

## The State of Nibbāna

Etymologically, *Nibbāna* derives from the prefix *ni-* ('out,' 'without,' 'finished' or 'ended'), and *vāna*, ('to blow,' 'to go,' 'to move,' or in another sense a 'restraint'). It can be used in relation to fire or burning, meaning extinguishing, quenching, cooling, or coolness—but not extinction. In reference to the mind, it means peaceful, refreshed, and happy: an absence of agitation and anxiety.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, it refers to the end of defilements: of greed, hatred and delusion. The commentaries and sub-commentaries usually define Nibbāna as the end of or escape from craving, which binds people to repeated existence.<sup>2</sup>

When the round of rebirth (*saṃsāravatṭa*) ends, freedom from rebirth (*vivaṭṭa*) takes over immediately and automatically.<sup>3</sup> One does not travel from a place of *saṃsāravatṭa* to a place of *vivaṭṭa*, unless speaking figuratively or comparatively. Ignorance, craving and clinging cease and Nibbāna appears simultaneously in their place. One can say that the cessation of ignorance, craving and clinging is Nibbāna.

Ignorance, craving and clinging disturb the minds of unenlightened people (*puṭhujjana*) and conceal wisdom; they entangle the mind with defilements (*kilesa*) and distort vision. When ignorance, craving and clinging cease, luminous wisdom (*vijjā*) arises. With such wisdom one sees all things accurately, not through the lens of one's desires. A person's perception, attitudes and personality change. A new knowledge and vision arises; things appear that one has never known, seen or conceived of because they were concealed in the shadows or because one was obsessed with other objects. [230] The mind unfolds and expands immeasurably; it

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, the verb and adjective form *nibbuta* is most often used, e.g.: A. I. 162; 197; A. II. 212; Sn. 153; AA. II. 259, 307; AA. III. 184; NidA. I. 199; in particular: DhA. I. 85; JatA. I. 60; BudA. 280.

<sup>2</sup> Analyses of the word *Nibbāna* occur at many scriptural passages, especially: Nid2. 33; VinA.: Pārājikaṇḍaṃ, Paṭhamapārājikaṃ, Sudinnabhāṇavāraṇṇana; DA. II. 464; AA. II. 283; KhA. 151; ItA. I. 165; SnA. I. 253, 299; NidA. I. 82, 104; DhsA. 409; Vism. 293-4; VinṬ.: Paṭhamo Bhāgo, Verañjakaṇḍavaṇṇanā, Vinayapaññattiyācanakathā; VismṬ.: Paṭhamo Bhāgo, Samādhiniddesaṇṇanā, Samādhī-ānisaṅsakathāvaṇṇanā; CompṬ.: Abhidhammatthavibhāvinītikā, Paramatthadhammavaṇṇanā; most of these explanations are identical or similar. Further definitions include: 'free from the jungle' (i.e., the tangle of impurities): A. III. 344; AA. III. 371; Dh. verse 283; [DhA. 6/71]; and 'an end to the triad of *dukkha*': *dukkha-dukkha*, *vipariṇāma-dukkha*, and *saṅkhāra-dukkha*: VismṬ.: Paṭhamo Bhāgo, Samādhiniddesaṇṇanā, Samādhī-anisaṅsakathāvaṇṇanā. The *Dhammavicāraṇa* of Somdet Phra Mahāsamaṇa Chao Krom Phraya Vajirañāṇavarorasa includes: free of 'piercing arrows' (Mahāmakuta University Press, 1958, p. 55).

<sup>3</sup> The words *saṃsāravatṭa* and *vivaṭṭa* are used here corresponding to the evolution of language; they are not the original specific terms. In the Canon, the preferred terms for *saṃsāravatṭa* are *saṃsāra* (e.g., S. II. 178; A. II. 12) and *vatṭa* (e.g., S. III. 64; S. IV. 52; Ud. 75). In later texts the two were used as a compound (e.g., Nd1. 343; Nd2. 17). As for *vivaṭṭa*, it was not generally used in the Canon in this sense, except in the Paṭisambhidāmagga (e.g., Ps1. 2, 107-11.) Later, in the commentaries and sub-commentaries it was abundantly used (e.g., Vism. 694; VinA.: Pācittiyakaṇḍaṃ, Musāvādavaggo, Padasodhammasikkhāpadavaṇṇanā; AA. III. 337; VismṬ.: Paṭhamo Bhāgo, Sīlaniddesaṇṇanā, Dutiyasīlapaṇḍakavaṇṇanā.)

