



Reflections on Nibbana

by Joseph Goldstein

At different times in our lives and meditation practice, we may get glimpses of something beyond our ordinary, conventional reality, touching a space that transforms our vision of who we are and what the world is. And these intimations can provide a powerful impetus to our practice as we begin to taste the possibility of freedom. Although we may have many selfless moments in our lives, it is the experience of Nibbana that finally uproots the delusion of self-centeredness. Given that it is the clearly stated goal and aim of the Buddha's teaching, the noble end of what makes the Eightfold Path noble, it seems important to explore the meaning and experience of Nibbana.

As challenging as it is, it seems important to explore the meaning and experience of Nibbana, given that it is the clearly stated goal and aim of the Buddha's teaching, the noble end of what makes the Eightfold Path noble. As the Buddha tells us in The Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Heartwood:

... so this holy life does not have gain, honor and renown for its benefit, or the attainment of virtue or concentration for its benefit, or knowledge and vision for its benefit, but it is this unshakeable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end.[1]

I have chosen to use the Pali term Nibbana rather than its Sanskrit form, Nirvana, because the latter has been popularized in our culture in ways that have just a passing relationship to its original meaning. Although it often indicates the best of something, Nirvana has been used as a name for restaurants, rock bands, health drinks, coffee, and perfume. By using the Pali term instead, its very unfamiliarity might help us explore its profound meaning, while recognizing that, until we're arahants, our understanding of Nibbana will always be incomplete.

Early in our practice, we may have a conceptual understanding through teachings and books, which can point us in the right direction on this path of awakening. Then, as our practice develops through various stages of insight, we get a clearer and clearer idea of the path and where it is leading. One map of these stages is referenced in the Buddha's discourse on the Relay of Chariots in The Middle Length Sayings. Details were further elaborated in The Path of Purification by Buddhaghosa many centuries later. These include the stages of arising and passing away, discerning what is the path and what it is not, dissolution, and equanimity.

This progress of insight is just one map of the meditative journey. Different lineages and traditions may describe the unfolding path in different ways. But there are a few pivotal experiences that may arise in any path of practice, whether or not they are understood as a systematic progression of insights. Care is needed at each of these junctures, because each one has the potential for pitfalls that can hinder our understanding.

At the stage of arising and passing away, the mind has become so clear and concentrated and the momentum of mindfulness so strong that we are seeing the rapidly changing nature of all phenomena quite effortlessly. There are feelings of great joy and rapture as we explore this level of experience

for the first time. The danger here is that we can become attached to these beautiful and profound experiences, taking them to be the final goal. For that reason, even these very wholesome states are called corruptions of insight.

We free ourselves from the misunderstanding of these experiences when we realize that even these remarkable states of mind are impermanent and that the path is one of continually letting go. This is when we discern what is the path and what is not. In continuing to be mindful of the flow of changing phenomena, the mind begins to highlight the disappearing aspect of whatever arises. As this stage of dissolution matures, we are often left feeling despondent, understanding that there is no solid ground of experience: everything continually falls away. This can be a challenging time in practice, often referred to as the rolling-up-the-mat stage (all we want to do is roll up our mats and go home!).

But if we persevere in our meditation, slowly the mind emerges from these experiences into the stage of great equanimity about all formations. At this point the mind is open, spacious, and non-reactive to whatever may arise, whether it be pleasant or unpleasant. Here, again, the experience of this equanimity is so profoundly peaceful that we can take it to be Nibbana itself. The great Burmese master of the last century, Mahāsi Sayadaw, described this experience and how we need to practice:

At times there is nothing to note, with the body disappearing and the sense of touch lost. However, at this moment, knowing consciousness is still apparent. In the very clear, open space of the sky there remains only one very clear, blissful consciousness, which is very clear beyond comparison and very blissful. The yogi tends to delight in such clear, blissful consciousness. But the consciousness is not going to stay permanent. . . . It has to be noticed as “knowing, knowing.”[2]

As our practice continues to mature, and all the various factors of enlightenment come into balance, we may also have glimpses of Nibbana itself. In the Pali Canon, there are many words and phrases used to describe this experience. Sometimes it is described in terms of what it is not: unborn, unmade, unformed, uncreated, unafflicted. Sometimes Nibbana is described in more positive terms: the highest peace, the deathless, an island, a shelter, a harbor, a refuge.

