

Buddhism, Language and Nihilism

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“Buddhism refers to the characteristic of Impermanence as the nature of all phenomena, whether physical or psychological. Thus, how is the ontology of Buddhist philosophical doctrine determined when everything is always changing, impermanent (relational/connected to exist), without a definite self-existent nature?

Buddhist philosophy establishes philosophy: With the principle of dependence (conditions, causes and conditions), and everything is always changing and changing in connection, there is no definite self-existent self-nature, which is the essence of Buddhist ontological philosophy. This difficult question awakens self-awareness and self-questioning in the readers. In this study, the author used consulting skills in language, nihilistic philosophy and Buddhist philosophy to pose problems for reference. An interesting and useful subject for reference in the academic field of philosophy.

- Thich Giac Chinh, Chief Editor.

Summary: The language assumes central importance in Buddhist psychology, which is to all effects a psychosemantics. All constructive cognitive processes (*saṅkhāra*) are nothing but artificial and conditioned products, including the *rūpa*, the ‘form’ or ‘body’ of things which, as explained in the doctrine of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, is generated, in fact, based on individual conscience. By studying the relationship between language and cognition in relation to the external world, Buddhist philosophy runs into one of the greatest problems of any tradition of thought: the question of being and nothingness. How can a “being” be defined? And furthermore, is it possible that being is annihilated and becomes nothing?

Introduction

The purpose of Buddhist negation is not merely negation as such, but the positive goal of pointing towards the Absolute. In other words, the Absolute is approached through the logic of negation. Negation is simply an expression of the Absolute.²

From the very beginning of the comparative studies between European

¹ BA Asian Studies (Rome),
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² Genjun, Sasaki. *Linguistic Approach to Buddhist Thought*. Motilal Banarsidass, 1986: 1.

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philosophical traditions and Buddhist philosophy, a fundamental problem has emerged that is still unsolved: is Buddhism a nihilistic thought?

Naturally, the interpretations here branch out into two main strands: the supporters of the idea of a Buddha as an extreme nihilist, and those who, on the other hand, point to existentialist instances.

In this type of question, however, the thought of Nāgārjuna is often brought to the debate by those who sometimes see him as the one who lead the nihilistic ideas of the Buddha to the extreme³.

Nevertheless, there is also the opposite thesis.

Regarding Nāgārjuna's alleged nihilism, Murti writes:

There is, however, hardly any justification for characterising the Mādhyamika as a nihilist. No absolutism would, in that case, escape this charge, for everyone of them has to negate all predicates of the absolute. There is no reason to single out the Mādhyamika as specially nihilistic. If anything, his is a very consistent form of absolutism.⁴

In his text Murti did his utmost to refute any hypothesis of nihilistic interpretation of Buddhism. There is indeed a certain tendency to assume that the very idea of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is a void that is a “nothing”⁵, and therefore this search for nothing would justify the nihilistic interpretation of Buddhism. The fact is that emptiness (*śūnya*, or in

pāli: *suñña*) is neither nothing nor nothingness (*ākiñcaññā*), and this can be easily understood by analysing the texts.

At first, we must distinguish the idea of emptiness or voidness from the idea of nothingness or not-being.

The problem Nihilism

The most complete explanation of what nihilism is, was given by Emanuele Severino, and therefore we will go back to his exposition⁶.

According to Severino's thought, everything is eternal, but the things of the world that appear to us, that is entities, are not eternal in themselves, but as *beings*, that is, aspects of the Whole, manifestations of the only Being. Severino's thought is often called neo-parmenidism, as it takes up the famous philosophy of Parmenides on being and nothingness. For Severino, nihilism cannot reasonably exist, in the sense in which a being contradictorily becomes a non-being. All that is, by its mere definition, *is* and cannot “be a non-being”. What is-not, by its very definition, is not, therefore it does not pertain to what *is*. Being is eternal, therefore it cannot be a non-being, but this means that is not eternal in a temporal sense.

Severino rejects both the nihilistic and the eternalist interpretation. Finally, what appears to us as the death of being, is in reality the being permanently taking itself out of *appearing*. Things appear to our vision, but when they disappear it does not mean that they are dead just because we no longer see them. We just cannot conceive them with our cognitive system anymore. But, if our cognitive system could transcend perceptual limits, we will

³ Ye, Shaoyong. *From Scepticism to Nihilism: A Nihilistic Interpretation of Nāgārjuna's Refutations*. Journal of Indian Philosophy, 2019, 47.4: 749-777.

