

NIBBANIC EXPERIENCE: THE FINAL SPIRITUAL GOAL

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1. The Buddhist ideal of Nibbana (the final emancipation) has given rise to a wide variety of interpretations. In this situation, the best approach to understand Nibbana is to understand it in its proper context, that is, in the context of the Four Noble Truths. Nibbana, which is the third Noble Truth, follows as a logical sequence from the first two truths: If there is suffering and if there is a cause for suffering, then it logically follows that the elimination of the cause of suffering leads to the cessation of suffering, which is Nibbana.

2. What is important to remember here is that Nibbana is the cessation of suffering. It is certainly not the cessation of life. Nor is it the annihilation of a self-entity, because Buddhism does not recognize such an entity, either to be annihilated in a physical sense, or to be perpetuated in a metaphysical sense. What really comes to an end is not a self-entity, but the false belief in such an entity.

3. Nibbana is best described as the cessation of passion (raga), aversion (dosa), and delusion (moha). Passion, aversion, and delusion are compared to three fires. As the Buddha says, "Everything is burning. Burning with what? It is burning with the three fires of passion, aversion, and delusion." If Nibbana is described as "extinction", it is "the extinction of these three fires". (Dighanikaya, PTS III, 217; Samyuttanikaya, PTS IV 19).

4. Passion, aversion, and delusion are also described as "limiting factors": When one is infatuated with passion (ratta), overcome by aversion (duttā), and blinded by delusion (mulha), one does not see things as they actually are. For this very same reason, passion, aversion, and delusion are also described as "boundaries" (sima), and as "barriers" (mariyada) (Suttanipata, v 799; Samyuttanikaya PTS 173, III 31). When one is free from these limiting factors, boundaries/barriers, one can see things as they truly are.

5. "Cessation of passion, aversion, and delusion" is the standard definition of Nibbana. All other dimensions of Nibbana, as for example, the highest emancipation, the highest happiness, and so on, are but different perspectives of understanding Nibbana as the cessation of passion, aversion, and delusion.

6. Nibbana as Cessation of Kamma (kamma-nirodha):

Kamma is volitional action. It is action driven by intention. Both wholesome and unwholesome kamma is motivated by self-interest and self-expectation. That is precisely why kamma has either good or bad results. Therefore, all kamma must come to an end in the Nibbanic

experience. What leads to the waning away of all kamma is explained by the Buddha, when he refers to four kinds of kamma:

- (a) dark kamma with dark results, i.e. bad kamma with bad results;
- (b) bright kamma with bright results, i.e. good kamma with good results
- (c) kamma that is both dark and bright, with dark and bright results;
- (d) kamma that is neither dark nor bright, with results that are neither dark nor bright.

It is the fourth kind of kamma that leads to the cessation of kamma. The Buddha explains it thus:

“And of what sort, monks, is the kamma that is neither dark nor bright, with a result that is similar, which itself being a kamma conduces to the waning of kamma? In this case, monks, the intention to abandon this dark kamma with its dark result, the intention to abandon this bright kamma with its bright result, the intention to abandon this kamma that is both dark and bright with its dark and bright result, this intention is called the kamma that is neither dark nor bright with a result that is neither dark nor bright, that conduces to the waning away of kamma.” (Anguttaranikaya, PTS II 232).

7. The absence of wholesome kamma in Nibbana does not mean that Nibbana is free from what is wholesome. What this means is that Nibbana represents a wholesomeness that is higher than kamma-wholesomeness. Accordingly, Nibbana is described as the highest wholesome (parama-kusala). In the Nibbanic experience, one does not face a moral dilemma or a moral struggle. There is no inclination to do what is unwholesome. There is no resistance to do what is wholesome. In the Nibbanic experience, all actions are spontaneously wholesome.

8. Nibbana as the Highest Level of Knowledge:

Knowledge in Nibbanic experience is described as: “wisdom” (panna), “accurate knowledge” (parinna), “gnosis” (anna), “higher knowledge” (abhinna), and “insight” (vipassana): (Dighanikaya PTS III 230; Majjhimanikaya PTS I 10). If Nibbana is the highest knowledge, what exactly is the object or content of this highest knowledge? In Buddhism the highest knowledge is defined as “knowledge of phenomena as they actually are” (yathabhuta-nana: Samyuttanikaya PTS V 144). The expression “phenomena” refers to the five aggregates of grasping. Accordingly, Nibbanic knowledge is certainly not the knowledge of a metaphysical reality, as for instance, God, God-head, or Cosmic Soul. Rather, it is the final awakening to the true nature of the world of sensory experience by fully comprehending the five aggregates of grasping.

