Cessation of Suffering

The Third True Reality for the Spiritually Ennobled: The Cessation of the Painful – Nirvana

The third True Reality is described in the first sermon as follows:

Now this, monks, for the spiritually ennobled, is the ceasing-of-the-painful true reality. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it (Samyutta Nikāya v.420-4).

That is, the ending of thirst for the ‘next thing’, so as to give full attention to what is here, now; abandoning attachments to past, present or future; freedom that comes from contentment; not relying on craving so that the mind does not fixate on anything, adhering to it, roosting there. When craving and other related causes thus come to an end, dukkha ceases.

This is equivalent to Nirvana (Pali Nibbana), also known as the ‘unconditioned’ or ‘unconstructed’ (asankhata, Skt asamkrta), the ultimate goal of Buddhism.

As an initial spur to striving for Nirvana, craving for it may play a role (A.II.145), but this helps in the overcoming of other cravings, is generally replaced by a wholesome aspiration, and is completely eradicated in the full experience of Nirvana: Nirvana is only attained when there is total non-attachment and letting go.

Nirvana literally means ‘extinction’ or ‘quenching’, being the word used for the ‘extinction’ of a fire. The ‘fires’ of which Nirvana is the extinction are described in the ‘Fire sermon’ (S.IV.19–20; BW.346; SB. 222–4). This teaches that everything internal and external to a person is ‘burning’ with the ‘fires’ of attachment, hatred (raga, dosa; Skt dvesa) and delusion (moha) and of birth, ageing and death. Here the ‘fires’ refer both to the causes of dukkha and to dukkha itself.

Attachment (i.e. sensual and other forms of lust) and hatred are closely related to craving for things and craving to be rid of things, and delusion is synonymous with spiritual ignorance. Nirvana during life is frequently defined as the destruction of these three ‘fires’ or defilements (e.g. S.IV.251; BW.364; EB.3.4.1)). When one who has destroyed these dies, he or she cannot be reborn and so is totally beyond the remaining ‘fires’ of birth, ageing and death, having attained final Nirvana.
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Both during life and beyond death, *Nirvana* pertains to the *Arahát*, one who has direct knowledge that he or she has destroyed the four ‘taints’ [*asava*, Skt *asrava*: the most deeply rooted spiritual faults, which are likened to festering sores, leeching off energy from the mind, or intoxicating influxes on the mind. These are the taints of (i) sense-desire, (ii) attachment to ‘being’ and to a prized identity, (iii) views, and (iv) spiritual ignorance, which are all seen as conditioning, and being conditioned by, spiritual ignorance (*M.1.54–5*; p. 68)].

*Nirvana* in life is described as ‘with remainder of what is grasped at’ (*sa-upadi-sesa*, Skt *sopadhi-sesa*), meaning that the *khandhas*, the result of past grasping, still remain for him. *Nirvana* beyond death is described as ‘without remainder of what is grasped at’ (*an-upadi-sesa*, Skt *nir-upadhi-sesa*), (*It.*38–9; *BTTA.97*; *BW.366–7*).