is clear, free, resplendent, peaceful, and profound. When the state of Nibbāna is reached a person knows this for himself:

*Nibbāna is to be seen for oneself,<sup>4</sup> timeless, inviting to come and see, to be brought within and realized, to be experienced individually by the wise.<sup>5</sup>*

Ordinary people are unable to comprehend or imagine the state of Nibbāna. When encountering new concepts people normally use previous knowledge as a basis for comparison, and in attempting to understand Nibbāna they create an image that is a composite of pre-existing perceptions. Take for example a person who has never heard of an elephant. On hearing the word 'elephant' he may think it is a foreign word or even an obscenity. Learning that an elephant is an animal, he may consider all animals, from ants to whales, irrespective of size or type. The image is clearer when he is told that an elephant is a large land animal with big ears, small eyes, tusks, and trunk. This image may be close to reality or far from it; if he were to draw a picture on paper of what he saw in his mind, it may resemble some bizarre, mythological beast. Having never seen the real thing, he uses familiar perceptions to create an elaborate new image. The image will depend both on the accuracy of the speaker's descriptions of the object, and on the listener's stored perceptions used as components for a new perception.

In the case of something utterly different from anything previously perceived and thoroughly incomparable, the listener has no way to conceive of it. [231] If he attempts to understand this thing by means of familiar concepts and perceptions, the only reasonable way for the speaker to respond is by negation. Further speculation by the listener, using stored perceptions for comparison, can lead to misunderstanding. He may even go so far as outright rejection, accusing the speaker of deception and claiming that the thing does not exist. Such rejection, based on unfamiliarity and an inability to conceive of something, would be ungrounded.

Nibbāna is beyond everything known by ordinary people, surpassing cognition influenced by ignorance, craving and clinging. It is a state arrived at directly with the abandonment of defilements, like sliding back a screen and seeing the sky. Nibbāna has no properties similar to things known by ordinary people. But claiming Nibbāna does not exist is incorrect.

The following fable has been used to illustrate how the unknown is not necessarily the unreal:

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<sup>4</sup> Author: alternatively, 'realizable in this lifetime'.

<sup>5</sup> A. I. 158-9; note that these five qualities are identical to the last five qualities of the Dhamma. This is consistent with the explanation that the first quality of the Dhamma (*svākkhāto*) is the teaching, later called *pariyatti-dhamma*, the Dhamma that should be studied. Qualities 2-6 (*sanditthiko* to *paccattam veditabbo viññūhi*) are attributes specific to *lokuttara-dhamma*, the Transcendent (Vism. 215-18).

A fish and a turtle were close friends. The fish had spent its entire life in a lake, whereas the amphibious turtle knew both land and lake. One day the turtle returned to the lake after a walk on land. He told the fish how refreshing it was to walk on land, among open fields and a pleasant breeze. The fish listened for a while perplexed and thought: 'What is walking?' 'What is dry land?' 'How can there be happiness without water? Certainly, it just spells death.' The fish grew impatient and interrupted the turtle, seeking clarification. The turtle explained using earth terms; when the fish inquired with water terms, the turtle could only reject them. The turtle could not find any terms to use for comparison and the fish concluded that the turtle was lying, the story wasn't true: dry land does not exist and nor do fields, pleasant breezes or happiness outside of water. The turtle spoke of something that does exist but it lay beyond the fish's ken. Since the fish had never been on land it was unable to understand.

