



Nirvana

Buddhism in Every Step 25

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Nirvana

What is nirvana? While we often hear references to the wonderful, joyous state of nirvana, most of us do not have the slightest inkling of what nirvana truly is. Some people even mistake nirvana as a euphemism for death. Some ascetics consider nirvana as simply annihilation or dissolution. They say, “The termination of the physical body and the exhaustion of one’s merit is the state of nirvana.” The Sautrantika¹ School also looks at nirvana as the dissolution of the five aggregates². One particular Theravada text

¹ An important Theravada School.

² The five aggregates are form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness.

says, “Nirvana is the complete exhaustion of the aggregates, like a fire that is burnt out or winds that are stilled.” These views of nirvana are one-sided and perhaps even misleading; in actuality, nirvana and annihilation are as different as day and night.

We have all read at one time or another the story of Prince Siddhartha meditating under the bodhi tree. Deep in meditation, he gazed up at the starry sky, and in a flash of insight he saw the true nature of things and became a fully enlightened Buddha. This awakening to the truths of life and the universe is what we call nirvana. He saw through the duality of me versus them, transcended the limitation of time and space, and entered into the boundless realm of dharmakaya³.

Why should we be concerned with nirvana? If we pause and take stock of our lives, we’ll see that human existence is limited in terms of both time and space. Life spans no more than a few decades, and the body usually grows no more than five or six feet tall. Nirvana frees us from such limitations and allows us to break out of our shell of delusion. In nirvana, life permeates all space, “traverses the three realms of existence and spans the ten directions.” In nirvana,

³ The body of truth

life pulsates through all time, “extends from antiquity to the present without change, lives through myriad kalpas and is forever new.” In such a state, “the mind encompasses the entirety of the universe, traversing realms as numerous as grains of sand.” When we see that self and the material world resonate in harmony and when we understand self and other as one, then there is no impulse to jealousy and no room for hatred or discrimination. To put it simply, by rediscovering our original nature, we dwell in nirvana and are once more able to see through the duality of subject versus object and the limitation of time and space.

Though human language and the human brain are limited and hardly conducive to understanding nirvana, we should, nevertheless, try to understand it. In the following few pages, we’ll start with an overview of nirvana, then we’ll talk about the grounds of nirvana, how it can be realized, and finally what the realm of nirvana is like.

I. An Overview of Nirvana

The word nirvana and the “cessation of suffering” of the Four Noble Truths are one and the same. Cessation of suffering does not mean the *annihilation*

of suffering; it means becoming *free* from the suffering brought on by the *deluded belief* in duality and discrimination. It also refers to the ensuing state of bliss, harmony, and being at ease with the world around us.

1. Defining Nirvana

There are two ways to define nirvana: by negation and by affirmation. We can also develop a sense for nirvana from looking at how it is explained in the sutras.

- a. Defining nirvana by negation—The *Dharma-skandha-pada* defines nirvana by listing forty-three examples of what is not nirvana. It speaks of nirvana as being, “without form, without limit, without outflow, without beginning, without attachment, without end, without arising, without clinging...” The *CatuhSATYA-nirveda* defines nirvana using sixty-six forms of negation, such as, “without decay, without loss, without equal, without obstacles, without want, unparalleled, immeasurable, without affliction...”

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- b. Defining nirvana by affirmation—The *Dharma-skandha-pada* also describes nirvana by means of fifty affirmations, such as, “absolute reality, the other shore, being wondrous, serene, permanent, secure, ultimate, hard to come by...” The *Ca-tuhsatya-nirdesa* uses forty-six affirmations to characterize nirvana, such as, “liberation, transcending all, unparalleled, most perfect, pure, ultimate, the truth, suchness...”
- c. Other depictions of nirvana—In the sutras, the following approaches have been used to explain nirvana:
- (1) The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* equates nirvana to Buddha Nature.
 - (2) The *Avatamsaka Sutra* calls nirvana the inherent nature of all dharmas.
 - (3) The *Lotus Sutra* equates nirvana to Buddhahood.
 - (4) The *Prajnaparamita Sutra* explains nirvana as the wisdom that knows what reasoning cannot know, the wisdom that sees the nature of all things.