One of the reasons it is challenging to describe Nibbana is that different traditions have quite different understandings of this culmination of the path. This essay is an attempt to create a template or map of some of these different perspectives, which may be helpful as we come across these teachings either through readings, from different teachers, or from our own experience.

I'll be speaking of two main approaches in Theravada traditions, which might be broadly categorized as the sutta method and the abhidhamma method. The first refers to the discourses of the Buddha as preserved in the Pali Canon, and the second to a detailed analysis of all the constituent elements of experience. This is sometimes referred to as "Buddhist psychology." Over the centuries, there have been a variety of interpretations arising from these primary sources, which has resulted in different schools of thought and practice often expressing quite divergent points of view. Sometimes these differences arise from different interpretations of the suttas, and sometimes from differences between the sutta and abhidhamma approaches.

Within these different approaches, there are two basic understandings of the Unconditioned, the Unborn, Nibbana. In the first, Nibbana is understood as an unconditioned reality beyond consciousness. In the second, Nibbana is understood as an unconditioned awareness.

We will be exploring some of the nuances of each of these understandings and of the differences between them.

Crucial to investigating this distinction is differentiating Nibbana itself as being unconditioned from the conscious experience of Nibbana, which is conditioned.

Bhikkhu Bodhi highlights this difference when he writes:

I don't know of anything in the Nikayas [the Buddhist Discourses] that supports the idea that the experience of Nibbana is itself unconditioned, as contrasted with an experience of what is unconditioned. Nowhere in the Pali Canon is Nibbana ever described as consciousness.[3]

Bhikkhu U Jagara expresses it this way:

The experience of Nibbana, according to suttas and abhidhamma, is a very conscious one in which awareness is present. However, Nibbana will not be the consciousness itself.[4]

In the classical Theravada interpretation, the discussion of Nibbana highlights two different aspects, referred to as Nibbana with residue and Nibbana without residue. The first refers to the conscious experience of Nibbana in this life, and the second to the cessation of becoming, which refers to parinibbana, the death of an arahant who is no longer reborn. In Pali, these two are called kilesa nibbana and khanda nibbana; that is, the cessation of defilements and the cessation of the aggregates.

Even here there are some divergent views. One description of parinibbana, the experience of the cessation of the aggregates, equates it with the act of blowing out a flame so that nothing at all remains. When the flow of the aggregates is fully understood as dukkha, then their ending, in and of itself, is peace. An important point to recognize is that it is not a question of the cessation of self, which would be the annihilationist view—but rather the understanding that there is no self in the first place, and that what comes to an

end is simply the dukkha of the endless rise and fall of the aggregates.

Mahāsi Sayadaw, however, makes quite a different point regarding the cessation of the aggregates, writing:

the cessation of the defilements and aggregates is not a concept of non-existence, but an ultimately and obviously existing unconditioned phenomenon.[5]

In understanding how we can experience the nature of Nibbana in this very life (kilesa nibbana), two terms—*magga* and *phala*, usually translated as “path” and “fruition”—and the experiences they describe play a critical role. And just to complicate things a bit further, there are even differences of view about how each of these two experiences function.

In the *abhidhamma* model, as we go through the various stages of insight and the factors of awakening have matured and are in balance, there can be a sudden cessation, a gap in the flow of the normal type of consciousness. In these moments, the mind takes Nibbana as its object. The first moment is called path consciousness (*magga*), and it has the function to uproot, in stages, the different defilements. There is only one path moment for each stage of awakening.

Immediately following the path moment is fruition consciousness (*phala*), that is, the mind resting in the unconditioned. We could say it is the reward of the path moment. Although fruition has no uprooting function, depending on the level of concentration, fruition can be experienced again and again for various lengths of time.

Meditation teacher Dipa Ma had mastery of these states. On one of her trips to the U.S., she settled into her seat on the plane and entered the fruition state for the entire journey. She emerged completely refreshed as the plane was about to land.

