

BUDDHIST ENLIGHTENMENT AND INEFFABILITY

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Introduction

Traditionally religion is one major area with which the alleged phenomenon of ineffability has been associated. In God - centred religions the claim that God is ineffable characterizes this belief. In Hinduism we come across two well known concepts, 'anirvacanīya' (indefinable) and 'avācya' (ineffable) which carry this sense. The *Kena Upaniṣad* statement: whence the word, along with mind, turn back without reaching' (*yato vāco nivartante-aprāpya manasā saha*) indicates an ineffable state in the heart of the Hindu religious experience. In the like manner, certain Mahayana Buddhist texts talk about 'the unspeakable nature' (anālāpya svābhava) of the ultimate religious experience. Among the Theravada Buddhists, today there is a wide-spread belief that Nirvāna (Pali: nibbāna) is something that cannot be described by words. In this manner some form of ineffability has been associated with religious experience always. The purpose of the present essay is to examine the concept of ineffability in the context of the Theravada Buddhist tradition preserved in the Pali canon.

It is customary among Buddhist scholars to make a distinction between what they call 'early Buddhism' and the Theravada tradition. Some scholars like the late Professor

KN Jayatilleke who were instrumental in making the concept of 'early Buddhism' popular seem to have used it almost exclusively to refer to the Pali canonical tradition not even accommodating the commentaries in the fold.

However today the concept is understood more broadly as referring to a form of Buddhism represented not only by the Pali canon but also by the Chinese Taisho collection and other similar early strands of Buddhist literature. In the present essay I use the term 'Pali canon' to refer to the earliest stage of Buddhism represented by the three baskets (ti-pitaka), namely, Sutta, Vinaya and Abhidhamma. My use of 'early Buddhism' solely refers to the Pali Canon for I do not make use of the Chinese or any other sources belonging to other traditions. One handicap in the Chinese canon is that it is not a collection of one homogeneous tradition but a mixture of many Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhist traditions. While this variagatedness enhances the richness of the collection by providing ample opportunities for the researcher of the history of ideas it is not as helpful as the Pali canon which preserves one uniform tradition. I use the term 'Theravada' to refer to both early and later developmetns of the tradition which takes the three baskets and the commentaries and the sub-commentaries as its sources.

The very term 'Buddhism' means many traditions for many people. There is a basic distinction between 'Hinayana' and 'Mahāyāna'. In the so-called Hinayana Buddhism there is only one living tradition, namely, the Theravada which is the traditional religion of Campuchia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand. There are many schools of Mahayana tradition practised traditionally in such countries as China, Japan and Korea. These schools can have considerable

differences among themselves. A third form of Buddhism called 'Vajrayana' has been traditionally practised in such places as Bhutan, Sikkim and Tibet. Although the core ideas are the same there are considerable differences in details and in practice among these traditions. Therefore we need to specify what Buddhism we are discussing. In the present paper my main focus is the Theravada Buddhism represented by the Pali canon.

In contemporary discussions of philosophy of religion the outcome of religious practice is generally described as 'religious experience'. This is used to cover all forms of religious ultimates, both 'personae of religious experience' such as God, Allah, Yahweh, Krshna etc. and 'impersonae of religious experience' such as Nirvana, Satori, Tathāgata-garbha, Atman/Brahman etc.¹ The use of the term lays stress on the experiential aspect of the religious life over the metaphysical aspect. Although in the context of the criticism of religion by logical positivism the new move to focus on one's experience has been little more helpful to the traditional God - centred religion, one's personal experience does not prove much in terms of metaphysics. I would maintain that the metaphysical problem typical of religion in general does not affect early Buddhism. By the same token I will argue that early Buddhism does not contribute to ineffability which is usually a result of adopting a transcendental metaphysical entity. In the course of this essay what I mean by religious experience in Buddhism is the nirvanic experience or nirvana although there are many degrees of experiencing the purification characterized by Nirvana before the actual realization of it.

What is Ineffability?