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- (5) The *Surangama Sutra* explains nirvana as the “end of all reasoning and the quieting of all disturbances.”
 - (6) The *Vimalakirti Sutra* calls nirvana “the path of non-duality of the ten stages of mind development.”
 - (7) The *Srimala-devi-simhanada Sutra* describes nirvana as the Tathagata-garbha (the birthing ground of all phenomena) or the pure, original nature.
 - (8) The Chan School of Buddhism calls nirvana original face.

While all these descriptions may be different, the meaning is still the same. What they are all essentially saying is that nirvana is “our pure, original nature and our true, original being.” The Buddha, through his teachings, shows us the way to become free of delusions and attain nirvana by rediscovering our true nature.

2. Understanding Nirvana

In more concrete terms, the *Agamas* give us four ways to gauge our progress towards realizing nirvana.

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- a. Nirvana is sweeping the mind clean of greed.
 - b. Nirvana is sweeping the mind clean of hatred.
 - c. Nirvana is sweeping the mind clean of ignorance, delusion, and erroneous views.
 - d. Nirvana is sweeping the mind clean of affliction.

Take a minute and rate yourself for each of these criteria. Be honest with yourself. How do you fare? If you fall short of even your own standards, perhaps you should double your efforts wherever there is room for improvement.

The *Vibhasa Sastra* gives a similar explanation of nirvana. It describes nirvana as “the eradication of all sorrow, the extinguishing of the three fires, the severing of the attachment to the three notions, and the disassociation from all realms of rebirth.” The three fires are greed, hatred, and delusion. The three notions are the notion of life and death, the notion of nirvana, and the notion of non-discrimination. As unenlightened beings, we all tend to endow these constructs with a sense of substantiality which keeps us from nirvana. Having the notion of nirvana keeps

us from nirvana, even the attachment to non-discrimination is discrimination in itself.

When Venerable Xuanzang returned to China from India, he translated the term nirvana as “complete and serene.” Complete means encompassing all there is, and serene refers to the state of being unagitated and unperturbed.

We often hear people talk about the impermanence of life, but it is within this very impermanence of life that we find the unchanging nature of nirvana. We also hear Buddhists talk about suffering in this world and nirvana as the ultimate happiness. When we say all suffering is rooted in the concept of self, we are referring to the usual connotation of self as a permanent and separate unit of identity that exists independently of others. When we speak of nirvana as the ultimate happiness, we are still talking about a self which feels this happiness. The self in the context of nirvana is the true self and is different from the day-to-day connotation of self that we talked about earlier. This self is grounded in oneness and in total harmony with all causes and conditions.

3. Characteristics of Nirvana

In addition to defining and understanding the meaning of nirvana, we can also develop a better appreciation for this state of being through some of the analogies that have been used to characterize nirvana.

- a. Comparing nirvana to a lotus blossom—In Buddhist literature, there are many references to lotus blossoms, especially in depicting purity and altruism. The lotus starts to grow in the muck and mire at the bottom of a pool; it passes through the water and blossoms in the clean air, untainted by the mud. Nirvana grows out of the trials and tribulations of life, yet remains untainted by them.
- b. Comparing nirvana to water—Like water, which extinguishes physical fires, nirvana extinguishes the fires of delusion. Just as water quenches our physical thirst, the realization of nirvana eliminates the thirst of desire.
- c. Comparing nirvana to an antidote—nirvana is a sanctuary for the weary. Like an anti-

dote, nirvana neutralizes the poison of delusion.

- d. Comparing nirvana to an ocean—The ocean accepts all water regardless of its source. The ocean knows no discrimination. Nirvana is a state of equanimity, without preference or aversion. Just as we could never measure fully the amount of water in the oceans, we could never fully describe the realm of nirvana.
- e. Comparing nirvana to food—Food keeps us alive and healthy. Those who have attained nirvana are free from the cycles of birth and death. In nirvana, one is beyond the limitations of human life. Just as food relieves us of our hunger, the realization of nirvana frees us from the suffering of affliction.
- f. Comparing nirvana to space—When we speak of space, there is no talk of arising, subsisting, changing, or passing away. The same is true of nirvana. Once nirvana is realized, one can never fall away from it. The realm of nirvana is boundless. It is not to be found at any one place, yet it is everywhere.

It is not dependent on any one thing, yet it is the foundation of all things. In nirvana, one dwells in the midst of all phenomena and is in harmony with the universe.