9. What takes place when Nibbana is realized is not a change in the nature of reality; it is a change in our perspective of the nature of reality. The fact of impermanence is not a problem in itself. It becomes a problem when it is wrongly perceived as permanence. This is what is called “perception of permanence in impermanence” (anicce nicca-sanna). In the same way, absence of a self-entity is not a problem in itself. It becomes a problem when it is wrongly perceived as self. This is what is called “perception of self in what is not self” (anatte atta-sanna): Anguttaranikaya PTS II 52.

10. For Buddhism, what actually matters is not the nature of the world as it really is, but the nature of the world as interpreted and constructed through the lens of our ego-centric perspectives: our views and beliefs, our speculative theories and dogmatic assertions, which do not conform to the nature of reality. When Nibbana is realized, what comes to an end is not the world, but a wrong interpretation of the world.

11. Another dimension of Nibbana is that it transcends the world. The idea of transcendence is expressed in the Buddhist discourses as “cessation of the world” (loka-nirodha), or as “end of the world” (lokanta) (Samyuttanikaya PTS I, 72). In this connection, the Buddha says: “In this fathom-long body, endowed with consciousness and perception, I declare the world, the origination of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path that leads to the cessation of the world” (Samyuttanikaya PTS I, 62).

12. For Buddhism “world” means the world of experience; in other words, the five aggregates of grasping. We grasp the five aggregates in three ways: “This is mine (etam mama)”, “this I am (eso’ham asmi)”, and “this is my self (eso me atta)”. The first is due to craving (tanha), the second is due to conceit (mana), and the third is due to wrong view (ditthi). In order to transcend the world, this three-fold grasping should come to an end by the opposite process of negation: “This is not mine”, “this I am not”, “this is not my ‘self’” (Samyuttanikaya PTS IV 2).

13. Accordingly, the Tathagata, or the one who has realized Nibbana, does not identify himself with any of the five aggregates, selectively or collectively: “The five aggregates on the basis of which one would designate the Tathagata, in the case of the Tathagata, they are given up, their root broken, uprooted like a palm-tree, and are all beyond all possibility of their ever again arising in the future. The Tathagata is deep, is not measurable, not fathomable, just as the deep ocean” (Majjhimanikaya PTS I 487-88). If the Tathagata is not identifiable by others, it is because he does not identify himself with any of the five aggregates, i.e. the world of experience.

14. The relation between the Tathagata and the five aggregates can be subsumed under two headings: (a) The Tathagata is neither identical with, nor distinct, from the five aggregates; (b) The Tathagata is not the five aggregates, nor is he without the five aggregates.

15. The fact that the Tathagata is not identical with any of the five aggregates means that he has transcended the world. The fact that the Tathagata is not distinct from the five aggregates means that he does not identify himself with anything that transcends the five aggregates, i.e. some metaphysical reality which goes beyond the five aggregates.

16. What this really means, is that the Tathagata makes use of the five aggregates, without attachment to them, without clinging to them, without appropriating them.

We find this idea of world-transcendence illustrated by the simile of the lotus flower:

“Just as, O monks, the lotus, born in water, grown in water, rises above the water and stands unsullied by the water, even so the Tathagata grows up in the world, rises above the world, and stays unsullied by the world.” (Samyuttanikaya BJE III 140).

17. Nibbana as Unconditioned Experience:

“Monks, there is not-born, not-become, not-made, and not-constructed. Monks, if not-born, not-become, not-made, not-constructed were not, no deliverance from the born, become, made, and constructed would be known. But, monks, since there is not-born, not-become, not-made, and not-constructed, therefore deliverance from the born, become, made, and constructed is known.” (Udana, PTS 80).

This quotation refers to the difference between Samsara and Nibbana. It seems to give the impression that Nibbana is some kind of metaphysical reality into which the Tathagata enters. Some modern scholars interpret the four words, not-born, not-become, not-made, and non-constructed as conveying four different meanings in favour of such an interpretation. However, Buddhist exegesis observes that the four words connote the same thing as they are used in a synonymous sense (*sabbani’pi padani annamanna-vevacanani: Itivuttaka Atthakatha PTS 129*) to show that Nibbana is not brought about by causes and conditions. What these synonyms entail is that whatever is dependently arisen is ‘born’, ‘become’, ‘made’, and ‘constructed’.

