

The Concept of Nibbāna in Milindapañha

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Abstract

Nibbāna is extremely subtle and hard to describe. It is not a place like heaven or paradise. Nibbāna is not annihilation of the self, since the so-called ‘Cattā’ does not exist-though attaining Nibbāna entails the annihilation of egoism. It is blissful, but there is no feeling associated with it. In fact, because there is no Feeling in Nibbāna, it is truly peaceful. Only Noble Ones can know what Nibbāna is really like, but we can understand fairly well by inference and constant practice of insight meditation. To get the taste of Nibbāna we should practice constant mindfulness. One who practices constant mindfulness of the body knows the taste of Nibbāna. When we are truly mindful, the mind is almost silent and purified to a great extent from mental defilements. If you can gain good concentration for one or two hours you will be able to understand how blissful Nibbāna would be. Then you will surely long to attain it, and give up worldly ways of thinking, and all worldly ambitions.

Introduction

The Pali term Nibbāna (Sanskrit Nirvāṇa) is composed of the particles ‘Ni’ and ‘Vāna’. Ni is a particle implying negation and Vāna means weaving or craving. It is this craving that weaves a cord connecting one life with another. This is the meaning that the great commentator Anuruddha gives to the term: ‘It is called Nibbāna, in that it is a “departure” from the craving which is called vāna, lusting. As long as the craving lasts one accumulates fresh karmic forces which bind one to the eternal cycle of birth and death. But when the cord is cut and all forms of craving are extirpated, the karmic forces cease to operate, thus ending the cycle of birth and death, and one attains Nibbāna.

Nibbāna is also explained as the extinction of the fire of lust (Rāga), hatred (Dosa) and delusion (Moha). The fire simile is one of the favourite similes constantly employed by the Buddha and used by Buddhists to elucidate the meaning of Nibbāna. In the famous Fire sermon the Buddha said:

The whole world is in flames. By what fire is it kindled? By the fire of lust (Raga), of hatred (Dosa) and of delusion (Moha). By the fire of birth, old age, death, pain, lamentation, sorrow, grief and despair it is kindled.

The extinction of this fire is called Nibbāna. ‘To him who has won freedom through the cessation of consciousness (Vijjāvimuttia) and the destruction of craving, the liberation of mind is (like) extinction (Parinibbāni) of a lamp. ‘By winning the highest purity you must be extinguished like a fire by water.’ ‘Kassapa meditates

without fuel extinguished (Nibbuto) among the burning, having attained the ultimate security, like a mass of fire extinguished' (Nibbuta). When the Buddha passed away, Anuruddha his disciple uttered the memorable words:

His mind was firm, without exhalation and inhalation. When the sage passed away, free from desire, having found peace, he endured pain with active mind: the liberation of mind was (like) the extinction of a lamp.

The idea of extinction is also expressed in other passages without the use of the simile of fire:

It is the complete cessation of that very 'thirst' (Tanhā), giving it up, renouncing it, emancipation from it, detachment from it.

Calming of all conditioned things, giving up of all defilements, extinction of 'thirst', detachment, cessation, Nibbāna.

O Bhikkhus, what is the Absolute (Asñkhata, Unconditioned)? It is, O Bhikkhus, the extinction of desire (Rāgakkhaya), the extinction of hatred (Dosakkhaya), the extinction of illusion (Mohakkhaya). This, O Bhikkhus, is called the Absolute.

O Rādhā, the extinction of 'thirst' (Taṇhakkhaya) is Nibbāna. O Bhikkhus, whatever there may be, things conditioned or unconditioned, among them detachment (Virāga) is the highest. That is to say, freedom from conceit, destruction of thirst, the uprooting of attachment, the cutting off of continuity, the extinction of 'thirst' (Tanhā), destruction of desire and craving for those Five Aggregates of Attachment: that is the cessation of Dukkha.

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The true connotation of the term Nibbāna or its true nature is a polemic in Buddhism. It appears that the ambiguity to describe the state or condition or place to which the Buddhist looks forward to as his ultimate goal, continues to pervade even up to the age of King Menander whose questions on the subject elicited from Nāgasena's replies.

It can be said from Nāgasena's point of view that Nibbāna is nothing more than the destruction of craving. Life is a suffering and repeated rebirth depends upon man's craving. In order to stop the cycle of birth and death, and the consequent suffering thereof, one has to stop the desire. Nāgasena's answers in this connection is that if he clings further to attachment he will be born again and if he does not, he is free from the cycles of births and deaths. Nibbāna is nothing else but cessation of craving and ultimately thereby the cessation of the individuality. The craving for life, in the wide sense, engenders a desire (Upādāna) for pleasure which results in procreation. The craving for existence in the dying man is translated into a rebirth.