- g. Comparing nirvana to a priceless gem—Like a priceless gem, nirvana is radiant and appeals to all.
- h. Comparing nirvana to a mountain peak—The steadfastness of nirvana can be compared to a tall mountain peak, reaching towards the sky, unfazed by the elements of weather. Nirvana stands tall, beyond the reach of all afflictions.

4. Various Kinds of Nirvana

The Yogacara School of Buddhism speaks of four kinds of nirvana: nirvana of pure original nature, nirvana with remainder, nirvana without remainder, and nirvana of non-abiding.

The nirvana of pure original nature is the seeing of dharmakaya (body of truth), the true nature of all phenomena. While delusion may temporarily prevent us from seeing the dharmakaya, its integrity is never compromised. Dharmakaya has countless wondrous aspects and encompasses all things. It is not the same

as all dharmas, yet it is no different. Dharmakaya is our pure, original nature. If we look inside of ourselves, we all can see dharmakaya.

Nirvana with remainder is attained when one is still alive. In this case, the word remainder refers to the effects of karma. The term “with remainder” means that while no new karma is being created, the effects of past karma have not been entirely extinguished. Because of the presence of the physical body, one still feels the various effects of hunger, temperature, sickness, and aging. In nirvana with remainder, one still has to eat when hungry or rest when tired. Even though the body continues to experience sickness, old age, and death, the mind is no longer enslaved by these processes. Regardless of one’s circumstances, one can still go on with life in a calm, reserved manner. This is what is meant by nirvana with remainder. Even today, there are some living examples of people who have attained this kind of nirvana. Mahakasyapa, one of the Buddha’s great disciples, is such an example. From the time of the Buddha some twenty-five hundred years ago to the present, Mahakasyapa is said to be still alive in this world today. According to one of the sutras that

prophesized the coming of Maitreya, the Buddha had instructed Mahakasyapa to remain in this world and be the custodian of his robes and alms bowl until Maitreya Bodhisattva becomes the next buddha of this world, some 67 billion years from now. Pindola, the Long-Brow Arhat, is another example of one who has attained nirvana with remainder. The Buddha also asked him to stay on in this world to teach the Dharma to sentient beings after his own passing. In my readings, I have come across three references to him making an appearance to help the people of this world.

The state of nirvana without remainder, or parinirvana, is reached when all effects of karma are completely worked out, and the physical body is just a thing of the past. Without the creation of new karma, there is no coming together of the five aggregates and no new birth results. In this state, one's true nature is "dissolved" in all phenomena and becomes one with the universe. Just as sugar dissolves in water without a trace, its presence, though not visible, is indisputable. This total harmony is summed up in the saying, "Time from antiquity to the present is not separate from the present thought. The boundless land that

separates you and me is nothing more than the tip of a down feather.”

In the *Agamas*, there is a story about a Brahmacari with the divine eye. He could look at someone and see the person’s past lives. When he looked at a heap of human bones, he could accurately surmise who the person was and when the person died. One day, the Buddha pointed to a heap of human bones and asked him if he knew to whom they belonged. He looked intently at the bones, but had no clue as to their identity. The Buddha then explained to the Brahmacari, “That person has entered nirvana. His being is now beyond time and space. He is free of life and death. He is now one with phenomenon and noumenon. He now spans all ten directions and pervades all dharma realms. This is why you cannot identify him.” From this, we can see that one who has attained nirvana without remainder is totally free of the burdens of a physical body.

Nirvana of non-abiding is also known as mahanirvana or anuttara-samyak-sambodhi. Of those who have attained mahanirvana, the sutras say, “Out of wisdom, one is no longer attached to life and death. Out of compassion, one is no longer attached to nir-

vana.” They see through the emptiness of the cycle of rebirth and continually reappear in this world to guide sentient beings through the sea of suffering. They have everything, yet they do not call anything their own. They are always active helping sentient beings, yet they are always at peace. They are not attached to any one way and can skillfully employ all means.

From the discussion of these various kinds of nirvana, we can see that one does not have to wait until the end of one’s life to enter nirvana. When Prince Siddhartha became a fully enlightened buddha under the bodhi tree, he entered the realm of nirvana with remainder. When the Buddha passed away at the age of eighty between two sala trees, he entered nirvana without remainder. During the forty plus years when the Buddha traveled far and wide to teach the Dharma to all those with a willing ear, he lived a life free of attachment. This kind of life that is purposeful yet without fixation on purpose is free and at ease. This is the realm of nirvana of non-abiding.