18. Unconditioned experience can also be understood as an experience free from the three roots of moral evil, namely, passion, aversion, and delusion. In positive terms, this means the presence of generosity, compassion, and wisdom. If passion, aversion and delusion are conditioning factors, their opposites, namely, generosity, compassion and wisdom serve, not as conditioning, but as un-conditioning factors.

19. Nibbana as De-construction (*visamkhara*)

From the Buddhist perspective, individual existence in samsara is a “process of construction”, a “process of fabrication” (samkhara), a construction or fabrication through the imposition of the three-fold grasping: ‘this is mine’, ‘this I am’, ‘this is my own self’.

20. If Samsaric experience is a process of construction (samkhara), the Nibbanic experience is complete de-construction (visamkhara). Hence, immediately after realizing Nibbana, the Buddha says:

“My mind has come to de-construction (visamkhara-gatam cittam). I have realized the ending of all cravings” (tanhanam khayam ajjhaga: Dhammapada v. 154).

With the destruction of all cravings that give rise to all volitional constructions, the mind comes, not to ‘destruction’, but to ‘de-construction’. When the mind has reached ‘de-construction’, the five aggregates do remain. Yet they are no more constructed, no more fabricated in the sense that the Tathagata does not impose on them the three kinds of clinging: this is mine, this I am, this is my own ‘self’.

“That which is selfless, hard it is to see;

Not easy is it to perceive the truth.

But who has ended craving utterly

Has naught to cling to, he alone can see.” (Samuyuttanikaya PTS IV 27)

“For one who is clinging, there is agitation; for one who has no clinging there is no agitation; when there is no agitation, there is calm; when there is calm there is no attachment; when there is no attachment, there is no coming-and-going; when there is no coming and going, there is no disappearance and re-appearance; when there is no disappearance and re-appearance, there is neither here nor there, nor in-between. This indeed is the end of suffering” (Samyuttanikaya BJE IV 130).

21. Nibbana as Conceptual Non-Proliferation (Nippapanca)

Every cognitive process, i.e., a mental process through which we cognize an object, begins with sense-consciousness and, ends with, what is called, conceptual proliferation. At this final stage, an individual does not have a mind under his own control. Rather, he is being controlled by his own mind. This is the nature of samsaric experience. In contrast, Nibbanic experience means, conceptual non-proliferation, i.e. to have a mind under one’s own control, rather than coming under the control of one’s own mind.

22. Nibbanic Experience as Freedom from I-Conceit:

I-conceit can manifest in three ways: I am equal, I am superior, or I am inferior in relation to someone else. The Arahant is free from I-conceit, because he does not make I-based comparisons. Nor does he project the I-conceit in relation to Nibbana, either. “Having directly known Nibbana as Nibbana, he does not conceive himself in Nibbana, he does not conceive himself apart from Nibbana, he does not conceive Nibbana to be ‘mine’, and he does not delight in Nibbana” (Majjhimanikaya PTS I 32).

23. It is not that the Arahant is not aware of Nibbana. As a matter of fact, awareness is fundamental to the Nibbanic experience. If not for awareness, the Nibbanic experience would be some kind of esoteric or mystical experience.

24. In pre-Buddhist meditational practices, what was sought after was mind’s concentration/unification/quietism (samatha) as an end in itself, not insight (vipassana), not wisdom (panna). Exclusive emphasis only on meditative experience, or higher levels of mind’s unification, as an end in self, can have many pitfalls. As Venerable Nyanaponika Thera observes:

“A fertile soil for the origin and persistence of beliefs and ideas about a self, soul, god or any other form of an absolute entity is misinterpreted meditative experience occurring in devotional rapture or mystic trance. Such experience is generally interpreted by the mystic or theologian as revelation of, or union with, a godhead; or it is taken for a manifestation of man’s true and eternal Self” (Vision of Dhamma: Buddhist Writings of Nyanaponika Thera, ed. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1994).