⁴ Murti, T.R.V. : *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism. A Study of the Mādhyamika System*. Routledge, 2008: 147-148.

⁵ Tola, Fernando, et al. *On voidness: study on Buddhist Nihilism*. Motilal Banarsidass, 1995.

⁶ Severino, Emanuele. *The essence of nihilism*. Verso Books, 2016.

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realize that being *is* always, even when it disappears from our *perceptual sphere*.

Actually, it is known that both older Buddhism and Mādhyamaka rejected the idea of nihilism. Rejecting both eternalism (*sāśvatadṛṣṭi*, in pāli: *sassatavāda*) and nihilism (*ucchedavāda*), Buddhist thinkers seem to take a position that does not foresee an eternity of being, but it is necessary to understand that the eternalism they reject is a temporal eternalism, which affirms the absolute truth of the conventional reality, where instead the timeless eternity of the ultimate Truth (*satya*, in pāli: *sacca*), cannot be considered a fact that persists over time, but rather, that it was never born and never can die.

The only permanent thing, *paramārtha* (in pāli *paramattha*), is the all-pervading sense (*parama-ārtha*), but this is an ultimate truth that conceives the totality of beings as a single reality in which everything is interconnected, and precisely since everything is interconnected it cannot exist as a piece separated from the net altogether. Everything is, therefore, *interdependent*.

What our mind sees instead is a reduction of the absolute into relative interpretations, in which the single pieces are not seen as interdependent, but as entities separate from us. But this worldview splits everything into subjects and objects, creating a suffering derived from this separation, which drives us to desire the object that is separate from us, and this causes attachment.

Similarly, as long as we live in the interpretative dimension of reality, everything is *appearance*, everything is relative (*sammuti*) because it is made up of nominal designations (*paññatti*).

Suffering, according to the most ancient Buddhism, is only the result of a cognitive deception. Not being aware of it (*avijjā*) means seeing impermanence

(*anicca*) as a death sentence for the things we attach to, without knowing that they are actually part of us, as we are part of the Whole.

Also, for this reason, the ultimate goal of Buddhist meditation can be defined as reunion (*samādhi*) between subject and object.

The question of nihilism, as explained by Severino, is an existential drama that they find themselves having to face all cultures. The idea about the possibility that “being” can become non-being (dying, ceasing to be) is a “permanent anthropological risk”⁷ that needs to find a solution. At the same time, however, this hypothesis is an unjustified fear according to Severino, as it is self-contradictory. Being *is* and cannot “not-be”. Everything that *is*, cannot not-be.

These are the famous verses of Parmenides which recite “being is, nothing is not” (*ésti gàr êinai, mēdèn d’oyk éstin*) and, consequently, if a thing is-not, it does not exist. Yet we can say “nothing”. But evoking the concept of *nothing* through the word “nothing” does not imply that nothingness, for what it claims to mean, can exist: if it is nothing then it does not exist. But Buddhism comes in here: the problem lies in the *word*.

However, the fact that we can evoke the word “nothing” (the concept of “nothing”), does not mean that what this concept purports to affirm is truth, but simply that *there is* actually something: a concept, precisely *the idea* of “nothing”.

But precisely, *the idea* of nothing *exists* and is not a nothing. The *no-thing* is not anything. The idea of nothing (what appears to our mind every time we use the word “nothing”) instead is *something*, and as something that is, it contradicts the very idea that

⁷ De Martino, Ernesto. *La fine del mondo. Contributo all’analisi delle apocalissi culturali*. Einaudi, 2019: 128.

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there may be the possibility of “being nothing” that is the impossible possibility of “being a non-being”.

Nihilism as byproduct of cognition

When we observe the burning wood, knowledge deceives us, giving us the impression that the wood becomes ash. From a logical point of view, since human beings have assumed the identity of things through language, affirming that wood becomes ash is an intrinsic contradiction, as it is claimed that wood becomes something other than itself. That is, the wood is what it is not. At the same time, the statement “wood *becomes* ash” implicitly also assumes the identity between wood and ash. But saying that wood is ash is nonsense. Furthermore, in what we believe to be a *becoming*, the identity of wood and ash does not appear. What we see instead, according to Severino, is a succession of independent states, each of which is a being of the things that appear, that is, it is an eternal.