II. Is Nirvana Grounded?

We generally say we live in this world or we live in this or that house, but can we really say where one

dwells in nirvana? According to the sutras, it is said that those who have entered parinirvana become one with emptiness. Some of you may find this frightening and think that emptiness means extinction or annihilation. You need not be afraid for emptiness here does not mean annihilation. Emptiness pervades all space and is ever present in all things. In nirvana, one is grounded in emptiness—without any home yet at home everywhere.

Tang Emperor Shunzong once asked the Chan Master Foguang Ruman the whereabouts of the Buddha after he has entered parinirvana. The emperor asked:

*“From where did the Buddha come?
After nirvana, to where did the Buddha go?
Since we say the Buddha is ever present in this
world,
Where is the Buddha now?”*

The Chan Master replied:

*“From truth the Buddha came.
After nirvana, to truth the Buddha went.
The dharmakaya fills all space;
Lives always in undeluded minds.
With-thought restores to without-thought;*

*Attachment returns to non-attachment.
[The Buddha] arrives for the sake of
sentient beings;
Leaves for the sake of sentient beings.
Clear and pure like the ocean;
Profound and ever present.
The wise should contemplate,
And have no doubt.”*

The emperor, still doubting, asked further:
“*The Buddha, born in a palace,
Died and entered nirvana, between two trees.
Taught in this world for forty-nine years;
Yet pronounced that he did not speak of
any Dharma.
Mountains, rivers, and vast oceans,
The sky, earth, sun, and moon,
There will be a time when they will cease.
Who can say that they are not subject to
birth and death?
I still have some questions;
Wise one, please explain.”*

In trying to use worldly logic and reasoning to understand nirvana, the emperor failed to fathom how the dharmakaya can be ever present. The Chan Master again explained:

*“The nature of Buddha is truth.
The deluded do not understand.
The dharmakaya is like space;
Has no birth nor death.
With the right conditions,
Buddha appeared in this world;
When the right conditions passed,
Buddha entered nirvana.
Reaching sentient beings everywhere,
[Buddha] is like the moon in the water.
Not permanent and yet not intermittent;
No birth and no death.
Lives, yet is never born;
Enters nirvana, yet has not ceased.
When mind sees emptiness,
There is no Dharma to speak of.”*

Like space, the dharmakaya of the Buddha is totally complete, without arising or ceasing. As a man in this world, he was bound by the processes of birth,

old age, sickness, and death, but the dharmakaya of the Buddha is without arising or ceasing. The historical Buddha came out of suchness to teach us the Dharma and the path of liberation from the cycle of rebirth. When the causes and conditions came to pass, the Buddha returned to the truth from which he came. Dharmakaya thus come and thus go—nothing is added or taken away. Without attachment, the true nature of Tathagata is forever whole. Nirvana is a realm that is free of attachment. If one has any attachment whatsoever, one cannot realize the realm of nirvana.

In Chinese Buddhist history, there is a story of a highly cultivated Chan master by the name of Jin Bifeng. According to the story, he almost regressed in his cultivation because of a single attachment. He could let go of all his desires except his love for his jade alms bowl. Each time before he entered samadhi⁴, he had to make sure that his alms bowl had been carefully put away before being able to rest his mind.

One day, as his life span was coming to an end, King Yama dispatched several of his messengers to

⁴ Deep meditative concentration

claim the master's life. Since the Chan master could foresee his death, he entered into deep samadhi. The underworld messengers could do nothing but wait for him to come out of his meditation. After waiting for a few days, they came up with a plan. Knowing that the Chan master treasured his alms bowl dearly, they obtained the bowl and began to bang it about with all their might. When the Chan master heard the racket, he immediately came out of his samadhi to try save his bowl from breaking. When Yama's messengers saw their chance, they clapped their hands and said, "Good, you now have to come with us." When the Chan master realized that his resolve was about to be tested, he took up the jade bowl and threw it onto the ground, smashing it to pieces. He then re-entered samadhi, leaving this verse behind as he did so:

*For one to claim the life of Jin Bifeng,
Chains must first be able to
bind the vastness of space.
If space can be shackled,
Then you can come to claim me,
Jin Bifeng.*

At that very moment, he entered nirvana. From this, we can see that to enter nirvana, one must let go of every shred of attachment and delusion. When we are not caught up in worldly phenomena, then we are at peace in all circumstances.

