EDITOR
Prof. Dr. S. SANKARANARAYANAN, M.A., Ph.D.
Director, Oriental Research Institute

ASSOCIATE EDITORS
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and
Dr. K.S. RAMAMURTI
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ON THE BRAHMAN IN BUDDHIST LITERATURE

Since T. W. Rhys Davids¹, several scholars have expressed the opinion that "the neuter Brahman is entirely unknown in the Nīkiyās". Some scholars, in their overenthusiasm to prove the Upaniṣadic character of early Buddhism, have, on the contrary, seen brahman where, in reality, Brahma is spoken of. These fantastic theories have justly been condemned, but their critics ignore the numerous texts of the Pali Canon which mention, beyond doubt, the neuter brahman². Some, again, while admitting that the latter is attested in the Pali Canon, think that it is used in a sense different from that in which it is used in the Upaniṣads: "das Heilige, Göttliche, Gute³". Even Wilhelm Geiger, who contributed so much to the elucidation of this problem, did not admit that the Buddha was using the term brahman in the Upaniṣadic sense. On the contrary, he thought that the Buddha gave it "eine besondere Färbung, eine neue Erleuchtung"⁴. The very term dharma/dhamma which the Buddha


borrowed from the past, and with which brahman is not seldom equated in the Pali Canon, has, according to Geiger, a new significiation with the Buddha: ‘das ehrwürdige Gefäss, das er mit neuem Inhalt fülte’. The Buddha’s purpose, thought Geiger, was to replace the idea of brahman with that of dhamma, i.e. to replace the idea of eternity with that of change.

A preliminary note on this last point seems necessary here. It is indeed usually thought that while the Upaniṣads teach the idea of an eternal Being, Buddhism, on the contrary, teaches a perpetual becoming, and that the famous ‘eternalism’ (sāsvatāvāda / sassatāvāda, sāvatatadṛṣṭi / sassatadīṭṭhi), which the Buddha condemns, refers to the Upaniṣadic doctrine. It cannot, however, be overlooked that, according to this ‘eternalism’, eternity is but the unending continuation of time, whether in this world or in another world; whereas, according to the Upaniṣads, eternity is nothing short of timelessness. Whether you call it brahman or otherwise, Buddhism also acknowledges a timeless eternal Being: I mean the Nirvāṇa / Nibbāna. As Buddhaghosa says:

appabhavattā ajārāmaraṇam; pabhavajārāmaraṇanam abbhavato nīcaṁ.

So far as I am concerned, I have no doubt that the Buddha accepted the atman as taught in the Upaniṣads. By his famous doctrine of anatā he denied, indeed, a certain conception of atman; but that conception has nothing to do with the Upaniṣadic teaching concerning the atman. The atman / atta that is denied by the anatā concept is the psychophysical individual composed of the five skandhas / khandhas; and the Buddha condemned this conception of atman because it was the most popular in his time. As a passage of the Samyutta-Nikāya clearly states:

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ye hi keci samaṇa vābrahmaṇa vā anekavihi tam attām samanupassāna samanupassanti, sabbe te pāñcupāñнакhandhe samanupassanti, estesam vā annataram.11. It is with reference to the five khandhas that the Buddha says: n’ etam mama, n’ eso ‘ham asmi, na m’ eso atta, ‘This is not mine I am not this, this is not my atman’. Nowhere does he say: ‘There is no atman’. The Buddha condemns, indeed, all theories about the atman (ātavāda / attavāda) or rather, all ‘clinging’ to theories about the atman (attarātupādāna); but that is quite in tune with the spirit of the Upaniṣads: the atman - the Absolute - is beyond thought and its expression in language (yata vāc no vartante aprāpya manastasaḥ); it can only be spoken of in negative terms: neti, neti..., ‘Not thus, not thus...’19.

It is sometimes said that although the texts that have been used prove that the Buddha did not deny the Upaniṣadic atman, or even that he accepted it, there are others, thousands of others, which prove just the opposite. Well, since the names of those texts have not been revealed so far, I will stick to my position until it is proved wrong. It is true that the scholastic tradition interprets the teaching of the Buddha in this respect in a purely negative sense; but, if a scientific study of the teachings of the Buddha is our ideal, we need not blindly follow this tradition, however venerable it may be. Even such a great scholar as E. Frauwallner - who is, I think, beyond all suspicion of heresy, spoke of ‘die einseitige negative Formulierung seiner Aussagen’. And I do not see why we should give more credence to this negative formulation than to such positive formulations as those given by Prajñāpāramitā texts, the authors of the Mahāyāna-stūralamkāra, the Ratnagotivibhāga and the Nārāyana-paripṛcchā, and by Vasubandhu, the author of the Viṃśatikā16.