To resolve this contradiction, Greek thought founds the idea of Nothing. That is, it assumes that in order to become something else, things first are annihilated: the thing goes into nothing and the other thing comes out of nothing. However, this explanation poses more problems than it solves: can we in fact accept that the statement “wood becomes ash” is equivalent to admitting that “nothing has become ash”? Of course not, but in doing so the West thought avoided getting rid of the becoming, which it needed to found its strength, a violent force of domination, but at the same time it was dominated by the terror of Nothingness. The creature turns against the creator, and guides the West on a distressing path of escape from the terror of death which inevitably translates into a desire for perennial

conquest, through which one can export one’s own sign of identity to the lands of the other⁸.

However, it is interesting to note that in Nāgārjuna’s work there is an example similar to that of Severino on wood and ash. Nāgārjuna wonders how it is possible to describe the event of combustion in which, at least apparently, a combustible thing becomes combusted in a form *other* than itself. For Nāgārjuna what Severino points out in his example is taken for granted: when we affirm that wood becomes ash, we are implicitly affirming an identity of wood and ash that contradicts the very sense of identity. But Nāgārjuna is more subtle: he does not analyse two “things” (wood and ash), but focuses on the event of combustion itself, which gives identity to the combusive agent and the combusted agent. He also makes a provocative statement that should make us think.

*yad indhanam sa ced agnir ekatvam
kartṛkarmanoḥ |
anyaś ced indhanād agnir indhanād apy rte
bhavet ||
nityapradīpta eva syād apradīpanahetukāḥ |
punarārambhavaiyarthyam evaṃ cākarmakāḥ
sati ||*

If the fire coincided with the fuel, [then] the agent and the object that undergoes the action would be the same thing. If the fire is other than the fuel, [then] it would exist independently from the fuel.

[The fire] would be eternally lit, without having been ignited, and there would be no

⁸ Severino, Emanuele, and Santo Pettinato. *Technics, nihilism, truth*. *Annali d’Italianistica* 29 (2011): 107-122.

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need to light it again. So it would be an act independent of the object.⁹

The problem is, as Nāgārjuna himself points out in verse 12 of *agnīndhana parīkṣā*, that “fire”, as such, as what we call “fire”, “does not exist dependent on fuel, nor independently of fuel” (*apekṣyendhanam agnir na nānapekṣyāgnir indhanam*). Conversely, the “fuel”, “does not exist dependent on fire, nor independently of fire” (*apekṣyendhanam agniṃ na nānapekṣyāgniṃ in-dhanam*). This is the great problem of sign identity: a single sign, although its identity is thought to be given independently, is certainly such (fire is “fire” and nothing else), but at the same time it cannot exist “fire” outside the linguistic system that gives identity to “fire” as a function of its opposition to everything else.

The fact that this example was well known in the Buddhist environment is beyond question, so much so that another great philosopher, Vasubandhu, also uses it, albeit for different needs: «Vasubandhu speaks of how a flame, which is in fact made of countless momentary explosions, and which may be passed from one wick to the next, in fact appears as a single, ongoing “light.” In the same way, the countless momentary “defilements,” which have originated out of previous actions and defilements, continue and move to a new set of aggregates with the appearance of a single, ongoing “intermediate body.” Thus there is no “intermediate body,” but there is a continuum of entities that may be said to “transmigrate,” in the sense that, joined together

conceptually across time, the continuum is said to be in different bodies at different times»¹⁰.

It is repeatedly reiterated already in the Pāli canon that the key to liberation from suffering is awareness, wisdom or gnosis, a superior form of knowledge that transcends cognitive limits, and this transcendence is implicit in the need to reach what the Buddha defines as “neither idea nor non-idea” (*nevasaññānāsaññāyatanaṃ*), a concept that at this point should be clear to be non-nihilistic, but rather opposed to any dualism (including that between the idea of being and that of non-being!) which is true nihilism.

The means for knowledge is undoubtedly meditation (*dhyāna*, in pāli: *jhāna*): for example, Johansson reports a case in which a monk «attains different levels of samādhi and what he learns in the different levels. So he attains “the signless concentration of mind” (*animitta cetosamādhi*), and his mind is pleased with it»¹¹. A 1986 study by Harvey focuses on the concept of dissolving the “sign” (*nimitta*) as the main purpose of meditation¹² which could lead us to further reflections on the relationship between semantic cognition, language, world perception and nihilism in Buddhist philosophy.

