

Nibbana as Living Experience

Nibbana [*nibbaana*] is the culmination of the Buddhist quest for perfection and happiness. The following is a longer excerpt of the author's comprehensive article (see details at end of article).

Nibbana is a state to be attained here and now in this very life and not a state to be attained only after death. In terms of *living experience* Nibbana can be characterized by four special attributes: (1) happiness, (2) moral perfection, (3) realization, and (4) freedom.

Happiness

Nibbana is described as the *highest happiness*, the supreme state of bliss. Those who have attained Nibbana live in utter bliss, free from hatred and mental illness amongst those who are hateful and mentally ill. *Sukha* in Paali denotes both happiness and pleasure. In English happiness denotes more a sense of mental ease while pleasure denotes physical well being. The Paali word *sukha* extends to both these aspects and it is certain that mental and physical bliss is experienced by one who has attained Nibbana.

The experience of non-sensuous physical bliss for limited periods is possible even before the attainment of Nibbana through the practice of *jhaana* or meditative absorption.

Moral Perfection

Nibbana is a state of *moral perfection*. For one who has attained Nibbana, all unwholesome motivational roots such as greed, hatred, and delusion have been fully eradicated with no possibility of their ever becoming active again. Therefore Nibbana is called the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion. All inflowing moral depravities are destroyed. Craving has been uprooted for good. All types of conceit, the superiority and the inferiority complex plus the complex of equality are eliminated.

The sublime modes of conduct (*brahmavihaara*) such as loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (*mettaa, karunaa, muditaa, upekkhaa*) are fully developed without any limitations.

Realization

Several expressions are used in the Paali Canon to denote the cognitive aspect of the experience of Nibbana. "The mass of darkness (of ignorance) has been torn asunder" is a frequent expression.

In his First Sermon the Buddha describes the realization of the Four Noble Truths as the arising of the eye, wisdom, insight, knowledge, and light. "The three knowledges have been attained" is another expression. The triple knowledge consists of retrocognition, clairvoyance, and the knowledge of the destruction of defilements. With the first two knowledges, one obtains personal verification of the doctrines of rebirth and kamma respectively. With the destruction of intoxicants one realizes the causal origination of all phenomena and egolessness. Sometimes three other cognitive faculties are mentioned as extra qualifications of arahants, namely, miraculous powers, the divine ear, and telepathy. With the attainment of Nibbana one also realizes that birth is destroyed, the higher life has been successfully lived, one's duty has been done, and there is no more of this (mundane) existence.

Freedom

All bonds which tie us down to suffering are torn asunder. Negative emotions restrict an individual's psychological freedom; therefore greed, hatred, and ignorance are described as circumscribing an individual's freedom. Greed, hatred, and ignorance are roots of unwholesome mental states which fetter the individual within.

There is an interesting simile which illustrates the nature of a fetter. If there is a white bull and a black bull tied together by a rope, the question is asked, whether the white bull is a fetter to the black bull or the black bull is a fetter to the white bull. In fact neither is a fetter to the other; the fetter is the rope by which they are tied together. Similarly the desire we have for external objects is the fetter that binds us. The arahant has cut this off and attained freedom.

Unhealthy negative emotions are always self-oriented and self-centered. The Dhammapada says that the fool laments, "He abused *me*, he beat *me*, he defeated *me*, he robbed *me*," and generates anger. As he is firmly tied to the idea of the self or the ego, and he cannot wean himself away from the experience which inflicted a wound on his ego, he is like a dog tied to a post.

This situation is quite in contrast to an experience the Buddha had once. A brahman came and abused him in very harsh language. The Buddha remained silent. When at last the brahman stopped, the Buddha asked: "If you were to visit a friend and you took a gift to him, but the friend declined to accept the gift, what would you do?"

The brahman replied that he would take it back. The Buddha said: "You brought me a gift of much abuse, I do not accept; you can take it back." The Buddha also states that even if one is cut into pieces with a double-handled saw, one should train oneself not to generate anger towards the tormentor. Moggallaana was an arahant who was mercilessly beaten by robbers but he was able to maintain his composure without a trace of anger. Such is the freedom one gains from negative emotions on the attainment of Nibbana.

An arahant has fully developed the *brahmavihaaras*, the sublime modes of conduct — universal love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These positive qualities are generated by transcending the self and are described as all-embracing and immeasurable. Thus they do not limit the scope of psychological freedom as do the mental states rooted in greed, hatred, and ignorance. The freedom won by an arahant is called release of mind and release through wisdom. Knowledge also arises in the meditator that freedom has been gained. This is called the "bliss of emancipation", the highest bliss that any human being could enjoy.