Now to come to our point, the neuter brahman is frequently mentioned in the Pali Canon as the highest goal of spiritual life. In

6. ibid.

13. Brhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad II, 3, 6; III, 9, 26; IV, 2, 4 ; 4, 22; 5, 15. For a fuller discussion of all this cf. L’ Atman - Brahman...especially chapter I.
16. L’ Atman-Brahman...pp. 3ff.; p. 33, n. 4; pp. 66, 68.
several texts we find this formula: so anattanto aparantarato diṭhe va dhamme nicchāto nibbuto sitibhūto sukhaḥ paṭisamyvedi brahmabhūtena attāna viharatī"). The Samyutta-Nikāya, in one passage, says of the Arahants: loke anupallittā te brahmabhūtā anāsavā").

There is no doubt here that the brahman is equated with the Nirvāṇa. If a more explicit proof is needed, it will also be found. A verse attributed to Udāyi-Thera reads as follows:

manussabhūtam sambuddham attadantam samākhitam
iriyamānām brahmapathe cittassu upasame rattaṇa

Now it is significant that one of the manuscripts of the Aṅguttara-Nikāya inserts, after brahmapathe, the gloss amatapathe. As Geiger already pointed out, this clearly proves the equivalence: brahman=Nirvāṇa (amata=Sanskrit amṛta).

Let us remember, in this connection, that the Bhagavadgītā (II, 72; V, 24-26) uses the expression brahmanirvāṇa and that the same text has (VI, 38): vimāḍho brahmaṁ pathi.

The expression brahmabhūta, often along with dhammabhūta, is also found in many other texts of the Pāli Canon. Thus, in the Aggañña-Sutta of the Dīgha-Nikāya, the Buddha is called ‘Dhammakhāya or Brahmakāya’, ‘Dhammabhūta or Brahmbhūta’ (dhammakāya iti pi brahmakāya iti pi, dhammabhūta iti pi brahmabhūta iti pi).

24. Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad IV, 4, 6. Saṅkara, in his comment on this passage, uses the expression brahmabhūta. Cf. also Saṅkara on Bhagavadgītā XVIII, 54: brahmabhūta = brahmāpratīka. - The expression brahmabhūta is not yet found in the early Upaniṣads, but it is several times found used in the Bhagavadgītā (V, 24; VI, 27; XVIII, 54). Cf. brahmabhūta: XIV, 26, XVIII, 53. For other references see L’ Atman-Brahman... p. 82, n. 2.
25. cittam ca susamākhiṃ vipassanam anāvam | akhilam sabbabhātē so maggo brahmāpattiyā | Samyutta-Nikāya IV, p. 118. - maggo brahmāpattiyā; cf. brahmāpratīkamge by which Saṅkara explains brahmaṁ pathi in Bhagavadgītā VI, 38.
27. Majjhima-Nikāya I, pp. 69ff.; Samyutta-Nikāya II, p. 27; Aṅguttara-Nikāya II, pp. 9, 24 (= Itivuttaka, p. 123); III, pp. 9, 417; V, p. 33; Pāṭisambhidāmagga II, p. 174; Geiger, Pāli Dhamma, pp. 77-78; Dhamma und Brahman, p. 6; K. Bhattacharya, L’ Atman-Brahman..., p. 91 with n. 3.
31. ibid. p. 90, nn. 4, 6, 8.
they understand the neuter brahman, which is really the highest; by this term they understand the personal Brahmas, as is clearly evidenced, for instance, by Visuddhimagga IX, 106 (=Atthasālīni §428)43. And this is not the only aberration that we notice in the commentaries of Buddhaghosa44.

In later Sanskrit Buddhist literature, the neuter brahman is hardly mentioned. Remarkable, however, are Lakkavatāra-Sūtra III, 26, and Mañjuśri-Nāmasamgiti1. A passage from the commentary on the Arthavinīcayā-Sūtra, recently edited by N. H. Samtanī1, is worth considering here. On page 81 of this text we read: brahmacaryaṃ nirvāṇaprapako 'nāsravo mārgaḥ. nirvāṇaḥ brahmocaye, paramapradhānavatā. kutā etā? 'ity api sa bhagavāṁ sāntaḥ śītabhūto brahmabhūta, iti sāvatā. Here brahmacarya is called 'the pure path that leads to Nirvāṇa' an idea that we have already noticed above. And, in support of this idea, our text cites a sūtra which recalls the formula that is found in several texts of the Pāli Canon1. But, when it says: nirvāṇaḥ brahmocaye, paramapradhānavatā, does it mean the neuter brahman? The editor write: "Explanations of brahma as nirvāna is remarkable. In Buddhaghosa's various interpretations, identity of brahma and nirvāna is not clearly stated, although brahma is considered to be something 'highest' (setthaśthena)..." Evidently the same confusion is made here as that which Geiger made, being misled by the word settha. And nothing, it seems to me, indicates that the author of our text has in mind the brahman rather than Brahman: his parama seems to designate the same thing as Buddhaghosa's settha.

