



Enlightenment in Mahayana Buddhism

Extract from *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side

The Mahayana understanding of samsara and nirvana

The Mahayana master Nagarjuna made the startling statement that samsara is no different from nirvana. What could he mean? Does this not contradict all the Buddha's teachings on the subject? Was he not inventing a renegade belief of his own? Nagarjuna wrote:

There is no distinction whatever between nirvana and samsara. The limit of nirvana is the limit of samsara. There is not the slightest difference between the two.¹

Mahayana Buddhists understand samsara and nirvana within the framework of the Two Truths, that is, ultimate and conventional truth. According to Madhyamaka philosophy, the ultimate truth of all things is that they are empty of inherent existence, which means that they do not exist independently, permanently or as a single entity. Nagarjuna believed that some scholars of the Nikaya schools treated nirvana as though it were an exception to this rule: they regarded it as a permanent state, something that was unproduced and that existed independently of anything else, and as a result they treated it like an ultimate reality that actually exists. Nagarjuna argued that this is a serious mistake for a Buddhist to make, and that there should be no exceptions whatsoever to the principle that the ultimate nature of everything is emptiness (*shunyata*).

It follows from this that both samsara and nirvana are ultimately empty in nature. Since they both have the same nature, one can therefore say that they are the same as each other in ultimate truth. On the conventional level, of course, they are very different and indeed are defined in relation to each other as opposites. So Nagarjuna's statement must be seen as referring specifically to the ultimate state of things as distinct from the way they appear to us conventionally.

The other major difference between the Mahayana and Nikaya views of this topic is that nirvana is not the ultimate goal of Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana distinguishes nirvana from complete buddhahood and considers nirvana to be a provisional goal. Mahayana Buddhists believe that the experience of nirvana eventually comes to an end with a fortunate rebirth, and the individual then continues on the path to full buddhahood. It is said that an arhat still has the subtlest veil of ignorance remaining, and this must be eliminated for complete buddhahood to be attained.



Finally, the doctrine of buddha nature or *tathagatagarbha* explains why Mahayana emphasises that nirvana is not something that we lack and are trying to attain, but rather it is something that is there all the time and that we realize once we have purified our ignorance and confusion. In other words, what we need to do is get rid of our ignorance, not gain a new wisdom that we lack. Following the Buddhist path is useful because it helps us to do just this. The path is seen as a process of abandoning not a process of acquiring. The buddha nature is with us always, we simply have to uncover it and realize it, so Mahayana carries a sense that enlightenment is immanent and fundamentally accessible.

ⁱ *Nagarjuna, Mula madhyamaka karika, XXV.19. See The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way, transl. Jay Garfield, Oxford University Press, 1995.*