

Nibbana from a lay person's perspective

(Dr Tin Htut, UK, 29th June 2011)

Nibbana is an ultimate goal for every Buddhists, but this objective has been an alluring and esoteric subject, which is attractive, and we often say in our prayers, yet it is hard to understand and comprehend by most people. It is not surprising as Nibbana is not 'pannatti' or conditional truth as we mortals know and comprehend, but a 'paramattha sacca' or non-conditional and ultimate truth that is universal. It is often described in negation, for instance, absence of suffering, death, rebirth and decaying since Nibbana could not be described satisfactorily using our common and daily terms. It is not a place or an abode which can be appreciated and comprehended like heaven or paradise as in other faiths, yet it is said to be always present and is everywhere.

So, what is Nibbana, a common question that a Buddhist scholar might get when trying to describe Buddhist philosophy to a non-Buddhist audience.

There have been a lot of descriptions on Nibbana, and even monographs exist on this subject, yet it is still mystifying and hard to comprehend and appreciate by most lay persons. Nibbana may not be totally described using our daily terms and conditions, as it is 'un-conditional.' However, I will attempt to describe it using my collective knowledge and experience. The readers can decide for themselves if it is logical and comprehensible, and scholars may also challenge on this description, but this is just my humble contribution towards Buddhist thoughts, which might be wrong, in trying to defend against some accusations like 'Buddhism is nihilistic and pessimistic' and it is annihilation to try to obtain Nibbana.

We may not appreciate Nibbana until and unless the following three conditions are met; the ultimate realisation of suffering, impermanence, and lack of eternal soul, or in Pali terms, 'dukkha, anicca, and anatta.'

It may easily express and understand these three factors as most of us know what suffering or 'dukkha' is, and we all have to die one day. However, one may

comprehend suffering only in conditional terms as pleasure and happiness usually follow after temporary suffering.

Science has come to understand 'anicca' in a way and has acknowledged that everything is in a decaying process within a time factor, and some even believe there is nothing after death, which is not exactly 'anatta' but maybe in halfway to understand it. The most difficult to understand is 'anatta' since we are firmly attached to our notions and beliefs that have been engrained throughout our life, and our desire to live eternally, and happily.

If Nibbana may describe in our perceptual terms I am inclined to give three analogies, firstly to highlight the nature of suffering. Suppose someone who does not believe in life after death, or an atheist, is suffering from an intractable and severe pain from an incurable disease, and the only way of relief from this suffering is falling asleep, this person may want to get a sound sleep or to die when he or she can no longer bear the pain and the suffering. The person may have the experience of a short relief from suffering when fallen asleep and wants to get the same relief for a longer period or indefinitely he or she may opt to die believing that there is nothing after death; like someone who has opted for euthanasia. For those persons, Nibbana is like falling asleep indefinitely and a relief from intractable pain and suffering. So, is Nibbana, an ultimate relief from all forms of suffering, including death.

Another example is on the nature of freedom and relief, and this time in a positive perspective. Let us suppose a person has been sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour and punishment, and there is no hope for him or her to be released; if this person has been given amnesty and would be released immediately with no bonds attached, how happy would she or he might be to be free of imprisonment and hardship. Again, it would be like a Nibbana for this person to be free; likewise, Nibbana is a freedom from the constant binding of life and death in a cycle of rebirths known as 'samsara.' The pleasure of relief may be like happiness or 'santi & sukha' that 'arahats' enjoy when they were relieved of the bondage of 'samsara' prior to the final moment of their death.

Here, one may argue that Nibbana has no perceptual experience and how could one experience piti or happiness of Nibbana?

It has been well documented in the Buddhist literature that the pleasure and peace of Nibbana can be experienced by those who have been there, when they came out of 'phala' or roughly speaking somewhat like entranced state where there is no perception at all. Nibbana can be experienced again and again during life and permanently after the death of 'arahats' or enlightened persons. This analogy is the nearest comparison that I could think of to describe Nibbana in a positive perspective. The last but not the least descriptive term of Nibbana in positive perspective that I would like to put forward is the achievement of a person in terms of his or her ultimate goal. Christians may regard heaven as their ultimate goal, so as Muslims do for 'paradise' and Hindus for the reunion of atman-soul with the creator Brahma-god. Nibbana is the equivalent achievement for Buddhists, and like other faiths the person will feel his or her accomplishment once Nibbana is experienced, which may occur in this very life, and unlike other goals set by various faiths, it is unconditional and opens to everybody.

May each of us attain our goals.

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