32. See ibid. pp. 92-93, 95, n. 4.
34. Dhamma und Brahman, pp. 6-7; cf. Pāli Dhamma, pp. 78-79.
35. See on this point L' Ātman-Brahman..., p. 91, n. 4.
36. In this sense, the term anātman is used in Vedānta. Note that, according to the Tattvātīrīya-Upaniṣad (II, 7), the brahman-ātman is anātma, and that according to the Maitri (II, 4; VI, 20, 21, 28), it is nirātman, nirātmaćca. In all these texts, the term ātman designates the psychophysical individuality whose negation is the true ātman. The Mahāyāna-Sūtraṇākāra and the commentary on the Ratnagotravibhāga have the same idea. See L' Ātman-Brahman..., pp. 69-70. See also pp. 72-73.
37. L' Ātman-Brahman..., pp. 53-54. See also p. 73.
38. Pāli Dhamma, p. 77, n. 3; Dhamma und Brahman, p. 8.
39. L' Ātman-Brahman..., p. 80. (In a future article I propose to study the different interpretations of Brahma given in the Pāli commentaries).
41. ibid. pp. 95, n. 3, and 150, n. 1. - In Sāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra V, 15 (cittasya brahmatādikam [brahmabhūtadhikam, Paññika] phalam), Brahmas seems to be meant.
42. The Arthaviniścaya-Sūtra & its commentary (Nibandha), Patna, K. P. Jaywal Research Institute, 1971 (Tibetan Sanskrit Works Series XIII).
43. The form brahmabhūta (besides brahmabhūta) is sometimes found in Vedānta literature also: thus Saṅkara, Brahmastūrabhāṣya I, 3. 15.
This is, then, the fate of brahman in Buddhism. As it has been pointed out\textsuperscript{44}, in contradistinction to the Upaniṣads themselves, the Pāli Canon is free from the confusion between brahman and Brahmā\textsuperscript{44}. But, in later literature, brahman becomes, in general, Brahmā. And, for modern times, A. Barth recorded long ago: "Il est, je crois, à peu près certain que la confusion que fait M. Leclère entre le brahman impersonnel; l'Etre absolu de la philosophie hindoue et les Brahmās des mondes célestes...est faite au Cambodge par les budhistes eux-mêmes, par les bonzes les plus lettrés et, d'autres égards, parfaitement orthodoxes\textsuperscript{44}.

\textbf{Dr. ASKO PARPOLA}

\textbf{INDIA'S NAME IN EARLY FOREIGN SOURCES*}

The earliest preserved name of 'India' is very probably the Sumerian toponym \textit{Me-luḫ-ḫa}, originally perhaps read \textit{Me-luḫ-ḫa}\textsuperscript{4}. In the cuneiform texts of the late third and early second millennia B.C. \textit{Mešuḫa} denotes the farthest off foreign country known to the Mesopotamians of those times. The geographical hints to its location, the references to \textit{Meluḫḫan} ships coming to Mesopotamia, as well as the nature of the trade goods mentioned all combine to suggest the identity of \textit{Meluḫḫa} with the Indus civilization: some 30 seals inscribed with the Indus script found at various Western Asiatic sites—including the islands of Bahrain and Failaka in the Persian Gulf—prove beyond any doubt that the Harappans played an active role in the international maritime trade in that period. By contrast, no evidence of this kind is available in these early times for Mesopotamian contacts with Nubia, which is called \textit{Meluḫḫa} in the cuneiform sources of the second half of the second millennium and later. The majority of scholars involved in the study of the \textit{Meluḫḫan} problem nowadays regard the Harappan solution most likely: with the collapse of the Indus civilization the Indian trade stopped, and the location of the original \textit{Meluḫḫa} was forgotten. Later, the name was transferred to a different country (Nubia) reminiscent of the ancient descriptions of \textit{Meluḫḫa}, such as its being the source of ivory imported to Mesopotamia, etc.\textsuperscript{4}

C. J. Gadd proposed that Sanskrit \textit{mleccha} ('non-Vedic-Aryan) barbarian' may be a survival of the original Indian name from which Sumerian \textit{Meluḫḫa} was derived. On the basis of the meaning and geo-

\textsuperscript{44.} \textit{L' Štman-Brahman...}, p. 151.

\textsuperscript{45.} On Buddha = Brahmā, cf. ibid. pp. 149 ff.

\textsuperscript{46.} \textit{Œuvres de Auguste Barth II} (Paris 1914), p. 372.

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2. For a select bibliography see ibid. 207.