That God is ineffable seems to be a received view in theistic religion. Many other forms of religion too make similar claims. For instance, in Taoism, a basic belief is that

1 This distinction has been used by John Hick in his *An Interpretation of Religion*. Yale University Press, 1989.

Tao that can be spoken of is not true Tao. In Hinduism, Atman/Brahman has been considered something beyond words. The idea of ineffability indicates some sort of limit to linguistic expression. However, when we examine the claim closely we can see that it is not only about a limit of language but also it points to limits of our knowledge and the nature of reality.

As a claim of the limits of language the ineffability is not confined to the field of religion alone. For instance in art it is generally believed that the subject matter of it lies beyond linguistic expression. There is also a very general claim that human emotions and experiences are ineffable. The alleged ineffability in both religion and art is taken as an aspect of this larger phenomenon of ineffability. There is a basic logical difficulty in making a claim to the effect that something cannot be described by words. The difficulty concerns the status of the very statement. Is not the statement itself a description of what is said to be 'indescribable'? Strictly speaking, to say that something is ineffable is to say something about it. What is said is an important thing because it opens the discussion as to why this particular thing is ineffable. The logical difficulty is that by making a statement regarding the impossibility of making a statement one is caught up in a self-contradictory situation. Noticing the difficulty Arthur Danto once defined ineffability as "that about which all that it is to be said is nothing more is sayable"². However if we accept the validity of this logical difficulty we have to conclude that nothing is absolutely ineffable.

Paul Henle discusses the possibility of two kinds of ineffability, one relative to a particular symbolism and one pervading linguistic system as a whole³. As an example of

2. 'Language and the Tao: Some Reflections on Ineffability' in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*. (1973) pp. 45-55.
3. 'Mysticism and Semantics' in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. (1943) vol. ix. pp.416-22.

relative ineffability he says that there can be a certain system of symbols in which certain statements cannot be made. By the very structure of such a system it can express only some ideas and not others. In such a situation, however, one can switch into another system and overcome the difficulty. The absolute ineffability is not something that is relative to one particular system of symbols but a situation that covers the phenomenon of language as a whole. It means that something cannot be expressed in any language at all. The claim made in religious literature seems to be something of the second sort. It seems to refer to human linguistic capacity in general and claims that there are things that lie beyond its limits

The Upanisadic statement mentioned earlier refers to word and mind. It seems to be saying that certain things cannot be thought or said. If something is absolutely unthinkable then that must be necessarily ineffable for we cannot talk about things we cannot think of. An associated claim is that we cannot know certain things. Here again what is debated is not the limit of particular individuals' capacity to know but the limits of universal human capacity to know. In other words, what is claimed is that there are things human beings cannot know in principle. If something is unknown then it must be unthinkable; what is both unknown and unthinkable must be ineffable.

There is a significant difference between the ineffability caused by the nature of the human language and one caused by the limits of the human cognitive capacity. In the case of the former, the ineffability is a result of the very nature of the language. A good example is the Advaita Vedantic Atman/Brahman state. It is said that the ultimate religious

experience of Atman/Brahman is a result of the realization that duality is false and what is real is only the non-duality. The language is taken as the major characteristic of the dual and hence unreal character of everyday experienced reality. The Atman / Brahman is characterized by oneness, and it is claimed that in oneness there cannot be any operation of language which requires duality and multiplicity for its very existence. Now this is a clear situation in which language, totally and wholly, is incapable of expressing the reality of Atman/Brahman.

Ineffability caused by unknowability and unthinkability is different. Strictly speaking we can say that the basic problem is not related language per se; but related to the limited cognitive capacity of ours. The ineffability occurs for the simple reason that we cannot talk about things that we do not know anything about.

It is customary for religions to uphold the existence of a reality transcending ordinary reality. The transcendence is something contrasted with the world. In religions it is held, again as a general rule, that anything connected with this world is not satisfactory, and therefore should ultimately be got rid of. The answer to the problem of this world is believed to lie in transcending it or going beyond it physically and mentally. Thus the acceptance of a transcending reality comes as a 'logical corollary' of that religious analysis of human predicament. What is transcendent, by definition, is unknowable and hence ineffable.