While we say that we have to let go of all attachment to enter nirvana, this does not mean we have to become uncaring and indifferent or that we have to sever all relationships with others, for nirvana cannot be attained outside of everyday living. The *Diamond Sutra* says, “Let intentions arise without any attachment.” How do we lead a worldly life that is without attachment? Let me discuss this question with the following four points.

1. At ease in every encounter

The Sixth Patriarch of the Chan School, Huineng, exemplifies this type of living. After he received the robe and alms bowl as a symbol of the passing of the lineage from the Fifth Patriarch, he went into hiding from those who wanted to challenge his legitimacy. For fifteen years, he lived among a group of hunters. Each day he would go with the hunters to hunt. Whenever he saw animals being caught in the traps set by the hunters, he would secretly try to free the

trapped animals. Whenever he had a chance, he would speak to the hunters about the importance of compassion. When they came back from a hunt to cook their kill, he would go into the woods to find edible leaves and plants to garnish their common meal. He was often teased for avoiding the meat and eating only the vegetables. Fifteen years may seem a long time, but Huineng was not at all bothered by the wait, for he had already realized nirvana and lived in peaceful freeness. Though he was not able to formally teach the Dharma, he made use of every opportunity to teach in whatever way he could. Though he did not observe the precepts as strictly as he would have liked, he found peace in observing the precepts in whatever way he could.

2. At peace with all circumstances

From the *Diamond Sutra*, we can see how the Buddha, after attaining nirvana with remainder, lived a life that was peaceful and serene. The sutra begins, “At mealtime, the Blessed One put on his robes, took his alms bowl and entered the city of Sravasti. Having begged for alms there in due order, he returned to where he was staying. Having taken his meal, he put away his robe and alms bowl, washed his feet, and sat

in a cross-legged posture....” On the surface, these are the trivia of life, but if we look deeper, we can see how the Buddha is at peace with every aspect of life. The fully enlightened one does not denigrate the demands of life. Even though he attained nirvana, he still needed to eat and sleep, and he did so without attachment.

3. Find tranquility in Buddha Nature

Nirvana is a state in which one sees through the emptiness of all phenomena. As such, those who have entered nirvana will not be perturbed by the trials and tribulations of life for they can see them as impermanent and empty in nature. They look at life with equanimity, without becoming attached to or developing aversion for any one aspect of life. In nirvana, they find tranquility in Buddha Nature. “When the mind is pure, the land is pure.” They make a pure land even in the midst of the sea of suffering. In the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, Vimalakirti “lived a layman’s life, but was unattached to the three realms of existence; lived with a wife, but always practiced pure living.” The life he lived was indeed a life without attachment.

4. Teach the Dharma as the occasion arises

After Prince Siddhartha entered enlightenment, he did not simply enter into a blissful nirvana without remainder, rather he entered nirvana with remainder and chose to stay in the suffering of samsara, traveling throughout India to teach the Dharma. In nirvana, one does not think solely of one's own liberation from suffering, but works tirelessly to help others free themselves. Many who have entered nirvana re-appear in this world to teach the Dharma to others. Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is an excellent example of one who acts selflessly. Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva once said, "As long as one being remains in hell, I vow not to become a buddha."

Many people have preconceived notions that a life of cultivation means a life of solitude and meditation, maintaining a wall of indifference between the practitioner and others. Such a notion is totally inconsistent with the many examples shown by the Buddha in the way he led his life. Living a life in nirvana means being at ease with all encounters, at peace with all circumstances, finding tranquility in Buddha Nature, and teaching the Dharma as the occasion arises.

III. The Path to Nirvana

Before committing ourselves to working towards nirvana, how can we know that there is even such a thing as nirvana? This is, indeed, a very difficult question to answer. It is like asking, “How much water is there in the ocean and how many sea creatures dwell in it?” Such questions are beyond the scope of everyday reason. Similarly, worldly human language is not capable of fully describing the wonder of nirvana, for nirvana transcends all worldly phenomena.