Thus it is the negative aspect of his positive advance in becoming. It is evident from the statement of Nāgasena that by clinging to sense-pleasure contact arises, by the arising of contact sensation arises, by the arising of sensation craving arises, and

by the arising of craving action arises. Hence action regulates ones' life. Thus with the cessation of craving ceases the link.¹ this is the positive aspect of Nibbāna. It may be defined as the most complete independence of the activities of the senses and as the complete mastery over further attachment to them. It is, after all, without any residuum left which can give rise to a new life. It is, indeed, the rasa or the underlying trend and ultimate goal of Buddhism. The king wants to know whether Nibbāna exists and if so, it can be shown by a simile. Nāgasena replies that Nibbāna is (Atthidhamma) like the wind which cannot be seen but only felt, so Nibbāna can be realized by the mind, it cannot be shown. If then Nibbāna exists, how can it be known and where is its position, questions further the king. Nāgasena answers thus:

“There is no spot looking East, 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 realize it whether he lives in Greece, China, Alexandria or in Kosala”.

“Just as fire exists and yet there is no place where fire (by itself) is stored up. But if a man rubs two sticks together the fire comes. So Nibbāna exists though there is no spot where it is stored up, but it is attained when the necessary conditions are fulfilled²”.

Nāgasena further removes the doubt of the king and asserts that Nibbāna exists and it is the tranquil state of internal nature. If one cannot conceive it with one's worldly knowledge, it would be illogical to conclude that it does not exist. Because a blind man cannot see light, can it be said that there exists no light? It can be apprehended only by the instruments of a gradually matured knowledge. It cannot be pointed out (Anidassana) nor is it subject to description (Inppapañca). It is all bliss and unalloyed and there is no intermingling of pain in it, though the process after seeking it is painful to which Nāgasena agrees. “Those who are in quest of Nibbāna, afflict their minds, and bodies, it is true, restrain themselves in standing, walking, sitting lying and food, suppress their sleep, keep their senses in subject, and abandon their very body and their life. But it is after they have thus in pain, sought after Nibbāna, that they enjoy the Nibbāna which is bliss unalloyed as teachers do, the bliss of knowledge. Thus it is, O king, that Nibbāna is all bliss and there is no pain mingled with it. For Nibbāna is one thing and the pain another³”.

The condition for arising of Nibbāna can never be located. For Nibbāna is uncompounded (Asañkhata). “All beings, O king, who are conscious, are karma-born

¹Rabindra Nath Basu, **A Critical Study of The Milindapañha (A Critique of Buddhist Philosophy)**, (Calcutta: Firma Kim Private Limited Press, 1978), p.102-108.

²Indianet Zone, **Anatta, Buddhist Philosophy**, available from http://www.indianetzone.com/22/nirvana_buddhist_philosophy_buddha.htm accessed 1 March 2011, p.1-3.

³Bihkkhu Pesala, **The Debate of King Milinda: Buddhist Tradition Series**, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited Press, 1998), p. 89-92.

(spring into existence as the results of karma). Fire and all things growing out of seeds, are cause-born (the result of a pre-existing material cause). The earth, the hells, water and wind-all these are season-born (depend of their existence on seasons connected with weather). Space and Nibbāna exist independently, alike of karma and causes and seasons. Of Nibbāna, O king, it cannot be said that it is karma-born, cause-born or season-born; that it has been or has not been or can be produced, that it is past or present or future, that it is perceptible by the eye or the nose or the ear or the tongue or by the sense of touch. But it is perceptible, O king, by the mind. By means of his pure heart, refined and straight, free from obstacles free from low cravings that disciples of Noble Ones who has fully attained can see Nibbāna”. Thus it is to be realized by the mind, by the pure heart, by right practices, free from obstacles and cravings⁴.

Nibbāna is a Dhamma in so far as it is an object of attainment through the life of effort. It can be realized only when the necessary conditions are fulfilled and then can one see Nibbāna face to face. It can be said that there is a cause of realization of Nibbāna but not of its origin. Just as one can go to the Himalayas but cannot bring them to oneself. The aspirant, when regulates his life aright in whatever place he may reside, centers in that City of Dhamma, It is a transcendental state to be realized by one’s intuitive wisdom. It is to be realized not by quiescent meditation only, nor in hypnotic trance, much less by mortification of desire, but by rational discontent, strong anguish, longing, followed by forward leap of the mind into peace and calm, then again by a vibrating zeal in which the aspirant strives with might and main along with the path. Just as a man who venturing into a strange land, has lost way, on becoming aware of the path, free from jungle, that will lead him home, bounds forward along it, contented in mind, exulting and rejoicing at the thought: “I have found the way at last!”, so the mind of the aspirant leaps forward into that state in which there is no becoming and then he found peace, then does he exult and rejoice at the thought: “A refuge have I found at last!”⁵”.