Although the claim to the effect that God or the Transcendent is ineffable is widely seen in religious literature what they meant by this claim is not quite clear. They cannot have meant that, for instance, God is totally ineffable

for that will make the most cherished element of religion to be wholly beyond human cognition. Hence it is claimed that God is knowable through God's grace and only through grace. Then the ineffability claim amounts to saying that God cannot be adequately described or God cannot be described by our ordinary language which does not rule out the possibility of talking of God by means of certain extra-ordinary methods of language such as *via negativa* etc. Although the religious traditions make this claim it is significant to note that they have never stopped talking of what they calimed to be unspeakable. This suggests that what they meant by the claim may not be toatal ineffability but some sort of limitation or even psycholglcal situation of the speaker. A good example is provided by William James. He identifies several characteristics of mystical experience among which he counts Ineffability as the first:

The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that it quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or trasferred to others. In this particularity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one's self to understand a lover's state of mind. Lacking the heart or ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly, are even likely to consider him weak-minded or absurd. The mystic finds that most of us accord to his experiences an equally incompetent treatmet⁴.

4 *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The Modern Library, New York. 1936. p.371.

In this account of ineffability James refers to two different reasons why something can be ineffable. One reason is that in the absence of the relevant experience one is not capable of talking about that particular thing. In the context of religion this has been described as 'spiritual blindness' by WT Stace⁵. The other aspect is that, however much one were to say about a particular phenomenon, one does not feel adequate. Now this second is a psychological condition. It is not really that one cannot describe something in language but one's emotional involvement is such that one does not feel satisfied with what one has said. It could well be the reason with some of the religious people who have made this claim. This does not, however, concerns us in the present context.

What has been maintained as ineffable in the field of religion is what is believed to be the ultimate reality. If what they meant by this claim is some psychological condition of one who makes the claim or some kind of laguage-relative limitation or a speaker-relative limitation they are not insurmountable difficulties. What is philosophically and religiously significant is the claim that the ultimate religious experience involves something totally transcendental and hence it is ineffable in the sense that human language cannot articulate it.

Buddhist Enlightenment

In his first sermon to the world the Buddha referred to his realization in the following words: *pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhum udapādi, nānam udapādi, paññā udapādi*,

5. *Mysticism and Philosophy*. Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc. Los Angeles. 1960. pp. 383-4.

*vijja udapādi, aloko udapādi*⁶: there arose eye, knowledge, wisdom, science and light with regard to the phenomena unheard of earlier'. In this statement the Buddha uses a series of cognitive terms to describe the vision he realized and the last term used is 'light'. The Buddhist nirvana may well be described as 'enlightenment' in this particular sense but not in its usual modern sense of being exclusively rational or intellectual.

The teaching of the four noble truths focuses on the idea of dukkha (suffering). It describes the human predicament as characterized by suffering and goes on to explain that suffering is caused by 'thirst' (*tanha*) and related defilements (*kilesa*). The purification (*visuddhi*) marked by the eradication of these defilements is called nirvana (the cessation of suffering = *dukkhanirodha*) constitutes the third noble truth and the fourth describes the path leading to the cessation of suffering. Along with 'purification' there is another term which is used widely in the texts to refer to nirvana, namely, 'vimutti' or liberation. It signifies the liberation from defilements.

The basic four noble truth-teaching makes it very clear that the ultimate stage of Buddhist religious life is purification of mind of defilements or liberation of mind from fetters (entanglements or shackles). This purification or liberation has many stages. The well-known four stages, namely, sotāpanna (stream-entrant), sakadāgāmi (once-returner), anāgami (non-returner) and arahanta (worthy-one) characterize the gradual process of purification or liberation. The texts elaborate bonds (saññojana) as ten. They are: personality-belief, skeptical doubt, clinging to mere rules and

