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DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

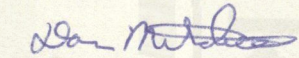
AREA CODE 317
PHONE

Dear Dr. Anderson,

Enclosed is a copy of the paper I plan to read at the AAS conference in October. I hope you find it adequate. I have tried to make it as short as possible because of the time factor involved in having four papers in two hours. I am sorry that this is coming to you so late, but as I am sure you know, the first semester one teaches is always extremely hectic.

I have also sent a copy to Dr. Jordan, and am looking forward to seeing you next month. I am sorry that I missed you this summer when I was in San Diego.

Sincerely,



Donald Mitchell

An Early Concept of the Good in Indian Buddhism:
The Sarvastivādin Concept of Nirvāna

In the early Buddhist tradition, which is sometimes referred to as Hīnayāna, there was a number of schisms about two hundred years after the Buddha's death. One such division gave rise to the Theravāda and Sarvastivāda schools. The former was later to be introduced into Ceylon and Southeast Asia where it is still active. However the Sarvastivāda school which remained on the Indian mainland perished when Buddhism was destroyed in India. Because of these historical events, it is the Theravāda tradition of philosophy that has become most familiar to the modern scholar of early Buddhist thought. Indeed, partly because of the present-day activity of this tradition, its codification in Buddhaghōsa's Visuddhimagga has been translated into English while the Sarvastivādin codification in Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośa has not.¹

This, I feel, is unfortunate in so far as Sarvastivāda once occupied an extremely strong position among the Buddhist schools and flourished in India for almost 1,500 years.² The importance of their philosophical position can be seen in the number of criticisms Śaṅkarācārya directed exclusively to the Sarvastivādin doctrines.³ In light of these considerations, I have decided to present a paper on a subject within the Sarvastivādin tradition. More specifically I have chosen to speak on the Sarvastivādin concept of the Good, or Nirvāṇa.

However, in order to analyze such a concept, we must first become familiar with some of the basic doctrines of Sarvāstivādin philosophy. Thus in working toward an understanding of this particular concept of Nirvāṇa we can perhaps learn more about the philosophy of Sarvāstivāda in general. For example, central to Sarvāstivādin philosophy is a type of pluralism that divides reality into a number of elements called "dharmas." There are seventy-five of these basic elements of existence, one of which is Nirvāṇa. Therefore, to understand the nature of Nirvāṇa, we must first understand the nature of the elements of existence; i.e., the dharmas.

I

The noun "dharma" comes from the Sanskrit root \sqrt{dhr} meaning "to hold or bear." Early Buddhism designated the dharmas as "that which is held to"; namely, the real. What is real is the individual dharmas as the elements which make up our universe. Further, in light of the Buddhist idea of impermanence (anitya), these elements are not so much permanent substances as they are "events." Reality is held to be a process of momentary events or elemental dharmas.

These dharmas were in turn analyzed by the early Buddhist schools and eventually even classified. In the Sarvāstivāda school, such an analysis of reality led to a type of pluralism that posited the existence of seventy-five elements or dharmas. In the classifying of these dharmas we can see the significance of one interpretation of the name "sarva-asti-vāda" (all things-

exist-school). This classification affirms the reality of both material and mental elements as well as number of phenomena which are neither material nor mental. Sarvāstivāda is neither a materialistic nor an idealistic school. Rather it takes a realistic position in positing the reality of all elements of experience be they mental or material.

The actual classification of the dharmas divides the elements into two main divisions. First are seventy-two elements which are conditioned by cause and effect, and second are the remaining three which are totally unconditioned. The former, or conditioned elements, are divided into four categories. First are the various sense organs and their corresponding objects. Second is the single dharma referred to as mind (citta). Third, is a list of the various mental or psychological functions such as will, memory, pride, shame, anger and doubt. It is this particular category of dharmas which is given the most attention in the Sarvāstivādin analysis. For it is these dharmas which are of most concern to the Buddhist monk in his religious practice. In that practice the monk attempts to cultivate such functions as concentration (samādhi) and non-injury (ahimsā), and eliminate such states as ignorance (moha) and deceit (māyā). The fourth and last category of conditioned dharmas is made up of elements that are neither material nor mental such as possession (prāpti), life (jīvita), and name (nāma).