Creativity

Creativity is another aspect under which the achievement of an arahant can be fruitfully discussed. The virtues of the arahant can be succinctly summarized as compassion and wisdom. These are the two qualities through which the creativity of the arahant finds expression. When arahants look at humanity they are moved by great compassion as they fully realize the gravity of the precarious condition of the worldlings. Therefore, they willingly plunge into a life of selfless activity, preaching to the people, trying to show them the path leading out of misery to eternal peace. It is especially noteworthy that the Buddha's role as teacher was so demanding that he barely slept two hours a day. The body of discourses he gave during the course of his long ministry of forty-five years is as profound as it is extensive. It stands preeminent in world literary history for originality of ideas, profundity of thought, and clarity of expression. These observations hold good for the discourses delivered by the arahants as well. The entire Paali Canon can be considered as testimony to the creative genius of the liberated beings. It is but natural that creativity finds spontaneous expression when a person attains liberation, as all negative emotions which hinder creativity and distort spontaneity are totally eliminated in the arahant.

Some arahants are endowed with the special accomplishment of the fourfold analytical knowledge, which qualifies them even more thoroughly for creative work. These are spelt out as analytical knowledge of the meaning or goal, profound truth, language or the medium of communication, and originality of expression. These four special qualifications make arahants experts in communicating to their audience the exact meanings and goals of the profound truths they have discovered, through the medium of refined language, using their own original modes of expression such as eloquent similes, metaphors, etc.

Several arahants, both male and female, are recorded as eloquent speakers and erudite exponents of the Dhamma. Special mention must be made of the Theragaatha and Theriigaatha, which comprise poems of exquisite beauty. They are utterances of monks and nuns embodying their varied experiences. Literary critics rank them among the best lyrics in Indian literature. They remain unrivalled in the literary history of the world as creative writing issuing forth from the undefiled purity of the human heart and the nobility of human wisdom. They are ever-fresh fountains of inspiration to the truth-seeker and lasting monuments to the creative genius of the liberated beings.

Physiology and Spirituality

The entire scheme of spiritual development comprising the Noble Eightfold Path is an efficient methodical plan of action designed to bring a gradual psycho-physical transformation culminating in the attainment of Nibbana. Cultivation of moral habits (*sīla*) is the frame for wholesome behavior by means of which healthy body chemistry gets gradually established. Neural circuits related to harmonious physical and vocal activity are strengthened, and those related to violence become proportionately weak.

The Avyaakatas

The state of Nibbana after the death of the arahant is nowhere discussed in the Paali Canon. The four alternatives put forward regarding this state, namely: (1) Does the Perfect One exist after death, (2) does he not, (3) does he and does he not, (4) does he neither exist nor not exist after death, are all left aside unanswered.

These questions are put aside because they are not useful to human happiness and understanding, not concerned with the Dhamma, not helpful for the higher life, not conducive to disenchantment and detachment, not conducive to cessation of misery, to tranquillity of the mind, to higher knowledge, to insight, and to peace (Nibbana).

The Aggivacchagotta Sutta cites a simile in this connection which illustrates that the questions themselves are meaningless. If there is a fire burning and if the fire goes out without fuel, can one ask the question: "In which direction did the fire go, east, south, west, or north?" The question itself is inappropriate as it assumes that fire can have existence independent of fuel. The nun Khemaa points out that the state of the Tathaagata after death is immeasurable. Just as it is impossible to calculate the drops of water in the ocean and the grains of sand in the earth, so is it impossible to conceptualize the state of Nibbana after the demise of the arahant.

The Anuraadha Sutta states that the five aggregates of grasping, or the personality factors, are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-self. Therefore the noble disciple is detached from them. He wins freedom, and after death becomes completely untraceable.

The Alagadduupama Sutta maintains that the Tathaagata cannot be identified with the personality factors even during his lifetime, so how can he be identified after death?

A plausible explanation is necessary for the traditional silence regarding the state of the arahant after death. Existence in the world implies time and space. One exists within a particular period in a particular space or locality. If one passes beyond time and beyond space, it is not possible to speak of existence with reference to such a one. To speak of both time and space one needs a point of reference, e.g. A is 50 years old. This means 50 years have passed since the event of A's birth. If A is not born, it is impossible to speak of "time" or existence with reference to him. Similarly with space. Without points of reference it is not possible to grasp space. There is a definite distance between any two specific points. Nor can one speak of direction without a point of reference. When the notion of "I," which is the point of personal reference, is eradicated, one goes beyond time, beyond space, and beyond causality. Therefore it is not possible to speak of the liberated being as existing or not existing.