Thus, the so-called being consists of name and form (Nāma-rupa). It is dynamic in its life continuum (Santati). Ignorance (Avijjā) and craving (Taṇhā) are the root causes, which, when overcome, cease the flow of births and deaths. Nāgasena, in this connection, discusses some good qualities (kusala Dhammas) by developing of which an aspirant could attain Nibbāna. He has expounded in detail with apt similes and illustrations the special features of each of these qualities and showed their powers to stop evil dispositions, so that the aspirant can break the cycles

⁴Bhikkhu Bodhi edited by N.K.G. Mendis, **The Questions of King Milinda: An Abridgement of the Milindapañha**, (Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society Kandy Press, 2011), p.129-136.

⁵A J Bahma, **Philosophy of the Buddha**, (India: Vikas Publishing House PVT LTD Press, 1982), p. 80.

of births and deaths and thus becomes free from sufferings. These are: morality (Sila), faith (Saddhā), exertion (Viriya), mindfulness (Sati) and concentration (Samādhi).

With the arising of faith, hindrances (Nibbāna) are destroyed, the mind (Citta) becomes pure, tranquil and unstained. It is aspiration in the sense that ‘on perceiving how the hearts of heart of others have been set free, it aspires to enter as it were by a leap upon the fruit of the first stage or of the second or of the third in the Excellent Way or to gain Arhatship itself, and thus applies himself to the attainment of what he has not reached, to the experience of what he has not yet felt, to the realization of what he has not yet realized’. Exertion (Viriya) plays an important part in a seeker’s mind. It is by one’s won exertion that one’s deliverance is obtained. It is rendering of support. All those good qualities which it supports do not fall away. ‘Just as a man, if a house were falling, would make prop for it of another post, and the house so supported would not fall: just so, O king, is the rendering of support, the characteristic of exertion and all those good qualities which it supports do not fall away⁶. It is an important factor in the achievement of the goal. It has been said by the Blessed One, ‘The exerting learner of the Noble Truth, O Bhikkhus, puts away evil and cultivates goodness, puts away that which is wrong and develops in himself that which is right and thus does he keeps himself pure.’⁷

Next comes mindfulness (sati), according to Nāgasena, with its characteristics as repetition (Apilāpana) as well as keeping up (Upagaṇhana). As the mindfulness springs up, the aspirant repeats over and over the good and bad, right or wrong qualities. ‘Thus the recluse follows after those qualities that are desirable and not after those that are not, thus does he cultivate those which ought to be practiced and not those which ought not’. That is how repetition is the characteristic of mindfulness. And the recluse makes what is evil in himself to disappear and keeps up what is good. This is the keeping up of mindfulness. Mindfulness, however, is closely associated with exertion (Viriya).

Finally comes concentration (Samādhi). It is the top (Pamukha) of all the moral states and they all lead to that end. It is said that “as all the rafters of a house go up to the apex, slope towards it, are joined on together at it and the apex is acknowledged to be the top of all, so is the concentration in its relation to other good qualities”. It has also been explained by the simile of an army leading towards the king gone on a battle-field. As the whole army elephants, cavalry, war chariots and bowmen would have him as their chief, summit, round him they would all be ranged. Thus it also the leader of all moral states.

In the Anumānapaṇha concentration has been described as jewel (Samādhiratanā). Just as a man adorns himself with a jewel, so also a recluse can put on the

⁶Dr. P.K.Kaul, **Nāgasena of Milindapañho**, (Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers Press, 1996), p.36.