An interesting note here is that the path and fruition are called supramundane consciousnesses. They are supramundane because they take Nibbana, the Unconditioned, as their object. Still, they themselves are conditioned phenomena. There is a subtle knowing of non-becoming. For example, Sariputta's fruition state of arahantship was a state not cognizant of any familiar object of consciousness, and yet he was not entirely without perception. His only perception was "nibbana is the cessation of becoming." In the suttas, Sariputta described it in this way: "The cessation of becoming is nibbana. On that occasion, friend, I was percipient: 'The cessation of becoming is nibbana'." [6]

Sāriputta's description is elaborated on here by Mahāsi Sayadaw:

Nibbana is said to be the cessation, liberation, non-arising, or nonexistence of conditioned phenomena. It is also said that Nibbana has no color, form, or size. It cannot be described by using a simile. Because of these points, one might believe that Nibbana is nothing, and think that it is the same as the concept of nonexistence. But it is absolutely not like the concept of nonexistence. It is obvious that it has the nature of cessation, liberation, non-arising, or nonexistence of conditioned phenomena. And because this nature is obvious, the phenomena of path and fruition can arise while directly experiencing the cessation of conditioned phenomena. [7]

Although there is general agreement in both the sutta and abhidhamma perspectives about the nature of Nibbana, there is some disagreement about how magga phala function. In the former, based on the discourses of early Buddhism, magga, or the path, does not refer to some singular, recognizable moment that uproots defilements, but to earlier stages of insight that might be called entering the path leading to Nibbana. In this way of understanding, it is the fruition moment that has the uprooting function, and is

the direct experience of Nibbana itself, and we can easily remember when and how it occurred. This fruition can be separated by long periods of time from the first entering of the path.

Bhikkhu Anālayo has written about this way of understanding in some detail:

The path and fruit distinction in the early suttas is not one of mind moments that follow each other right away, but one between events that can take place at many years of distance from each other. One is the moment when one is so fully engaged in and advancing on the path that it can be said with certainty that before passing away one will realize the fruit. In the case of one on the path to stream-entry, this could be either with a predominance of faith or else with a predominance of wisdom, resulting in the "faith follower" and the "Dharma follower." Both have not experienced Nibbana and not eradicated any defilement or fetter, but they do have developed to some degree the five faculties.

When such a one realizes stream-entry, then this is the "fruit," and it is this experience of Nibbana itself that effects the eradication of defilements/fetters. The way I understand it is that in the case of stream-entry it is precisely because of having had the experience of Nibbana, wherein there is no reference point whatsoever for the sense of "I am," that the view of a self is utterly eradicated; the very certainty of this direct experience makes it impossible to have substantial doubts about the path (just as one who has touched fire will no longer be able to have any doubts if fire is hot) and, from the viewpoint of this direct experience of Nibbana, it becomes also unmistakably clear that moral conduct is an important foundation, but moral observances on their own do not lead to awakening.[8]

Thus, in both models—whether one calls it the path moment or the fruition moment—it is this glimpse of Nibbana

itself that is called 'attaining the Dhamma eye,' where one has achieved independence with respect to the Dhamma.

Please keep in mind that both the sutta and abhidhamma approaches are descriptions of people's actual experiences. Although we might be inclined to wonder which description is right — and even more so as we consider the Thai Forest approach — I don't think that is the appropriate question. A better question might be What can each perspective teach us? and then wait until we are arahants to draw some final conclusion, if at that point there is even a need or wish to do so.

We have discussed those traditions that understand Nibbana, the Unborn, Unconditioned, as transcending awareness. In my understanding of the Thai Forest tradition, Nibbana is understood as an unconditioned awareness, never born (without beginning) and undying. It is sometimes described as that which knows or even 'the one that knows,' although the latter is said to be a Thai colloquial expression and does not refer to a 'self.'

In this view, unconditioned awareness is a reality apart from the five aggregates. Ācariya Mahā Boowa, a great master of the Thai Forest tradition, explains:

Whatever arises has to vanish; whatever is true, whatever is a natural principle in and of itself, won't vanish. In other words, the pure mind won't vanish. Everything of every sort may vanish, but that which knows their vanishing doesn't vanish. This vanishes, that vanishes, but the one which knows their vanishing doesn't vanish.[9]

And in talking of Nibbana as 'unbinding,' Ajahn Thanissaro writes:

The Buddha describes it as pleasure, but it's not a pleasant feeling, and so it's not an aggregate. Similarly, he describes it as a type of consciousness, but one that's not known in conjunction with the six sense bases. In other

words, it has no object. Because it doesn't fall within the consciousness-aggregate, it lies outside of past, present, and future. Outside of space, it has "neither coming nor going nor staying in place." It's a separate dimension entirely.[10]

So the suggestion here is that Nibbana is a special kind of consciousness outside the framework of the five aggregates.

