

# Nibbāna

## Secret Treasure of the Buddhas

### Non-Conceptual Nibbāna

Just because we can concoct fancy explanations about Nibbāna doesn't mean they're true.

“This is peaceful, this is excellent: the stilling of all fabrications; the relinquishment of all assets; the destruction of craving; detachment, cessation, Nibbāna.” —*Mahā-Mālunkya Sutta* (M I 436)

This description of Nibbāna by the Buddha is a *kammattthāna*, one of the forty classic meditation subjects. It is a contemplation on the ultimate peace of Nibbāna, *upasamānussati*. This verse very succinctly expresses the theme of this work. For anyone who can understand this description of Nibbāna will be in a position to realize it directly.

We are told in *Mahā-Parinibbāna Sutta* (D II 93) that the Buddha's teaching is *svākkhāta*—well-proclaimed; *sandiṭṭhika*—can be seen and realized here-and-now; *akālika*—timeless; *ehi-passika*—inviting one to come and see for oneself; *opanayika*—leading one onwards to enlightenment; and *paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhi*—the wise individual can understand it directly. The purpose of this work is to help you experience these six qualities of the Buddha-Dhamma here-and-now.

We should be clear that describing Nibbāna in words is categorically impossible. The ineffable can be experienced, but not explained; realized, but not articulated. Nevertheless, one can cognize the way to realization of non-conceptual phenomena by careful application of adequate terminology, and experience it by practice. Indeed, this is precisely the principle of operation of the Buddha's teaching. Hopefully this apparently contradictory idea will become clearer in the discussion below.

### Suttas versus Commentaries

But first we have to draw aside the curtain of monastic secrecy, and discuss openly why there is such confusion and controversy about the meaning of Nibbāna. Not only do the various schools and branches of Buddhism disagree; but even within the Theravāda tradition, there is a great division over the meaning, approach to and realization of Nibbāna. It has become a great *faux-pas* in Buddhist circles even to hint that one has

attained Nibbāna, or any of the transcendental states leading up to it. I think this is because no one is quite sure what Nibbāna is, let alone how to realize it—even though realizing Nibbāna is the purpose of the entire teaching of the Buddha.

Ultimately these problems boil down to the pre-conceptual, non-conceptual, para-conceptual or meta-conceptual nature of Nibbāna itself (pick your pet prefix; we will go with *non-conceptual*). We have to agree with Chinese Master Lao-Tsü that “Those who speak [about Nibbāna] do not know; those who know, do not speak.” However, although Nibbāna cannot be described directly, certainly something can be said about its nature, and how to approach it by the Noble Eightfold Path. Once the path and goal are made clear, the intelligent reader can ascertain the steps necessary to complete the work on his own.

For the first centuries after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*, the original words of the Buddha were passed on by oral recitation. The problems began when the Suttas were written down. Putting any knowledge into language, especially writing, often results in the conceit that knowing the **words** about something is equivalent to knowing it **directly**. Of course that is absurd, ludicrous—but the institution of modern university education is largely based on that very delusion.

An anecdote may help to illustrate this. Once I was playing a Bach Prelude for a friend in a side room at a social event. Another guest came in, and once I had finished, began to criticize my performance. After several points were advanced, I offered him my instrument and asked, “Can you do it better?” He shrank away, “I can’t play a note.”

Similarly in many ‘Buddhist’ venues we encounter those who like to criticize, but cannot present anything superior in the way of explanation, practice or realization. However if we inquire, we often find that they are relying not on their own insight, but on the writings or interpretations of some popular teacher, or of the early scholastic monks who compiled commentaries on the original Suttas.

There is a popular belief—a conceit no doubt originated by the authors of the commentaries themselves, and fostered by their disciples—that the interpretations and authority of the commentaries are derived from *pakiṇṇakadesanā*—some obscure passages scattered here and there in the Suttas, known only to deep scholars. Another questionable idea deeply rooted in the Sāsana is that the Sutta-Piṭaka is simply the external teaching—the Buddha preaching to ordinary people in conventional language—implying that the Suttas are not as deep as later works compiled by the scholars themselves.

But the truth is that the commentaries are derivative, not more ‘advanced’ than the Suttas. Very often they are inconclusive regarding the meaning of deep Suttas. They

often give several possible—even mutually contradictory—interpretations. Sometimes, overlooking the direct meaning, they go off on a speculative tangent. The commentaries are silent on some of the most profound Suttas, as if they don't know what to say about them.

The Buddha foretold the dangers that would befall the Sāsana in the future:

“In times to come, monks will lose interest in those deep Suttas that deal with transcendental matters; they will not listen to those Suttas having to do with emptiness, *suññatā*. They will not think it worthwhile learning or pondering over the meanings of those Suttas.” — *Āni Sutta* (S II 267)

The Buddha is not foreseeing some remote future: it has already happened. According to the *Manorathapūraṇī* commentary on the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, there was a debate early in the Sri Lankan Sāsana between the scholar-monks and the meditators. And the conclusion was that merely communicating the words of the Suttas and commentaries would be sufficient for the continuity of the Sāsana, and that direct realization of the practice is not so important. So the basket (*piṭaka*) of the Buddha's words came to be passed on from generation to generation in the dark—that is, without the corresponding realization.

Certainly much was lost as a result of that unfortunate decision. In practice, this has resulted in the monks emphasizing the derivative commentaries more than the original words of the Buddha. This is visible in the division in Sri Lanka between the ritualistic temple monks—who generally wear bright, almost day-glo colored robes—and the meditators who prefer more sober vestments. Even among the meditators, most are university-educated, trained to value the words of the Suttas over the realities and realizations they are supposed to represent. Thus the monks chant the Paritta-Suttas with great facility, but cannot explain them in terms of Nibbāna or *suññatā*—to say nothing of realizing them for themselves. If you ask, they reply that they are 'too busy' managing their temples to devote much time to meditation.

Also there is a tendency in the commentaries to elaborate on and obfuscate even perfectly clear words in the Suttas, simply as an exegetical requirement. This led to many unnecessarily complicated ideas; thus the deeper meanings of the Dhamma got obscured. Actually the depth of the Dhamma can be seen only through its simplicity and clarity, just as one can see the bottom of a lake only when the water is calm and pellucid. Unnecessary elaborations and interpretative complications led to obscuration of the clear meaning, and the unfortunate result today is that few followers of the Buddha's path are becoming enlightened.

The Buddha's teaching expressed in the Theravāda Suttas is self-sufficient; it stands perfectly well on its own without outside help. But as the Buddha's teaching spread it became diluted, distorted and polluted by outside ideas. This is a matter of great concern to all sincere followers of the Buddha's teaching. Yet many hesitate to say anything about it, because criticism of any Buddhist may be seen as criticism of Buddhism; perhaps they fear being seen as promoting schism, or that our Sāsana might appear to the world as a house divided.

Well it is too late; the house was divided a long time ago. The great schisms already occurred, and are a matter of historical record. There is no use crying over spilt milk, or posing as if we Buddhists are one big happy family—we're not. That being so, I sought to trace back the weakness in our line to the root, and cut it out there.

