

## NIRVANA AND NO-SELF – POSTMETAPHYSICAL BUDDHISM

### 1. Postmetaphysical Buddhism

Classical notions of the self in Buddhism typically refer to the view that there is no self. This was originally an idea that the Buddha presented in order to explain how we could diminish suffering. It is suggested by some commentators that the Buddha's original outlook was *therapeutic*, that is, being in the world meant that we would necessarily experience suffering. It was therefore a *practical approach* to suffering. It is, then, a contested point as to whether the Buddha himself made the elimination of *all* suffering an axiomatic or essential part of his teachings or whether this became source of *doctrine* after his death. Either way many of the Buddhist traditions hold it to universally true that there is no tangible self which, in turn, enables the complete elimination of suffering.

Keeping to this narrow point I want to bring in the work of Jürgen Habermas. The character of the theory of no self is that it is metaphysical. It is making a claim about Being that is not open to refutation in non-metaphysical terms. But, I contend, it is no longer, philosophically, possible to hold any metaphysical views of the world which claim to make universal observations about the ultimate nature of reality. The ultimate nature of infinite reality is, and always will be strictly unknowable to finite beings such as ourselves. Habermas sums this position quite succinctly in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*

'Metaphysics believes it can trace everything back to one. Since Plato, it has presented itself in its definitive forms as the doctrine of universal unity; theory is directed toward the one as the origin and ground of everything.' (115)

"The question of how objective knowledge is possible has been answered by some theorists in an objectivistic and by others in a relativistic sense. Members of the first group reckon on an independent reality, toward which our interpretations finally converge, in the sense intended by a correspondence theory of truth. This group leaves intact the idea of reason that holds that in the long run exactly one true and complete theory would have to correspond to the objective world. ... The objectivists are faced with the problem of having to take a standpoint between language and reality in order to defend their thesis; but they can only argue for such a null-context from within the context of the language they themselves use. ... So whoever absolutises one of the two aspects of the linguistic medium of reason, be it its universality or its particularity, gets caught in aporias." (135)

The attempt to defend the idea of no self metaphysically is no longer credible.

### 2. No Self and Nirvana

The need for a theory of no-self in Buddhism is linked to the soteriological and ethical premise of such a perfectible psychological state as Nirvana. If we subscribe to the view of Nirvana as a psychological state rather than a heavenly place then it is commonly described as a state in which there is no more suffering. The Buddha's promise to an end to suffering, if such a promise was so naïvely made, is dependent upon the effort of the individual to skilfully deal with the psychological roots of suffering and thereby, in due course, attain Nirvana - a perfect state of equanimity.

The idea of a state of psychological 'perfection' may, and indeed I believe it does, have value as an ideal possibility, but the classical view of Nirvana is, to all intents and purposes,

impossible to achieve or even get reasonably close to. I think Stephen Batchelor in his book *After Buddhism. Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age* articulates a vision of Nirvana that sits more comfortably with modern philosophy and psychotherapy. That is, some suffering is just endemic in the human condition. Death, disease, pain and the kind of suffering caused by grief and loss face us all. Even the Buddha felt pain and loss. Yet the well tried and effective Buddhist techniques of meditation and mindfulness do help enormously to accept and alleviate such suffering. We know that the Buddha used these techniques for himself in later years which cannot but imply that the usage was a response to a felt form of suffering.

So the Buddha suffered. This is good news because it gives us a much more credible and useful way of looking at Nirvana. Rather than it being a state without any suffering whatsoever we can now look upon it as an achievable state where unnecessary suffering is no longer experienced (or, in practical terms, is substantially diminished); and where life's inevitable suffering is diminished by the practices of mindfulness and psychotherapy.

From this it follows that the classical Buddhist idea of no-self loses its function and therefore its relevance. The notion of no-self follows directly from the classical notion of Nirvana. If Nirvana is seen as a state where there is no suffering at all, and if classical Buddhism explains suffering as being caused by the self's clinging and attachment to impermanent and undesirable psychological states then the position wherein one feels no suffering has to be one in which there is no self to suffer the inevitable torments that life is wont to dish out on a regular basis. This is a blessing. To be able to achieve a state of perfect equanimity whilst one's closest relative is, in an extreme case, being tortured has more than a hint of the inhuman and robotic about it. What a postmetaphysical Buddhism can offer, and it is a substantial offering, is an acceptance (through mindfulness) of the emotional impact on oneself of such a horrible circumstance and the ability to withstand it and reduce as far as possible the level of suffering experienced. To want more, understandable as that may be, is both unrealistic and a category error induced by latent metaphysical thinking in much Buddhism.

### **3. Jung and Individuation**

I think the debate within Buddhism about the self/no-self issue would benefit from being informed by an understanding of the Jungian theory of individuation. Rather than trying to divest ourselves of selfhood the project of our life should take almost the opposite course of trying to incorporate the totality of our selfhood or being into an authentic Self. We find this Self through the long and arduous process of trying to integrate all those alienated, cut-off, dissociated and repressed aspects of identity from which we assiduously try to defend ourselves. We might see the self or ego as the everyday sense of ourselves (and our world) that we have and which has protected us from those aspects of our early socialisation that were dangerous to us by repressing them. The higher or authentic Self is that part of our identity or personhood that consciously seeks to integrate the cut-off parts of our self back into a more rounded and total personhood or individuated Self.

But neither Nirvana nor the totalised individuated Self are achievable in their ideal state. But they are *ideals* which we can strive towards. Thus they are not metaphysical absolutes but psychological states that are theoretically ideally achievable but in reality we can only reach them either approximately or temporarily. The healing of unnecessary and historical suffering is a very real possibility as are temporary states of postmetaphysical Nirvana.

### **4. Buddhism and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

I wonder if the experience of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) might tell us something relevant about the Buddhist conception of no-self? I have suffered from a severe case of PTSD from which it is taking a long time to recover. It strikes me that if you seriously interpret PTSD from a no-self perspective you will never get well. Critical to recovery is the extremely painful process of recognising (in the horrific traumatic symptoms, experiences and memories) the wounded parts of yourself that were necessarily cut-off through the inevitable process of dissociation that characterises trauma. The psychological term “dissociation” describes it well. In trauma we assiduously and desperately block-off and defend ourselves from the terrifying experiences and memories that threaten to overwhelm us. Recognising that this is the case is the first step in the healing process. The next step is to integrate these wounds. It is of course immensely difficult because we are, quite rightly, terrified of them which is why we describe them as traumatic. I cannot see how a no-self-approach would help because to integrate these dissociated parts we have to accept them as being a part of *our* selfhood - as being *my* experience. If we simply witness them in the classic Buddhist sense as phenomenological “bundles of consciousness” we would not be able to recognise these “bundles” as categorically different from non-traumatic conscious experiences. We would never be able to integrate them because there would be no self into which they could be integrated. We would remain traumatised.

On the plus side, though, the Buddhist conceptions of acceptance, loving kindness and mindfulness are invaluable tools (alongside psychotherapy) in the healing process from trauma. Intriguingly Epstein in *The Trauma of Everyday Life* suggests that the Buddha himself, in his description of his own journey to enlightenment, was implicitly describing his healing from the trauma of the loss of his mother in infancy.