Dhammas as entities

The translation of the term “dhamma” has always created numerous problems for scholars of Buddhism. It is a fact that the term, deriving from the root *dhr-* (“firm”, “stable”) is interpreted in

⁹ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*: 10.1-2

¹⁰ Gold, Jonathan. *Paving the Great Way. Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy*. Columbia University Press, 2015: 62.

¹¹ Johansson, Rune. *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism*. Curzon Press, 1979: 206.

¹² Harvey, Peter. “Signless” *Meditations in Pāli Buddhism*. The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, vol. 9, No. 1, 1986.

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different ways according to the Indian traditions that make use of it. The contextual use of the term suggests that it should be interpreted in terms of “law”¹³, “norm”, “conduct”. I suggest, however, to interpret this term also as “entity”, when referring to the plurality of possible dharmas, and as “being”, when the Dhamma is meant as singular.

yadaiva sarvadharmāṇām utpādo
nopapadyate /
tadaivam sarvadharmāṇaṃ nirodho
nopapadyate //

Given that the production of any entity is senseless,

in the same way it is senseless to support the annihilation of any entity.¹⁴

The Buddha often speaks of *Dhamma* in the singular, distinguishing it from the plural *dhammā*. It is quite evident that there are two distinct things in his speech. Regarding the singular Dhamma, the Buddha has to say that it is visible here-and-now (*sandiṭṭhika*), but also that it is substantially timeless (*akālita*), therefore not subject to the unfolding sequence of events or, in the most common perception, to becoming, to a being-before-and-after. The unique singular Dhamma is so important to the Buddha’s thinking that he often refers to his doctrine directly as “the Dhamma” (*dhamma-vinaya*).

Death therefore also appears as a problem regarding the disintegration of things. The Buddha recognizes that in appearance everything is in constant

transformation, but this change, dutifully recognized as a change of *form*, does not necessarily coincide with death from form to form becoming. Becoming itself is rejected as an evolutionary concept (*pariṇāma*) when it is stated that it is incorrect to argue that an effect comes from a cause, nor that an effect is an evolved form of its cause¹⁵.

According to the Abhidhamma the only meaning of *paññatti* is “which lacks an objective referent” (*asabhāva-dhamma*), therefore the nāgārjunian idea of a *prajñāpti* is quite different. The delicate question involves the Abhidhammic idea that phenomena come into being from a state of previous nonexistence (*ahutvā sambhanti*), just as they would cease to exist when they disappear (*hutvā paṭiventi*). This nihilistic idea is completely absent in original Buddhism, and in fact it is not found in the Pāli canon. Nāgārjuna, who promotes a drastic return to original Buddhism, placing himself in open controversy with subsequent interpretations, wrote important verses on the logical impossibility for a being to *become* as much as from a non-being, as much as from another different being, just as from a “non-being”. A being cannot logically become itself neither from a (different) being nor from a previous state of non-being¹⁶.

The nāgārjunian discourse cannot help but see a single being-self (*tattva*) of things¹⁷, relegating total conventionality to the phenomenal apparitions of

¹³ Squarcini, Federico. *Tradition, veda and law: studies on South Asian classical intellectual traditions*. Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2008.

¹⁴ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*: 7.29.

¹⁵ Karunadasa, Yakupitiyage. *Early Buddhist Teachings. The Middle Position on Theory and Practice*. Wisdom Publications, 2018: 23.

¹⁶ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*: 21.12-13.

¹⁷ Jones, Richard H. *On What is Real in Nāgārjuna’s “Middle Way”*. *Comparative Philosophy*, 2020, 11.1: 5. Siderits, Mark. *Nāgārjuna as anti-realist*. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 1988, 16.4: 311-325. Mishra, Ananda. *Nāgārjuna’s śūnyatā: beyond being and nothingness*. *The Journal of East West Thought*, 2018, 8.1: 47-53.

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dhammas-entities (therefore all *dhammas* are interdependent, that is empty, which means that there is a single “whole” in which the phenomenology of the world appears), on the contrary, the Theravādins argue that there are *dhammas* in an objective way (*paramatthaviijjamānatā*), and that they would be such because they would be knowable (*ñeyya*) in the “ultimate” sense (*paramatthato upalabhamānatā*), therefore not decomposable into further elements of interdependence, but such in themselves, the whose independent existence would be verifiable by the proof of the facts (*samvijjamānatā*), unlike other *dhammas*, which are interdependent and therefore intrinsically vacuous and conventional (*sammuti*) although empirically knowable.