My understanding is that in these Thai Forest teachings there is less mapping of stages, but rather an emphasis on the gradual letting go of all clinging until final liberation. But just as in the models emphasizing stages of insight and the potential for mature equanimity to be confused with Nibbana itself, there is the same caution in the Thai tradition regarding highly refined states of mind. The following is from the teachings of Ācariya Mahā Boowa in a book called *Straight from the Heart*:

Once when I went to practice at Watt Do Dhammachedi, the problem of unawareness had me bewildered for quite some time. At that stage, the mind was so radiant that I came to marvel at its radiance. Everything of every sort which could make me marvel seemed to have gathered there in the mind, to the point where I began to marvel at myself, 'Why is it that my mind is so marvelous?' Looking at the body, I couldn't see it at all. It was all space - empty. The mind was radiant in full force.

But luckily, as soon as I began to marvel at myself, to the point of exclaiming deludedly in the heart without becoming conscious of it... "Why has my mind come so far?"—at that moment, a statement of dhamma spontaneously arose. This too I hadn't anticipated. It suddenly appeared, as if someone were speaking in the heart, although there was no one there speaking. It simply appeared as a statement: "If there is a point or a center of the knower anywhere, that is an agent of birth." That's what it said.[11]

The crucial point here is that even the most refined state of consciousness becomes an expression of ignorance if there is any identification with it at all:

This radiance is the ultimate counterfeit, and at that moment it's the most conspicuous point. You hardly want to touch it at all, because you love it and cherish it more than anything else. In the entire body there is nothing more outstanding than this radiance, which is why you're amazed at it, love it, cherish it, dawdle over it, want nothing to touch it. But it's the enemy king: unawareness[12]

So right here, we have a significant point of divergence regarding the nature of that which knows the Unconditioned: is this knowing itself Nibbana or is it still a conditioned phenomenon taking Nibbana as an object? One subtlety to consider here is that magga phala, path and fruition consciousness, even though they are both conditioned, are supramundane and are outside the wheel of becoming, that is, the five aggregates subject to clinging.

In addition to these differences of view, there are other potentially confusing issues. Within the sutta and abhidhamma models, there can be challenges in recognizing the stages of insight and magga phala. Different stages can easily be mistaken one for another, sometimes even for experienced teachers. There is often a tendency to claim the higher attainment; Sayadaw U Pandita, in a small gathering of Western dharma teachers, suggested that when it's not completely clear, it's better to assume the lower one. But it can also happen that we sometimes don't acknowledge or fully understand the higher stages, and assume that we're not yet experiencing them, when in fact we are. This presents its own hindrance on the path.

There can also be misunderstandings regarding magga phala because there are five different kinds

of cessation experiences, four of which arise out of an imbalance of certain factors. For example, the mind can experience a kind of cessation out of an excess of sloth and torpor, of concentration, of calm, or of rapture. Only the cessation of magga phala is the experience of Nibbana. Interestingly, even in this genuine experience of some stage of awakening, people's description of their understanding will vary depending on which of the three characteristics—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, or selflessness—was the doorway to the Unconditioned.

Given all these uncertainties, how then do we assess these various experiences, whether in ourselves or others? For me, there is one specific teaching about Nibbana that, regardless of the tradition, suggests a very pragmatic approach in understanding these experiences, namely the experience of Nibbana has the power to uproot the defilements from the stream of consciousness, so that they no longer arise:

And what, bhikkhus, is the Unconditioned—the destruction of lust, of hatred, of ignorance—that is called the Unconditioned.[13]

In many suttas, the Buddha describes the uprooting of different defilements at different stages of Awakening. Has a particular experience, whatever name we may have given to it, uprooted the defilements or not? No matter how glorious an experience may be or what philosophical view we might have, the uprooting of the defilements is always the bottom line. This may be clear in the moment, or reveal itself over time, so we can watch to see whether defilements have indeed been uprooted.

As Bhikkhu Bodhi writes, "Descriptions are just second-degree interpretations, and the decisive point is the eradication of defilements." And U Jagara expresses it this way: "What is important is not the experiences we have but how we get transformed by them. This is the difference

between a ‘big experience’ and a ‘transformative insight,’ the former becoming a memory and the latter changing the viewer permanently.”

