PERFECTION WITHOUT GOD: A VIEW FROM THE PÅL CANON

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Introduction

In no other religion is the belief in human perfectibility more central than in Theravāda Buddhism. Each religion is built upon a central narrative, a story out of which beliefs and doctrines emerge. In some cases, this story is about the victory of order over chaos; for example, the Vījñā Purāṇa of Hinduism tells of God's heroic struggles with the demons of chaos. The narrative structure of Judaism underscores fidelity to God throughout the vicissitudes of slavery and freedom, interweaving redemption and exile. Christianity's New Testament is about divine descent, the 'myth' of God's incarnation, sacrifice and resurrection. The central narrative of Islam is about God's revealing the imperative to establish a community of the faithful, the 'ummah', and the human response to that command.

Theravāda Buddhism's story is strikingly different. In it, the gods are marginal to the narrative; the miraculous, while present, is unimportant when compared with the spiritual struggle of a single being. If we may bend Eliade's term somewhat, its central theophany (the inversion of "the sacred" into the mundane) occurs not atop a mountain nor in the heavens, but quietly within the psyche of a man seated under a tree. This "minimalist" theophany is realized by the presence of a bodhi-tree ("enlightenment"-tree, Ficus religiosa) within every Theravāda temple complex.

Theravāda Buddhism's story is the story of Siddhattha Gotama, a sixth century BCE noble of the Śākya clan of the northern Indian subcontinent, and his quest for spiritual perfection. His quest is entirely human, for no god teaches him and no revelation enlightens him. Precisely by his own efforts he becomes transformed. He becomes perfected, he becomes an arahant, a supreme Buddha. In Theravāda Buddhist myth and its symbolic representation, the attainment of human perfection is the very heart of religion.
A VIEW FROM THE PÅLÍ CANON

2. "The holy life has been fulfilled"—nissamā brahma-accariyam, and "what was to be done has been accomplished"—nissatā kāmapāram. In virtually all Indian religious systems since about the sixth century BCE, the goal of the holy life (brahma-accariya), known as mokṣa, is freedom from suffering and the conditions which give rise to suffering. This phrase affirms that the arahant has fulfilled this aim. That s/he is a "finished product," so to speak.

3. "One who has destroyed the defilements"—kāmin. The term ātavā has been translated as "innoxious," "tame," "deadly outlaws," and "drugs." Each of these translations derives from the etymology of ātavā (sing.), "that which flows (cut or on), outflow and inflow," including the intoxicating extract or secretion of a tree or flower and therefore "drug" or "intoxicant." However, none of these alternatives suggests how central a doctrinal role the terms play, nor do they indicate why the destruction of the ātavā is the sine qua non of arahant. I would prefer to leave ātavā untranslated and to indicate that the four ātavā are kāma or sensuality, bhava or existence, ādiṭṭhi or views, and avijjā or ignorance. These four constitute samskāra, and the destruction of these four constitutes arahant or nibbāna. To indicate the doctrinal importance of the concept of ātavā, Kāramāha is the most common epithet of the arahant, and one or another of its forms (kāramāha or ātavā, kāma or simply ātavā or nīraďau) occurs more than one hundred times in the Pāli Canon, far more than any analogous term.

4. "Who has completely destroyed the fetters of rebirth"—parakkhaṁ bhava-sampādito. The term sampādītaṃ derives from sam, "together," and pi, a cognate of the English word they and the root of yoga. The samayajāti are the yogis to rebirth, often translated as "fetters." There are said to be ten sampādītaṃ, five lower and five higher. The five lower fetters are: (1) saddhā, Great faith (view or cognition, ādiṭṭhi) in an abiding self or personality; (2) vinijjā, Doubt; (3) kāma-cittavā, Desire for sensual pleasures; (4) abhinivvatā, Pride; (5) kāma, senses; and (6) avijjā, Ignorance. The five higher fetters are: (1) upādāga, Lust for forms; (2) arāhagga, Lust for formlessness; (3) rāja, egoism or pride; (4) sīla-sampādani, Restlessness; and (5) avijjā, Ignorance.