Though we cannot accurately describe nirvana, we can, through the Buddha’s teachings, gradually realize it for ourselves. In fact, it is said in the sutras, “If one wishes to experience the buddha-realm, one’s mind must be pure like space.” While we cannot “experience” nirvana through our sensory organs, we cannot categorically deny its existence. Though the human eye does not see microscopic organisms such as germs and bacteria, we, nonetheless, accept what scientists say about them. Scientists are experts in these areas, and we defer to their judgement in these matters. Likewise, while we ourselves have not ex-

perienced nirvana, we can learn from those who have that it does exist.

Nirvana is not to be found in any one place or at any one time. In this sense, nirvana is like fire. Fire is not something that exists in and of itself. It is created when two flints are rubbed together or when we strike a match. When prajna and compassion shine through delusion, nirvana will present itself, and we will see first hand that nirvana does exist.

How can we enter nirvana? Let me offer three suggestions.

1. It is said in the sutras that if we diligently practice according to the precepts, we can all attain nirvana one day. The precepts are like our eyes. With our eyes, we can see regardless of where we are; with the guidance of the precepts, we can experience nirvana regardless of the circumstances in which we may find ourselves.
2. The Buddha teaches that to reach enlightenment, we must continually contemplate the Three Dharma Seals: All samskaras (forms and actions of this world) are impermanent,

all dharmas do not have a substantial self⁵, and nirvana is perfect peace. When we truly understand the emptiness of all phenomena, we will see things as they are without attachment or aversion for them. When we are free of all clinging, then any agitation we may feel is calmed. If we can accept what life brings with equanimity, then we have reached the tranquil and serene state of nirvana.

3. To experience nirvana, we must ground our body and mind in the three roots of learning: precepts, concentration, and wisdom. We should use the four all-embracing virtues of giving, amiable speech, conduct beneficial to others, and cooperation as skillful means to teach the Dharma. Additionally, we should integrate the six paramitas into every aspect of our daily lives so that we may remain vigilant of our minds and continually open our eyes to our own delusions.

⁵ A substantial self means a self that is permanent and can exist independent of others.

When we hear how others have entered nirvana, we may feel that we do not measure up. This defeatist attitude is also a form of fixation and is an erroneous view. The Buddha teaches us that with diligent effort we all can become enlightened. In fact, we need to know that entering nirvana has nothing to do with how old we are, how smart we are, or how long we have practiced.

We learn from the sutras that people of any age can enter nirvana. Subhadra, the last convert of the Buddha, was one hundred and twenty when he realized nirvana. At the other end of the spectrum, Sramanera Kunti, a disciple of Sariputra, was only seven when he realized nirvana. Whether we can enter nirvana or not depends on our spiritual maturity and not on our chronological age.

From the sutras, we learn that the realization of nirvana is independent of how smart we are, but hinges upon whether or not we can discover our innate Buddha Nature. This discovery process does not call for a certain level of education or intellectual capacity. Among the Buddha's disciples, the wise Sariputra as well as the slow Ksudrapanthaka attained nirvana. When we vow to embark on the path to

buddhahood, we should have confidence that nirvana is ultimately within our reach. As long as we are totally committed to practicing the Dharma, we will one day see through our delusions and attain buddhahood.

Realizing nirvana is also independent of how long we have practiced. The sincerity of practice is a much more important factor. Among the five men that the Buddha expounded the Dharma to soon after he attained enlightenment, Kaundinya attained nirvana after a few days. Ksudrapanthaka, who was slow in learning, realized nirvana after twenty days of diligent effort. Upali attained nirvana while shaving the Buddha's hair. As to Ananda, he had the responsibility of attending to the Buddha, and this kept him from attaining enlightenment until after the Buddha had already entered parinirvana.

From the many examples of those who have attained nirvana, we can see that the realization of nirvana is independent of external factors or circumstances. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* emphasizes that nirvana is attained through the elimination of internal delusions and not through the culmination of external factors.

IV. The Realm of Nirvana

Nirvana is the total liberation from suffering. Those who have realized nirvana experience unparalleled joy that flows from within. Even the way enlightened ones carry themselves reflects the internal serenity. Simply by being in their presence, others can also share in this limitless happiness. From the sutras, we learn that when Maudgalyayana saw the recently enlightened Sariputra, he was awe-struck by his radiance and bearing. He asked, “Sariputra, you look exceptionally radiant—pure like a freshly bloomed lotus, dignified like the warm sun, and peaceful like a gentle breeze. Have you found the way out of the cycle of rebirth?” Sariputra smiled gently and nodded his head.

