

Value and Unique Attributes of Nibbāna

1. Nibbāna is Attainable in this Lifetime

[371] Nibbāna, which is the highest goal of Buddhism, can be realized by people in this present life, when they apply effort and are endowed with the necessary qualities. One need not wait until the next life, as revealed by Nibbāna's attributes *sandiṭṭhikaṃ* (seen clearly by oneself, realizable in this life) and *akālikaṃ* (not subject to time, immediate).¹ The Buddha offered ways of practice for realizing Nibbāna in this present life², as confirmed in this passage:

*I tell you this: Let a wise person come to me who is sincere, honest and straightforward, and I will instruct him, I will teach him Dhamma. If he practises what he is taught, then within seven years by realizing for himself here and now through direct knowledge he will enter upon and abide in that supreme goal of the holy life for the sake of which clansmen rightly go forth from the home life into homelessness. Let alone seven years – in six years, five years... half a month, in seven days he can achieve that goal.*³

2. Nibbāna Is Attainable By All

Every person with determination and spiritual aptitude can realize Nibbāna. No restrictions exist concerning race, class, caste, wealth, gender, or whether one is a householder or monastic, as verified by the Buddha's verses:

'The straight way' that path is called,

And 'fearless' is its destination.

The chariot is called 'silent',

Fitted with wheels of righteousness.

A sense of shame is its rear-guard,

Mindfulness its armour;

I say this Dhamma vehicle,

¹ A. I. 158-9. *Sandiṭṭhika* means the same as *diṭṭhadhammika*, e.g. at KhA. 124; SnA. I. 71; see also A. III. 40 and the Aṅguttara sub-commentaries, referred to in the Maṅgalatthadīpanī (Sumanavaggo, Sīhasenāpatisuttādivaṇṇanā).

² E.g.: S. II. 18, 115 = S. III. 164 = S. IV. 141; A. IV. 351-3, 454-5.

³ D. III. 55-56; related passages at Vin. I. 9-10; M. I. 172; M. II. 44. (See the chapters in *Buddhadhamma* on *cetovimutti/paññāvimutti* and *satipaṭṭhāna* which pertain to realization in one's present lifetime. See also D. II. 314-5; M. I. 62-3.)

Has right view guiding as charioteer.

One who has such a vehicle,

Whether a woman or a man,

Has, by means of this vehicle,

Arrived at the abode of Nibbāna.⁴ [372]

The Buddha permitted women to be ordained as bhikkhunis despite the opposition by elements of Indian society at that time; he claimed that women who follow the Dhamma-vinaya⁵ are capable of realizing supermundane states, from stream-entry to arahantship, equally as men.⁶

At one time, Somā Bhikkhunī was sitting at the foot of a tree when Māra approached, and wanting to disturb and frighten her, exclaimed in verse:

That state so hard to achieve

Which is to be attained by the seers,

Cannot be attained by a woman

With her two-fingered wisdom.

Somā Therī replied:

What does womanhood matter at all

When the mind is concentrated well,

When knowledge flows on steadily,

Seeing correctly into Dhamma.

One to whom it might occur,

'I am a woman' or 'I am a man'

Or I am anything at all -

⁴ S. I. 33.

⁵ The teaching and the discipline.

⁶ Vin. II. 254-5.

*Is fit for Māra to address.*⁷

In relation to householders and monastics the Buddha had this to say:

*I do not praise the wrong way of practice on the part either of a householder or one gone forth; for whether it be a householder or one gone forth, one who has entered on the wrong way of practice, by reason of his wrong way of practice, is not accomplishing the true way, the Dhamma that is wholesome. I praise the right way of practice on the part either of a householder or one gone forth; for whether it be a householder or one gone forth, one who has entered on the right way of practice, by reason of his right way of practice, is accomplishing the true way, the Dhamma that is wholesome.*⁸

*I say there is no difference between a lay follower who is (thus) liberated in mind and a bhikkhu who has been liberated in mind for a hundred years, that is, the one liberation is the same as the other.*⁹

[373] Caste was a serious issue of debate and controversy in India about which the Buddha frequently discoursed. One example is the discussion between the Buddha and the brahmin Esukārī:

‘Master Gotama, the brahmins prescribe four types of wealth... they prescribe wandering for alms as the wealth of a brahmin... the bow and the quiver as the wealth of a noble... farming and cattle-breeding as the wealth of a merchant... the sickle and carrying-pole as the wealth of a worker... What does Master Gotama say about this?’