All this, of course, constitutes an absolute contradiction in the *nāgārjunian* system, as it would admit the existence of elements of the system that are extraneous to the system itself, but capable of influencing it. *Nāgārjuna*, however, while using a typically *Abhidhammic* lexicon, opposes it to the extent that it is admitted that something ultimate (*uttama*) includes some entities (*dharma / dhamma*) to the detriment of others, endowing them with an independent intrinsic nature (*paramattha-sabhāva*).

Conceiving the eternal Being

According to the hypothesis of some scholars¹⁸, ancient Buddhism conceived the state of Buddha as that of “deathless”. However, in an attempt to understand what the condition of death indicates, we can make two hypotheses: if death in Buddhism indicates the condition of annihilation then the state

of immortality (*amṛta*) acquires a certain value to which we usually think analogously also to the concept of Greek *ámbrōtos*. However, by carefully analyzing some passages of the *pāli* canon, such as the philosophy of *Nāgārjuna* which claims absolute fidelity to ancient Buddhism, it is evident that rather the “deathless” condition indicates that of full-Being in opposition to that of an existent being and its disappearance according to the apparent and relative change of the things of the world.

All this pushes us to formulate reflections about the most ancient form of Buddhism, which some call early Buddhism or proto-Buddhism. In this regard, there are conflicting opinions also among scholars. According to Vetter, for example «the Buddha at first sought, and realized, the ‘deathless’ (*amṛta*, *pāli*: *amata*), which is concerned with the here and now. Only after this realization, when he had already started preaching this discovery, did he supposedly become intimately acquainted with the doctrine of rebirth held in certain ascetic circles»¹⁹.

There is also another factor to consider: it is possible that in ancient Buddhism the idea of rebirth and that of karma were not related in the way they are today. The idea of rebirth initially referred to a non-personalistic fact: the ego was linked to the worldly experiences of the body, and with it dissolved at its death, but “something”, like a vital core of being, was kept anchored to worldliness if he was not freed from *bodhi*. Around this something then crystallized new aggregates from which a new person was generated. So it is always a different ego that is born from time to time, but what allows it is precisely to die without having obtained the liberation of this

¹⁸ Langer, Rita. *Buddhist Rituals of Death and Rebirth*, Contemporary Sri Lankan Practice and Its Origins, 2007: 26-28.

¹⁹ Bronkhorst, Johannes. *Did the Buddha Believe in Karma and Rebirth?*, Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1998: 3.

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sort of soul (remember that in Buddhism a soul is never explicitly mentioned) which is anchored to materiality of the world and bodies. A similar discourse occurs in the older Sāṃkhya philosophy between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. In fact, according to Vetter, in ancient Buddhism factors such as craving and ignorance were much more crucial in determining rebirth than karma²⁰.

If the Buddha had really believed in a reincarnation as we understand it today, his doctrine of the non-self (*anatta*) would appear senseless, since it affirms the ephemeral nature of personal identity, precisely in constant change and destined to fall apart with the body death.

Which brings us back to the initial problem: the centrality of mental factors of attachment and ignorance as the real causes of rebirth.

The Buddha did believe in rebirth, and he did believe that one's future destiny is determined by what we may call karma, but which is in some essential respects different from what his contemporaries meant by it. For the Buddha, one's future destiny is determined by what passes in one's mind, i.e., by desires and intentions.²¹

But we are not specifically interested in rebirth, but a problem related to the concept of death. What is, that is, the Buddha's idea of being and existence. How does the Buddha face the problem of dissolution. In other words, did you believe that the death and dissolution of the body corresponded to annihilation,

²⁰ Vetter, Tilmann. *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*, Brill, 1988: XXI.

²¹ Bronkhorst, Johannes. *Did the Buddha Believe in Karma and Rebirth?*, Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1998: 16.

going to nothing, or does your philosophy not foresee destruction in nihilistic terms?

It is not indifferent to understand what the Buddha's position was regarding the problem of nothingness. We know that barring errors of interpretation, the concept of emptiness (*suñña*) has nothing to do with a nihilistic cancellation. Emptiness refers to being ephemeral, devoid of the substantiality that is attributed to it as intrinsic. Ephemeral is an idea believed to be different from what reality is, but the Buddha never denied the existence of an absolute reality, rather he limited himself to saying that it was misunderstood, misinterpreted, distorted by conventional and arbitrary constructions, which precisely they are ephemeral constructions, but behind them there is nothing. The conventional reality (*sammuti*), already mentioned in the Abhidhamma and then taken up by Nagarjuna, is like a lens of glasses that stands between the view and the truth, distorting the vision, filtering, precisely by interpreting, through social and linguistic conventions which, being the result of an arbitrariness, which is an opinion on how the world should be interpreted, organized and pigeonholed, are ephemeral. Once the obstacle has been removed, reality should appear as it is, and this is the idea of absolute (*paramattha*).