6 Samyuttanikaya (Sacca Samyutta).

rituals, sensuous craving, ill-will, craving for fine-material existence, craving for immaterial existence, conceit, restlessness and ignorance. The first five are called lower fetters and the other five higher fetters. Of them the first three are eradicated at the first stage of liberation; in the second stage next two are softened; these two are completely eradicated at the third stage; the last five are destroyed at the final stage and such a person is called 'arahant' or one who has realized nirvana. It is quite natural in the teaching of the Buddha that there is a very deep and extensive analysis of human mind for the ultimate aim is the purification of the mind. The Buddhist analysis of defilements is very deep. It talks about many aspects and characteristics of these defilements. Rune Johansson has to say the following about the Buddhist emphasis on human psychology:

Anybody with a good knowledge of psychology and its history who reads the Pali nikayas must be struck by the fact that the psychological terminology is richer in this than in any other ancient literature and that more space is devoted to psychological analyses and explanations in this than in any other religious literature⁷.

This emphasis in Buddhism makes sense in the context of the nature of the ultimate realization advocated in Buddhism, namely, nirvana or the consummate purity of mind.

Characterizing the happiness arising from the cessation of suffering, nirvana, has been described as the 'highest happiness' (*parama sukha*). Highlighting the purity arising from the cessation of defilements is described in texts very often as the extinction of lust, ill-will and delusion (*rāga-khaya, dosa-khaya, mohakhaya*). These three mental factors

7 *The Psychology of Nirvana*. George Allen and Unwin LTD. London. p. 11.

have been recognized in the Buddhist psychological analysis as representative of defilements. All the other defilements are regarded as the species of these three. For the same reason they are described as 'roots of unskillfulness' (*akusalamūla*). The arahant's behaviour is described as one of kusala for it is devoid of the defiling factors characterized by these three.

The path to arahanthood has been elaborated in the discourses. What is striking in these accounts is that there is no mysticism in the whole process. The Buddhist path to purification begins with morality (*sīla*) and goes through the stage of development of the moral qualities of mind along with its concentration (*samādhi*) and finally culminates in wisdom (*pañña*). In the second (samadhi) stage one starts cultivating one's mind. The key elements of this process are abandoning what are called five hindrances (*nīvarana*) and generating the advanced states of mind called absorptions (*jhāna*). In the Jhanic states gradually one's mind gets directed to itself and the connections with the external world become less and less. However these are not mystical states for they are characterized by the clarity of mind. The Samānaphala Sutta of the Dighanikaya, one of the authoritative discourses of the Canon elaborates this stage of the process in the following manner:

Then he, equipped with Ariyan morality, with his Ariyan restraint of the senses, with his Ariyan contentment, finds a solitary lodging, at the root of a forest tree, in a mountain cave or gorge, a charnel-ground, a jungle-thicket, or in the open air on a heap of straw. Then, having eaten after his return from the alms-round, he sits down cross-legged, holding his body erect, and concentrates on keeping mindfulness established before him.

Abandoning worldly desires, he dwells with a mind freed from worldly desires, and his mind is purified of them. Abandoning ill-will and hatred... and by compassionate love for the welfare of all the living beings, his mind is purified of ill-will and hatred. Abandoning sloth-and-torpor, ... perceiving light, mindful and clearly aware, his mind is purified of worry and flurry. purified of sloth-and-torpor. Abandoning worry-and-flurry.. and with an inwardly calmed mind his heart is Abandoning doubt, he dwells with doubt left behind, without uncertainty as to what things are wholesome, his mind is purified of doubt...

As long, Sire, as a monk does not perceive the disappearance of the five hindrances in himself, he feels as if in debt, in sickness, in bonds, in slavery, on a desert journey. But when he perceives the disappearance of the five hindrances in himself, it is as if he were freed from debt, from sickness, from bonds, from slavery, from the perils of the desert.

And when he knows that these five hindrances have left him, gladness arises in him, from gladness comes delight, from the delight in his mind his body is tranquilized, with a tranquil body he feels joy, and with joy his mind is concentrated. Being thus detached from sense desires, detached from unwholesome states, he enters and remains in the first jhana, which is with thinking and pondering, born of detachment, filled with delight and joy. And with this delight and joy born of detachment, he so suffuses, drenches fills and irradiates his body that there is no spot in his entire body that is untouched by his delight and joy born of detachment...