Our authentic tradition broke long ago, when the monks of Anuradhapura accepted scholastic ideas and attitudes drawn from South Indian *Vedānta* as more important than the Buddha's original words, as being more essential to the propagation of the teaching than the perfection of the practice. Having previously been a teacher of *Vedānta*, with well over a million published words on the subject, I am intimately familiar with both its strengths and its flaws. My purpose here is to subtract from the Theravāda tradition what was added from outside, to restore the original literature, teaching and practice to the foremost priority, to create an authentic standard against which other renditions can be measured.

Besides the concerns expressed above, I am inspired to write this series for three reasons: First because my mentor the Venerable Kaṭakurunde Ñāṇananda invited me to do so, and generously permitted me to make free use of his previous extensive research into the Suttas. He is probably the most senior forest tradition monk in Sri Lanka, and certainly the foremost exponent in English of the Suttānta view—that the Suttas, the original words of the Buddha and his direct disciples, take precedence over the derivative commentaries, Abhidhamma and other later works.

Second, I write in the hope that this work will be of benefit to my brothers and sisters in the Dhamma, as well as interested lay persons. And finally, I write because I am wary of the weakness, inconsistency and inadequacy of the orthodox interpretation, having seen its dangerous results, and want to clarify the correct views for myself. I am well aware that the foregoing are minority views in the Sri Lankan Sāsana today, and that I am risking being seen as a disruptive heretic. But I am confident that history, and the universal law of Dhamma, will vindicate these words. Thus let us proceed.

## ***Nāma-Rūpa***

How ‘name-and-form’ came to mean something obscure and esoteric

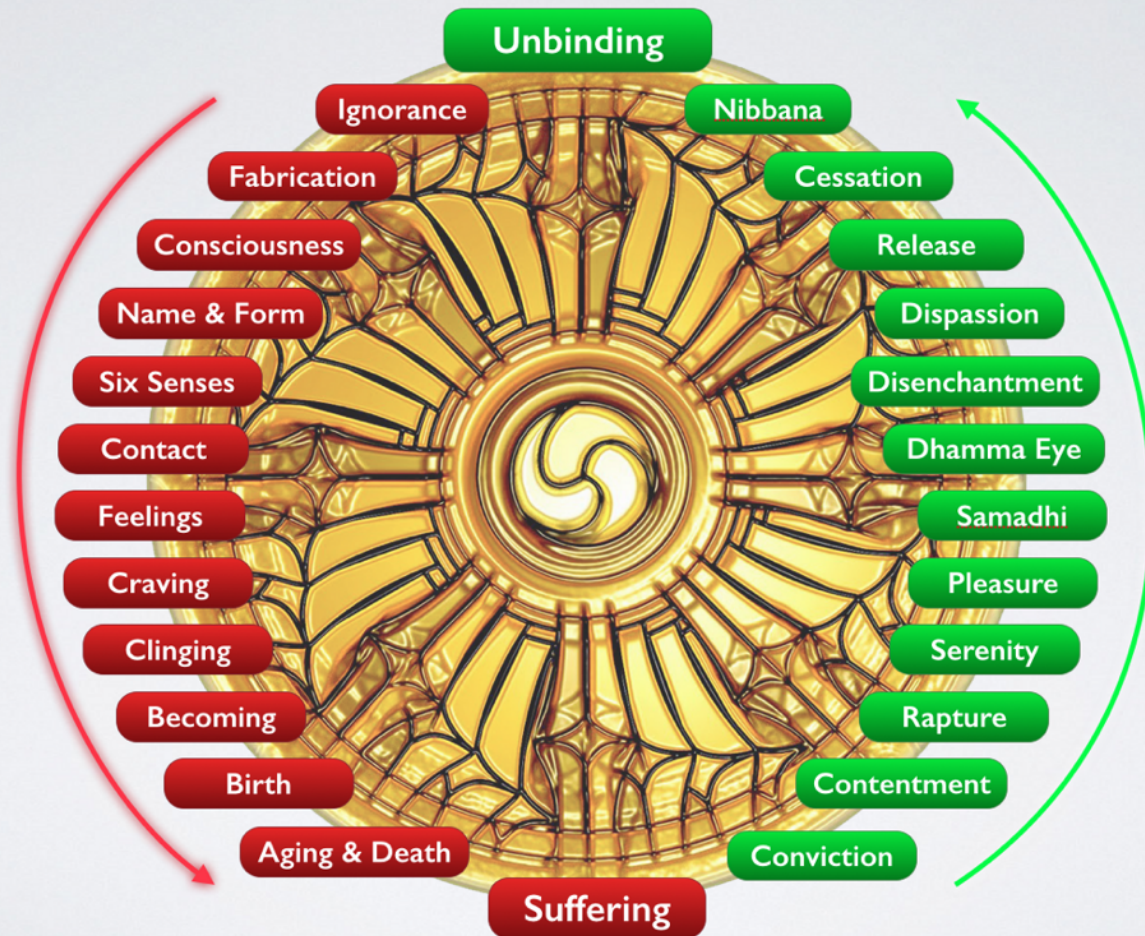
*dve nāma kiṃ? nāmañca rūpañca.*

“What is the ‘two’?” “Name-and-form.” —*Kumārapañhā*

Every Buddhist monk knows this catechism: ten questions Buddha put to Venerable Sopāka, who attained Arahantship at the age of seven. All ten questions are deep. This is the second question, and its answer is precisely what we are concerned with here: *nāmañca rūpañca*, name-and-form.

Name-and-form is an early stage in the process of becoming, Dependent Origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*—also rendered as Dependent Arising, Dependent Co-arising, etc.) discovered by the Buddha. The reciprocal relationship between name and form creates a vortex, a dynamic feedback loop that generates the energy and information required for further stages of becoming.

# Dependent Origination



It is plain that *nāma* means 'name' in the Suttas. However, the commentaries hesitate to recognize this obvious meaning. Even in the context of the simple question above, the *Paramatthajotikā* commentary employs contorted etymology, explaining *nāma* to mean 'bending'. It says that all immaterial states are called *nāma*, in the sense that they bend towards their respective objects and also because the mind has the nature of inclination.

Unfortunately this forced, obscurantist misinterpretation became the standard definition of *nāma* in all subsequent *Abhidhamma* compendiums and commentaries. The complex idea of bending towards an object is unnecessarily brought in to explain the simple word *nāma*. Maybe they thought because it has to do with deep insight, explaining *nāma* as 'name' was too simplistic for good exegesis. However, *nāma* still has a great depth and power even when understood simply as 'name':

“Name has conquered everything  
There is nothing greater than name  
All have come under the sway  
Of this one thing called name.” —*Nāma Sutta* (S I 39)

The mechanism of delusion operates primarily through language: “I think, therefore ‘I am’.” We assign verbal labels and semantic tags to our experience, and then begin to reason with and about them without further reference to the actualities they represent. Heidegger called this ‘idle talk’, because it produces no value in terms of understanding or action.

