

# Nirvana

## Nirvana during Life

It is often thought that *Nirvana* during life is an ever-present state of the *Arahat*, but it would seem that this cannot be so. As *Nirvana* is synonymous with the cessation of all that is *dukkha*, and *Nirvana* during life is not seen as inferior to *Nirvana* beyond death in any respect (*Sn.876–7*), it cannot be ever-present; for the *Arahat* will at some time experience physical pain. Moreover, simply to walk down the road is to have such conditioned states as feeling and consciousness occurring.

As the cessation of *dukkha* involves the stopping of each of the *nidanas* and *khandhas*, *Nirvana* lies beyond the occurrence of such states.

One must therefore see *Nirvana* during life as a specific experience, in which the defilements are destroyed forever, and in which there is a temporary stopping of all conditioned states (*Sn.732–9*).

Such a destruction-of-defilements is clearly a transcendent, timeless experience, for it is said to be 'deathless' (*S.V.8*) and 'unconditioned' (*S.IV.362*). During life or beyond death, *Nirvana* is the unconditioned cessation of all unsatisfactory, conditioned phenomena.

During life, it is where these phenomena stop, followed by their recurrence in the arising of normal experiences of the world; once attained, this stopping can be returned to. Beyond death, it is where they stop for good.

Descriptions of the *Nirvanic* experience stress its 'otherness', placing it beyond all limited concepts and ordinary categories of thought. This is clearly shown in a description at *Ud.80; BTTA.95; BW.365–6*) that begins by firmly asserting the existence of that which lies beyond all *dukkha*.

It then says that this is a sphere where there are neither the four physical elements, nor the four formless mystical states or corresponding heavenly levels of rebirth where only mental phenomena exist. This indicates that it is beyond mind-and-body (*nama-rupa*).

Further, it is said to be beyond this world or any other world of rebirth, and beyond the arising and ceasing of phenomena in the process of life and rebirth. It is without any 'support' (*patittha*) on which it depends, and is without any mental 'object' (*arammana*).

In the face of *Nirvana*, words falter, for language is a product of human needs in this world, and has few resources with which to deal with that which transcends all worlds.

*Nirvana*, it is said, is an aspect of the *Dhamma* which is 'difficult to understand . . . beyond abstract reasoning, subtle' (*Vin.I.4*). The most accurate and least misleading descriptions are negative, saying what it is *not*. Thus, above, there is an affirmation of existence followed by a string of negations. Most synonyms of *Nirvana* are also negative: the stopping of *dukkha*, the unborn, the unbecome, the unmade (*Ud.81; BW.366*), the deathless, stopping (*nirodha*), non-attachment (*viraga*).

Positive descriptions of Nirva are generally of a poetic, suggestive nature. Thus it is said to be: the 'further shore' (beyond this 'shore' of life and its pains, *M.I.134-5; BTTA.77*); the '[cool] cave of shelter' (a powerful image of peace and rest in the hot Indian climate).

Certain positive descriptions give a less poetic indication of its nature. It is the 'calming (*samatha*) of all constructing activities' (*Vin.I.5*), the 'highest bliss', the very opposite of *dukkha* (*M.I.508*). It is 'timeless' (*A.I.158*), for it is beyond time (*Miln.323*), and so is permanent and eternal (*Kvu.121; S.IV.368-73; BW.364-5*) emphasizes the goal as 'the unconditioned', then adds many synonyms for this, including: the taintless, the true reality (*sacca*), the beyond, the very-hard-to-see, the undecaying, the non-manifestive (*anidassana*), the unelaborated (*nippapanca*), the peaceful, the sublime, the amazing, freedom, the unclinging, the island (amidst the flood), the refuge.

### Nirvana beyond Death

At the death of an *Arahat* or Buddha, the 'grasped at' personality factors come to an end. This raises the question of what happens to an awakened person beyond death: does he still exist?

The Buddha was often asked this question of the state of a *Tathagata*, here meaning a Buddha or *Arahat*, after death: could it be said that he 'is' (*hoti*), that he 'is not' (being annihilated), that he 'both is and is not', or that he 'neither is nor is not'?

These were part of a small set of 'undetermined questions' which the Buddha set aside without answering (*S.IV.373-400*). One reason for this was that he saw speculating over them as a time-wasting diversion from spiritual practice.

When one monk told him that he would leave the *Sangha* unless he was given answers to these questions, the Buddha gave a simile to show how foolish he was: if a man was shot by a poisoned arrow but refused to let a doctor cure him until he knew everything about who shot the arrow, and what the arrow was made of, such a man would soon die (*M.I.426–31; BW.230–3; SB.168–72*). The Buddha then said that he had clearly explained *dukkha* and the way beyond it, but that asking the undetermined questions was not connected with, nor conducive to, *Nirvana*. This accords with his saying that he taught only what was both true and spiritually useful (*M.I.395*).

Besides these practical considerations, the Buddha also clearly saw the undetermined questions as having a misconception built into them. Like the innocent man who was asked 'have you stopped beating your wife?', he could not rightly reply either 'yes' or 'no' to them. The Buddha explained that the questions were always asked by people who saw a permanent Self as somehow related to the five *khandhas*, but that he did not answer the questions because he had no such view (*S.IV.395*). That is, his questioners were asking about the fate of an awakened substantial *Self* after death, and as no such thing could be found during life, it was meaningless to discuss its state after death.

Setting aside this misconception, how might one understand the state of the awakened person beyond death? Is he to be seen as annihilated with the ending of the five *khandhas*? Such a view, equivalent to the second undetermined question, is seen as particularly pernicious, however: for it is emphasized that all that ends at death is *dukkha* (*S.III.109–12*).

Some light is shed on the situation by a passage in which the Buddha discusses the undetermined questions on a *Tathagata*, equating these with questions on whether an awakened monk 'arises' (i.e. is reborn), or not, etc. after death (*M.I.486–7*). Here he says that, while one would know whether a burning fire had gone out, one could not meaningfully ask what direction the quenched fire had gone in: east, west, south or north. He then stresses that a *Tathagata* (even in life) is 'deep, immeasurable, hard-to-fathom as is the great ocean' (*BW.367–9*). While to a Western-educated person, an extinct fire goes nowhere because it does not exist, the Buddha's audience in ancient India would generally have thought of an extinguished fire as going back into a non-manifested state as latent heat (e.g. *A.III.340–1*). The simile of the extinct fire thus suggests that the state of an awakened person after death is one which is beyond normal comprehension, not that it is a state of nothingness:

'There exists no measuring of one who has gone out [like a flame]. That by which he could be referred to no longer exists for him. When all phenomena are removed, then all ways of describing have also been removed' (*Sn.1076*). Similarly, it is said that the questions on the *Tathagata* are set aside because, beyond his death, there are absolutely no grounds for saying that he is with or without a body, with or without perception, or neither with nor without perception (*S.IV.402*).

Source: Excerpted, with minor edits, from Harvey, P. (2013) *An introduction to Buddhism: teachings, history and practices*. 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Pages 74-75; 78-79.)