As for the three unconditioned elements of existence, the first is space (ākāśa). Space is regarded by the Sarvāstivādins as a positive entity or dharma that is all-pervading and eternal.

It is an unconditioned dharmā and therefore free from all causation. Finally, it is referred to as that which renders the activity of all material things possible. Without space, the other elements of existence could not function.

The second unconditioned dharmā is a rather complicated element to understand. It has been defined by Vasubandhu as "the non-perception of dharmas caused by the absence of conditions. . . ." ⁴ In other words it is an event where conditions are absent so that a dharmā, or dharmas, pass from the future to the past without being perceived in the present. It is an "unrealized possibility," or a possibility of perception that was simply never actualized. As the Sanskrit name of the dharmā (apratisamkhyānirodha) implies, it is the cessation of a possibility of perception that never came into the field of conscious awareness or knowledge. For example while I am reading this paper in this room, certain events of which I am not aware are taking place outside. While it is possible that I could perceive these events, the conditions for doing so are not present and so the events pass away without my being aware of them. This phenomenon where elements come into and then pass out of existence without entering the field of perception is the phenomenon to which this dharmā refers.

The third unconditioned element, which is the last of the seventy-five dharmas, is that of Nirvāna or what I have called

the Summum Bonum of the Sarvāstivādins. Nirvāṇa is the supreme dharma which is the goal to be achieved by the Buddhist devotee. However in order to appreciate the "uniqueness" of the Sarvāstivāda position concerning the nature and achievement of Nirvāṇa, we must first consider their concept of time. For it is through their concept of time that the above analysis of reality takes on another dimension that will in the end distinguish it from all other systems of Buddhist thought.

II

In the above analysis of the Sarvāstivādin concept of reality I mentioned in passing that the dharmas move, as it were, from the future to the present and then into the past. Here we find another interpretation of the name "sarva-asti-vāda," i.e., that the past, present and future all exist simultaneously, and that it is in these three separate periods of time that the elements of existence move and have their being.⁵ This view differs sharply with the Theravādin position that posits only the present moment as real. It also raises questions not only concerning the momentariness of the dharmas but also concerning the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence itself. That is, if the conditioned dharmas exist during all time (i.e., travel through the three periods of time) then it would seem that they are permanent substantial entities "wandering" from the future into the present and eventually going into the past.

The Sarvāstivādin reply is that the conditioned dharmas manifest themselves in the present moment as actual and phenomenal (kāritra-lakṣaṇa). In this sense they are momentary and imper-

manent for they are conditioned by the four powers of genesis, subsistence, decay and destruction. Genesis takes the dharma from the future and gives it to subsistence. At this point the dharma would go on forever if it were not for the third force, decay, which reduces it and passes it on to destruction. As conditioned by these forces of the present, the dharmas are impermanent and momentary. However the Sarvāstivādins also claim that in essence (svabhāva) they always exist in one of the periods of time:

in essentia they exist also before and after. A dharma, as it is, exists always, i.e., during all time, and travels, as it were, through the three periods of time.⁶

In relating this concept of time to the attainment of Nirvāṇa, the Sarvāstivādins point out that the condition of man is one of suffering (dukkha). Man is "thrown" into the world of samsāra where the dharmas are in a perpetual state of commotion and turmoil (sāśrava-dharma) as they pass from the future into the past. This world of samsāra is caused by karma and is conditioned by ignorance and craving. The five skandhas which make up one's personhood are defiled (sāśrava-skandha).

If this is the condition of man, there must be a purification process to bring about the cessation of this commotion and turmoil. This is not an annihilation of the dharmas but rather a purification of the "defiled" dharmas. This purification is brought about by wisdom (prajñā) and/conditioned by concentration (samādhi). Here we see the great importance of

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analyzing, distinguishing and classifying the elements of reality. For when they are known they can be singled out and purified by concentration one by one. Such a methodical contemplation of the dharmas is understood by the Sarvāstivādins as a form of wisdom.⁷ Buddhaghōṣa concurs when he defines "wisdom" as having:

the characteristic of penetrating into dharmas as they really are themselves. It has the function of destroying the darkness of delusion which covers the own-being of dharmas. It has the manifestation of not being deluded. . . . 'He who is concentrated knows, sees what really is. . . .'⁸

In other words, when wisdom is present in the center of the stream of dharmas passing from future to past, the purification is completed and the commotion and turmoil ceases. One's personal continuum of existence moves smoothly and harmoniously and one's life is characterized by serenity and bliss.

