

CHAPTER 34

CHARACTERISTICS OF NIBBĀNA

What is Nibbāna, friend? The destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion—that, friend, is called Nibbāna.

— Samyutta Nikāya

In contradistinction to *samsāra*, the phenomenal existence, Nibbāna is lasting (*dhuva*), desirable (*subha*), and happy (*sukha*).

According to Buddhism all things, mundane and supramundane, are classified into two divisions, namely, those conditioned by causes (*sankhata*) and those not conditioned by any cause (*asaṅkhata*).

“These three are the features of all conditioned things (*sankhatalakkhanī*): arising (*uppāda*), cessation (*vaya*), and change of state (*thitassa aññathattam*).”³⁹⁷

Arising or becoming is an essential characteristic of everything that is conditioned by a cause or causes. That which arises or becomes is subject to change and dissolution. Every conditioned thing is constantly becoming and is perpetually changing. The universal law of change applies to everything in the cosmos—both mental and physical—ranging from the minutest germ or tiniest particle to the highest being or the most massive object. Mind, though imperceptible, changes faster even than matter.

Nibbāna, a supramundane state, realised by Buddhas and arahants, is declared to be not conditioned by any cause. Hence it is not subject to any becoming, change and dissolution. It is birthless (*ajāta*), decayless (*ajarā*), and deathless (*amara*). Strictly speaking, Nibbāna is neither a cause nor an effect. Hence it is unique (*kevala*).

Everything that has sprung from a cause must inevitably pass away, and as such is undesirable (*asubha*).

Life is man’s dearest possession, but when he is confronted with insuperable difficulties and unbearable burdens, then that very life becomes an intolerable burden. Sometimes he tries to seek relief by putting an end to his life as if suicide would solve all his individual problems.

Bodies are adorned and adored. But those charming, adorable and enticing forms, when disfigured by time and disease, become extremely repulsive.

397. See *Gradual Sayings*, i, p. 135.

Men desire to live peacefully and happily with their near ones, surrounded by amusements and pleasures, but, if by some misfortune, the wicked world runs counter to their ambitions and desires, the inevitable sorrow is then almost indescribably sharp.

The following beautiful parable aptly illustrates the fleeting nature of life and its alluring pleasures.

A man was forcing his way through a thick forest beset with thorns and stones. Suddenly to his great consternation, an elephant appeared and gave chase. He took to his heels through fear, and, seeing a well, he ran to hide in it. But to his horror he saw a viper at the bottom of the well. However, lacking other means of escape, he jumped into the well, and clung to a thorny creeper that was growing in it. Looking up, he saw two mice—a white one and a black one—gnawing at the creeper. Over his face there was a beehive from which occasional drops of honey trickled.

This man, foolishly unmindful of this precarious position, was greedily tasting the honey. A kind person volunteered to show him a path of escape. But the greedy man begged to be excused till he had enjoyed himself.

The thorny path is samsāra, the ocean of life. Man's life is not a bed of roses. It is beset with difficulties and obstacles to overcome, with opposition and unjust criticism, with attacks and insults to be borne. Such is the thorny path of life.

The elephant here resembles death; the viper, old age; the creeper, birth; the two mice, night and day. The drops of honey correspond to the fleeting sensual pleasures. The man represents the so-called being. The kind person represents the Buddha.

The temporary material happiness is merely the gratification of some desire. When the desired thing is gained, another desire arises. Insatiate are all desires.

Sorrow is essential to life, and cannot be evaded.

Nibbāna, being non-conditioned, is lasting (*dhuva*), desirable (*subha*), and happy (*sukha*).

The happiness of Nibbāna should be differentiated from ordinary worldly happiness. Nibbānic bliss grows neither stale nor monotonous. It is a form of happiness that never wearies, never fluctuates. It arises by allaying passions (*vūpasama*) unlike that temporary worldly happiness which results from the gratification of some desire (*vedayita*).

In the Bahuvedanīya Sutta (MN 57) the Buddha enumerates ten grades of happiness beginning with the gross material pleasures which result from the pleasant stimulation of the senses. As one ascends higher

and higher in the moral plane the type of happiness becomes ever more exalted, sublime and subtle, so much so that the world scarcely recognises it as happiness. In the first *jhāna* one experiences a transcendental happiness (*sukha*), absolutely independent of the five senses. This happiness is realised by inhibiting the desire for the pleasures of the senses, highly prized by the materialist. In the fourth *jhāna* however, even this type of happiness is discarded as coarse and unprofitable, and equanimity (*upekkha*) is termed happiness.

The Buddha says:³⁹⁸

“Fivefold, Ānanda, are sensual bonds. What are the five? Forms cognisable by the eye—desirable, lovely, charming, infatuating, accompanied by thirst, and arousing the dust of the passions; sounds cognisable by the ear... odours cognisable by the nose ... flavours cognisable by the tongue ... contacts cognisable by the body—desirable, lovely charming, infatuating, accompanied by thirst, and arousing the dust of passions. These, Ānanda, are the five sensual bonds.

Whatever happiness or pleasure arises from these sensual bonds is known as sensual happiness.