We will therefore investigate the nature of this absolute and its relations with being and its disappearance, or "die".

The words and concepts that the semantic roots convey are very important in understanding what we might call the cognitive subsoil of a certain culture. Buddhism certainly, despite its criticism of the official Vedic tradition, is not an exception to the Indo-European mentality. Sometimes glottology has been able to help better understand issues of

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philosophical and historical-religious interest through the reconstruction of the semantic roots of the concepts used by various traditions of thought and which, even changing the nuance of meaning over time, maintain their meaning in their roots original that is unconsciously handed down when used.

There would be much to say about the problem of death in Indo-European thought, but in view of this analysis of death in Buddhist thought, I have found it interesting to re-propose a theory that has gained some popularity in recent years. In fact, it seems that the Indo-European term to indicate death initially meant “to disappear”, which significantly changes the way we conceive this word. Although also in English the metaphor of disappearance is used to indicate death, it is significant that, contrary to what happens today, the term indicating death had as its original primary meaning that of disappearing, to vanish. We do not know what the conception of death was in primitive Indo-European thought, but the anthropology of religions has already suggested in the past that the idea of death understood as the definitive and permanent dissolution of the individual, could be a more recent elaboration in certain cultures human. Death as “going to nothing”, becoming nothing, death as annihilation, is the current conception but probably not the most ancient. The hypothesis of a death conceived as “going outside the field of appearing” is also possible, which does not mean that the individual is conceived as annihilated, or whose being is thought to be transformed into non-being. The idea of death as disappearance implies that being continues to be, it simply does not appear anymore.

There is a clue that makes us realize how this misunderstanding is somehow a deception, and

further linguistic and philological studies should investigate the question of death and nothingness systematically by taking this suggestion. The Hittite language is in some ways peculiar in the Indo-European linguistic panorama, as it retains extremely archaic features that are not present in the other language families, which made some glottologists suppose that the Hittite had separated from the Indo-European continuum well before other families²². If therefore the morphological peculiarities allow us to make this hypothesis, we can also deduce that certain lexical meanings retain, in the Hittite form, the most archaic variant of the meaning of certain Indo-European roots. Now, if we go to see which Hittite term originated from the root **mer-*, which in all other Indo-European languages indicates “death” in a sense of “annihilation” of being, we discover that in Hittite the word is *merzi*, which however was understood by philologists more precisely with the following meanings: “disappear”, “vanish”, which is very different from the more direct and powerful concept of “death by annihilation”. It seems a subtlety but the most important etymological dictionary of the Indo-European roots, the *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (1959) edited by Julius Pokorny refers to the root **mer-* (page 735) the following definition: *sterben* “to die”, or even *aufgerieben werden* “to be canceled”, and as an example from the Hittite it reports *me-ir-ta*, translated as *starb* “dead”, but we cannot be sure that this meaning is not a reinterpretation derived from a metaphor that was starting to make its way into the Indo-European mentality. In other Indo-European languages, replacing the concept of “annihilation”

²² Fortson, Benjamin. *Indo-European Language and Culture*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010: 171.

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with that of “disappearing” as meaning of the words derived from the root *mer- is already a total fact, but we cannot say the same about the Hittite. In fact, if we consult the *Etymological Dictionary of the Hittite Inherited Lexicon* (2008) and focus on the term *mer-zi / mar* (page 577) we notice that the definition that is provided is completely different: “to disappear, to vanish”, and again, in the adjectival derivatives such as *marnuṽala* the proposed definition is that of “invisible”, which is very different from “destroyed”, or “annihilated”. Yet another derivative term: *mar-nu-ṽa-la-an, marnu-zi, mernu-zi* is defined as “to cause to disappear, to dissolve”. The hypothesis therefore that originally the Indo-European term did not indicate death in the nihilistic sense (going into Nothing or the destruction of the entity) but rather a “disappear”, a “no longer being visible” of the entity, is confirmed. As further confirmation, the same author of the dictionary reports this explanation (page 578), saying that the term *mer-zi / mar* “is generally connected with PIE *mer- which is usually glossed ‘to die’. In my view, however, the Hittite meaning ‘to disappear’ must have been the original meaning, whereas the meaning ‘to die’ as found in other IE languages only developed after the splitting off of Anatolian. It is likely that *mer- ‘to disappear’ was at first an euphemistic term for dying”.