Again a monk, with subsiding of thinking and pondering, by gaining inner tranquility and oneness of mind, enters and remains in the second jhana which is without thinking and pondering, born of concentration, filled with delight and joy. And with this delight and joy born of concentration he so suffuses his body that no spot remains untouched....

Again, a monk, with the fading away of delight remains imperturbable, mindful and clearly aware, and experiences in himself that joy of which the noble ones say: Happy is he who dwells with equanimity and mindfulness", and he enters and remains in the third jhana. And with this joy devoid of delight he so suffuses his body that no spot remains untouched...

Again, a monk, having given up pleasure and pain and with the disappearance of former gladness and sadness enters and remains in the fourth jhana which is beyond pleasure and pain, and purified by equanimity and mindfulness. And he sits suffusing his body with that mental purity and clarification so that no part of his body is untouched by it.

The aspects described in these passages cover the second samādhi stage in the process of purification. The jhānas referred to are those belonging to the realm of forms (*rūpa*) where the existence characterized by the presence of physical form. The Buddhist tradition also refers to four other stages of jhana which are called 'formless' (*arūpa*). They have not been elaborated in the Samaññaphala sutta perhaps for they are not essential for the purification of mind. They have been described in many other discourses in the following manner:

Through the total overcoming of the perception of matter, however, and through the vanishing of sense-reactions and the non-attention to the perceptions of variety, with the idea, 'Boundless is space', he reaches the Sphere of Boundless Space (*ākāśānañcāyatana*) and abides therein. Through the total overcoming of the sphere of boundless space and with the idea 'Boundless is consciousness', he reaches the Sphere of Boundless Consciousness (*viññānañcāyatana*) and abides therein.

Through the total overcoming of Sphere of Boundless Consciousness and with the idea: 'Nothing is here', he reaches the Sphere of Nothingness (*ākāśañcāyatana*) and abides therein.

Through the total overcoming of the Sphere of Nothingness he reaches the sphere of Neither-Perception-nor-non-perception (*nevasaññā-nāsaññāyatana*) and abides therein.

The account of these finer states of jhana shows that they result from the gradual isolation of mind from the external world. Even in the fourth stage the mind is not totally devoid of perceptions; but they are almost absent in it. These states cannot be described as mystical or transcendental for they are nothing other than what has been described.

The culmination of the trend of isolating mind from perceptions is the attainment of cessation (*nirodha samāphatti*). Usually this is described as the cessation of what is perceived and felt (*saññā vedayita nirodha*). A recent authority describes this attainment in the following manner:

'attainment of extinction ... is the temporary suspension of all consciousness and mental activity, following immediately upon the semi-conscious state called

'Sphere of Neither-Perception - nor - Nonperception. The absolutely necessary preconditions to its attainment are said to be perfect mastery of all 8 absorptions (jhana), as well as the previous attainment of Anagami or Arahatsip... With regard to the difference existing between the monk abiding in this state of extinction on the one hand, and a dead person on the other hand, M.[Majjhimanikaya] 44 says: In him who is dead and whose life has come to an end, the bodily (In and Out breathing) verbal (Thought Conception and Discursive Thinking) and mental functions have become suspended and come to a standstill, life is exhausted, the vital heat extinguished, the faculties are destroyed. Also in the monk who has reached 'Extinction of Perception and Feeling" (saññā - vedayitanirodha) the bodily, verbal and mental functions have been suspended and come to a standstill, but life is not exhausted, the vital heat not extinguished, and the faculties are not destroyed⁸.

As this description suggests this is a temporary stopping of all sensory avenues including mind. The resultant state is characterized by complete cessation of any form of conscious existence. In this state one is not much different from a lifeless piece of log and characterized by total nothingness. Even in this state there is nothing mystical because there is nothing either mystical or non-mystical.