5. "Liberated by right knowledge"—sattamahā-ātavā. To be freed (vimutta) is to attain nibbāna, and this is done by knowledge (ātavā). The term ātavā derives from ātavā, and is therefore a grammatical cousin of ātavā (ātavā, ātavā, ātavā, ātavā, ātavā), each of which carries a nuance
of “cognition”. Like नाया and पुष्ठा, अर्थ has the sense of spiritually liberating knowledge, but is generally distinguishable in that it is used in the precise sense as that knowledge which brings about the fruition itself.14

In the Majjhima Nikāya15 we find four characterizations of arahatā which shed light on our discussion, the first of which reads: “Soon after ordination, the venerable Bhāradvāja, remaining in this very life attained just that unsurpassed goal of the holy life, that for which sons of good families rightly go forth from their homes for the homeless life, and he knew: Rebirth has been destroyed, the holy life has been fulfilled, what was to be done has been accomplished, there is no more rebirth beyond the present world. And so the venerable Bhāradvāja became one of the arahants.”16

This citation contains the crucial formulation from the Dīgha Nikāya xx.32 discussed above, but it also discusses the path towards that fruition in monastic terms. While our text does not make monastic status a prerequisite for arahatī, it does underscore the importance of “going forth” (pubballīkāya), the term by which Buddhist novitate ordination is known in this day. It establishes a homeless (anāgāriya) ideal, postulates that arahatī is attainable in this life (ābhīṣeṇa va dhīmaṇa) and underscores that arahatī is attained by knowledge, as indicated by the use of the instrumental case, abhimukhāḥ.

A second characterization from the Majjhima Nikāya raises dīna’s most analytical disciple, Śrīmūta “When, friends, a noble disciple understands what is unskillful (akusala), understands what is skillful, understands what is the basis of skill, he has rid himself of all lustful (vīpaścīnasamāya), has dispelled all aversive (paṭighānasamāya), has overcome ignorance, has forayed and penetrated (dukkhātā anākāra). In this sense, friends, is the noble disciple one of right view, who has full confidence in the Dhamma, who has arrived at the good Dhamma.”17

This citation revives around the notion of skill (kusala), a key ethical concept in the Pāli Canon which is often contrasted with the idea of merit (puṣṭha). A meritorious action is a good deed which

A VIEW FROM THE PĀLI CANON

bears karmic reward, just as a demeritorious action bears karmic punishment. A skillful act, by contrast, does not involve karma at all. It may be inferred that an arahant performs kusala but not puṣṭha: since the arahant is by definition free from rebirth (“khitā ātā”), there could be no rewards for his or her actions; therefore there could be no puṣṭha. Yet the arahant’s behavior is morally exemplary, and is considered kusala.

This citation also describes the perfected human as one who has overcome three additions (unāsanaya): those based on attraction or lust (taṇhā), those based on aversion or hate (pāpaṭikā), and those based on opinions (dīpīkā) which are rooted in egosis (asmiṇi). This point about the arahant being free from egotic opinions is reflected in the Aṣṭadālappana Sutta: “Those monks who are arahants, who have destroyed the taṇhā, who have lived the life, accomplished what there was to be done, who have put down their burden, who have attained their goal, who have completely destroyed the attachments (which lead) to rebirth, who are liberated by right knowledge (ākāra)—one cannot know their course.”18 What is added here is “vijñāṇa tecam na tā hi puṣṭhpanduṇa”, that the arahant ultimately is beyond our knowing and beyond language.19

Finally, the Majjhima Nikāya offers an etymology of the term arahant: “By what reason is a monk called an arahant? Because far (dārakī) from him are evil and unskillful factors linked to the defilements (beḷeṣaṇa) which result in suffering in fearful rebirths, which is future birth-old age-death.”20

There is a play on the words arahant and dārakī. The arahant is described as far removed from certain undesirable factors (nākapākikākādhamma). These factors are inextricably linked to the defilements, the ṣālāṃ, which are lust (taṇhā), hatred (dosa) and delusion (moha), which in turn produce fearful rebirths (punabharivāva saṅkrāt). In the third collection of the Sutta Piṭaka, the Sattamukha Nikāya, these verses (gāthā) about the arahant are found:21

Blissful are the arahants, Thirst is not seen in them. All egosis are uprooted. The net of delusion is broken. They have attained freedom from lust, Their heart-minds are transcendent. In the world they are not unattached, They have become divine, without the āsāvā. They fully know the five aggregates, They roam the seven fine dhammas.
Worthy of all praise, Sons of the Buddha are they born. The seven gems are theirs, Adepts in the threefold training. They go about, these great heroes, Beyond all fears and anxiety.