“Whoso should declare: ‘This is the highest happiness and pleasure which beings may experience’ I do not grant him that, and why? Because there is other happiness more exalted and sublime.

“And what is that other happiness more exalted and sublime? Here a bhikkhu lives, completely separated from sense-desires, remote from immoral states, with initial and sustained application born of seclusion, in joy and happiness abiding in the first ecstasy (*paṭhama jhāna*). This is happiness more exalted and sublime.

“But should anyone declare: ‘This is the highest happiness and pleasure which beings may experience’—I do not grant him that, and why? Because there is another happiness yet more exalted and sublime.

“Here a bhikkhu, stilling initial and sustained application, having tranquillity within, mind one-pointed, initial and sustained application having ceased, as a result of concentration lives in joy and happiness, abiding in the second ecstasy (*dutiya jhāna*). This is the other happiness more exalted and sublime.

“Yet should anyone declare that this is the highest happiness and pleasure experienced by beings—I do not grant it. There is happiness more exalted.

“Here a bhikkhu, eliminating joy, abides serene, mindful, and completely conscious, experiencing in the body that of which the ariyas say: ‘Endowed with equanimity and mindfulness he abides in bliss.’ Thus

398. Majjhima Nikāya, No. 57 *The Blessing*, No. 4, pp. 129–132.

he lives abiding in the third ecstasy (*tatiya jhāna*). This is the other happiness and pleasure more exalted and sublime.

"Still should anyone declare that this is the highest happiness—I do not grant it. There is happiness more exalted.

"Here a bhikkhu, abandoning pleasure and pain, leaving behind former joy and grief—painless, pleasureless, perfect in equanimity and mindfulness—lives abiding in the fourth ecstasy (*catuttha jhāna*). This is the other happiness more exalted and sublime.

"However, were this declared to be the highest happiness—I do not grant it. There is happiness more sublime.

"Here a bhikkhu, passing entirely beyond the perception of form, with the disappearance of sense reaction, freed from attention to perceptions of diversity, thinks: 'infinite is space'—and lives abiding in the realm of infinite space (*ākāsañnañcāyatana*). This other happiness is more exalted and sublime.

"Nevertheless, if this were declared the highest happiness—I do not grant it. There is happiness more sublime.

"Here a bhikkhu, transcending entirely the realm of infinite space, thinks: 'infinite is consciousness', and lives abiding in the realm of infinite consciousness (*viññānañcāyatana*). This other happiness is more exalted and sublime.

"And yet should this be declared the highest happiness—I do not grant. There is higher happiness.

"Here a bhikkhu, transcending the realm of infinite consciousness, thinks: 'There is nothing whatsoever' and lives abiding in the realm of nothingness (*ākiñcaññāyatana*). This other happiness is more exalted and sublime than that.

"And still were this declared the highest happiness—I do not grant it. There is happiness more exalted.

"Here a bhikkhu, passing entirely beyond the realm of nothingness, lives abiding in the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception (*nevasaññānāsaññayatana*). This other happiness is more exalted and sublime.

"Yet whoso should declare: 'This is the highest bliss and pleasure which beings may experience'—I do not grant him that, and why? Because yet another happiness is more exalted and sublime.

"And what is this other happiness more exalted and sublime? Here a bhikkhu, utterly transcending the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, lives, having attained to the cessation of perception and sensation (*saññāvedayita-nirodha*). This, Ānanda, is the other happiness more exalted and sublime."

Of all the ten grades of happiness this is the highest and the most sublime. This transcendental state is *nirodha samāpatti*, that is, experiencing Nibbāna in this life itself.

As the Buddha himself has anticipated, one may ask: "How can that state be called highest happiness when there is no consciousness to experience it."

The Buddha replies: "Nay, disciples, the Tathāgata does not recognise bliss merely because of a pleasurable sensation, but, disciples, wherever bliss is attained there and there only does the Accomplished One recognise bliss."³⁹⁹

"I proclaim," says the Buddha, "that everything experienced by the senses is sorrow." But why? Because one in sorrow craves to be happy, and the so-called happy crave to be happier still. So insatiate is worldly happiness.

In conventional terms the Buddha declares:

Nibbānam paramam sukham

Nibbāna is the highest bliss.

It is bliss supreme because it is not a kind of happiness experienced by the senses. It is a blissful state of positive relief from the ills of life.

The very fact of the cessation of suffering is ordinarily termed happiness, though this is not an appropriate word to depict its real nature.

Where is Nibbāna?

In the *Milindapañha* the Venerable Nāgasena answers this question thus:

There is no spot looking East, South, West, or North, above, below or beyond, where Nibbāna is situate, and yet Nibbāna is, and he who orders his life aright, grounded in virtue and with rational attention, may realise it whether he lives in Greece, China, Alexandria, or in Kosala.

Just as fire is not stored up in any particular place but arises when the necessary conditions exist, so Nibbāna is said not to exist in a particular place, but it is attained when the necessary conditions are fulfilled.