The final stage in the path to purification is 'wisdom' and it has three stages. The Sāmaññaphalasutta describes these stages in the following manner:

8 *Buddhist Dictionary*. Nyanatiloka. (First published in Sri Lanka in 1948)

And he, with the mind concentrated, ... applies and directs his mind to the knowledge of previous existences. He remembers many previous existences: one birth, two, three, four, five births ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty births, a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand births several periods of contraction, of expansion, of both contraction and expansion "there my name was so-and-so, my clan was so-and-so, my caste was so-and-so, my food was such-and-such, I experienced such-and-such pleasant and painful conditions, I lived for so long. having passed away from there, I arose there. There my name was so-and-so... And having passed away from there, I arose here". Thus he remembers various past births, their conditions and details...

And he, with mind concentrated, ... applies and directs his mind to the knowledge of the passing-away and arising of beings. With the divine eye, purified and surpassing that of humans, he sees beings passing away and arising: base and noble, well - favoured and ill - favoured, to happy and unhappy destinations as kamma directs them, and he knows: 'These beings, on account of misconduct of body, speech or thought, or disparaging the Noble Ones, have wrong view and will suffer kammic fate of wrong view. At the breaking-up of the body after death they reborn in a lower world, a bad destination, a state of suffering, hell. But these beings, on account of good conduct of body, speech or thought, of praising the Noble Ones, have right view and will reap the kammic reward of right view. At the breaking-up of the body after death they are reborn in a good destination, a heavenly world". Thus with the divine eye... he sees beings passing away and rearing...

And he, with mind concentrated, purified and cleaned, unblemished, free from impurities, malleable, workable, established and having gained imperurbability, applies and directs his mind to the knowledge of the destruction of the corruptions. He knows as it really is. "This is suffering", he knows as it really is: "This is the origin of suffering", he knows as it really is: "This is the cessation of suffering", he knows as it really is: "This is the path leading to the cessation of suffering." And he knows as it really is "These are the corruptions" "This is the origin of the corruptions", "this is the cessation of the corruptions", "this is the path leading to the cessation of the corruptions". And through his knowing and seeing his mind is delivered from the corruption of sense desire, from the corruption of becoming, from the corruption of ignorance, and the knowledge arises in him: "This is deliverance", and he knows: "Birth is finished, the holy life has been led, done is what had to be done, there is nothing further here."

The actual occasion of becoming an arahant and realizing nirvana occurs at the realization of the knowledge of the destruction of the defilements. The unmythical character of the stage of realization is emphasized in the discourse through the following simile:

Just as if, Sire, in the midst of the mountains there were a pond, clear as a polished mirror, where a man with good eyesight standing on the bank could see oyster-shells, gravel banks, and shoals of fish, on the move or stationary. And he might think: "This pond is clear, ... there are oyster-shells, ... just so with mind concen-

trated, ... he knows: "Birth is finished, the holy life has been led, done is what had to be done, there is nothing further here. This, Sire, is a fruit of the homeless life, visible here and now..."

This simile makes it very clear that the final stage of the process of purification is wholly unmythical and does not refer to any transcendental phenomenon. The conclusion I draw from this is that nirvana is not a transcendental phenomenon which lies beyond human cognitive capacity. Nor does it indicate any transcendental reality similar to Atman / Brahman which is the negation of ordinary reality that alone can allegedly be described by language, and therefore nirvana or the Buddhist enlightenment is not ineffable.

The alleged Problem of Transcendence and Ineffability of Nirvana

The debates on the nature of nirvana and the person who has realized it are not new. In the discourses themselves we find statements which could be used as supporting a transcendental interpretation of nirvana. Our discussion cannot be complete without an examination of at least some of such key instances. One of such well-known instances occurs in the *Udāna* (which is known among the students of Buddhism as U. 80 with reference to the Pali Text Society edition of the *Udana*). What follows is the text and the translation of the two relevant passages:

