

NIBBANA

by Bhikkhu Bodhi

The Buddha says that he teaches only Dukkha and the cessation of Dukkha, that is, suffering and the end of suffering. The First Noble Truth deals with the problem of suffering. However, the truth of suffering is not the final word of the Buddha's teaching. It is only the starting point. The Buddha starts with suffering, because his teaching is designed for a particular end: it is designed to lead to liberation. In order to do this he must give us a reason for seeking liberation. If a man does not know that his house is on fire, he lives there enjoying himself, playing and laughing. To get him to come out we first have to make him understand that his house is on fire. In the same way the Buddha announces that our lives are burning with old age, sickness and death. Our minds are flaming with greed, hatred and delusion. It is only when we become aware of the peril that we are ready to seek a way to release.

In the Second Noble Truth, he points out that the principal cause of suffering is craving, the desire for a world of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch sensations and ideas. Since the cause of dukkha is craving, the key to reaching the end of dukkha is to eliminate craving. Therefore the Buddha explains the Third Noble Truth as the extinction of craving.

Psychological Dimension of Nibbana

The Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering has two dimensions: a psychological dimension and a philosophical dimension. We shall deal briefly with each of them.

First, the psychological dimension. We find that unhappiness, discontent or suffering results from the tension between desire and the lack of the thing desired. Now there are two possible approaches to overcoming this unhappiness. One is to obtain the object desired, to secure possession of it; the other is to eliminate the desire.

The Buddha's teaching reverses the common assumption that happiness can be found by satisfying our desires. If we carefully examine the happiness that comes from satisfying desire, we would find that such happiness is unreliable and insecure. This happiness depends on external things. These objects of desire are inevitably impermanent, and when we are separated from them we become unhappy. Thus even in the midst of happiness we become vulnerable to suffering. Therefore the Buddha points out that true happiness is to be achieved by taking the opposite approach, the approach of eliminating our desires.

If we eliminate the desire our mind remains satisfied, content and happy no matter what our external situation may be. The Buddha says that this principle can be carried through all the way to the total uprooting of craving. This is the cessation of craving, the end of dukkha visible here and now.

Philosophical Dimension of Nibbana

But the end of dukkha has a more wide-ranging meaning than this. Craving drives us on over and over in samsara, the round of birth and death. When craving is eliminated, our actions no longer build up kamma, then the wheel of becoming is brought to a halt. This is the state of final deliverance which is the aim of the Buddha's teaching.

The state of final deliverance is called "Nibbana" in Pali and "Nirvana" in Sanskrit. Nibbana literally means the extinguishing of a flame. The word "Nibbana" used by the Buddha means the extinguishing of the flame of craving, the extinguishing of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion.

Nibbana is the ultimate goal of the Buddha's path. The Buddha says "Just as the water of a river plunges into the ocean and merges with the ocean, so the spiritual path, the Noble Eightfold Path, plunges into Nibbana and merges with Nibbana.

Nibbana is an existing reality

Regarding the nature of Nibbana, the question is often asked: Does Nibbana signify only extinction of the defilements and liberation from samsara or does it signify some reality existing in itself? Nibbana is not only the destruction of defilements and the end of samsara but a reality transcendent to the entire world of mundane experience, a reality transcendent to all the realms of phenomenal existence.

The Buddha refers to Nibbana as a 'dhamma'. For example, he says "of all dhammas, conditioned or unconditioned, the most excellent dhamma, the supreme dhamma is, Nibbana". 'Dhamma' signifies actual realities, the existing realities as opposed to conceptual things. Dhammas are of two types, conditioned and unconditioned. A conditioned dhamma is an actuality which has come into being through causes or conditions, something which arises through the workings of various conditions. The conditioned dhammas are the five aggregates: material form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. The conditioned dhammas do not remain static. They go through a ceaseless process of becoming. They arise, undergo transformation and fall away due to its conditionality.

However, the unconditioned dhamma is not produced by causes and conditions. It has the opposite characteristics from the conditioned: it has no arising, no falling away and it undergoes no transformation. Nevertheless, it is an actuality, and the Buddha refers to Nibbana as an unconditioned Dhamma.

The Buddha also refers to Nibbana as an 'ayatana'. This means realm, plane or sphere. It is a sphere where there is nothing at all that corresponds to our mundane experience, and therefore it has to be described by way of negations as the negation of all the limited and determinate qualities of conditioned things.

The Buddha also refers to Nibbana as a 'dhatu,' an element, the 'deathless element' (amata-dhatu). He compares the element of Nibbana to an ocean. He says that just as the great ocean remains at the same level no matter how much water pours into it from the rivers, without increase or decrease, so the Nibbana element remains the same, no matter whether many or few people attain Nibbana.