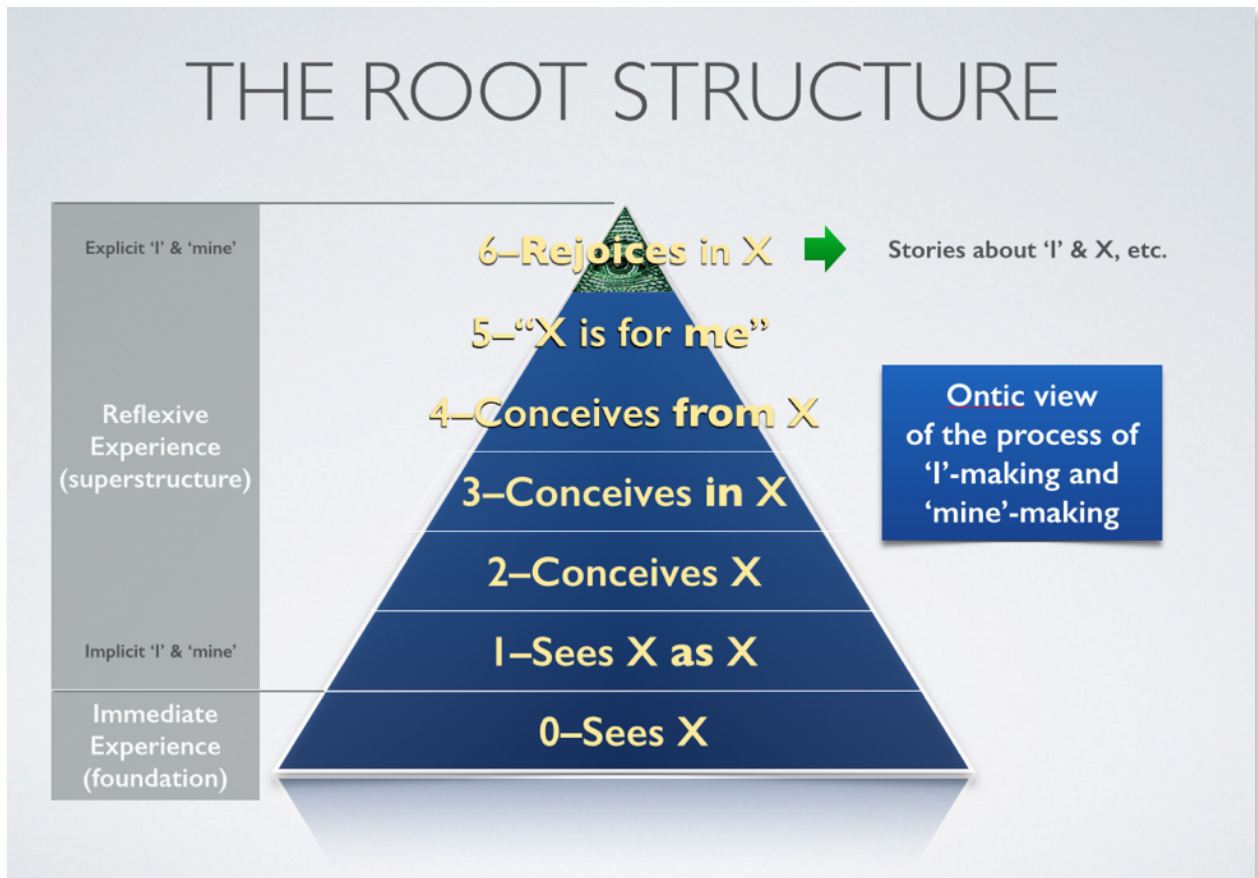
The symbols we assign to phenomena are static, but reality is dynamic, ever-changing. Consequently even if we take pains not to distort the definitions of our terms, as soon as they are created the underlying reality changes, robbing them of support. Then when we return to actual experience expecting to find the results of our ‘impeccable logic’, we are sorely disappointed. This is a major source of suffering due to cognitive dissonance, especially for ‘educated’ but unenlightened people.

Here is another verse whose original meaning is often ignored by commentators:

“Beings are conscious of what can be named  
They are established on the nameable  
By not comprehending the nameable things  
They come under the yoke of death.” —*Samiddhi Sutta* (S I 11)

This verse reveals a basic relation between ontology and consciousness: ordinarily we are aware only of what we can name. In other words, we perceive a world of ‘things’ that are actually symbols and concepts. Conversely, if we lack a word or symbol for a perception or experience, we tend to throw it into our mental trash bin, and as a result often remain completely unconscious of it. To register in our attention, a thing or experience must be **recognizable**—that is, we can assign it to a predefined category or definition.

# THE ROOT STRUCTURE



Recognition marks the shift from **immediate experience** to **reflexive experience**, from the world of the senses to the delusive conceptual world we normally inhabit. This is explained elaborately in the *Mūla-pariyāya Sutta*. At first we simply perceive an object of the senses pre-conceptually. Once we recognize it, however, we shift to conceptual mode. Then step-by-step we conceive its relationship to 'I', projecting the conceit of 'self' on the object and marking its acquisition as 'mine'. This egoistic conceit is the origin of our delusion about that perception or thing. This all happens automatically, habitually, in an instant. We don't actually comprehend what we are doing, therefore our abstractions and conceptualizations become a cause of suffering.

All this shows that the word *nāma* has a deep significance, even when it is simply taken in the sense of 'name'. But just to be certain, let us see whether there is anything wrong in rendering *nāma* as 'name'. Here is the definition of *nāma-rūpa* given by the Venerable Sāriputta:

"Feeling, perception, intention, contact, attention—this, friend, is called 'name'. The four great primaries and form dependent on the four great



primaries—this, friend, is called ‘form’. So this is ‘name’ and this is ‘form’; this, friend, is called ‘name-and-form’.” —*Sammāditthi Sutta* (M I 46)

Is there any justification for regarding feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention as ‘name’? Suppose there is a toddler who is unable to speak or understand language. Someone gives the infant a rubber ball for the first time. If he is told “This is a rubber ball,” he will not understand. How does he get to know that object? He smells it, feels it, tries to eat it, and finally throws it or rolls it on the floor. His face brightens as at last he cognizes it as a toy. Now the child has **recognized** the ball—not by the name that the world has given it, but **functionally** and **pre-conceptually** by the factors included under ‘name’ in *nāma-rūpa*: feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention.

We can recognize an object and make it ‘mine’ even without language. The world attaches a name to the object for easier communication. When the name gets the agreement of others, it becomes a consensus reality. This shows that the definition of *nāma* given by the Venerable Sāriputta is actually a fundamental or functional notion of ‘name’, the pre-conceptual prototype or sensory template for later development of language.

However conversant a meditator may be with the conventional world, also has to understand and realize this elementary, pre-conceptual world of name-and-form. But if a meditator wants to explore this pre-conceptual name-and-form, he has to return to the state of a child, at least from the point of view of consensus reality. This is why a meditator develops mindfulness and full awareness of feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention—*sati-sampajañña* — instead of words to understand name-and-form through his practice.