Consider the distinct experience and perception arising from each of the senses. Sense impressions differ absolutely from each other and are not comparable: sights cannot be compared with sounds, nor can sounds with smells. A person blind from birth cannot understand the nature of green, red, orange, pink or other characteristics of sight, using perceptual knowledge from other sense bases. Words such as 'loud,' 'faint,' 'malodorous,' 'fragrant,' 'sour' or 'sweet' would all be inadequate. No one can accurately explain to a person born without the sense of smell the quality of fetid, fragrant, the smell of roses, citrus or jasmine. Words such as 'red,' 'blue,' 'heavy,' 'light,' 'fat,' 'thin,' 'bitter' and 'salty' would all be unsuitable. Human beings have five sense organs for cognizing the world's properties, the sense objects (*ārammaṇa*). [232] Knowledge surpassing the domain of mundane objects will generally remain hidden. Even the five recognized sense objects are known according to disparate qualities. Lack of familiarity or an inability to conceive of something is therefore not a guarantee of its non-existence.

Soon after the Buddha's enlightenment, before proclaiming the Dhamma, he had this thought:

*The Dhamma<sup>6</sup> that I have attained is profound, difficult to see, difficult to realize, peaceful, excellent, not accessible by reasoning,<sup>7</sup> subtle, to be known by the wise.*

*This is followed by the verse: I should not now teach what I have attained with such tribulation; this Dhamma cannot be easily realized by those overcome with greed and hatred. Beings dyed in lust, enveloped in darkness (ignorance), will not discern that which goes against the current, is subtle, profound, difficult to see, refined.<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Author: The word *Dhamma* here refers to Dependent Origination, Nibbāna, or the Four Noble Truths – the essential meaning is the same.

<sup>7</sup> Author: Not within the realm of reasoning.

<sup>8</sup> Vin. 1. 5; M. I. 168.

Despite its complexity the Buddha made great effort to teach and explain the Dhamma. However, Nibbāna cannot be penetrated by mere thought. No words or perceptions exist to accurately describe or define it. Conceptualizing and disputing the subject of Nibbāna only leads to misunderstanding. The correct way is to apply the teachings so as to arrive at Nibbāna and see it clearly for oneself. With proper determination, rather than being ‘inconceivable’ or ‘indescribable,’ Nibbāna is ‘difficult to see, difficult to realize,’ as quoted by the Buddha above.

The following quote is an affirmation by the Buddha that the realization of Nibbāna, and other sublime states, can truly occur, when the ‘eye’ of wisdom opens. This is the Buddha’s conversation with the brahmin student Subha. The Buddha refutes the brahmin Pokkharasāti’s assertion that it is impossible for humans to experience superlative knowledge and vision (*ñānadassana*): [240]

*‘Young man, suppose there were a person blind from birth who could not see black forms, white forms, green, yellow, red, or pink forms. He could not see even and uneven forms, the stars, the moon or the sun. Were he to say that black and white forms do not exist, and beholders of black and white forms do not exist; that green forms do not exist, and beholders of green forms do not exist ... that the moon and sun do not exist, and beholders of the moon and sun do not exist; were he to say ‘I do not know or see those things, therefore they do not exist’; would he be speaking correctly?’*

*‘Incorrectly,’ the young man replied.*

*The Buddha then continued: ‘Just so, the brahmin Pokkharasāti is blind and visionless. That he could know, see or realize outstanding knowledge and vision, which is competent, excellent and superhuman, is impossible.’<sup>9</sup>*

It is worth noting the expressions the Buddha used when he spoke about Nibbāna. The definitions of Nibbāna can be summarised in the following four ways:

- 1) *By negation:* Those marking the renunciation and removal of some inferior, unlovely or disadvantageous condition belonging to the round of rebirth (*vaṭṭa*). For example: *Nibbāna is the end of greed, hatred and delusion;*<sup>10</sup> *Nibbāna is the cessation of becoming;*<sup>11</sup> *Nibbāna is the end of craving;*<sup>12</sup> and *the conclusion of suffering.*<sup>13</sup> Such descriptions also use terms revealing a quality directly

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<sup>9</sup> M. II. 201-2.

<sup>10</sup> S. IV. 251, 261.

<sup>11</sup> S. II. 117.

<sup>12</sup> S. III. 190.

