

Doctrines of the Nepalese Svābhāvikas

excerpts from:

Essays on the Languages, Literature, and Religion of Nepal and Tibet
by B. H. Hodgson, London: Trübner & Co., 1874

[pp. 23-25:]

Speculative Buddhism embraces four very distinct systems of opinion respecting the origin of the world, the nature of a first cause, and the nature and destiny of the soul.

These systems are denominated, from the diagnostic tenet of each, Swābhāvika, Aiswarika, Yātnika, and Kārmika; and each of these, again, admits of several sub-divisions, comprising diverse reconciling theories of the later Bauddha teachers, who, living in quieter times than those of the first Doctors, and instructed by the taunts of their adversaries, and by adversity, have attempted to explain away what was most objectionable, as well as contradictory, in the original system.

The Swābhāvikas deny the existence of immateriality; they assert that matter is the sole substance, and they give it two modes, called Pravritti, and Nirvritti [this should be Nivritti], or action and rest, concretion and abstraction. Matter itself, they say, is eternal, (however infinitesimally attenuated in Nirvritti); and so are the *powers* of matter which powers possess not only activity, but intelligence.

The proper state of existence of these powers is that of rest, and of abstraction from everything palpable and visible, (Nirvritti), in which state they are so attenuated on the one hand, and so invested with infinite attributes of power and skill on the other, that they want only consciousness and moral perfections to become gods. When these powers pass from their proper and enduring state of rest into their casual and transitory state of activity, then all the beautiful forms of nature or of the world come into existence, not by a divine creation, nor by chance, but spontaneously; and all these beautiful forms of

nature cease to exist, when the same powers repass again from this state of Pravritti, or activity, into the state of Nirvritti, or repose.

The revolution of the states of Pravritti and Nirvritti is eternal, and with them revolve the existence and destruction of nature or of palpable forms. The Swábhávikas are so far from ascribing the order and beauty of the world to blind chance, that they are peculiarly fond of quoting the beauty of visible form as a proof of the intelligence of the formative powers; and they infer their eternity from the eternal succession of new forms. But they insist that these powers are inherent in matter, and not impressed on it by the finger of God, that is, of an absolutely immaterial being. Inanimate forms are held to belong exclusively to Pravritti, and therefore to be perishable; but animate forms, among which man is not distinguished sufficiently, are deemed capable of becoming by their own efforts associated to the eternal state of Nirvritti; their bliss in which state consists of repose or release from an otherwise endlessly recurring migration through the visible forms of Pravritti. Men are endowed with consciousness, as well, I believe of the eternal bliss of the rest of Nirvritti, as of the ceaseless pain of the activity of Pravritti. But those men who have won the eternity of Nirvritti, are not regarded as rulers of the universe, which rules itself; nor as mediators or judges of mankind still left in Pravritti; for the notions of mediation and judgment are not admitted by the Swábhávikas who hold every man to be the arbiter of his own fate—good and evil in Pravritti being, by the constitution of nature indissolubly linked to weal and woe; and the acquisition of Nirvritti being, by the same inherent law, the inevitable consequence of such an enlargement of his faculties, by habitual abstraction, as will enable a man to know what Nirvritti is. To know this, is to become omniscient, a Buddha; to be divinely worshipped as such, while yet lingering in Pravritti; and to become, beyond the grave, or in Nirvritti, all at least that man can become, and all respecting which some of the Swábhávikas have expressed much doubt, while others of them have insisted that it is eternal repose, and not eternal annihilation* (Súnyatá);

though, adds this more dogmatical school, were it even Súnyatá, it would still be good; man being otherwise doomed to an eternal migration through all the forms of nature; the more desirable of which are little to be wished; and the less so, at any price to be shunned.