‘Well, brahmin, has all the world authorized the brahmins to prescribe these four types of wealth?’ – ‘No, Master Gotama.’ – ‘Suppose, brahmin, they were to force a cut of meat upon a poor, penniless, destitute man and tell him: “Good man, you must eat this meat and pay for it”; so too, without the consent of those [other] recluses and brahmins, the brahmins nevertheless prescribe these four types of wealth.

‘I, brahmin, declare the noble supermundane Dhamma as a person’s own wealth... What do you think, brahmin? Suppose a head-anointed noble king were to assemble

⁷ S. I. 129; Thīg. verses 60–62.

⁸ M. II. 197; cf. S. V. 18–19.

⁹ S. V. 410; the Thai translated edition renders the phrase ‘the one liberation is the same as the other’ as ‘they are both liberated by deliverance,’ since the Thai Pali edition reads: *yadidaṃ vimuttiyā vimuttanti*. The Burmese and Roman editions read: *yadidaṃ vimuttiyā vimuttinti*. The phrase also occurs at A. III. 34, for which the Thai edition translates it differently. The commentaries (SA. III. 292 and AA. III. 244 explain ‘vimutti’ as *arahatta-phala-vimutti*. The scriptures from around the first century B.C. onwards, for example the Milinda-pañhā (Miln.: Book IV, Chaṭṭhavaggo, no. 3, Gihī-arahattapañho, dilemma 62), assert that a lay-person realizing arahantship must take higher ordination (*upasampadā*) on that very day or else attain *parinibbāna*. On the question of why an enlightened householder would take ordination, see Miln.: Book IV, Chaṭṭhavaggo, no. 9, Ghipabbajitasammāpaṭipattipañho (dilemma 54).

here a hundred men of different birth and say to them: “Come, sirs, let any here who have been born into a noble clan or a brahmin clan or a royal clan take a fire-stick of teak, sal-wood, pine, sandal-wood, or pomegranate wood and light a fire and produce heat. And also let any who have been born into an outcast clan, a trapper clan, a wicker workers’ clan, a cartwrights’ clan, or a scavengers’ clan take a fire-stick made from a dog’s drinking trough, from a pig’s trough, from a dying vat, or from castor-oil wood and light a fire and produce heat.”

‘What do you think, brahmin? When a fire is lit and heat is produced by someone in the first group, would that fire have a flame, a colour, and a radiance, and would it be possible to use it for the purposes of fire, while when a fire is lit and heat is produced by someone of the second group, that fire would have no flame, no colour, and no radiance, and it would not be possible to use it for the purposes of fire?’

‘No, Master Gotama... For all fire has a flame, a colour, and a radiance, and it is possible to use all fire for the purposes of fire.’

‘So too, brahmin, if anyone from a clan of nobles goes forth from the home life into homelessness, and relying on the Dhamma and Discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata... holds right view, he is one who fulfils the wholesome qualities that are the way of deliverance. If anyone from a clan of brahmins goes forth... from a clan of merchants... from a clan of workers goes forth from the home life into homelessness, and relying on the Dhamma and Discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata... holds right view, he is one who fulfils the wholesome qualities that are the way of deliverance.’¹⁰ [374]

3. Nibbāna Is the Highest Spiritual Attainment

Although the attainment of Nibbāna is dependent on mental deliverance (*cetovimutti*), that is, it relies on a particular achievement of *jhāna*, and this achievement has a bearing on the everyday life of enlightened beings, Nibbāna is distinct from *jhāna*. Nibbāna is a release even from these psychic achievements and is accessible when one is able to transcend them. There are some unique aspects to the attainment of Nibbāna:

The realization of Nibbāna is decisive, final and irreversible. In regard to moral conduct, for example, true spontaneous selflessness arises. This selfless conduct stems from eradication by wisdom of selfish hankering, to the point that all self-obsession is abolished. As this selflessness arises naturally and of its own accord, it is not the result of will-power or force; one need not seize one opinion or habit in order to let go of another. One need not hold up some ideal, sacrifice oneself to an object of faith, suppress one’s passions by calm or insight, or get absorbed in *jhāna*.