<sup>13</sup> This last is an indirect rather than an explicit definition. See e.g., S. IV. 43; Ud. 80; It. 47.

opposite to an attribute of *vaṭṭa*. For example, Nibbāna is unconditioned (*asāṅkhata*), ageless (*ajara*), and deathless (*amata*).<sup>14</sup> [233]

- 2) *By synonym*: Those indicating completion or perfection. For example, *santa* (peaceful), *paṇīta* (excellent), *suddhi* (pure), and *khema* (secure).
- 3) *By simile and metaphor*: Similes are more often used for explaining the state and traits of a person who has attained Nibbāna than for Nibbāna itself. For example, the comparison of an arahant<sup>15</sup> to a bull, leading his herd across the river to arrive at the other side,<sup>16</sup> or to a person crossing a great ocean filled with dangers and reaching the shore.<sup>17</sup> The Buddha claimed that it is inaccurate to say an arahant is reborn ('reappears') somewhere, or is not born; he compared an arahant to a fire that is extinguished because there is no more fuel.<sup>18</sup> There are some direct similes, for example: Nibbāna is like a tranquil, pleasant region;<sup>19</sup> like the other shore, secure and free from danger;<sup>20</sup> and like a message of truth.<sup>21</sup> There are many metaphors, for example: *ārogya* (without illness; perfect health), *dīpa* (an island; freedom from danger), and *leṇa* (a cave; shelter from danger). In later scriptures composed by disciples there are metaphors referring to Nibbāna as a city, e.g., *puramuttamaṃ* (magnificent city)<sup>22</sup> and *nibbāna-nagara* (fortress of Nibbāna)<sup>23</sup> used as oratorical and literary terms. Thai idioms include great deathless citadel (*amata-mahānagara-nirvāna*), and crystal city, but these later words are not recognized as terms that reveal the state of Nibbāna.
- 4) *By direct explanation*: These explanations occur in only a few places, but they are of much interest to scholars, especially for those who consider Buddhism a philosophy. The varying interpretations have given rise to numerous debates. I have presented a selection below.

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<sup>14</sup> For the sources of all these single words see below (n. 26).

<sup>15</sup> Footnote: A perfectly awakened being.

<sup>16</sup> M. I. 226.

<sup>17</sup> S. IV. 157, 174.

<sup>18</sup> M. I. 486-7; S. IV. 399.

<sup>19</sup> S. III. 108-9.

<sup>20</sup> S. IV. 174.

<sup>21</sup> S. IV. 195.

<sup>22</sup> Ap. 530.

<sup>23</sup> Miln.: Book IV, Aṭṭhamavaggo, no. 5: The Gift of Vessantara (dilemma 71).

Epithets for Nibbāna are occasionally found grouped in a single passage. Examples of all four kinds of definition are listed below, in Pali alphabetical order.<sup>24</sup> [234]

*Akaṇha-asukka*: not black, not white (not confined to social class or caste; neither good nor bad; neither *puñña* nor *pāpa*).

*Akata*: not made; not built.

*Akiñcana*: nothing lingering in the mind; free from anxiety.

*Akuto-bhaya*: fearless.

*Accuta*: immovable; undeparting.

*Acchariya*: marvellous.

*Ajara, Ajajjara*: ageless; undecaying.

*Ajāta*: not born.

*Anata*: not swayed; absence of craving.

*Ananta*: limitless.

*Anādāna*: no grasping.

*Anāpara*: sublime; foremost.

*Anālaya*: without longing; absence of clinging.

*Anāsava*: without *āsava* (effluents/taints).

*Anidassana*: not seen with the eye; signless.

*Anītika*: without calamity.

*Anuttara*: unsurpassed; supreme.

*Apalokita (-na)*: not disintegrating; not dissolving.

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<sup>24</sup> From many sources, the important ones being: S. IV. 359-373; M. I. 173; A. II. 247-8; Ud. 80-1; S. IV. 210.

*Abhaya*: free of danger.

*Abbhūta*: 'has not been before'; wonderful.

*Abyādhi*: without disease.

*Abyāpajja*: without oppression.

*Abhūta*: not coming to be.

*Amata*: deathless.

*Amosa-dhamma*: imperishable.

*Asaṅkiliṭṭha*: undefiled.

*Asaṅkappa*: unshakeable.

*Asaṅkhata*: not constructed.

*Asaṅhīra*: unshifting.

*Asoka*: sorrowless.