Of course for the meditator, the equanimity of innocence is accompanied by knowledge, not by ignorance. Even though he is able to recognize objects by their conventional names, a meditator prefers to develop mindfulness of the factors that are included in Venerable Sāriputta's definition of *nāma*: feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention. This practice for comprehending name-and-form is given in the *Satipatṭhāna Sutta* and elsewhere. The meditator does not forget the consensus reality of language and semantic conceptual understanding; he merely sets it aside for the duration of his meditation.

The point is that the pre-conceptual world is specific to each individual; that is why the Dhamma has to be realized by oneself: *paccattaṃ veditabbo*. You have to understand your unique pre-conceptual world of name-and-form by yourself. No one else can do it for you. Nor can it be defined or denoted by technical terms, because such terminology is also part of name-and-form, subject to the limitations of semantic conceptual conceits and the definitions of delusive consensus consciousness. To comprehend *nāma-rūpa* and attain Nibbāna, one must find a standpoint outside of conceptual consciousness. We will deal with this issue in the next section.

## Untangling the Tangle

Dhamma is what actually *is*, as opposed to what only *appears to be*.

“There’s a tangle within, a tangle without, The world is entangled in a tangle. O Gotama, I ask you: Who can disentangle this tangle?” — *Jatā Sutta* (S I 165)

According to the Buddha, suffering is not out there in the ‘objective’ world theorized by conventional worldly philosophers. The origin of suffering is found in our subjective conceptual world of name-and-form. As it is said: *acchecchi taṇhaṃ idha nāmarūpe*: the aim of a meditator is to “cut off the craving in this name-and-form.” (*Samiddhi Sutta*, S I 12)

Let’s use a simile from the Suttas to clarify: the Buddha is called the ‘incomparable surgeon’, *sallakatto anuttaro* (*Sela Sutta*, Sn 56). Also he is sometimes called *taṇhāsallassa hantāraṃ*, ‘one who removes the dart of craving’ (*Pavāraṇā Sutta*, S I 192). So the Buddha is the incomparable surgeon who pulls out the poison-tipped arrow of craving.

The poisonous arrow of craving is embedded in the wound of *nāma-rūpa*. When one is wounded by a poison-tipped arrow, first of all the wound has to be cleaned. Then the bandage has to be applied, not on the archer or on his arrow, but on the wound itself. Similarly, the preliminary step in the treatment of the wound caused by the poison-tipped arrow of craving is clear understanding of name-and-form. Trying to ‘fix *saṃsāra*’ by improving the external condition of the world will be of absolutely no help in overcoming suffering. Thus humankind is no closer to solving the problem of suffering, even after centuries of plans and schemes, work and struggle.

Thus a meditator, however proficient he may be in conventional worldly usage of words, has to pay special attention to the basic pre-conceptual components of *nāma*, as defined by Venerable Sāriputta: feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention. This requires a process of deconditioning to awaken from the hypnotic trance induced by family, schooling, media and society. It involves unlearning habitual verbal associations down to childlike simplicity. But of course, the meditative equanimity thus developed is not based on ignorance but on knowledge.

The significance of *rūpa* in *nāma-rūpa* is similar. Here too we have something deep, but many take *nāma-rūpa* to mean ‘mind and matter’, ‘mind and body’ or even ‘mentality-materiality’. Like uninstructed materialists, they assume that mind and matter are disjunct. But in Dhamma there is no such rigid Aristotelian duality. *Nāma* and *rūpa* are intimately interrelated, and taken together the pair forms an important link in the chain of *paṭicca samuppāda*, Dependent Origination.

*Rūpa* exists in relation to *nāma*. That is, form is known with the help of name. As we saw above, the infant gets first-hand knowledge of the rubber ball through contact, feeling, perception, intention and attention, even before he knows its name. Similarly, the definition of *rūpa* is given by Venerable Sāriputta as:

*cattāri ca mahābhūtāni, catunnañca mahābhūtānaṃ upādāya rūpaṃ*

“The four great primaries (elements) and form dependent on the four great primaries—this, friend, is called ‘form’.” — *Sammāditthi Sutta*



Air, water, fire, earth: the four great primary elements constitute the most primal pre-conceptual notion of form. Just as feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention represent the primary notion of *nāma* in conventional understanding, the four great primaries form the basis for the primary notion of form as the world sees it.

It's not easy to recognize these primaries without deep contemplation of their natures. But out of their interplay we get the perception of form, *rūpasaññā*. In fact what is called *rūpa* in this context is actually *rūpasaññā*. The world builds up its concept of form in reference to the behavior of the four great elements. The perception, recognition and designation of form is experienced in terms of the behavior of the elements. And that behavior is known with the help of *nāma*: feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention.

The earth element is recognized through the qualities of hardness and softness, the water element through the qualities of cohesiveness and dissolution, the fire element through hotness and coolness, and the wind element through motion and inflation. In this way one gets acquainted with the nature of the four great primaries. And the perception of form, *rūpasaññā*, that one has at the back of one's mind, is the net result of that acquaintance. So this *nāma-rūpa* is one's ontology, one's background notion of 'the world'.

The relationship between *rūpa* and *rūpasaññā* will be clear from the following verse, where a deity puts a riddle before the Buddha:

"There's a tangle within, a tangle without,  
The world is entangled with a tangle.  
Of that, O Gotama, I ask you:  
Who can disentangle this tangle?" — *Jatā Sutta*

The Buddha answers the riddle in three verses, the first of which is fairly well known, because it happens to be the opening verse of the *Visuddhimagga*:

"A wise monk, established in virtue,  
developing concentration and wisdom,  
being ardent and prudent,  
is able to disentangle this tangle.

"In whom lust, hate  
And ignorance have faded away,  
Those influx-free Arahants,  
In them the tangle is disentangled.

"Where name and form  
As well as resistance and the perception of form  
Are completely cut off,  
It is there that the tangle gets untangled."

The reference here is to Nibbāna, where the tangle is disentangled.

The coupling of name-and-form with *paṭigha* and *rūpasaññā* in this context is significant. Here *paṭigha* is used, not in its common meaning of 'repugnance', but 'resistance' — the resistance of inert matter. For instance, when one blindly knocks against something in passing, one turns back to recognize it. But even before that, one knows generally what kind of object it is by its resistance. The Buddha has said that the worldling is blind until

the Eye of the Dhamma (*dhamma-cakkhu*) arises in him. So the blind worldling recognizes an object by the resistance he encounters in contacting it.

*Paṭigha* and *rūpasaññā* form a pair analogous to *nāma-rūpa*. *Paṭigha* is the resistance experienced when we contact an object, and *rūpasaññā*, perception of form, is the resulting recognition of that object. This perception is in terms of feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention to what is hard or soft, hot or cold and so on. Out of such perceptions of sense contact common to blind worldlings arises the conventional reality, the ontological conception of 'the world'.