Here we are reminded of a statement made by Fritjof Capra in his *Tao of Physics* relevant to our present context. He states: "Physicists can 'experience' the four dimensional space-time world through the abstract mathematical formalism of their theories, but their visual imagination, like everybody else's, is limited to the three-dimensional world of the senses. Our language and thought patterns have evolved in this three-dimensional world and therefore we find it extremely hard to deal with the four-dimensional reality of relativistic physics." Thus, when the four-dimensional reality too eludes the perceptual experience of the average man, how can Nibbana, which transcends all these four dimensions, come within mere verbal experience? Therefore it is impossible to speak of the arahant's state in terms of existence or non-existence.

At this point an observation can be made from another point of view. Buddhism describes the characteristics of all things in terms of three statements – meaning all conditioned things are impermanent, all conditioned things are unsatisfactory, all phenomena are non-self.

Therefore, we can surmise a condition that is permanent and blissful, but it is not a self. That state is Nibbana. It has to be a dimension completely different from all that is worldly. The permanence that is conjectured here has no reference to time and space, and the bliss that is spoken of has no reference to feelings.

Further, there is a great difference between the death of an ordinary worldling and that of an arahant. In fact, the Dhammapada specifically states that the vigilant ones, meaning arahants, never die (in the ordinary sense of the word).

Let us first see what happens when a worldling dies. It is an accepted fact that everybody fears death. We also fear the unknown; therefore death is doubly fearful because we know least about it. It seems reasonable to assume that at the root of all fear there lurks the fear of death. In other words we fear everything which directly or indirectly threatens our life. So long as our bodies are strong enough, we can either fight or run away from the source of fear, with the intention of preserving life. But when ultimately we are on the deathbed face to face with death and our body is no longer strong enough to flee from death, it is highly unlikely that we will mentally accept death with resignation. We will struggle hard, long for and crave for life, and reach out and grasp a viable base somewhere as the dying body can no longer sustain life.

Once such a viable base, for instance a fertilized ovum in a mother's womb, has been grasped, the process of becoming or growth starts there, which in due course gives rise to birth. This is what is referred to in the twelve-linked dependent co-arising as "craving conditions grasping, grasping conditions becoming, becoming conditions birth." Thus a worldling dies and is reborn.

Now let us consider the last moments of an arahant. As an arahant has no fear whatsoever from any source, he would not be agitated as he has no craving for life. He will watch the process of death with perfect equanimity and crystal-clear mindfulness. Further, the Mahaaparinibbaana Sutta, which explains the final moments of the Buddha, states that the Buddha passed away immediately after rising from the fourth jhaana. The fourth jhaana is characterized by purity of equanimity and mindfulness. It is not known whether all arahants attain *parinibbaana* after the fourth jhaana, but certainly they cannot have a deluded death. As they do not grasp another birth the state they attain after final passing away has to be described as unborn . Similarly it is uncaused. As it is no ordinary death, it is called the deathless state. It is beyond elemental existence, beyond *brahmalokas*, neither in this world nor the next, beyond the radiance of the sun and moon. It is beyond what we know of in the three worlds of *kaama*, *ruupa*, and *aruupa* . Therefore, as it is beyond the ken of ordinary human understanding, any attempt to define the state is bound to end in failure. The course of liberated ones cannot be traced like that of birds in the air.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the Buddha would have realized a far more profound world view than he chose to preach to humanity. As that knowledge was far too complicated for ordinary comprehension, and as it was irrelevant for the solution of the human problem of suffering, keeping that profound knowledge as the framework within which to work, the Buddha would have preached to humanity how best we could order our life in order to achieve harmony and peace in such a world. This harmony at the highest level is Nibbana. Those who followed him lacked the profound world view, but learned the practice for the attainment of lasting peace and emancipation.

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Source: Excerpt is based on and adapted from "Nibbana as Living Experience / The Buddha and The Arahant: Two Studies from the Pali Canon", by Lily de Silva. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/desilva/wheel407.html> .

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Note: 'Nibbana As Living Experience' originally appeared in the *Sri Lanka Journal of Buddhist Studies* (Vol. I, 1987). 'The Buddha and the Arahant' originally appeared in *Pritidana Mañjari*, Mudliyar W.S. Gunawardena Commemoration Volume, edited by M.H.F. Jayasuriya, Dehiwela, Sri Lanka.

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