The doctrinal elements in this verse are familiar: The arahants are blissful (sukho). They have no desire (tanha). They have no ego (asavatma). They have broken the net of delusion (moksha). Their minds (citta) are transcendent. They know the five aggregates (tacchakkha); which means they understand the Buddha’s teaching of non-self (anatil). They are free of the thirst (taru). They have mastered the threefold training (tessa sikkha) in morality, mental discipline (sammādhi) and wisdom (panna). They know the seven noble teachings, which, according to the commentary,22 are faith (adukhi), shame (hiri), religious dread (ottappa), mindfulness (sati), energy (panna), meditation (sammādhi) and wisdom (panna). They wear the seven gems, which are identified with the seven sacred jewels of enlightenment (sattī bojjhanga); namely, mindfulness (sati), investigation of the Dhamma (dhamma-sati), energy (viriya), ecstasy (iti), tranquility (pajandhi), concentration (sammādhi), and equanimity (upekkha).23 They are true heroes (mahārāja) and true sons of the Buddha (putta buddhavac). Finally, they are beyond all fears and anxieties.

There is one passage from the Anguttara Nikāya which adds to our portrait of the arahant: “Sagacious (or silent) with regard to speech, sagacious with regard to speech, sagacious with regard to mind, free from the bond, the sage is blessed with sagacity, as is called one who has renounced all.”24 The ambiguity of the verse is in the word muni, which originally meant silent (the English cognate is mute) and later was applied to a sage. The verse could be praising the arahant as either silent or sagacious, or perhaps both. Added by this verse is the idea that the perfected human has renounced everything.

In the Khudaka Nikāya, the final or miscellaneous collection of the Sutta Pitaka, are found several verses of relevance. First is the Jānabataka verse: “From whom lust, hatred and ignorance have departed, he is known as ‘one who has cultivated his body, sagacious with regard to speech, sagacious with regard to mind, free of the bond, the sage is blessed with sagacity, as is called one who has renounced all.”25 The claim that the arahant is beyond lust (avena); hatred (dota); and delusion (moha); and it has already been noted that the arahant is said to be beyond fear and anxiety and one to have renounced all. New speculations are Abhidharmaka’s view, one

A VIEW FROM THE PĀLI CANON

who has cultivated his mind; rahuva; a planet usually reserved for the Buddha which derives from jatthā, thus, plus other gods or agnati, gone or come, leaving ‘Thus-come/Thus-gone One’; and bud- dhāna or ‘buddha’, from bhu, to be awake.26 Finally, in the Dhammapada, the most famous text of the Khudaka Nikāya, is the verse “Victory over self is far greater indeed than victory over others. Neither a god nor a celestial musician27 nor Mha28 together with Brahma29 can reverse the victory of such a disciplined and restrained person.”29 In this verse the arahant is said to be beyond the gods; this point is reflected in the title of this essay: “Perfection without God.” Up to this point, its aim has been to sketch the meaning of human perfection in the Sutta Pitaka; the concluding section of this essay will be an analysis of the “without God” from the title. What is the religious import of holding the perfected human to be beyond the gods?

God and Human Perfection

It would be one thing to say that the Buddhist understanding of enlightenment is unrelated to the notion of God, and that therefore there should be no conflict between nihāna and God, or between Buddhism and any theistic religion. This has been the assumption underlying many interreligious dialogues. However, a closer reading of our texts shows that the concepts of nihāna and of God do not merely “miss” one another, but that they truly are inimical.

In an intriguing text from the Dīgha Nikāya, the Teviyā Sutta, 2 young brahmin named Vāseṣṭha approaches the Buddha to ask whether there are many differing religious teachings which claim to lead to union with God (brahma/sukha); these are simply different routes to the same goal, or whether some teachings are right and some are wrong.31 The Buddha likens their teachings about a path to union with God to a man who builds a staircase without knowing the size of the palace for which the staircase was intended;32 and to a man who, wishing to drink from a river, beckons the river to come to him.33 The Buddha says that unless one has uprooted the fetters (saṁyojana); or above) there could be no spiritual progress, and that the unenlightened (avassathā) brahmin theologians would not attain union with God even after their deaths, let alone during this life.

Where the reader might expect the Buddha then to discourse on the superiority of the goal of nihāna over union with God, he tells Vāseṣṭha: “I know God, I know the realm of God, I know the way to the realm of God, and the path to attain the realm of God.”34 The
NATHAN KATZ

encounter concludes with the Buddha teaching Vasëjita how to attain "Vasëjita, the liberation of the heart through the cultivation of love... is the way to union with God."

Vasëjita then becomes a disciple of the Buddha, under his tutelage earnestly pursuing union with the God he so loves.

This text is cited to show that, in the view of the Pali canon, the Buddha knew God, and he taught that a person who... is without hatred, without ill-will, pure and disciplined, therefore shares these good qualities with God and should attain union with Him after death.

If the Buddha knew about God, he was also very clear that God is at best irrelevant to humankind’s most profound spiritual undertaking, a hindrance at worst. One of the most intriguing of all the Buddha’s teachings is the Brahmagha Surta, which is the very first sutta in filter which enshrines all philosophical views which are inimical to the Buddha’s teaching. It has rightly been called... the sannyas of the Doctrine, whose seal of approval must be obtained in reality from all other attempts at a reflective interpretation of man’s existential situation.