He also speaks of Nibbana as something that can be experienced by the body, an experience that is so vivid, so powerful, that it can be described as "touching the deathless element with one's own body."

The Buddha also refers to Nibbana as a 'state' (pada), as 'amatapada' - the deathless state - or 'accutapada', the imperishable state.

Another word used by the Buddha to refer to Nibbana is 'sacca', which means 'truth', an existing reality. This refers to Nibbana as the truth, a reality that the Noble Ones have known through direct experience.

So all these terms, considered as a whole, clearly establish that Nibbana is an actual reality and not the mere destruction of defilements or the cessation of existence. Nibbana is unconditioned, without any origination and is timeless.

Is Nibbana conditioned by its path?

Now the question is often asked: If Nibbana is attained by the practice of the path, doesn't this make it something conditioned something produced by the path? Doesn't Nibbana become an effect of the cause, which is the path? Here we have to distinguish between Nibbana itself and the attainment of Nibbana. By practising the path one doesn't bring Nibbana into existence but rather discovers something already existing, something always present.

Is Nibbana mere annihilation?

As a precaution we have to repeat that Nibbana cannot be understood through words or expressions or study of the text. One has to understand Nibbana by actual realization. However, in order to convey some idea of the goal to which his teaching points, the Buddha resorts to words and expressions. He uses both negative and positive expressions, and to get a balanced idea of Nibbana both types of expressions have to be considered. Otherwise you will come away with a one-sided, distorted picture of Nibbana.

The Buddha speaks of Nibbana primarily by way of terms negating suffering: as cessation of suffering, cessation of old age and death, the unafflicted, the unoppressed, the sorrowless state, and so forth.

It is also described as the negation of the defilements, the mental factors that keep us in bondage. So Nibbana is described as the same as the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion. It is also called dispassion (viraga), the removal of thirst, the crushing of pride, the uprooting of conceit, the extinction of vanity.

The purpose behind the Buddha's negative terminology is to show that Nibbana is utterly transcendental and beyond all conditioned things; to show that Nibbana is desirable, that it is the end of all suffering, and to show that Nibbana is to be attained by eliminating defilements. The use of negative terminology should not be misunderstood to mean that Nibbana is mere annihilation, a pure negative attainment.

To correct this one sided view, the Buddha also describes Nibbana in positive terms. He refers to Nibbana as the supreme happiness, perfect bliss, peace, serenity, liberation, freedom. He calls Nibbana 'the island', an island upon which beings can land, which is free from suffering. For those beings swept away helplessly towards the ocean of old age and death, it is a place of safety and security.

It is also described as a "cave" which gives safety from the dangers of birth and death. Nibbana is called the "cool state" - coolness which results from the extinguishing of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion.

The story of the Turtle and the Fish

To illustrate this error of regarding Nibbana as sheer nothingness, the Buddhists relate the story of the turtle and the fish. There was once a turtle who lived in a lake with a group of fish. One day the turtle went for a walk on dry land. He was away from the lake for a few weeks. When he returned he met some of the fish. The fish asked him, "Mister turtle, hello! How are you? We have not seen you for a few weeks. Where have you been? The turtle said, "I was up on the land, I have been spending some time on dry land." The fish were a little puzzled and they said, "Up on dry land? What are you talking about? What is this dry land? Is it wet?" The turtle said "No, it is not," "Is it cool and refreshing?" "No, it is not", "Does it have waves and ripples?" "No, it does not have waves and ripples." "Can you swim in it?" "No you can't" So the fish said, "it is not wet, it is not cool, there are no waves, you can't swim in it. So this dry land of yours must be completely non-existent, just an imaginary thing, nothing real at all." The turtle said that "Well, may be so" and he left the fish and went for another walk on dry land.

Two elements of Nibbana

Now the attainment of Nibbana comes in two stages, the two referred to as the two elements of Nibbana. One is the Nibbana element with the residue remaining. The other the Nibbana element without the residue remaining. The element of Nibbana with residue remaining is the state of Nibbana attained by the arahat (the liberated one) in this present life. Namely, the extinction of greed, hatred and ignorance and of all other defilements. The residue that remains in the arahant is the five aggregates that constitute his present life individuality, the psycho-physical organism produced from the past life. Upon attainment of Nibbana, his body and mind continue until the end of the life span.

The second stage of the attainment of Nibbana is called the Nibbana element without a residue remaining. This is the element of Nibbana attained by an arahant with his passing away, with the breakup of his body, what we conventionally call death.

The passing away of an arahant is the final and complete passing out from conditioned existence. It does not lead to a new birth. In his own experience, the arahant sees only the cessation of a process, not the death of a self. The experience for him is without subjective significance, without reference to 'me' or 'mine'. At this stage the residue of the five aggregates comes to an end.