In the Rohitassa Sutta the Buddha states:

In this very one-fathom-long body, along with its perceptions and thoughts, do I proclaim the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world and the path leading to the cessation of the world.⁴⁰⁰

399. Majjhima Nikāya, No. 57.

400. Samyutta Nikāya, i, p. 62.

Here “world” means suffering. The cessation of the world, therefore, means the cessation of suffering which is Nibbāna.

One’s Nibbāna is dependent upon this one fathom body. It is not something that is created nor is it something to be created.⁴⁰¹

Nibbāna is there where the four elements of cohesion (*āpo*), extension (*pathavī*), heat (*tejo*), and motion (*vāyo*) find no footing.

Referring to where Nibbāna is, Samyutta Nikāya states:⁴⁰²

Where the four elements that cleave, and stretch,
And burn, and move, no further footing find.

In the Udāna⁴⁰³ the Buddha says:

Just as, O bhikkhus, notwithstanding those rivers that reach the great ocean and the torrents of rain that fall from the sky, neither a deficit nor a surplus is perceptible in the great ocean, even so despite the many bhikkhus that enter the remainderless parinibbāna there is neither a deficit nor a surplus in the element of Nibbāna.

Nibbāna is, therefore, not a kind of heaven where a transcendental ego resides, but a Dhamma (an attainment) which is within the reach of us all.

An eternal heaven, which provides all forms of pleasures desired by man and where one enjoys happiness to one’s heart’s content, is practically inconceivable. It is absolutely impossible to think that such a place could exist permanently anywhere.

Granting that there is no place where Nibbāna is stored up, King Milinda questions Venerable Nāgasena whether there is any basis where-on a man may stand and, ordering his life aright, realise Nibbāna:

“Yes, O King, there is such a basis.”

“Which, then, Venerable Nāgasena, is that basis?”

“Virtue, O King, is that basis. For, if grounded in virtue, and careful in attention, whether in the land of the Scythians or the Greeks, whether in China or in Tartary, whether in Alexandria or in Nikumba, whether in Benares or in Kosala, whether in Kashmir or in Gandhāra, whether on a mountain top or in the highest heavens,—wherever he may be, the man who orders his life aright will attain Nibbāna.”⁴⁰⁴

401. “Verily this (*nibbāna*) is to be attained (or realised) by means of the four paths of sainthood, and is not to be produced.”—Visuddhimagga.

402. *Kindred Sayings*, pt. i, p. 23. *Yattha āpo ca pathavī tejo vāyo na gadhati*.

403. See Woodward, *Verses of Uplift*, pp. 66–67.

404. *Questions of King Milinda*, pp. 202–204.

What Attains Nibbāna?

This question must necessarily be set aside as irrelevant, for Buddhism denies the existence of a permanent entity or an immortal soul.⁴⁰⁵

The so-called being of which we often hear as the “vestment of the soul” is a mere bundle of conditioned factors.

The arahant bhikkhuṇī Vajirā says:

And just as when the parts are rightly set,
The word chariot arises (in our minds),
So doth our usage covenant to say
A being when the aggregates are there.⁴⁰⁶

According to Buddhism the so-called being consists of mind and matter (*nāma-rūpa*) which constantly change with lightning rapidity. Apart from these two composite factors there exists no permanent soul or an unchanging entity. The so-called “I” is also an illusion.

Instead of an eternal soul or an illusory “I” Buddhism posits a dynamic life-flux (*santati*) which flows *ad infinitum* as long as it is fed with ignorance and craving. When these two root causes are eradicated by any individual on attaining arahantship, they cease to flow with his final death.

In conventional terms one says that the arahant has attained *parinibbāna* or passed away into Nibbāna.

As right here and now, there is neither a permanent ego nor an identical being it is needless to state that there can be no “I” or a soul (*atta*) in Nibbāna.

The *Visuddhimagga* states:

Misery only doth exist, none miserable;
Nor doer is there, nought save the deed is found;
Nibbāna is, but not the man who seeks it;
The path exists, but not the traveller on it.

The chief difference between the Buddhist conception of Nibbāna and the Hindu conception of Nirvāna or Mukti lies in the fact that Buddhists view their goal without an eternal soul and creator, while Hindus do believe in an eternal soul and a creator.

This is the reason why Buddhism can neither be called eternalism nor nihilism.

In Nibbāna nothing is ‘eternalised’ nor is anything ‘annihilated.’

As Sir Edwin Arnold says:

405. See Chapter 29.

406. *Kindred Sayings*, part 1, p. 170.

If any teach Nirvāna is to cease,
Say unto such they lie.
If any teach Nirvāna is to live,
Say unto such they err.



It must be admitted that this question of Nibbāna is the most difficult in the teaching of the Buddha. However much we may speculate we shall never be in a position to comprehend its real nature. The best way to understand Nibbāna is to try to realise it with our own intuitive knowledge.

Although Nibbāna cannot be perceived by the five senses and lies in obscurity in so far as the average man is concerned, the only straight path that leads to Nibbāna has been explained by the Buddha with all the necessary details and is laid open to all. The goal is now clouded, but the method of achievement is perfectly clear and when that achievement is realised, the goal is as clear as "*the moon freed from clouds.*"