From the foregoing sketch it will be seen, that the most diagnostic tenets of the Svābhāvikas are, the denial of immateriality, and the assertion that man is capable of enlarging his faculties to infinity. The end of this enlargement of human faculties is association to the eternal rest of Nirvritti, respecting the value of which there is some dispute; and the means of it are, Tapas and Dhyána; by the former of which terms, the Svābhāvikas understand, not penance, or self-inflicted bodily pain, but a perfect rejection of all outward (Prāvrittika) things; and, by the latter, pure mental abstraction. In regard to physics, the Svābhāvikas do not reject design or skill, but a designer, that is, a single, immaterial, self-conscious being, who gave existence and order to matter by volition. They admit what we call the laws of matter, but insist that those laws are primary causes, not secondary; are inherent eternally in matter, not impressed on it by an immaterial creator. They consider creation a spontaneity, resulting from powers which matter has had from all eternity, and will have to all eternity. So with respect to man, they admit intellectual and moral powers, but deny that immaterial essence or being, to which we ascribe those powers. Animate and inanimate causation, they alike attribute to the proper vigour of nature, or Swabháva. I believe the Svābhāvika to be the oldest school of Buddhist philosophy; but that school has, from the earliest times, been divided into two parties, one called the Svābhāvikas simply, whose tenets I have endeavoured to state above, the other termed the Prájñika Svābhāvikas, from Prájñá, the supreme wisdom; viz. of nature.

The Prájñikas agree with the Svābhāvikas, in considering matter as the sole entity, in investing it with intelligence as well as activity, and in giving it two modes, or that of action and that of rest. But the Prájñikas incline to unitize the powers of matter in the state of Nirvritti; to make that unit, deity; and to consider

man's *summum bonum*, not as a vague and doubtful association to the state of Nirvritti; but as a specific and certain absorption into Prajná, the *sum* of all the powers, active and intellectual, of the universe.

[The Svābhāvikas and Prājñika Svābhāvikas are then contrasted with the Aiśvarikas, who “admit of immaterial essence.”]

* This interpretation of the Swābhāvika Súnyatá is *not* the general one, though the opponents of Buddhism have attempted to make it so; for the prevalent sense of the word among the B[a]uddhas, see on. . . .

[p. 83 fn.:] The doctrine of *Súnyatá* is the darkest corner of the metaphysical labyrinth. Eighteen kinds of *Súnyatá* are enumerated in the *Rakshá Bhágavati*. I understand it to mean generally space, which some of *our* philosophers have held to be a *plenum*, others a *vacuum*. In the transcendental sense of the *Buddhists*, it signifies not merely the universal *ubi*, but also the *modus existendi* of all things in the state of quiescence and abstraction from phaenomenal being. The *Buddhists* have eternised matter or nature in *that* state. The energy of nature ever *is*, but is not ever *exerted*; and when not *exerted*, it is considered to be void of all those qualities which necessarily imply perishableness, and, which is the same thing, of all those qualities which are cognisable or distinguishable, and hence the energy in that state is typed by sheer space. Most of the *Buddhists* deem (upon different grounds) all phaenomena to be as purely illusory as do the Vedantists. The phaenomena of the latter are sheer energies of God; those the former are sheer energies of Nature, deified and substituted for God.

[Note: This account by Hodgson, written in 1828 on the basis of information from his Nepalese Buddhist pandit Amṛtānanda, did not turn out to be a description of four schools of Nepalese Buddhists. Rather, it was a description of four systems of tenets from the Buddhist scriptures as extracted and analyzed by his

informant, and named according to “the diagnostic tenet of each” system. Further, Hodgson took “dharma” to be matter, as may be seen by such statements of his as: “. . . Dharma is *Diva natura*, matter as the sole entity, invested with intrinsic activity and intelligence, the efficient and material cause of all.” [p. 72] Later translators understood the “dharmas” as the “elements of existence,” “states of consciousness,” “phenomena,” etc. The Svābhāvika doctrines reported by Hodgson, however, are what Mahatma letter 22 advises Hume to study. So we can assume that they reasonably accurately represent doctrines accepted by the Mahatmas.]