⁷Bhikkhu Dr. Thich Minh Chau of Viet-Nan, **Milindapañha and Nāgasenabhikshusātra** (A comparative Study), (India: Kalika Press, 1964), p.16.

gem of concentration. In this Anumānapanha the different forms of concentration have been enumerated, such as Savitakka-savicāra, Avitakka-vicāramatto, Avitakka-avicāra, Suññato, Animitto and Appaṇihito samādhis. Regarding ‘vitakka’ and ‘vicāra’, the text characterizes these as the effecting of an aim (Appaṇālakkhana) and the thrashing out again and again (anumajjanalakkhāṇa) respectively. Just as a bronze gong that has been struck reverberates afterwards and the sound lingers on, so applied thought is to be understood thus as ‘striking’, sustained thought is to be understood thus as ‘reverberating’. It is also said that all the immoral states immediately disappear from the mind of that one who wears this gem. They can’t live with him like the drops of water on lotus leaf. Thus the Milindapanha describes it as the purest state of mind which generates peace and tranquility in it. It is after the attainment of Samādhi, in understanding the thing in its real perspective.⁸

So Nibbāna has certain qualities inherent in it. In all, forty kinds of special qualities have been mentioned. Some of these are: Nibbāna is free from all defilements and sufferings. It is the abode of Arhats. It drives out old age and dying. Nibbāna is not born, does not die, does not disease, does not arise, is hard to master, and cannot be carried off by thieves.⁹ It depends on nothing, yet it can be realized by the mind. It is the sphere of the Aryans, without obstruction, unending. Nibbāna is hard to obtain, but once it is realized it brings to fulfillment of knowledge and freedom (Vijjāvimutti). Nibbāna has the scent of moral habit. Nibbāna is lofty, immovable and free from approval and repugnance (Anunayapaṇṭigha Vipparamutta), like a mountain peak.

Conclusion

Nibbāna is extremely subtle and hard to describe. It is not a place like heaven or paradise. Nibbāna is not annihilation of the self, since the so-called ‘self’ does not exist-though attaining nibbāna entails the annihilation of egoism. Nibbāna can be experienced while in human form, and by whom? The living Aahats keep experiencing Nibbāna until they attain Parinibbāna. There are two aspects to Nibbāna, namely:

1. Sa-Upādi-sesa-Nibbāna (Nibbāna with the aggregates still in existence). This status is achieved by the Arahats on the extinction of the defilements (klesha), but with the five aggregates continuing until such time the life span is exhausted.

2. Anupādi-sesa-Nibbāna. (Nibbāna at the time of the physical demise of the Arahats with the five aggregates also dying, at the same time). Here the whole of physio-psychic process meets with death with no remainder. And no last thought.

The ‘Noble ones’ (Ariya Puggala), from the earliest stages such as the ‘fruit of the first stage of stream entry’ (Sotānapatti Phala), have the ability to experience

⁸T.R.V.Murti, **The Central Philosophy of Buddhism**, op. cit., (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1960), p. 235.

⁹Nalinaksha Dutt, **Mahayana Buddhism**, (Dehil: Indological Book House, 1973). p. 251.

glimpses of Nibbāna. At the beginning it would be felt only for a few moments. But as one keeps advancing stage by stage until up to the stage of Arahatship, this time gap of being able to experience Nibbāna keeps expanding. This gap is Phala-Samāpatti.

What happens when the Arahats who enters the state of Pari-Nibbāna is that:

1) ‘Rūpa kāya’ or the physical form loses its life force and gets disintegrated into the primary elements of Āpo, Thejo, Vāyo, Pathavi, and Ākasa (water, heat, wind, earth and space elements). The carriers of these primary elements being the atoms and molecules which in turn continue to exist supporting other forms of life.

2) ‘Nāma Kāya’ or the Mind content, which is passa, vedanā, Saññā, sankhāra and Viññāna (contact, sensation, perception, volition and consciousness) falls apart as the life force leaves the ‘Rūpa kāya’. This is because the Āyu sankhāra (longevity built by Kamma) has come to an end. Since the Arahats has no more klesha, his mind does not grasp anything further. Therefore as there is no re-linking consciousness to establish another birth. The mind passes onto pure emptiness, which is Nibbāna.

3) Viññāna (consciousness) falls apart as there is no need of it to identify or make known any further phenomena, as all mental activity has ceased. Nevertheless there is something left behind, that is:

4) Vachi Sankhāra, all what the Arahats spoke, by way of advice and sermons given.

- They have been retained in the memory by those who listened and passed down by word of mouth or by writing for the use of the others. In the case of Buddha there is the ‘tipitaka’.

- They are also available in the cosmic mind in the form of subtler mental/mnemonic energies.

5) Citta Sankhāra directed with loving kindness and care, and for the welfare and salvation of others are still in existence. They are also there in the said form of subtler mnemonic energies awaiting to be reciprocated by the intended incumbents.

6) All that went through the Arahats mind at ‘Tadāmbana Level’ is present in the universe. They are in much subtler layer of citta sankhāra mentioned above. Of them the marked impressions would stand out, and could be referred to, by those who have the skills to do so. Not only of the Arahats, but also of all beings such impressions get passed on to the cosmic mind.

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