As we explore these various teachings, an intriguing question arises: Is there some way of holding these perspectives as part of a common understanding, or do they reflect fundamental differences of view regarding the nature of Nibbana? I would like to offer one possibility that might provide a way of understanding their commonality. Please keep in mind that this is a provisional suggestion, and greater enlightenment might reveal a different conclusion.

It seems possible that the differences of understanding among traditions stem from what they are emphasizing in the process: either the nature of the mind that has been freed from defilements or what it is that accomplishes that freedom (namely, the cessation of the flow of normal, worldly consciousness). The former is described by Upasika Kee, a renowned Thai laywoman teacher. In the book of her teachings called *Pure and Simple*, she writes about Nibbana as unentangled knowing, that is, a knowing free of the entanglement of greed, hatred, and delusion: “Nibbana is simply this disbanding of craving.” That’s what the Buddha stressed over and over again.[14]

The latter—what it is that accomplishes that freedom—highlights the liberating power of Nibbana itself, namely, the power to uproot those defilements. Both could rightly understand Nibbana but be describing it from different perspectives.

In addition to the different descriptions of Nibbana above, there are also various references to a temporary Nibbana, that is, the mind temporarily cooled down from the fires of the hindrances and defilements. In this regard, Ajahn Buddhadasa, an innovative Thai master from Southern Thailand, referenced a colloquial use of the term *nibbana* in ancient India, where villagers would speak of

boiled rice reaching nibbana, meaning that it had cooled down and was ready to eat. He spoke of how this temporary cooling effect on the mind—temporary nibbana—actually makes our lives possible; otherwise, we would be continually on fire with various afflictive emotions. It is because there are many times in the day when our minds are somewhat cooled that we can function in skillful ways. It would be extremely helpful in our practice to notice all these times of coolness. There is a similar expression in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* called ‘quenched in that extent.’ This is not the actual attainment of Nibbana, but an approximation of it when the defilements have been temporarily quenched through insight.

So, what significance do all these views about Nibbana have for us and our lives? In what way can an understanding of Nibbana impact the immediacy of so many kinds of suffering? Or is it of interest only to philosophers and those far along the path? These questions touch on the importance of compassion in helping to alleviate suffering whenever we can. For many, it might be suffering caused by poverty, violence, racism, sexism, homophobia, the growing effects of climate change, and so many other conditions of our lives in this world. And on the deepest level, encompassing all the others, is the suffering of our endless wandering in samsara, driven on by the forces of ignorance and craving.

Compassion arises from our willingness to come close to this suffering and not looking away. At its heart, this engagement is strengthened by a growing realization of selflessness. As Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, a great Tibetan master of the last century, said, “when we realize the selfless nature of phenomena, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless.”

Although we may have many selfless moments in our lives, it is the experience of Nibbana that finally uproots the

delusion of self-centeredness. And even as we work to alleviate the societal causes of suffering, we can also strive to realize the ultimate refuge and help others find this peace. At different times in our lives and meditation practice, we may get glimpses of something beyond our ordinary, conventional reality, touching a space that transforms our vision of who we are and what the world is. And these intimations can provide a powerful impetus to our practice as we begin to taste the possibility of freedom.

[1] Majjhima Nikāya 29, “The Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Heartwood”
(<https://suttacentral.net/mn29/en/bodhi>).

[2] From the translation of a taped talk “The Purification and Progress of Insight” (Malaysia, 1988)

[3] Personal correspondence, February, 2021.

[4] Personal correspondence, February, 2021.

[5] Venerable Mahāsi Sayadaw, *Manual of Insight*, translated and edited by the Vipassanā Mettā Foundation Translation Committee. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2016, 462.

[6] Pali Text Society: V,11.

[7] Mahāsi Sayadaw, *Manual of Insight*, 455-456.

[8] Bhikkhu Anālayo, personal correspondence, April 2021.

[9] Venerable Ācariya Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno, *Straight from the Heart: Thirteen Talks on the Practice of Meditation*, translated from the Thai by Thānissaro Bhikkhu, 133. <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/thai/boowa/straight.html>.

[10] Thanissaro, Tricycle, Spring 2020, 100-101.

[11] Mahā Boowa, Straight From the Heart, 132-133.

[12] Ibid. 110.

[13] From “Connected Discourses on the Unconditioned.” In *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1372.

[14] Upasika Kee Nanayon, *Pure and Simple*, 41. Text