

ADDENDUM TO THE EARLY HERESIES

(*Indo. Taur. Vol. II*)

I hope I may be permitted a brief note on a subject whereon much ink has been and will be spilt, namely the etymology of Nirvāṇa.

There is no question of what the word meant and how it was etymologized in classical Buddhism, and as early as Aśoka's time, namely « blowing out » as of a flame from the root *vā* = blow, cf. *vāyu*. But I venture to doubt that this was the original meaning, because the metaphor does not occur in other parts of Buddhist and unlike āsrava it does not make sense in the physiological context; the soul is not regarded as a *prāṇa* — *ātman* as *prāṇa* had been rejected long since in the development of Indian thought. Further extinction is very hard to separate from annihilation of a flame if there is no *ātman*/substratum of the flame, and Buddha disclaims being an annihilationist.

In looking therefore for an etymology, I suggest that *vā/van* is very appropriate and makes sense in the context: the aim and achievement of the ascetic is to reach the state of non-acquisition of karma. This leaves the nature of the entity that does not acquire uncommitted, and Buddha could say he was not an annihilationist. One who has reached this state is tathāgata, and his nature is an irrelevant question. But Buddha's doctrine would thus be very near that of Prakudha Katyayana (and his grand-pupil, Mahavira Jina). Jina's non-acquisition is further described as kaivalya, Buddha's is not further described, but the world has become irrelevant to one in that state.

The chief difficulty is that (—)*vāna* is not recorded from *vā/van* in Whitney and presumably not in the grammarians. But in the new thought a new word might be wanted.

One must ask how the classical sense arose. Our answer would be that it arose with the classical sense of non-*ātman*. Buddha had denied the *ātman*, but the initiative in the sense of *ātman* came from the proto-Vedānta orthodox school; hence those who denied it found themselves denying in a different sense from the original denial, when *ātman* was

not the only possible continuant of the personality, but as Buddha held, an entity unknowable by definition, and therefore without proof and unnecessary. While the positive sense of finding, attaining *ātman*, the rationale of non-acquisition ceases to be understood, and the unfamiliarity of the word eases the change of meaning.