"MASTERS OF BUDDHISM ADORE THE BRAHMAN THROUGH NON-ADORATION"

(BHAVYA, MADHYAMAKAHṚḌAYA, III)

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Bhavya, the Buddhist ācārya of the early sixth century A.D., who seems to have attempted in his Madhyamakahṛḍaya (accompanied by an auto-commentary, called Tarkajvālā) the first systematic treatise on contemporary Indian Philosophy, was peculiarly independent as well as liberal in his philosophic outlook. In a preceding article on this subject: "The Vedānta-Philosophy described by Bhavya in his Madhyamakahṛḍaya" (Indo-Iranian Journal, II, 1958, Nr. 3, Pp. 165-190, written in collaboration with Prof. H. Nakamura), I have presented in English a translation of the available Sanskrit text and Commentary (found only in Tibetan) of Chapter VIII, verses 1 to 16, of this important work, where Bhavya states the pūrva-paśa of the Vedāntins before proceeding to refute their arguments. To illustrate Bhavya's characteristic approach in dealing with the Vedāntic doctrine of his days, I have also quoted and translated therein two additional kārikās from a different Chapter of the same work, viz., IV, verses 7 and 56 (ibid, pp. 179-180). Here, in replying to the Hinayānists, who accuse the Mahāyānist for having common affiliations with the Vedāntins, Bhavya points out by implication, that the Vedānta need not be totally rejected, because whatever is well said therein and acceptable to us was already said by the Buddha himself (= Vedānta ca hi yat sūktaṃ tat sarvam Buddhabhāṣītam).

Bhavya's criticism refers naturally to the Pre-Śaṅkara Vedānta, of which Gauḍapāda has been quoted by him as a prominent authority, and the Supreme Reality of the Vedāntins, the Brahman, is represented by him on their behalf as having various attributes, like: Ātman, Puruṣa, Maheśvara, kartṛ, karmakṛt, eka, sarvatraga, nitya, para, acyuta, pada, avikalpa. Such a conglomeration of apparently inconsistent attributes could not but be an easy target for a veteran Mādhyamika dialectician like Bhavya, because when once the Brahman was regarded as avikalpa
(inconceivable) and also as inexpressible ("yatram vacam agocaraḥ" – verse 16), he could not allow it to be designated with all the remaining positive attributes, which would fall only within the sphere of a relativistic terminology obtained in the realm of conception. If such terms are to be used at all to describe the Brahman, they could only have a purely conventional meaning and merely practical suggestiveness. They could by no means express the Absolute Truth, which is beyond words. The Pre-Śaṅkara Vedānta might well be aware of this consequence, when it declared the Truth to be avikalpa (inconceivable) and yet did not hesitate to describe it in the same breath as being a positive object of approach for the Yogin, who endeavoured to lose his own identity into it through meditation and direct perception, in order to attain the state of Immortality (ibid., Chap. VIII, verses 3, 5.).

Thus, the Pre-Śaṅkara Vedānta of Bhavya’s time, which appears to be deeply rooted in its affiliations with Yogic theories and practices, especially of the Dhyāna-yoga, could not afford to notice the logical implications of its stand in using both positive as well as negative statements to describe the Absolute. Bhavya, on the other hand, following the Madhyamaka-tradition, is consistent in holding, that only negative statements are possible and tenable for communicating the true nature of the Absolute, although conventional designations, like: Brahman, might be used as only an indirect guidance. He also brings out fully the traditional Mādhyamika distinction between the “Two Truths”: vyāvahāra-satya (the conventional Reality) and Paramārtha-satya (the Absolute Truth). We find the Post-Bhavya Vedānta and, in fact, the Indian philosophical systems in general, benefitting by such Buddhist criticism, and improving their respective logical positions by building up a systematic Mayavāda, and bringing out the full implications of Negation by developing the theory of Apoha.

With these introductory remarks, I quote below a few verses from Chapter III of the abovementioned work of Bhavya, with a translation based upon the Tibetan Tarkajvalā. Here he describes the Supreme Reality, called “Brahman” by the Vedāntists, which the Mahāyānists hold, in principle, to be identical with “Nirvāṇa” or “Dharmakāya,” and which, being beyond the reach of the human mind, is incapable of being worshipped either physically, or mentally or vocally. It can be adored only by means of Non-adoration (anupāsāmayoga), and this is what the Buddhist saints, like Avalokiteśvara, Maitreya, Samantabhadra and Mañjuśrī have always done.

(In the following, the Kārikās found in the manuscript-copy of the