25. There are two Nibbana Elements: Nibbana Element with Base (sa-upadisesa) and Nibbana Element without Base (anupadisesa). When the Arahant is in Nibbana Element with Base, his five physical sense faculties still remain and function. Therefore, he experiences likes and dislikes, pleasures and pains. He knows that they are impermanent and therefore they do not bind him. They are not experienced with passion and aversion, or with emotional reaction to them. On the other hand, when the Arahant experiences Nibbana Element without Base, “here itself, all that is felt, being not delighted in, will become cool”. The Nibbana Element without Base refers to the final passing away of the Arahant. Cf. “The Tathagata fully passes away through the Nibbana Element with no Base”. (Tathagato anupadisesaya nibbana-dhatuya parinibbayati: Dighanikaya, Buddha Jayanti Edition II, 210).

26. Nibbana as the Deathless/Immortal (Amata):

‘Amata’, the Pali expression for “deathless/immortal” occurs often in the Buddhist discourses as another expression for Nibbana. Buddhism does not recognize an immortal soul or an eternal God. Accordingly, the notion of immortality assumes a different meaning in Buddhism. Immortality is not the perpetuation of a self-entity into eternity. Immortality is what results from the elimination of the ego-illusion.

27. The Arahant, one who has realized Nibbana, does not identify himself with the five aggregates, which are subject to death. In that sense he has won a psychological victory over death. The experience of death is there when one identifies oneself with what is subject to death. Therefore, the Arahant, the liberated saint, does not die per se. Saints never die. They get extinguished (nibbanti).

28. According to Buddhism, therefore, immortality can be achieved here and now, while the mortal frame remains.

29. How can we understand the post-mortem position of the Tathagata? Is it complete annihilation in a physical sense (materialist nihilism)? Is it eternal continuation in a metaphysical sense (spiritual eternal-ism)? This, in fact, is the topic of a dialogue between the Buddha and Vacchagotta, an itinerant philosopher, who was very prone to metaphysical speculations.

30. In this dialogue Vacchagotta asks the Buddha, whether an emancipated monk, after the dissolution of the body, re-appears or does not re-appear, or both reappears and does not reappear, or neither reappears nor does not reappear. Then the Buddha told Vacchagotta that “none of the four alternatives arise” or “fit the case” (na upeti). Then Vacchagotta got so bewildered as to tell the Buddha that he had lost whatever faith he had from the earlier part of the dialogue. Then the Buddha illustrated the whole situation with an appropriate simile:

The Buddha: What do you think, Vaccha? Suppose a fire were burning before you. Would you know: this fire is burning before me?

Vaccha: I would, Master Gotama.

The Buddha: If someone were to ask you, Vaccha: ‘What does this fire burning before you, burn in dependence on?’ – being asked thus, what would you answer?

Vaccha: Being asked thus, Master Gotama, I would answer: ‘This fire burns in dependence on fuel of grass and sticks’.

The Buddha: If that fire before you were to be extinguished, would you know: ‘This fire before me has been extinguished?’

Vaccha: I would, Master Gotama.

The Buddha: If someone were to ask you, Vaccha, ‘when that fire before you was extinguished, to which direction did it go: to the east, the west, the north, or the south? – being asked thus, what would you answer?’

Vaccha: That does not apply, Master Gotama. The fire burned in dependence on its fuel of grass and sticks. When that is used up, if it does not get any more fuel, being without fuel, it is reckoned as extinguished.

The Buddha: So too, Vaccha, the Tathagata has abandoned that material form by which one describing the Tathagata might describe him, he has cut it off at the root, made it like a palm stump, done away with it so that it is no longer subject to future arising. The Tathagata is liberated from reckoning in terms of material form, Vaccha, he is profound, immeasurable, hard to fathom like the ocean. 'He reappears' does not apply; 'he does not reappear' does not apply; 'he both reappears and does not reappear' does not apply; 'he neither reappears nor does not reappear' does not apply. (The same is true of the other four aggregates: feelings, perceptions, volitional constructions, and consciousness.)

31. The above statement that none of the alternatives of the four-fold predication "does arise," has given to an idea that the post-mortem status of the Tathagata is some kind of mystical absorption with an absolute that transcends the four possibilities proposed by Vacchagotta. In other words, that the emancipated monk, after "death" enters into a transcendental realm that goes beyond all descriptions in terms of existence, non-existence, both existence and non-existence, and neither existence nor non-existence. It has also been suggested by some that if the four questions were 'meaningless', this meaninglessness is partly due to the inadequacy of the concepts contained in them in referring to this state of transcendence.