Knowledge and understanding are almost always associated with words and concepts—to the point that if one simply knows the name of a thing, one is thought to know it. Because of this misconception the world is in a tangle. Names and concepts—nouns and verbs, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions—perpetuate ignorance in the world.



Actual knowledge is non-conceptual. Therefore phenomenological insight into the actual non-conceptual nature of reality is the only possibility of release. And that is why a meditator practically comes down to the level of a child in order to understand name and form. He is working to disentangle the notions of *paṭigha* and *rūpasaññā* from *nāma-rūpa*. He may even have to pretend to be disabled, slowing down his movements to develop mindfulness and full awareness of every action.

So there is something really deep in *nāma-rūpa*, even if we render it simply as 'name-and-form'. There is an implicit connection with 'name' as conventionally so called, but

unfortunately this connection is obscured in the commentaries and *Abhidhamma* by bringing in the idea of 'bending' to explain the word 'name'. So we need not hesitate to render *nāma-rūpa* by 'name-and-form'. Simple as it may superficially appear, *nāma-rūpa* as used in the Suttas goes far deeper than the worldly concepts of name and form.

In conclusion: 'name' in 'name-and-form' is a formal name, an apparent name. 'Form' in 'name-and-form' is a nominal form, a form only in name. The formal name and the nominal form are both fabrications. Actual reality is unknowable by words, concepts and symbols; ordinarily we can be conscious of only that fraction of experience for which we have a name-and-form on file in our ontology. The key to overcoming this pervasive illusion is to decondition ourselves from the conventional understanding of *nāma-rūpa* by long training in specific attention informed by the Buddha's teaching of Dhamma: what actually is, as opposed to what only appears to be.

## ***Nibbāna***

Gone out like a fire extinguished

In a previous section we discussed how scholastic monks, eager to showcase their exegetical skills, unnecessarily complicated and distorted the meaning of *nāma-rūpa* in the Buddha's teaching. Something similar happened regarding the word Nibbāna. Here too the semantic developments in the commentaries are unsupported by the Suttas. We find needlessly complex explanations of the etymology of the word Nibbāna, such as *vānasaṅkhātāya taṇhāya nikkhantattā*: 'Nibbāna is so-called because it is an exit from craving, which is a form of weaving.'

What? Taking the element *vāna* to mean a form of weaving is as unnecessarily complex and misleading as taking *nāma* as some kind of bending. The commentaries define craving as a kind of weaving, in the sense that it connects one form of existence with another; and the prefix *ni-* is said to signify the exit from that weaving. This approach is straight out of Indian scholastic commentaries on *Vedānta*, which also employ obscure misinterpretation of word roots to twist the text into bizarre renderings. The resulting confusion blocks any attempt at realization.

But we do not see this kind of forced, indirect etymology and interpretation anywhere in the Suttas. The Suttas use the word Nibbāna in the sense of 'extinction' or 'extinguishing', as a fire that runs out of fuel. This direct sense brings out the true essence of the Dhamma.

The simile of the extinction of a fire is very often used as an illustration of Nibbāna. For instance the *Ratana Sutta*, commonly chanted as a *paritta*, says *nibbanti dhīrā yathāyaṃ padīpo*: "Those wise ones get extinguished, even like this lamp." The simile of a lamp

getting extinguished is also found in the *Dhātuvihaṅga Sutta*. Sometimes it is the figure of a torch going out: *pajjotass'eva nibbānaṃ, vimokho cetaso ahu*: "the mind's release was like the extinguishing of a torch." — *Mahā-Parinibbāna Sutta* (D II 157) In the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* (M I 487) the Buddha presents a sustained Socratic dialog, giving the simile a deeper philosophical dimension:

"What do you think, Vaccha: If a fire were burning in front of you, would you know that, 'This fire is burning in front of me'?"

"...yes..."

"And suppose someone were to ask you, Vaccha, 'This fire burning in front of you, dependent on what is it burning?' Thus asked, how would you reply?"

"I would reply, 'This fire burning in front of me is burning dependent on grass and timber as its sustenance'."

"If the fire burning in front of you were to go out, would you know that, 'This fire burning in front of me has gone out'?"

"...yes..."

"And suppose someone were to ask you, 'This fire that has gone out in front of you, in which direction from here has it gone? East? West? North? Or south?' Thus asked, how would you reply?"

"That doesn't apply, Master Gotama. Any fire burning dependent on a sustenance of grass and timber, being unnourished from having consumed that sustenance and not being offered any other, is classified simply as 'out' (unbound)."





A fire burns dependent on its fuel. When a fire is burning, if someone were to ask us “What is burning?” how shall we reply? Is the wood burning or the fire? The truth is that they have a reciprocal relationship like *nāma-rūpa*: the wood burns because of the fire, and the fire burns because of the wood. Here we have another case of causal relatedness of this-to-that, *idappaccayatā* or specific conditionality, the underlying principle of Dependent Origination. Thus there is a very deep significance in the fire simile.

Nibbāna as a term for the ultimate aim of Dhamma is significant because of its allusion to a fire going out. In the *Asaṅkhata Samyutta* (S IV 368–373) as many as thirty-three terms are listed to denote this ultimate aim. But of all these epithets, Nibbāna became the most widely used, probably because of its significant allusion to fire. The fire simile holds the answer to many questions relating to the ultimate goal.

The wandering ascetic Vacchagotta and many others accused the Buddha of teaching a doctrine of annihilationism. Their accusation was that the Buddha proclaims the annihilation, destruction and nonexistence of a being that is existent.

“And how is the *bhikkhu* a noble one whose banner is lowered, whose burden is lowered, who is unfettered? Here a *bhikkhu* has abandoned the conceit ‘I am,’ has cut it off at the root so that it is no longer subject to future arising. That is how the *bhikkhu* is a noble one whose banner is lowered, whose burden is lowered, who is unfettered...

“So saying, *bhikkhus*, so proclaiming, I have been baselessly, vainly, falsely, and wrongly misrepresented by some recluses and brahmins thus: ‘The recluse Gotama is one who leads astray; he teaches the annihilation, the destruction, the extermination of an existing being.’ As I am not, as I do not proclaim, so have I been baselessly, vainly, falsely, and wrongly misrepresented by some recluses and brahmins thus: ‘The recluse Gotama is one who leads astray; he teaches the annihilation, the destruction, the extermination of an existing being’.” — *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (MN 22)

And the Buddha answered them fairly and squarely with the fire simile. To paraphrase:

“Now if a fire is burning in front of you dependent on grass and twigs as fuel, you would know that it is burning dependently and not independently, that there is no fire in the abstract. And when the fire goes out with the exhaustion of that fuel, you would know that it has gone out because the conditions for its existence are no more.”



When the fuel is exhausted, the fire ‘goes’ out. The Pāli word *upādāna* often seen in such contexts has the sense of both ‘fuel’ and ‘grasping’; and in fact, fuel is something that the fire grasps for its existence. *Upādānapaccayā bhavo*: “dependent on grasping is being and becoming” (*Mahā-nidāna Sutta*). Grasping / clinging and being / becoming are two very important links in the process of Dependent Origination, *paṭicca samuppāda*.