It is in light of this belief that the Buddhist definition of good and evil can be understood. What is "good" (kuśala) in Buddhism is whatever is favorable to this process of purification. What is evil (akuśala) is whatever is unfavorable to this purification and would disrupt the smooth flow of the dharmas from the future into the past. With this in mind, we can now examine the ultimate Good, the Summum Bonum of Nirvāṇa.

III

Wisdom, as we have seen, achieves the ultimate transformation of ignorance (avidya) into enlightenment (bodhi), of defile-

ments into purity, and eventually of samsāra into Nirvāṇa itself. To use a Buddhist metaphore, it is as though carbon has been transformed into diamond. Through the presence of wisdom in the context of concentration on the dharmas, there is a purification of one's existence where one achieves a freedom spoken of as the unconditioned (asamskrta) state of Nirvāṇa. This ontological state of being is manifested in the personal form of the Buddha.⁹

Nirvāṇa itself is called "prati-samkhyā-nirodha" which means "the cessation (of defilements) attained by transcendental wisdom." Wisdom purifies the skandhas (anaśrava-skandha) and effects the transformation of ignorant craving into enlightenment thus attaining Nirvāṇa. This attainment is referred to as ultimately a "possession." For in fact Nirvāṇa, for Sarvāstivāda, is a dharma which one comes to possess as the "fruit" of the purification process.

Sarvāstivāda speaks in this way because they have introduced a special dharma which has the function of acting as a glue that "sticks" the dharmas together in "one's own continuity" (sva-santāna) as distinguished from that of another sentient being. This "glue-like" dharma is called "possession" (prāpti) and is that power or force by which a dharma is inserted into a personal series or continuity. It is by this dharma of possession that Nirvāṇa is linked permanently to one's continuity.

This possession of Nirvāṇa brings with it an eternal disjunction (visamyoga) from, or cessation of, all impure dharmas