*Ārogya*: without sickness; perfect health.

*Issariya*: freedom; mastership.

*Khema*: security; safety.

*Taṇhakkhaya*: the end of craving.

*Tāṇa*: defender; protection.

*Dīpa*: island; refuge.

*Dukkakkhaya*: the end of suffering.

*Duddasa*: difficult to see.

*Dhuva*: enduring.

*Nipuṇa*: subtle.

*Nippapañca*: without obstructive defilements; without *papañca*.

*Nibbāna*: the cessation of defilements and all suffering.

*Nibbuti*: cooling; the allayment of affliction.

*Nirodha*: cessation of suffering.

*Paṇīta*: excellent.

*Paramattha*: the supreme benefit.

*Parama-sacca*: the supreme truth.

*Pāra*: the other shore; safe destination.

*Mutti*: release; emancipation.

*Mokkha*: salvation.

*Yogakkhema*: freedom from bondage.

*Leṇa*: sanctuary; shelter from danger.

*Vimutti*: liberation; freedom.

*Vimokkha*: liberation.

*Viraja*: stainless.

*Virāga*: the fading, cooling off, and expiration of lust.

*Visuddhi*: purity; impeccable.

*Sacca*: truth.

*Santa*: peaceful; still.

*Santi*: peace.

*Saraṇa*: refuge.

*Siva*: highest bliss.

*Suddhi*: purity.

*Sududdasa*: exceedingly difficult to see. [235]

There are many more references and descriptions for Nibbāna in the scriptures containing verses by disciples and in the commentaries (e.g., Niddesa, Paṭisambhidāmagga, Theragāthā, Therīgāthā, Apadāna), as well as in later scriptures, (e.g., Abhidhānappadīpikā). Examples are listed below:

*Akkhara*: imperishable; interminable.

*Akhalita*: unfaltering.

*Acala*: unwavering.

*Anārammaṇa*: free from constraints; independent of sense objects.

*Anuppāda*: not born.

*Apavagga*: without formations (*saṅkhāra*); final emancipation.

*Amaraṇa*: deathless.

*Arūpa*: without *rūpa*; formless.

*Asapatta*: without enemies.

*Asambādha*: unconfined; unoppressed.

*Kevala*: unadulterated; inherently complete.<sup>25</sup>

*Nicca*: constant; certain.

*Nirupatāpa*: free from distress.

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<sup>25</sup> *Kevala* (Sanskrit: *kaivalya*) is a word expressing the ultimate goal of the Jain religion. In the Buddhist Pali Canon this word is not used as a direct reference to Nibbāna, but rather as a name for someone who has attained Nibbāna, e.g., *kevalī* or *kebalī*. In many locations, e.g.: S. I. 167; A. I. 162; M. II. 144; A.V. 16; Sn. 88.

*Paṭipassaddhi*: tranquillity; calm.

*Pada*: place to be reached; destination.

*Para*: the beyond; the ultimate.

*Pariyosāna*: conclusion; goal.

*Pahāna*: the abandonment of defilements.

*Vivaṭṭa*: deliverance from the round of rebirth (*vaṭṭa*); without *vaṭṭa*.

*Vūpasama*: stillness.

Some of these terms are very important, since they are consistently used as definitions for Nibbāna, for example: *asaṅkhata*, *nirodha*, *vimutti*, *virāga*, *santa* and *santi*. Other words are used infrequently. Some are used in only one location, others in two or three locations, so they should not be regarded as highly significant. They are included here to increase understanding. The same is true for the translations. They provide some sense of the meaning, but they might not give a complete flavour as they lack the supportive context. And most importantly, many terms were familiar to people in the specific time period, region and community in which the Buddha taught and the terms were associated with their personal values or religious beliefs. When the words were spoken, the listeners probably understood the meaning completely. Sometimes the Buddha used descriptive words for Nibbāna to facilitate communication while substituting a new meaning in accordance with Buddha-Dhamma. People outside of those time periods, places and groups may not completely understand the meaning of these words.