Eternalists, overcome by the craving for existence, want to find some permanent essence of existence. But the Buddha taught that what is true for the fire is also true for existence. That is, existence is caused by and dependent upon grasping. There is an existence only as long as there is grasping. As we saw above, the firewood is called *upādāna* because it catches fire. The fire catches hold of the wood, and the wood catches hold of the fire. And so we call it ‘firewood’. This is a case of a this-to-that relation or specific conditionality (*idappaccayatā*). This is also true of what is called ‘existence’, which is not an absolute reality but a conditioned phenomenon dependent on a specific chain of causality.

Even in the Vedic period there was the dilemma between ‘being’ and ‘non-being’. They wondered whether being came out of nonbeing, or non-being came out of being. *Katham asataḥ sat jāyeta*: “How could being come out of non-being?” (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.2.1–2) In the face of this dilemma regarding the first beginnings, they were sometimes

forced to conclude that *nāsadāsīt no sadāsīt tadānīm*: “In the beginning there was neither non-being nor being” (*Rgveda* X.129, *Nāsadīya Sūkta*). Or else in their confusion they would leave the matter unsolved, saying that perhaps only the creator knew about it.

This shows what a lot of confusion these two extreme concepts *sat* and *asat* — being and non-being—created for the philosophers. The Buddha completely reappraised the whole problem of existence and presented a perfect solution, the Middle Way. He pointed out that existence is a fire dependent upon the fuel of grasping—so much so that when grasping ceases, existence ceases as well.

In fact the fire simile holds the answer to the tetralemma included among the ten unexplained points often mentioned in the Suttas. It concerns the state of the Tathāgata after death—whether he exists, does not exist, both or neither. The presumption of the questioner is that one or the other of these four must be true.

The Buddha solves or dissolves this presumptuous tetralemma by bringing in the fire simile. He points out that when a fire goes out with the exhaustion of the fuel, it is absurd to ask in which direction the fire has gone. All that one can say about it is that the fire has gone out. *Nibbuto tveva saṅkham gacchati*: “It comes to be reckoned as ‘gone out’.” (*Aggivacchagotta Sutta*)

A reckoning is just an idiom, a worldly usage which is not to be taken too literally. This illustration through the fire simile drives home to the worldling the absurdity of his presumptuous tetralemma of the Tathāgata’s existence after death.

In the *Sutta Nipāta* we find these profound verses:

“Like the flame blown out by the force of the wind reaches its end, it cannot be reckoned. Just so the Sage free from the mental body goes to rest and can no longer be discerned.”

“The one who has come to rest, is he then nothing? or is he actually eternally healthy? Please explain this to me, O Sage, for this Teaching has been understood by you.”

“There is no measure of the one who has come to rest there is nothing by which they can speak of him, when everything has been completely removed, all the pathways for speech are also completely removed.”

— *Upasīvamānavapucchā* (Sn 1074)

Here ‘reckoning’ or discernment is to be understood in terms of the four propositions of the tetralemma: is, is not, both is and is not, and neither is nor is not. Any such

reckonings in terms of extreme views of existence or nonexistence imply total misconception of the phenomenon concerned, whether being or fire. Absent the chain of causality leading to clinging, becoming and being, there is no birth. Reckoning or discernment is impossible in the absence of a measure, or a system of terminology to support comparison and analysis.

Once the fire has gone out due to exhausting its fuel, it cannot be traced. Nothing can be said about it, for it was never an independent entity to begin with. It is simply gone, and that is also all that we can say about the Sage who has gone to Nibbāna. He is called the Well-gone One (*sugata*) because his manner of going is good (*sobhana-gamana*), because of being gone to an excellent place (*sundaram thānam gatattam*) and because of having gone rightly (*sammāgatattā*):

*“Bhikkhus, so long as the Well-gone One abides in the world, or the Well-gone One’s discipline is present, it is for the welfare and pleasure of many, for the compassion and happiness of gods and men. Bhikkhus, who is the Well-gone One?”*

*“Here, bhikkhus, the Thus-gone One is born in the world, accomplished, fully enlightened, endowed with clear vision and virtuous conduct, well-gone, the knower of worlds, the incomparable leader of men to be tamed, the teacher of gods and men, enlightened and blessed. Bhikkhus, that is the Well-gone One.”*

*“Bhikkhus, what is the discipline of the Well-gone One? He proclaims the Teaching good at the beginning, middle and end, explaining the complete and pure holy life. Bhikkhus, this is the discipline of the Well-gone One.”*  
—*Sugatavinaya*, 10

## **Nibbāna isn't Annihilation**

Just Cessation, as the Buddha said

The previous section began to explore the direct meaning of the word Nibbāna in terms of the Suttas. It seems plain enough in that light. But the commentators didn’t appreciate the deeper connotations of Nibbāna in the context of Dependent Origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*), so they developed a new etymology of their own.

The commentators were uneasy about the implications of the word ‘extinction’. Apparently they felt compelled to reinterpret certain key passages on Nibbāna to avoid the charge of nihilism or annihilationism, which also had been leveled at the Buddha. They conceived Nibbāna as a ‘something’ existing in its own right. They could not say

where Nibbāna is; sometimes they even said that it is everywhere. They would say, with undue emphasis on speculative grammatical interpretation, that lust and other defilements are abandoned upon 'going' to Nibbāna.

That is a nice safe description for scholars and others addicted to words and symbols. But what do the practitioners who actually realized Nibbāna say? As recorded in texts like the *Thera-gāthā* we find joyous utterances like, *sītibhūto'smi nibbuto*: "I am grown cool, I am extinguished." (*Rāhula Thera*) The words *sītibhūta* and *nibbuta* indicate a cooling effect. Why did later scholars find them inadequate? Probably because the scholars weren't practitioners.

Extinction is an experience bringing a unique bliss of appeasement. As the *Ratana Sutta* says, *laddhā mudhā nibbutiṃ bhujānānā*: "They experience the bliss of appeasement won free of charge." Normally appeasement is won at a cost, but the appeasement of Nibbāna comes *gratis*.



*Extinction* is a loaded term. From the worldly point of view, it seems to mean death, a dreaded annihilation. The commentators conceived of Nibbāna as something like a

location, on reaching which one abandons the defilements. Sometimes they say that craving is destroyed on seeing Nibbāna, as if Nibbāna were a ‘thing’ that could be seen.

