



Nirvana

Extract from *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side

What is nirvana? “The extinction of desire, the extinction of hatred, the extinction of illusion”, said Buddha’s disciple Shariputra.ⁱ

Literally, nirvana (*nibbana* in Pali) means ‘blowing out, extinguishing’, and here it refers to the extinguishing of the fires of desire, hatred and ignorance that rage inside us. These are, of course, the fundamental causes of suffering which implies that as soon as they have been extinguished then automatically one ceases to suffer. If the causes of suffering do not exist then suffering cannot be produced. It follows that nirvana is taken to mean the end of suffering, or the cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering, and so it is defined as the opposite of samsara.

The logic of this process entails that as soon as the causes of suffering have been extinguished one’s actions no longer create karmic consequences. This is due to the fact that karmic results depend primarily on motivation, and once the Three Poisons have been eliminated from the mindstream then motivation (or intention) is free from both good and bad thoughts. This situation, in turn, means that one will not be bringing about a karmic rebirth after death, and that is why nirvana is also said to be freedom from rebirth. Once one has attained nirvana one is free of the cycle of birth and death, and no longer bound to be reborn within samsara.

It is important to remember that nirvana is not ‘a thing’: it is not something that one can get by following the Buddhist path, and neither is nirvana a place, like a heaven, where one will go as a result, or as a reward, for practising Buddhism. Nirvana is a realization, a way of seeing things. When one understands deeply the nature of things according to the Four Noble Truths, and when one is able to sustain that understanding continuously, one is said to have attained nirvana.

What is nirvana like?

The question most people ask is ‘so what is the experience of nirvana like?’ The only possible reply is that it cannot be put into words. Nirvana is beyond words, because words cannot convey the true nature even of ordinary things let alone of enlightenment. Imagine trying to describe the taste of a tomato to someone who has never seen or tasted a tomato before; or trying to describe to a young child what the experience of falling in love is like. Language is inadequate at communicating the quality of experience, and likewise it falls short as a means of expressing ultimate truth.



As a result, nirvana is spoken of in two ways. It is sometimes described positively in the form of metaphors, but more often it is described in negative terms as what it is not. This second way is similar to the *via negativa* in Christian and Sufi mysticism. The Buddhist scriptures use a number of classical images for nirvana and the list below is taken from *The Questions of King Milinda*.

Positive images of nirvana

- like cool water that relieves fever, nirvana relieves the fever of the passions
- like medicine that puts an end to illness, nirvana puts an end to all sufferings
- like an unshakeable mountain peak, nirvana is unshakeable
- like the wind that you cannot actually see, nirvana is there but you cannot point to it

Negative expressions of nirvana

- it is not something that is produced, nor is it unproduced
- it is not past, or future, or present
- it cannot be perceived by the senses
- it is unborn and unconditioned
- it is extinction or absence of craving, hatred and ignorance
- it is freedom from suffering/absence of suffering
- it is freedom from rebirth

Some non-Buddhists have interpreted the negative expressions of nirvana as meaning that nirvana is a negative state, a state of 'nothingness' or blankness or self-annihilation. This is a misunderstanding. Nirvana is freedom from suffering, from the causes of suffering and from rebirth, and freedom from these things can surely not be construed as negative. When it is said that nirvana is beyond time and space, and beyond human perception, this is not intended to convey a depressingly inaccessible state but rather to inspire the idea of a transcendent state. Other people are horrified at the prospect that one would no longer have any passions or emotions left, and they imagine that enlightenment would turn us all into boring, lifeless vegetables. This hardly seems like an attractive religious goal. But nothing is further from the truth, and the experience of nirvana is associated in the scriptures with joy, happiness, serenity, gentleness, compassion, kindness, tolerance and understanding. These are said to be the qualities of someone who has attained nirvana.



The experience of nirvana

- **Nirvana can be experienced in life.** Buddhism is quite different from other religions in that its religious goal can be experienced in life and not only after death. The lifestory of the Buddha exemplifies this.
- **Nirvana and parinirvana.** When nirvana is experienced in life it is called 'nirvana with remainder' because one still has one's body, which is something of a limitation. When it is experienced at death it is called *parinirvana* or complete nirvana or 'nirvana without remainder' because then one is free of the body so rebirth, or the reconstituting of the five aggregates, will not occur.
- **Nirvana and pain.** After nirvana has been attained in life, the person appears to think and function much the same as everyone else, but the difference is that his/her mind is quite different. For example, the body can still become ill or injured and one can still feel pain, but the pain will not affect one's mental state.
- **The arhat.** Whoever attains nirvana is called an *arhat*, meaning someone who has conquered their mind and the 'enemy' of the Three Poisons. This is the goal of Theravada Buddhism.

Nirvana cannot be produced

Although in one sense nirvana is seen as the result of many years or many lifetimes of virtuous effort, in another sense nirvana is not the result of anything. If it were the result of something this would mean that it was produced, and then it would be conditioned and therefore impermanent. But nirvana is permanent in the sense that it is beyond time, and the truth of nirvana is always there whether we realise it or not. Buddhists have to tread carefully between saying that nirvana is unconditioned on the one hand, and saying that one attains enlightenment by following the Buddhist path, on the other hand.

Are these two statements contradictory? Possibly not because nirvana does not automatically occur as the result of any particular action. There is no guarantee that if you meditate for x hours or behave virtuously for x years, you will automatically attain nirvana. It is more elusive than this and cannot be brought about through an A plus B equals C sort of approach. Like all mystical states it is beyond our control. *The Questions of King Milinda* illustrates this point with an image: it says that a path does not cause a mountain, it just leads there.

ⁱ Samyutta Nikaya, IV.252.