Atthi bhikkhave tadāyatanam, yattha neva pathavi na āpo na tejo na vāyo na ākāśānañcāyatanam na viññānañcāyatanam na ākiñcaññāyatanam na nevasan nānāsarññāyatanam nāyam loko na paro loko ubhoc-

andimasuriyā tadaham bhikkhave n'eva āgatim na gatim na thitim na cutim na upapattim appatittham appavattam anārammanam eva tam, es' ev' anto dukkhassāti' There is that sphere wherein is neither earth nor water nor fire nor air; wherein is neither the sphere of infinite space, nor of infinite consciousness, nor of nothingness, nor of neither-perception nor-non-perception; wherein there is neither this world nor a world beyond nor both together nor moon nor sun; this I say is free from duration and departure; there is no establishment no continuation, no object ; this indeed is the end of suffering'.

Atthi bhikkhave ajātam abhūtam akatam asaṅkhatam no ce tam bhikkhave abhaviṣṣa ajātam abhūtam akatam asaṅkhatam nayidha jātassa bhūtassa katassa saṅkhatassa nissaranam paññāyetha: Yasmā ca kho bhikkhave atthi ajātam abhūtam akatam asaṅkhatam tasma jātassa bhūtassa katassa saṅkhatassa nissaranam paññāyati: Monks, if that not-born, not-made, not-compounded were not, no escape from the born, become, made, compounded had been known here. But, monks, since there is a not- born, not- become, not-made, not-compounded, therefore an escape from the born, become, made, compounded is known.

The first passage talks about a sphere which does not involve any of the characteristics of the world we ordinarily experience. The language used suggests that what is described is a place or some sort of entity. The next passage seems to say that there is what is not born, not become, not made and not compounded. It is believed that, although the crucial term does not occur in the discourse, what is being

referred to is nirvana. There is another statement in U.55 which says that "just as the ocean does not shrink or overflow) even so, though many monks attain parinibbana in that condition of nibbana without any attachment left. Yet there is neither shrinking nor overflow seen in that condition of nirvana". This statement suggests that there is only one nirvana. If we just go by the literal meaning of these passages they may be taken as referring to a transcendental reality which could well be nirvana. However, this is not the only way of interpreting these passages. It is possible to interpret them as referring to the nature of nirvanic experience which is opposite to the nature of the ordinary experience. The characteristics such as being born, become, made and compounded are associated with our day-to-day experience. Such an interpretation would go along well with the general trend of the characterization of nirvana in the discourses. Rune Johansson who studied the nirvana from a point of view of psychology makes the following observation: "it is possible that this passage [quoted as the second in this paper], which is so ambiguous in meaning, is one of the starting points for the development of Buddhism as a metaphysical theory"⁹

The Buddha's rejection of all the four propositions regarding the arahant is taken sometimes as indicating an ineffable state. In the Aggi Vacchagottasutta (Majjhimanikaya 72) a dialogue relevant to this point occurs between the Buddha and Vacchagotta. The latter asks from the Buddha about the possibility of the post-mortem existence of the arahant. The Buddha replies to him saying that the arahant cannot be described as existing, not existing, both existing and not existing or neither existing nor not existing. In this

⁹ *The Psychology of Nirvana.* George Allen and Unwin LTD, London. 1969. p. 80.

reply the Buddha rejects all the four logical alternatives. The argument is that if anything at all can be said it must be said by means of any one of the above four alternatives; if all the four are inapplicable then no language can describe the status of the arahant after his death.

The Buddha explains why the four positions are not relevant to the arahant. He takes the fire that was burning in front of them as an example and asks from Vacchagotta whether is it proper to ask where the fire has gone once it is extinguished. The latter admits that such a question was not proper. He says that fire which was burning owing to some causes such as fuel gets extinguished once the causes are removed. There does not arise a question as to where the fire has gone. In the like manner, the Buddha said, the arahant has totally destroyed all the five aggregates with which one could speak of him. The arahant is liberated from the notion of material form (*rupa*), feeling (*vedana*), perception (*sāññā*), constructions (*sankhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāna*). The Buddha further explains the status of such an arahant as "*gambhīro appameyyo duppariyogāho seyyathapi mahasamuddo*¹⁰": deep, immeasurable, unfathomable, like the great ocean". There is a similar statement in the Suttanipata which describes the state of the arahant in the following manner:

The person who has attained the end does not have a measure; he does not have that with which one can speak of him. When all the phenomena are totally destroyed all the ways of speech too are destroyed"¹¹.