Thus the commentarial definitions of Nibbāna are contradictory. On one hand we are given a definition of Nibbāna as release from craving, which is interpreted as ‘weaving’. On the other, we are told that craving is destroyed on seeing Nibbāna. To project Nibbāna into the distance, and hope that craving will be destroyed on seeing it, is something like trying to build a staircase to a palace one cannot yet see. In fact this is a simile that the Buddha used in his criticism of the Brahmins’ point of view:

“Poṭṭhapāda, it’s as if a man at a crossroads were to build a staircase for ascending to a palace, and other people were to say to him, ‘Well, my good man, this palace for which you are building a staircase: do you know whether it’s east, west, north, or south of here? Whether it’s high, low, or in between?’ and, when asked this, he would say, ‘No.’ Then they would say to him, ‘So you don’t know or see the palace for which you are building a staircase?’ When asked this, he would say, ‘Yes.’

“So what do you think, Poṭṭhapāda—when this is the case, don’t the words of that man turn out to be unconvincing?”

—*Poṭṭhapāda Sutta* (DN 9)

There is a very clear statement of the Third Noble Truth in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*. Having first said that the Second Noble Truth is craving, the Buddha goes on to define the Third Noble Truth in the words, *tassāyeva taṇhāya asesavirāgaṇirodho cāgo paṭinissaggo mutti analayo*: “the Third Noble Truth is the complete fading away, cessation, giving up, relinquishment of that very craving, the release from and non-attachment to that very craving.”

The commentary says that destruction alone is not Nibbāna: *khayamattaṃ na nibbānaṃ* (*Abhidh-av* 138). But in the Suttas the term *taṇhakkhaya*, the destruction of craving, is very often used as a term for Nibbāna, for example in *Itivuttaka* 90. The Buddha himself calls destruction of craving the highest bliss:

“Whatever bliss from sense-desires there is in the world,  
Whatever divine bliss there is,  
All these are not worth one-sixteenth  
Of the bliss of the destruction of craving.” —*Rāja Sutta* (U 2.2.12)

Many of the verses found in the *Udāna* are extremely deep. *Udāna* means a joyous utterance, and generally a joyous utterance comes from the very depths of one’s heart, like a sigh of relief. The concluding verse in an *Udāna* often goes far deeper in its

implications than the preceding narrative. For instance, in the following joyous utterance of the Buddha:

“What is the use of a well, If water is there all the time? Having cut craving at the root, In search of what should one wander?”

—*Udapāna Sutta* (U 7.9.69)

The destruction of craving is not the destruction of some ‘thing’. Craving is a kind of thirst, and that is why Nibbāna is called *pipāsavinayo*, the dispelling of thirst, in the *Aggappassāda Sutta*. While the world running here and there in search of water, one who has quenched his thirst for good simply looks within and drinks from the wellspring of his bliss.



The destruction of craving was called the highest bliss by the Buddha himself. However the term *taṇhakkhaya* appeared too negative to the scholars, thus they minimized its value. They searched for grammatical excuses in conventional usage to separate that term from Nibbāna.

According to the Buddha, Nibbāna is realization of the cessation of existence. Existence is said to be an eleven-fold fire; the entire existence is a raging fire. Lust, hate and



delusion are fires. Therefore Nibbāna may be best rendered by the word 'extinction'. Once the fires are extinguished, what more is needed?

Unfortunately Venerable Buddhaghosa, well-trained in the rhetoric of South Indian Brahmanism, was unprepared to appreciate this point of view. In his famous *Visuddhimagga*, and in the *Sāratthappakāsinī* and *Sammohavinodanī* commentaries, there is a long discussion on Nibbāna in the form of a discussion with an imaginary heretic (Vism 508; Spk III 88; Vibh-a 51). Many of his arguments are inharmonious with both the letter and spirit of the Dhamma.

First Buddhaghosa gets the heretic to put forward the idea that the destruction of lust, hate and delusion is Nibbāna. But actually the heretic is simply quoting the Buddha word, for in the *Nibbāna Sutta* of the *Asaṅkhata Saṃyutta*, Nibbāna is called the destruction of lust, hate and delusion: *rāgakkhayo, dosakkhayo, mohakkhayo idaṃ vuccati nibbānaṃ*.

The words *rāgakkhaya, dosakkhaya* and *mohakkhaya* together form a synonym of Nibbāna, but Buddhaghosa interprets it as three synonyms. Then he argues directly against the Buddha in form of the imaginary heretic, that if Nibbāna is the extinguishing of lust it is something common even to the animals, for they also extinguish their fires of lust through enjoyment of the corresponding objects of sense (Vibh-a 53). This argument ignores the deeper sense of the word extinction as it is found in the Suttas.



To explain the position of lustful beings in the world, the Buddha gives the simile of a man with a skin disease sitting beside a pit of hot embers:

“Suppose, Māgandiya, there was a leper with sores and blisters on his limbs, being devoured by worms, scratching the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, cauterizing his body over a burning charcoal pit. Then his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives, brought a physician to treat him. The physician would make medicine for him, and by means of that medicine the man would be cured of his leprosy and would become well and happy, independent, master of himself, able to go where he likes.” —*Māgandiya Sutta* (MN 75)

That man is simply trying to assuage his pains by the heat of the fire. It is an attempt to warm up, not to cool down. Similarly, the lustful beings in the world are trying to warm up by drawing near the fires of lust. There is no way that can be compared to the extinction and cooling down of the Arahants.

As the phrase *nibbutiṃ bhujjamaṇā* (*Ratana Sutta*) implies, that extinction is a blissful experience for the Arahants. It leaves a permanent effect on them, so much so that upon

reflection he sees that his influxes are extinct, just as a man with his hands and feet cut off, knows upon reflection that his limbs are gone:

“Saṇḍaka, I will give you a comparison, for some wise men understand when a comparison is given. Saṇḍaka, a man’s hands and feet are cut off. In whatever posture he may be, he would know ‘my hands and feet are cut off’, and reflecting would know ‘my hands and feet are cut off’. In like manner, the bhikkhu who is perfect, has destroyed desires, has done what should be done, put down the burden, has come to the highest good, has destroyed the desire ‘to be’ and rightly knowing, is released, would know constantly and continually ‘my desires are destroyed’.”

—*Saṇḍaka Sutta* (MN 1 513)

Today the deeper implications of the word Nibbāna are obscured by a set of disingenuous and misleading arguments based on a scholarly methodology borrowed from South Indian Brahmanism. Nevertheless, most Theravādins, dazzled by the brilliance of Ven. Buddhaghosa’s scholarship, accept his arguments as gospel.

That has led to an unfortunate situation where the sober voices of the forest practitioners are out-shouted by a politicized chorus of university-trained city temple scholastics. ‘I know, I see, that’s just how it is!’ (*Kālakārāma Sutta*) they chant. But actually, unenlightened, they are clinging to the straws and reeds (*Nadī Sutta*) of speculative commentaries, while the current of *saṃsāra* sweeps them downstream toward the inevitable precipice.

Everyone accepts and admits that very few people are becoming enlightened nowadays. And the rare Stream-entrants, Once-returners, Non-returners and Arahants that do arise, come almost exclusively from the forest tradition. Could that be because the practitioners alone retained the correct understanding of Nibbāna?

## Nibbāna is Nowhere

Don't need no ticket, you just get on board...