32. These interpretations are not at all acceptable. The correct position is that the questions do not arise at all. It is not because of the inadequacy of the concepts. Rather, it is entirely due to their illegitimacy. They are as illegitimate as the four questions as to where the fire went. Here too, what is focused on is not the inadequacy of the four questions, but their illegitimacy.

33. A fire can burn only so long as there is fuel. Once the fuel is exhausted the fire gets extinguished. "Being extinguished" does not mean that the fire gets released from its fuel and goes out to one of the four directions. In the same way, it is not the case that at "death" an entity called Tathagata, is released from the five aggregates and finds its way to some kind of transcendental existence. To try to locate a Tathagata in a post-mortem position is like trying to locate an extinguished fire. In both cases, the questions are equally meaningless and equally unwarranted.

34. As recorded in one Buddhist discourse, Anuradha, a disciple of the Buddha held the view that the after-"death" condition of the Tathagata is such that it could be explained with reference to a position that transcends the four possibilities. When this matter was reported to the Buddha, the Buddha told Anuradha: "In this very life, a Tathagata is not comprehensible in truth and reality (saccato thetato anupalabbhiyamane). It is not proper, therefore, to say that

the after-“death” condition of the Tathagata could be explained with reference to a position other than the four possibilities”. The Buddha sums up the correct position in the following words: “Anuradha, both formerly and now, it is just suffering and the cessation of suffering that I proclaim.” (Samyuttanikaya PTS, IV 383).

35. If the four questions do not arise, this explains the present position of the Tathagata, not his post-mortem condition. The present position of the Tathagata is such that it does not admit any of the four questions. For, although the Tathagata is not without the five aggregates, he does not identify himself with any of them. It is this situation that makes the Tathagata incomprehensible in this life itself.

36. One reason for interpreting Nibbana in a metaphysical sense is that most contemporary religions believe in a reality which is either transcendental, or both transcendental and immanent. Some are inclined to believe, therefore, that this metaphysical conception should have its counterpart in Buddhism as well. From the Buddhist perspective, all such attempts in interpreting Nibbana in this manner, amount to spiritual eternal-ism, which upholds the theory of the metaphysical self. Buddhism began by rejecting spiritual eternal-ism (sassatavada). There is, therefore, no reason why its final goal should entail a theory which it rejected at its very beginning.

37. Then, is the post-mortem condition of the Tathagata one of complete annihilation, in a physical sense? This is one conclusion that prevailed particularly during the early stages of the academic study of Buddhism. It was contended that since Buddhism denies a self-entity, it naturally and logically leads to a nihilistic conclusion. A similar view was held by a Buddhist monk called Yamaka, during the time of the Buddha. Then the Venerable Sariputta told Yamaka that since the Tathagata cannot be identified, with or without reference to the five aggregates, it is not correct to conclude that the Tathagata comes to annihilation (Samyuttanikaya PTS III 109 ff.) This second interpretation is an attempt to understand Buddhism in the light of materialist nihilism (ucchedavada). Buddhism began by rejecting materialist nihilism. Therefore, there is no reason, why the final goal of Buddhism should entail a theory which it rejected at the very beginning.

38. If both interpretations are not tenable, it is because, in this very life itself, there is no identifiable entity called Tathagata, either to be perpetuated in a metaphysical sense, or to be annihilated in a physical sense. Therefore, the Buddha’s answer to all such questions is that the questions do not arise.

“If any teach Nirvana is to cease,

Say unto such that they lie.

If any teach Nirvana is to live,
Say unto such they err.”

Edwin Arnold, Light of Asia.

Conclusion:

The shortest, but the most comprehensive, definition of Nibbana:

“Nibbana is the complete elimination of passion (raga), aversion (dosa), and delusion (moha)”. According to this definition, realization of Nibbana, seems to be one of the easiest tasks. But, it is the most difficult thing to be realized. Self-conquest is infinitely more difficult than the conquest of the whole world.

Nibbanic experience is not something esoteric and mystical. It is not some kind of eternal existence in heaven, or absorption with a transcendental reality. Nibbanic experience is to be realized in this very world, while being a human being.

Recommended for reference:

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