should tell us that 'fire' is a convenient designator for a causal series of flames (just as 'the one light that shone all night' was really a causal series of lamp flames). And this in turn means that no statement using the word 'fire' can be ultimately true (or ultimately false). Any such statement lacks meaning at the ultimate level of truth. All that can be talked about at the ultimate level are individual flames, not the series of flames as a whole. This is why no answer to the question where the fire has gone is true. For a statement to be true (or false) it has to be meaningful. And statements about mere conceptual fictions are not ultimately meaningful.

When we apply this analysis to the case of the arhat after death, it becomes clear why the Buddha can reject all four possibilities without implying that nirvāna is an ineffable state. The word 'arhat' is a convenient designator, just like 'fire'. So nothing we say about the arhat can be ultimately true. The only ultimately true statement about the situation will be one that describes the *skandhas* in the causal series. It is, for instance, true that at a certain point (which we conventionally call 'the death of the arhat') the *nāma skandhas* existing at that moment do not give rise to successor *nāma skandhas*. Does this mean that the arhat is annihilated – that nirvāna means the utter extinction of the enlightened person? No. There is no such thing as the arhat, so it lacks meaning to say that the arhat is annihilated. And for exactly the same reason, it lacks meaning to say that the arhat attains an ineffable state after death.