In this explanation the idea that the arahant does not

10 *Majjhimanikaya* 1. Pali Text Society. p. 487.

11 Attamgatassa na pamanam' atthi - yena nam vajju tam tassa natthi sabbesu dhammesu samuhatesu - samuhata vadapatha pi sabbe (*Suttanipata* 1076)

have any of the aggregates with which one can speak of him leaves open the possibility that the arahant can still have some form of existence in the absence of the five aggregates. This kind of interpretation is supported by the subsequent statement which compares the arahant to the great ocean which is immeasurable. In particular, this last statement can be interpreted as indicating a transcendental state which lies beyond human comprehension. In fact, K.N. Jayatilleke, one of leading modern interpreters of Buddhism, holds a similar position: In interpreting these passages he says: The transempirical cannot be empirically described or understood, but can be realized and attained"¹². K.N. Jayatilleke may have been forced to allow this transcendental interpretation due to the fact that the textual passages betray such a sense. However, the important fact to consider is whether we should go by such relatively isolated passages or we should go by the large majority of the instances which describe nirvana as the purity of mind caused by the cessation of all defilements.

I believe that our interpretation of nirvana has to be guided by the large number of such instances. The resultant picture of nirvana is that it is a sublime state of mind and that it manifests in the experience as purity of defilements and liberation from bonds. As I have explained elsewhere, the uniqueness of Buddhism is that it does not have a concept of transcendence similar to that of theistic religions or the so-called monistic religions such as Advaita Vedanta¹³. Like any other religion, Buddhism too views the present state of

12 *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. London. pp. 475-6.

13 *Nirvana and Ineffability: A Study of the Buddhist Theory of Reality and Language*. Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies. Colombo. 1993 See pp. 148-151.

the human existence as unsatisfactory. Buddhism describes this by the word 'dukkha' (suffering), and says that we must get rid of this suffering. The eradication of suffering, however, does not mean that we must go to a transcendental state (God, Heaven or Atman/Brahman) in order to overcome it. That is why the Buddha says: The world, its origin, cessation and the path leading to the cessation lies within this fathom-long body¹⁴. The transcendence Buddhism talks is only an attainment to higher state of mind which is a result of mental development. The enlightened person has been described as one who is born and brought up in the world but lives in it without getting smeared by its defilements. The mind of such a person may be unfathomable like the great ocean by an ordinary mind. But it cannot mean that the arahant enters a transcendental reality after his attainment to arahanthood.

Conclusion

In many religious traditions we find that the ultimate religious experience or reality has been described as ineffable mainly due to the fact that it has been described as transcendental. If something is beyond human comprehension and lies totally above human cognition such a thing has to be ineffable in the sense that one cannot talk about something that one does not know. But, faced with the task of characterizing their religious experience, many religious traditions have made inconsistent statements. On the one hand, they say that the ultimate religious reality is unknowable and ineffable. On the other hand, they say that it can only be known by extra-ordinary methods. If something can be

known by whatever manner, it is difficult to hold that it is going to be ineffable. The only consistent position to hold is total transcendence, total unknowability and total ineffability. But this position is not much helpful either religiously or philosophically.

It is important to note that the early Buddhist tradition has never said that nirvana is ineffable. None of the arahant who realized nirvana has claimed their experience to be ineffable either. As we saw in the above discussion of the nirvanic path the clarity of vision is the hallmark of the entire process. There is nothing mystical at any point of the process. Therefore It is quite natural that such a religious tradition has not understood its ultimate religious experience to be ineffable.

14 Imasmimyeva byamamatte kalebare saññimhi samaññake lokanca paññapemi lokasamudayañca lokanirodhañca lokanirodhagam inipatipadañca. *Samyuttanikaya* 1. Pali Text Society. London. p. 62