An important word for describing Nibbāna is *asaṅkhata* ('not constructed'). Nibbāna does not exist as a result of causes or conditions. It may be claimed that Nibbāna must arise from causes, since Nibbāna is the fruit of *magga* (the Path, the Way) or of practice in accordance with the Way. This doubt can be answered briefly by way of analogy: if we compare practice for reaching Nibbāna with travelling to the city of Chiang Mai, we see that Chiang Mai, which is the goal of the journey, is not the result of the path or the act of travelling. Regardless of the road or of travelling, Chiang Mai exists. The road and travelling are causes for reaching Chiang Mai, but not for Chiang Mai itself. It is the same with the Path and practice along the Path, which are causes for attaining Nibbāna, but not for Nibbāna itself.<sup>26</sup>

Apart from *vimutti*, there are many other synonyms that reveal facets of Nibbāna, as presented earlier. Of all these synonyms, there are two often-used words that represent important properties: *visuddhi* and *santi*. *Visuddhi* is purity or

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<sup>26</sup> This matter is discussed in the Milindapañhā: Book IV, Sattamo vaggo, no. 8: Nibbānassa Atthibhāvapañho (dilemma 65).

cleanness, the absence of defilements which tarnish and obscure, and the ability to see things clearly. *Santi* is peace, the absence of agitation and affliction, the end of turmoil; this state of mind is serene, deep, cool, settled, self-reliant, able to fully experience the fruits of practice, and ready to be employed for action.

The few passages that explain the state of Nibbāna explicitly are presented below. In some cases a story is provided in order to give the context for the Buddha's words:

1. At one time the Buddha gave a Dhamma discourse to the bhikkhus concerning Nibbāna. As the bhikkhus were listening intently, the Buddha uttered this exclamation: [236]

*Monks, there exists that sphere (āyatana) where there is neither the earth, water, fire, or air elements; nor the realm of infinite space; nor the realm of infinite consciousness; nor the realm of nothingness; nor the realm of neither perception nor non-perception; nor this world; nor the next world; nor the moon; nor the sun. I do not say that that sphere has going, coming, arising, staying, or passing away. It has neither foundation, nor movement, nor constraint (ārammaṇa). That is the conclusion of suffering.*<sup>27</sup>

2. On another occasion, the Buddha gave a similar teaching to the bhikkhus, and uttered this verse:

*Indeed, anata (the state of not inclining towards birth; being without craving, i.e., Nibbāna) is difficult to see. Truth (sacca) is not easily discerned. Having penetrated craving, and by knowing and seeing (the truth), there will be nothing lingering in the mind (nothing to cause mental anxiety).*<sup>28</sup>

3. On a similar occasion:

*Monks, there is the Not-born (ajāta), Not-become (abhūta), Not-made (akata), Not-constructed (asaṅkhata). If there were not the Not-born, Not-become, Not-made, Not-constructed, then there could not be known the escape here from the born, the become, the made and the constructed. But because there is the Not-born, Not-become, Not-made, Not-constructed, therefore the escape here can be known from the born, become, made and constructed.*<sup>29</sup>

4. On a similar occasion:

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<sup>27</sup> Ud. 80-81.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

*Still being dependent, there is wavering. Not being dependent, there is no wavering. There being no wavering, there is tranquillity. With tranquillity, there is no favouring. With no favouring, no coming and going. With no coming and going, no passing away and arising. With no passing away and arising, there is neither this world, the other world, nor a between-the-two. This is the conclusion of suffering.<sup>30</sup>*

5. Another account describes the Buddha correcting the view of Brahma.<sup>31</sup> In brief, at one time this pernicious view arose in the Brahma named Baka:

*This abode of Brahma is permanent, enduring and eternal. It is perfect; there is no way for it to perish. This abode of Brahma is not born; it does not originate, age, die, or pass away. A superior salvation cannot be found.*

The Buddha, knowing Baka's thought, went to him and said: *Brahma, you have lapsed into ignorance. Therefore, you claim that which is impermanent as permanent, unstable as enduring, and uneternal as eternal...and there being a superior salvation, you claim there is none.*

Then Māra<sup>32</sup> possessed one of Brahma's retinue, who spoke to the Buddha: *Bhikkhu, bhikkhu, do not offend Brahma, do not offend Brahma. [237] This is Brahma, the Great Brahma, the Lord (abhibhū), the Unvanquished, The All Seeing One, the Omnipotent, the Sovereign, the Maker, the Creator, Excellence, Providence, the Master, Father of those born and to be born...*