Everything we have written so far is just about Nibbāna as a term. It's just a preamble to show that the word Nibbāna in the sense of 'extinction' has a deeper dimension that has to be understood in the context of the law of Dependent Origination, *paṭicca samuppāda*. As we proceed, we will study many deep Suttas on Nibbāna to penetrate to the essence. I strongly encourage you to take advantage of the links to read the original Suttas; they provide essential context for our study.

Much of the original significance of the term Nibbāna was undermined by scholars bringing in a speculative etymology, based on misinterpreting the element *vāna* as 'weaving'. We don't see any justification or explanation for this, apart from exegetical hubris. The Buddha often declares that Nibbāna is the cessation of suffering or the destruction of craving. He frequently uses terms like *dukkhanirodho*, 'cessation of suffering' and *tanhakkhayo*, 'cessation of clinging' in the Suttas as synonyms for Nibbāna. If they are synonyms, there is no need to discriminate by insisting on a

periphrastic usage like *āgama* — as if Nibbāna is a ‘thing’ or location somewhere ‘out there’ that one can go to.

Another important aspect of the problem is the relation of Nibbāna to the Holy Life, *brahmacariya*. For when the Holy Life is lived completely, it culminates in Nibbāna:

“What now, friend, is the Holy Life, and who is a follower of the Holy Life, and what is the final goal of the Holy Life?”

“This Noble Eightfold Path, friend, is the Holy Life; that is, right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. One who possesses this Noble Eightfold Path is called ‘one who lives the Holy Life’. The destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion: this, friend, is the final goal of the Holy Life.” —*The Cock’s Park (3)* (SN 45.20)

In the *Rādhasaṃyutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* the Venerable Rādha puts a series of questions to the Buddha for explanation:

“Venerable sir, for what purpose is right view?”

“Rādha, it is for disenchantment.”

“Venerable sir, for what purpose is disenchantment?”

“Rādha, it is for dispassion.”

“Venerable sir, for what purpose is dispassion?”

“Rādha, it is for release.”

“Venerable sir, for what purpose is release?”

“Rādha, it is for extinction (nibbāna).”

“Venerable sir, for what purpose is extinction?”

“Rādha, it is not possible to answer that question. Extinction is the final end. The Holy Life is lived to reach extinction and it is the end.”

—*Māra Sutta* (SN 3.22.1.1)

When Venerable Rādha puts the question, *Nibbānaṃ pana, bhante, kimatthiyaṃ?* “For what purpose is Nibbāna?” The Buddha gives this answer: “Rādha, you have gone beyond the scope of questions, you are unable to grasp the limit of questions. For, Rādha, the Holy Life (*brahmacariya*) is merged in Nibbāna, its consummation is Nibbāna, its culmination is Nibbāna.”



Thus the Holy Life merges in Nibbāna, just as rivers merge in the sea. Wherever the Holy Life is lived to the full, Nibbāna is right there. That is why Venerable Nanda, who earnestly took up the Holy Life encouraged by the Buddha’s promise of heavenly nymphs, attained Arahantship almost in spite of himself (*Udāna 3.2*). At last he approached the Buddha and begged to relieve him of his promise. This shows that as soon as one completes the training in the Holy Life, he is in Nibbāna. Only before attaining Arahantship, when the training is incomplete, can one go to heaven.

Thus Nibbāna is a result that comes of its own accord. There is no justification for a periphrastic usage like, ‘on reaching Nibbāna’. No glimpse of a distant object is necessary, no ticket for a long journey needs to be purchased, no need to navigate a meandering course. As soon as the Noble Eightfold Path is perfected one attains Nibbāna—right then and there.

*svākkhāto bhagavatā dhammo sanditthiko akāliko ehi-passiko opanayiko paccatam veditabbo viññuhi”ti*

“The Dhamma is well-proclaimed by the Blessed One, visible here and now, timeless, inviting of inspection, onward-leading, and directly experienceable by the wise.”—(many occurrences throughout the Suttas)

Now, why do the scholars try to refute this by projecting Nibbāna into the future, somewhere far away? This contradicts the words *sanditthiko akāliko*, ‘visible here-and-now, timeless’ in the verse quoted above. In the case of an examination, after answering the questions one has to wait for the grade: pass or fail. In the Holy Life, as soon as you

answer the question correctly you pass, and the certificate is already there. The term *aññā* used in such contexts stands for full certitude of final knowledge, the experience of Nibbāna—*Añña Sutta* (SN 47.36).

The experience of the fruit of Arahantship gives the final certificate of attainment, *aññāphalo* — *Ānanda Sutta* (AN 9.37). That is why Nibbāna is called something ‘to be realized’ — *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (SN 56.11). One becomes certain that *khīṇā jāti, vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ*: “birth is extinct and the Holy Life is lived completely.” — *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (DN 2)

Of course there will always be some who, out of misfortune and illusion, want to push Nibbāna far away, who keep asking ‘what is the purpose of Nibbāna?’ So there remains a demand for scholars and speculators who go on splitting hairs to answer such useless questions. Normally, whatever one does in the world has some purpose. All occupations are for gain and profit. Even thieves and murderers have some purpose and profit in mind.

So naturally the deluded worldlings project their profit motive on those who are in the Holy Life: ‘Why should one attain Nibbāna? What is the purpose of trying to attain Nibbāna? What is the use of Nibbāna?’ Rather than rejecting such questions, the scholars brought in periphrastic phrases like *nibbānaṃ pana āgamma*: ‘on reaching Nibbāna’ just to answer them. They like to say that ‘on reaching Nibbāna’, as if somewhere far away, sometime in the future, craving will be destroyed. This has the effect of putting Nibbāna out of reach and discouraging realization. It also contradicts the Buddha’s explanation of Nibbāna as realizable in the here-and-now—*Brahmajāla Sutta*.

A little analysis reveals the fallacy in both this question and the answer. For if there is any aim or purpose in attaining Nibbāna, it would not be the ultimate aim. In other words, if Nibbāna is the ultimate aim, there should be no aim in attaining Nibbāna. Though it may sound tautological, Nibbāna is the ultimate aim for the simple reason that there is no aim beyond it.

Craving has the nature of projection or inclination. It is leaned forward, anticipatory, and that is why it is called *bhavanetti*, ‘craving for rebirth’ or ‘the leader in becoming’. It leads one on and on in *saṃsāra*, like the carrot before the donkey. That inclination is why all objects presented by craving have some object or purpose as a projection.

But what if one’s object is the destruction of craving itself? Because its inclining nature is always bent forward, craving begets craving in an infinite progression. This is for that, and that is for the other. Thus as Heidegger points out, “We are always already

ahead of ourselves.” As the phrase *taṇhā ponobhavikā* implies, craving brings up existence again and again.—*Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* (SN 56.11)

But that is not the case when one’s aim is the destruction of craving itself. On attaining that aim there is nothing more to be done. This brings us to the conclusion that the term *taṇhakkhayo*, ‘destruction of craving’, is a full-fledged synonym of Nibbāna. This deep point deserves further explanation, and we will continue to elucidate it in this work.