If therefore this hypothesis is correct, a radical change has occurred in Indo-European thought, the most archaic form of which is fortunately attested by the Anatolian family which would seem to have separated well before other linguistic groups, and this change actually concerns the great misunderstanding that Severino will recognize about the conception of Being. The idea that disappearance

is confused with annihilation, from which the idea of death as the over-annihilation of Being is a historical fact.

With the prefix of negation *ḡ- the Indo-European languages that conceived death as annihilation, develop the concept of *ḡmṛtos, “immortal”, “which cannot die”. The derived terms of our interest are the Greek *ámprotos*, “immortal” and *ambrosíā*, the nectar of the gods, and the Sanskrit *amṛta* considered a drink that makes immortal.

Conclusion

The language assumes central importance in Buddhist psychology, which is in effect of a psychosemantics. All constructive cognitive processes (*saṅkhāra*) are nothing but artificial and conditioned products, including the *rūpa*, the ‘form’ or ‘body’ of things which, as explained in the doctrine of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, is generated, in fact, on the basis of individual conscience.

What we can call as ‘psychic apparatus’, which is only a linguistic designation to understand a set of processes, is described by Buddhism as arising from the interaction of five aggregate factors (*khandha*). These five elements are factors of interaction that are continuously experienced by the body and that are part of the ‘external world’. They are embodied constantly and contribute to forming the psychic dimension. These five main elements are interdependent, which means that they exist depending on each other, and so is the psyche. Their coexistence ensures that the psyche is maintained, like how a house of cards is maintained for the balance of all the cards that push against each other without falling. The five aggregates are: *rūpa* (form), *vedanā* (sensation), *saññā* (cognition), *saṅkhāra* (formations), *viññāṇa* (conscience).

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We can say that Buddhist psychology considers the existence of a lexeme (*samaññā*), a semantic cognition (*sañña*), as well as a signification (*sankhā*), and the binomial signifier (*nāma*) and signified (*rūpa*).

Language which shape the world (*loka*) is nothing but a convention (*vohāro*) which is part of a common conception (*paññatti*), which would not exist without such a conventional agreement.

This complex system of cognitive reiteration is called ‘semiotic-significant proliferation’ (*papañcasaññāsankhā*). Since this discourse is also valid for the subjects (*puggala*), it can be deduced that there are no beings (*satta*) who are nothing but agglomerates of cognitive factors (*suddhasaṅkhārapuñja*).

Any living being, therefore, is nothing but the aggregation of several cognitive-perceptive factors (*suddhasaṅkhārapuñja*) which would generate the illusion of an identity (*ātman*). The identity, by self-preservation, would adopt the mechanism of appropriation of further mental images (identification). Both the nominal signifier (*nāma*) and the formal signified (*rūpa*) are dependent on cognition.

The philosophers of Abhidhamma are the first to make use of this distinction. In the Pali definition, the opposition is between *paramattha* and *sammuti*. The first term is identified by commentators as “ultimate”, “definitive” *uttama*. The suffix *-attha* indicates the meaning, but in the compound *paramattha* it does not refer exclusively to the meaning of a sign but to what was called *svabhāva*, the self-existent, Being that is itself, or *viśaya*, the object²³. The term *sammuti* instead conveys a sense

of relativity, a conventionally accepted argument. The root seems to be *saṃ-man* “thinking together”.

The main debate between ancient and post-nāgārjunian Buddhism is taking place over the aforementioned *svabhāva*. First of all, we are not sure how the authors of the Abhidhamma intended it, but it is certain that from Nāgārjuna onwards *svabhāva* means something very similar to the idea of “identity of nature”, that is, the entities, as we know them, are such because an intrinsic nature differentiates them, making the stone different from the flower and the flower different from the river and so on. For Nāgārjuna, who pays close attention to the relationship between language and cognition, nominal existence does not testify to a real existence, but only a relative existence. The stone is not such without the nominal identity that differentiates it from what we call “flower” and “river”. Therefore, in the philosophy of Nāgārjuna, there can be no stone that is such and that is said to be independent of the human convention that attributes that identity to it. The essence is not independent of human will, therefore *svabhāva* is an ephemeral, empty concept in itself²⁴.