If the divides the line between the Buddhist point of departure and the standpoint of other points of belief, which most definitely includes all varieties of them. As such, the Brahmagha schematizes and analyzes what are taken to be wrong views (mīsīciṭṭhikhi), of which there are sixty-four varieties (sam̄mādiṭṭhikhi). Wrong views are of three types: (1) wrong views with fixed consequences (niyatiya-nicciṭṭhikhi), which “undermine the basic principles of moral-ethical notions,” such as nihilism and fatalism; (2) speculative views (dīgha-vipaṭṭita), includes “all metaphysical theories, religious creeds, and philosophical tenets concerning issues that lie beyond the reach of possible experimental verification,” of which the prime example is... as unprovable in the higher worlds, but in every case act as impediments to the path of liberation.”

A VIEW FROM THE PĀLI CANON

(3) However, upon closer analysis speculative views are not so benign because “[a]ll such views arise out of personality view [sa-kkhyādīthi], the fundamental belief in a self or ego-entity.”

Conclusion

As long as there remains egoism (asmīnṭhā), according to Buddhist teaching, there is no perfection; this much is well known. But to take another step, the Buddha taught that the belief in a God is an expression of sa-kkhyādīthi, “personality view,” which is the philosophical justification and expression of this egoism. Therefore, while the belief in God is not morally reprehensible, as are “wrong views with fixed consequences” (niyatiya-nicciṭṭhikhi), it is nevertheless a wrong view, a “running after speculations” (dīgha-vipaṭṭita), an obstacle to the highest level of human attainment known as nīkāya.

Notes

1. The Theravada school of Buddhism is dominant in most southern Buddhist countries—Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Laos, Cambodia (Kampuchea); its most sacred texts are found in the Pali Canon.

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3. The canon of the school of Theravada Buddhism is known as the Tripitaka, the “Three Baskets” of the Buddha’s discourses: the Sutta Pātthana; the discipline code for monks and nuns, the Vinaya Pātthana; and the higher teachings, the Abhidhamma Pātthana. The Sutta Pātthana, which is the best known of the three, is composed of ten collections (saṅkhaṛa), the first of which is the collection of longer discourses, the Dhamma Dīpāka.


The text below will be discussed later.
A VIEW FROM THE PÅLI CANON

Majjhima Nikaya, i.141; ye in bhikkhu arahato kathavā sotavā tāvakkalavatti obhāṣitā aparāmakālavo paripūta mahāgamyena samma-dāna-viṁśaṁ, vaj-}

ya-paramaṇaṁ eva nāthi, padhāraya.

It is not necessary to review the voluminous scholarship on this crucial point of the identity of the arahant and of nāthi. My own views are found in "Nagar jina and Wriggling on Every", in Buddhist and Western Philosophies, ed. by Nathan Katz (New Delhi: Sri Shekhar, 1981), 106-27.

Majjhima Nikaya, i.280: Kathaṁ ca bhikkhu sahaṁ hote: itiṁ 'sa hosi pāpakās aukuto, dhammA saccakālo pūraśvanādikāt ācate dharmāyaṁ dhammāyaṁ kathāyaṁ kathāyaṁ kathāyaṁ. Sappāvaasāyaṁ, ii.33-84:

Sukhīnaṁ vasī arahanto tāyaṁ tapo na vajāmi/ Arahanto sammāsathiṁ mohikaṁ petulīyam/ Ajarāṁ apsuptiṁ cittāṁ tapo ca sambhavati/ Lokā apanggitāṁ bhavahāvatāṁ arahato/ Pulatkhaṅgade pāluṁ sammattadhikāmāśāya/ Pannasappāvaasūpīṁ bhāsati āmetaṁ pakāīpayyati/ Sattvānaṁ anupajjāy, tā tikkhiṁ nikkhiṁ/ Arahantānaṁ mahāvīraṁ pahīthıhaṁkhaṇayaṁ.


নাথান ক্যাট


csi kha-General bhava-kulāṇād ahaṁ-maṅga puñāḥ-pani—āhaṁ bhūmā, Tu-

nītīyā hy bhava-kulāṇaḥ, Chandaḥ bhāṣita-kulaḥ, Bhañcāryaḥ bhāṣita-kulaḥ—
aha kha labhā labhā uṣṭāyaḥ sukṣmaṁ Bhūmā-saṅkhyāṇadāyaḥ?

1) Dharmakīrti, p. 392.
2) Dharmakīrti, p. 394.