The Buddha admonished Māra, finishing with: *Brahma and all his company and retinue are in your hands, are in your power...but I have not fallen into your hands, nor am I under your power.*

When Baka maintained: *I have declared the permanent as permanent, the enduring as enduring, the eternal as eternal...* the Buddha announced there are many things that Brahma does not know, including:

*The state that can be known (viññāṇa), not seen with the eyes (anidassana),<sup>33</sup> limitless (ananta), and all radiant (sabbato-pabhā),<sup>34</sup> which the solidity of earth cannot hold, the wetness of water...the heat of fire...the movement of wind cannot hold, the existence of beings...the divinity of devas...the rule of Pajāpati...the grandeur of Brahma...the brilliance of the Ābhassara Brahmas...the beauty of the Subhakiṇha*

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Brahma: in Brahmanism the chief of the gods, creator of the universe.

<sup>32</sup> The 'Evil One', the 'Tempter', personified as a deity.

<sup>33</sup> Another translation is 'incomparable'.

<sup>34</sup> Another translation is 'can be reached from every direction,' or 'can be reached by every method,' i.e., can be attained by every method of *kammaṭṭhāna*.

*Brahmas...the abundance of the Vehapphala Brahmas cannot hold, the lordship of the Lord cannot hold, the characteristics of all things cannot hold.*

Baka replied to this by saying that he would vanish from sight, but he was unable to do so. The Buddha in turn said he would vanish and did vanish. Brahma and his retinue could only hear his voice speaking: *Having seen the danger in being, and seen the existence of those who seek non-being (vibhava), I do not praise any sort of being, nor cling to delight (i.e., bhavataṇhā: the craving for being).*<sup>35</sup>

6. Another story tells of a bhikkhu who travelled through every realm until he reached the Brahma world, seeking an answer to a question.

This bhikkhu had the following doubt: *Where are the four great elements - earth, water, fire and air - extinguished without remainder?* He then entered a state of concentration and visited the various deities, beginning with the realm of the Four Great Kings, to pose his question. Unable to answer him, the gods suggested he go to progressively higher heaven realms until he arrived at the Brahma world. The Brahmas too could not answer but said that the Great Brahma, the Lord, would surely know. With a radiance the Great Brahma revealed himself to that bhikkhu. [238]

The bhikkhu posed his question to the Great Brahma, who prevaricated: *I am Brahma, Great Brahma, the Lord, the Unvanquished, the All Seeing One, the Omnipotent, the Sovereign, the Maker, the Creator, Excellence, Providence, the Master, Father of those born and to be born.*

The bhikkhu continued: *I did not ask you if you are Brahma, Great Brahma, the Lord... I asked you where the four great elements are extinguished without remainder.*

Brahma replied again, that he is Great Brahma, the Lord, etc.

The bhikkhu asked again, for a third time, at which point Brahma took him by the arm and led him to one side, saying: *Monk, these gods, followers of Brahma, recognize me as one for whom there is nothing not known, seen, experienced, or realized. Therefore, I did not answer in front of them. Monk, I also do not know where the four great elements are extinguished without remainder. It is thus your misdeed and mistake that you have abandoned the Blessed One, and come to search for an answer to this problem elsewhere. Go and approach the Blessed One to pose this question and accept whatever answer he gives.*

The bhikkhu then went to ask the Buddha, who answered: *You should not ask: 'Where are the four great elements - earth, water, fire and air - extinguished without remainder?' You should ask: 'Where can earth, water, fire and air find no*

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<sup>35</sup> M. I. 327-8.

footing? Where can long and short, small and large, beautiful and repulsive find no firm ground? Where do mentality and corporeality terminate without remainder?’ He then explained as follows:

*The state that can be known (viññāṇa), not seen with the eyes (anidassana),<sup>36</sup> limitless (ananta), and can be reached from every direction (sabbatopabhā),<sup>37</sup> here, earth, water, fire and air can find no footing; long and short, fine and coarse, beautiful and repulsive can find no firm ground; mentality and corporeality terminate without remainder. Because sense consciousness (viññāṇa) ceases, mentality and corporeality terminate here.<sup>38</sup>*