No matter how lofty a person’s mental achievements, one must see into their causal nature and let go of attachment to these achievements before realization of Nibbāna is possible. This letting go ultimately supports, consolidates and perfects further spiritual development, even for enlightened beings. For example, such

¹⁰ Esukārī Sutta: M. II. 180-84.

beings can benefit from proficiency in *jhāna* to abide when alone in ease and happiness (*diṭṭhadhamma-sukhavihāra*). If originally they accessed the eight levels of *jhāna*, with the realization as a non-returner or an arahant, they can achieve ‘cessation of perception and feeling’ (*saññāvedayita-nirodha*).

Some spiritual accomplishments can suspend defilements and suffering for a long period, but not yet irrevocably. [375] The defilements and suffering can return, and therefore these heightened mental states are temporary; they are a means to suppress other conditions or to engage the mind in something else. The realization of Nibbāna, however, puts an absolute end to suffering and mental impurities. And through this realization, only harmful conditions cease, for example: greed, craving, anger, woe, confusion, fixed views of self, and ignorance; all goodness remains. Furthermore, the vices are automatically replaced by the exceptional wholesome qualities of a life guided by wisdom and compassion, which surpass ordinary happiness and cannot be securely accessed by other spiritual achievements. Therefore, although a person who has realized Nibbāna may not have experienced the most refined states of *jhāna*, he or she is still superior to someone who has these experiences but is as yet not fully enlightened.

The realization of Nibbāna brings about a fundamental transformation of a person’s heart, personality, thinking process, worldview and behaviour. There are two principal aspects to this mental transformation. The first involves knowledge, understanding, opinions and belief, which pertains to ignorance and wisdom. The second concerns a person’s sense of values or relationship to desire, which pertains to craving and enthusiasm (*chanda*).

A student who believes her teacher will criticize and punish her may tremble at the thought of meeting the teacher, whereas if she knows that the teacher is kind she will feel happy and at ease. People who see others as enemies and those who see others as friends will behave differently. A person finding a map that shows the location of a hidden diamond may risk his life and even kill others for that diamond, while another person may not give it much thought. People desiring pleasurable sights, tastes, fragrances, sounds and tangible objects tend to be engrossed with these things. If they believe that they can truly possess these objects then their happiness is dependent on the acquisition of these things. In contrast, fully enlightened beings understand the world as it really is, they see nothing that can be truly owned or controlled, they go beyond the search for pleasurable sensations, and they recognize how to act in harmony with truth. They do not yearn for sense impressions. As a consequence, a new understanding arises of one’s relationship to the world: material possessions, other people, nature, and even one’s own life. One is of the world but not bound to or tarnished by it.

This liberation and inner transformation is difficult to describe and therefore the scriptures explain it with similes, for example: recovering from an illness, sobering up, cooling down, clearing out refuse, escaping from a snare or chain, and crossing over an expanse of water to a safe haven. [376] These similes all depict the happiness of relieving an original entanglement, inconvenience, confinement and

struggle. The release from these constraints to a state of freedom and safety is Nibbāna. An enlightened person can move about as he pleases, without worrying about self-protection. Some of the above similes can be used for other spiritual achievements; the difference lies in the fact that *jhāna*, for example, provides only temporary results.

At least a small percentage of human beings will seek the meaning and ultimate goal of life, beyond merely being born, searching for sense pleasure and dying. Sometimes material difficulties or a struggle for survival will cause them to temporarily neglect or interrupt their search, but when circumstances permit and as long as doubt persists people will concern themselves with these matters. Therefore any creed or philosophy that merely answers to material comfort and does not meet people's spiritual needs is incomplete and unable to offer adequate satisfaction. To use Buddhist terminology, responding to 'mundane welfare' (*diṭṭhadhammikattha*) alone is insufficient; one must also attend to 'spiritual welfare' (*samparāyikattha*) and 'supreme welfare' (*paramattha*).¹¹ The teachings on Nibbāna and other spiritual achievements fulfil this requirement. Some psychic attainments, however, although surpassing mundane phenomena, are still classified as subordinate, that is, one is encouraged to reach the final stage of Nibbāna, the supreme benefit and true perfection.

¹¹ See Appendix 2.