Since Nāgārjuna claims to re-establish the original Buddhist teaching, it is not clear why the masters of Abhidhamma had instead a greater consideration of *svabhāva*, to the point of being the definition of *paramattha*. In this context, *paramattha* is considered not as the Absolute as such, but its appearance in the being-self of each being, to put it with Severino. All of this is by no means anachronistic and helps us understand what is by no means a huge contradiction in the authors of the

²³ Sasaki, Genjun. *Linguistic Approach to Buddhist Thought*, Motilal Banarsidass, 1986: 77.

²⁴ Tachikawa, Musashi. *Svabhava and Sunyata*. *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies* (Indogaku Bukkyogaku Kenkyu), 1995, 43.2: 1027-1021.

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Abhidhamma, who simply, compared to Nāgārjuna, have the focus shifted elsewhere. Nāgārjuna focuses on the ephemeral nature of the word, while the authors of the Abhidhamma still see it as something that, apparently evident, cannot be denied. As ephemeral, even the word is eternal and testifies to the Absolute. In this sense, however, it is not said that the identity attributed is not such. The intrinsic nature of phenomena (*svabhāva*) does not lie in their nominal essence, but precisely in their being, that is, reflections of the Being. With this the authors of the Abhidhamma are not entirely enemies of Nāgārjuna, they simply do not possess its radicality, in which however Nāgārjuna demonstrates to remain firm in the awareness that the same emptiness evoked by him, for the mere fact of being named, is reified, showing that they know not only that the nominable entities are not at all non-existent, and that their being ephemeral does not refer to a non-existence but to a conceptual misunderstanding, but also proves to know the enormous difference between what is his image reified when he gives the example of the misunderstanding that is prefigured in the very concept of “ephemeral” used by him.

If anything, it is the subsequent Mahāyāna philosophy that makes a mistake when, proposing a dualism that it should avoid, it announces a drastic opposition between *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti*, sometimes falling into that error announced by Nāgārjuna himself and making the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) a sort of dogma thus reifying it.

The term *saṃvṛti* is not the Sanskrit etymological equivalent of *sammuti*, but a new term, created by replacing the suffix of the stem pāli *saṃ-man* with the meaning of “cover”, “hide”, creating *saṃ-vṛ* which, however, lent itself equally to make the concept of a distorted reality that was seen by a filter

that modified its perception, like particular lenses. Thus, together with the idea of relativity, that of “convention” or “designation” (*prajñāpti*), already present in the equivalent pāli form (*paññatti*) but which will find its fortune in Sanskrit in the works of authors of the school of “sole cognition” (*cittamātra*). But the difference is still great. While for the *cittamātra* authors the term *prajñāpti* is considered a synonym of *saṃvṛti*, for the old school Buddhists (*theravādin*) the condition of the designation (*paññatti*) involves both the absolute and the relative: «the relative represents the things which are considered as existents from the viewpoint of conventional usage (*lokanirutti*), but not in reality. These things are relative and transitory. They assume a form of limitation also. They reveal themselves as the relative. The relative is a form of manifestation or indication (*paññatti*). Both the things, absolute and relative, are thus involved in *paññatti*»²⁵.

This clearly indicates, at least for my point of view, that the authors were careful not to fall into the trap of reification. The Absolute they speak of as the truth of Being is clearly an arbitrary designation. It must be understood in some way, and therefore we use a term, precisely “absolute”, to indicate what we want to be non-relative, but clearly, also the use of the term makes us fall back into the convention, and we must be very careful. We begin to understand that the Buddhist obsession with the transcendence of language is far from an exaggeration. The only way to get rid of the designation is to transcend the designation itself.

If we look at how the conception of the Absolute and the relative in Buddhist terms is subsequently

²⁵ Sasaki, Genjun. *Linguistic Approach to Buddhist Thought*, Motilal Banarsidass, 1986: 82.

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developed, particular attention must be paid to those philosophers who made use of these terms after Nāgārjuna. For example, in the conception of Dharmakīrti the ultimate reality (*paramārtha*) is recognized in terms of causality, while the function of conventional or conceptual truth is relegated to language. The aspect of causality, however, shifts the conception of absolute in Dharmakīrti more towards materialism than it was in Nāgārjuna, who dedicates entire chapters of his work to also dismantling aspects such as the agent (*karmakāraka*), fire and fuel (*agnīndhana*), origin and cessation (*pūrvāparakoṭi*), and with them also causality is recognized as unfounded.

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