These descriptions of Nibbāna have resulted in various interpretations and debates. Some scholars interpret the last two passages as a Buddhist attempt to combat Brahmanism by assimilation, by incorporating the Brahmanic personification of God. [239] Note that in all these passages the Buddha was either teaching bhikkhus, who had a basic knowledge of Dhamma, or was speaking to Brahma, who is a master theoretician. I will not elaborate upon these details here, but remember that this disparity of interpretation arises because Nibbāna cannot be conceived of; it must be known directly through spiritual practice.

Pali words are sometimes translated differently. The word *āyatana* in the first passage, for example, can be translated as ‘sphere’, and some interpret this to mean a dwelling or place. Others interpret *āyatana* as another dimension. The word *viññāṇa*, in passages five and six, is considered by some to be identical with *viññāṇa* in the expressions eye-*viññāṇa*, ear-*viññāṇa*, etc. They thus interpret Nibbāna as some form of consciousness, defining Nibbāna as a consciousness that is not seen with the eyes, etc. In the commentaries, however, *viññāṇa* is explained in this passage to be a name for Nibbāna, ‘the state that can be known’, as used above.<sup>39</sup> We can see that in passage six the word *viññāṇa* occurs twice. The first *viññāṇa* refers to Nibbāna, with its own distinct translation (‘the state that can be known’), while the latter *viññāṇa*, in the phrase *viññāṇa ceases*, refers to the consciousness that is the condition for the arising of mentality and corporeality as explained in the *paṭicasamuppāda*.

We should refrain from drawing conclusions about Nibbāna simply because an interpretation accords with our preferences and preconceptions. If we establish firm convictions about something we do not yet clearly know, we may be greatly deceived. Rather, we should put our emphasis on those methods leading to Nibbāna along with the benefits of gradual liberation. This is more practical. As our spiritual practice develops, we will clearly see the results for ourselves.

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<sup>36</sup> See n. 33.

<sup>37</sup> Another translation is ‘all radiant’.

<sup>38</sup> D. I. 215-223.

<sup>39</sup> DA. II. 393; MA. II. 412.

Although we may have considered these explanations of Nibbāna, if we have not practised and arrived at this state, we should remember that all ideas of Nibbāna are comparable to the image the blind men formed after touching the elephant. The story from the Pali, in brief, is as follows:

At one time in the city of Sāvattthī, a large number of religious ascetics, wanderers, and brahmins, of various creeds, adhered to their own beliefs and doctrines as the only truth, while repudiating those of others. This gave rise to quarrelling: ‘The truth is this way, not that way; the truth is not that way, it is this way.’ In response the Buddha told the following story:

In former times a king of Sāvattthī ordered his advisors to gather all those men in the city who were blind from birth and present them with an elephant. The advisors showed one group of blind men the elephant’s head; to another they showed the elephant’s ear. They showed the tusks to another group, the trunk, the abdomen, the legs, the back, the tail, the tip of the tail, to each separate group, saying each time that this is an elephant. They then informed the king that the blind men had become familiar with the elephant. The king went to the gathering of the blind and asked them, ‘Have you seen the elephant?’ They replied, ‘We have seen it, Your Majesty.’ The king inquired further: ‘As you say you have seen an elephant, what is it like?’

Those blind men who had touched the head said that an elephant is like a water-pot. Those who felt the ears said an elephant is like a winnowing basket. Those who touched the tusks – a ploughshare. Those who touched the trunk – a plough shaft. Those who touched the abdomen said an elephant is like a granary. Those who touched the legs, like a pillar. Those who touched the back, like a mortar. [241] Those who touched the tail, like a pestle. Those who touched the tip of the tail said an elephant is like a broom. When this was finished, the blind men began to argue – an elephant is this way, not that way; an elephant is not that way, it is this way – to the point of brawling.

At the end the Buddha uttered this verse:

*Indeed, some ascetics and brahmins cling to such views and doctrines; people who see only one part, being contentious, argue and quarrel.*<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ud. 67-8.