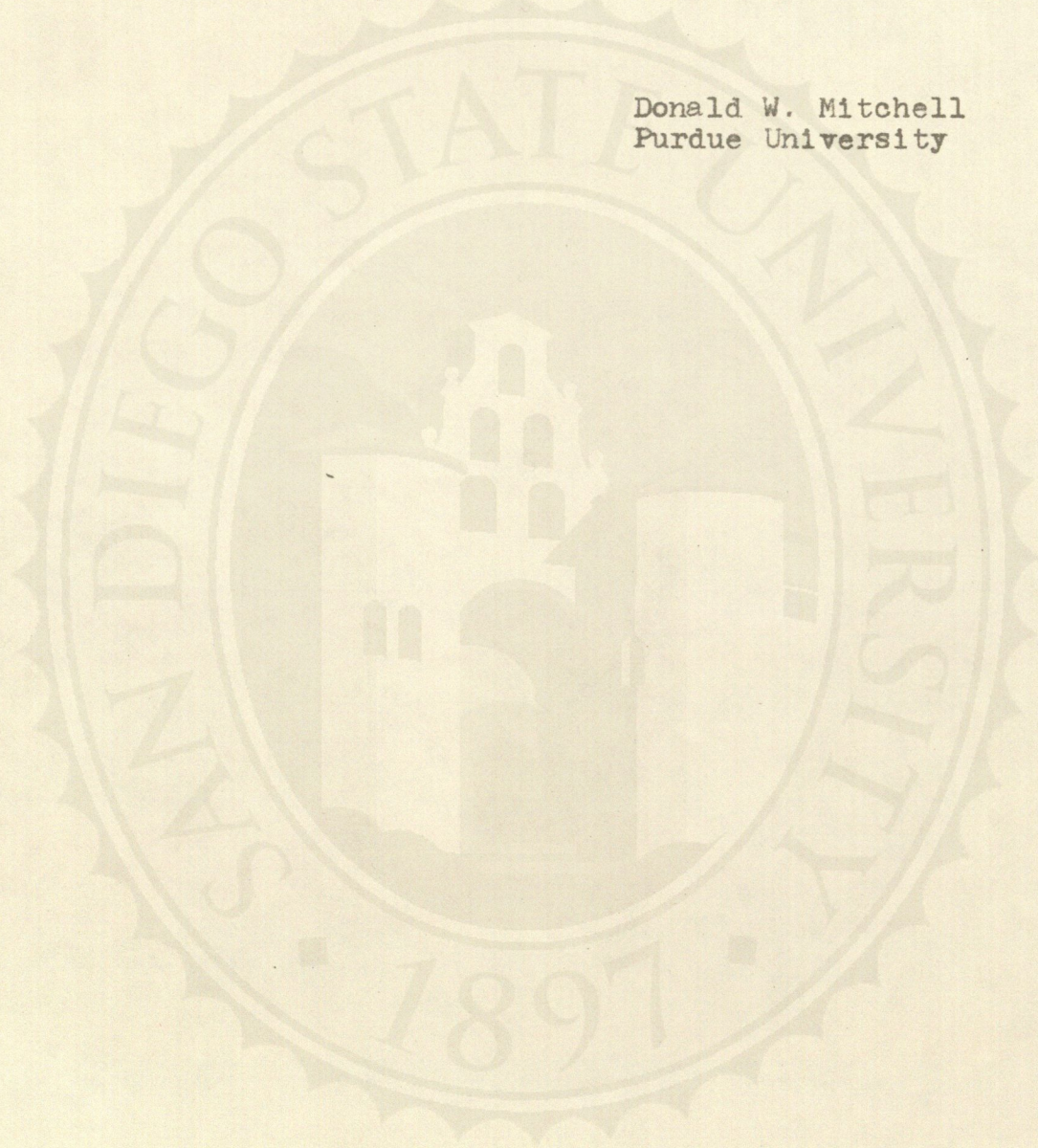
which in turn puts an end to the accumulation of karma and the cycle of rebirth. Upon death, the enlightened one enters Parinirvāṇa where only the Nirvāṇic dharma remains because of its eternal and unconditioned nature. Therefore, when one speaks of Nirvāṇa as a cessation or a "blowing-out," this means to the Sarvāstivādin the ceasing of any defiled elements in ones continuity of existence or flow of consciousness. The enlightened one is characterized as possessing only pure or holy (arya) dharmas in his personal continuity. This continuity is totally devoid of the turmoil and commotion which would characterize the presence of ignorance and craving, for wisdom remains at the center of one's existence accompanied now by its ultimate fruit, Nirvāṇa.

In conclusion I should note that this theory was eventually attacked by the other schools of both the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna traditions. Their criticism seemed to fall heaviest on the Sarvāstivāda concept of possession or prāpti. The other Hīnayāna schools claimed, on the theoretical level, that prāpti was simply a verbal evasion of the problem of personal identity given rise to by the atomizing tendency of their dharma theory, a problem I might add that is present in the West, for example, in the philosophy of David Hume.

The Mahāyāna schools claimed, on the practical level, that such a concept of possession even when applied to Nirvāṇa would lead to a self-seeking that would reinforce rather than "empty"

the ego that stands in the way of enlightenment. However this may be, Sarvāstivāda remained until the fall of all Buddhism in India a strong and influential school. And its unique type of realism in the Buddhist tradition has made an interesting contribution to the history of Eastern thought.

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Footnotes

¹For Buddhaghosa's work see The Path of Purification, trans. by. Bhikkhu Nanamoli (Colombo: R.Semage, 1956). Also Vasubandhu's work has been translated into French by L. de la Vallee Poussin: L'abhidharmakosa de Vasubandhu, 6 Vol. (Paris, 1923-31).

²Edward Conze, Buddhism: Its Essence and Development (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959) p. 67.

³These criticisms are discussed in detail in Yamakami Sogen, Systems of Buddhistic Thought (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1912), pp. 97-171.

⁴Sogen, p. 164.

⁵Edward Conze, Buddhist Thought in India (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 120.

⁶Ibid., p. 139.

⁷Edward Conze, Buddhism: Its Essence and Development, p. 162.

⁸Ibid., p. 105.

⁹Edward Conze, Buddhist Thought in India, p. 159.