Many years later when Sariputra entered parinirvana, his student Kunti was grief-stricken. With tears flowing and nose running, he took his teacher’s heap of bones and went to see the Buddha. The Blessed One consoled him saying, “Now that your teacher has entered parinirvana, do you think the merit⁶ from his cultivation has also disappeared with his passing?”

⁶ This merit is causeless and to be distinguished from blessings, the fruit of good karma.

Kunti replied, “No.”

“That’s right. While your teacher is now free of all suffering, his merit lives forever. There is no cause to cry.”

When Kunti heard this, he immediately understood what the Buddha was teaching him. He looked at living and dying in a totally different light. What is important is not the physical body, for the body represents the accumulation of karma and as such lives and dies. What is important is the being of enlightenment, causeless and timeless, lighting up the darkness that envelopes deluded sentient beings.

The sutras also speak of the fearless state of nirvana. There was once a bhiksuni who was bitten by a poisonous snake while meditating in a cave. When her disciples saw what happened, their first reaction was to go seek medical help. The bhiksuni told them calmly, “There is no need to go seek help. The poison has now spread all over my body. Could you please go and ask Sariputra to come here so that I might talk with him before I pass away?”

When Sariputra arrived, he was very surprised to find the bhiksuni looking as well as ever. He said, “You seem to be full of health, not at all like someone

who is about to die. Are you sure you were bitten by a poisonous snake?”

The bhiksuni replied, “I have been contemplating emptiness and have found peace in nirvana. The snake can only harm my body, but it cannot disturb the serenity of nirvana.”

The *Avadanas* speak of nirvana as the ultimate happiness. Those who cannot comprehend the meaning of nirvana, think that the bliss of nirvana comes from the suppression of all desires. This is a grave misunderstanding, as illustrated by the exchange between King Milinda and the monk Nagasena. The king asked, “The Buddha teaches that for us to realize nirvana, we must let go of sensory pleasures. This is very hard to do and causes me great pain. What is the point of realizing nirvana if it takes all the joy out of living?”

Nagasena replied, “It is incorrect to equate nirvana with the ‘pain’ of abstention. When the Buddha teaches us to refrain from indulgence, it is only a means to an end. When one wants to learn a skill, one has to first ‘painfully’ practice the basics of that skill before one can excel in it.”

Nirvana is the total liberation from suffering. When we let go of all attachment and aversion, we live in harmony with all that is conditioned and in so doing calm the agitation that comes with desire. The realm of nirvana is without arising, without abiding, without attachment to the phenomenal self, and without blemish.

In nirvana, there is no arising and consequently no ceasing and no impermanence. Not only is there no arising of worldly phenomena, there is also no arising concerning the notion of nirvana itself. It is the realm of the absolute truth of the Middle Way, without the duality of self versus environment or purity versus delusion. The following story illustrates how we often make something out of nothing. Once there was a merchant pulling a cart of merchandise to the market. On the way, his cart fell into a ditch, and he was unable to pull the cart out no matter how hard he tried. A passer-by offered to help, and between the two of them, they managed to put the cart back on the road. The passer-by asked the merchant, “Now that I have helped you pull the cart out of the ditch, how are you going to thank me?”

The merchant replied, “There is ‘nothing’ I can give you to show you my gratitude.”

“Good, give me this ‘nothing’,” said the passer-by.

The merchant was in a quandary and said, “How can I give you ‘nothing’?”

“I am sure you can find this ‘nothing’ to give me.” From the word “nothing,” the notion of something arises in the passer-by.

As the realm of nirvana is without arising, it follows that it is also without abiding, even about the notion of nirvana. In nirvana, one does not abide in anything for one’s being is now in the entirety of the universe, in all dharma realms, in Buddha Nature, in the vastness of space, as well as in the purity of one’s heart and mind.

In nirvana, there is no attachment to the phenomenal self. To realize nirvana, one must first see that this being we call self is nothing but the accumulation of karma and as such is impermanent and does not exist independent of others. Once we are rid of this fixation we have about ourselves, then we can experience the great liberation of selflessness. From selflessness, we can then find our true self. This true

self is our timeless Buddha Nature. From the sutras, we learn of a certain exchange between the Buddha and a skeptic who wanted to test the Buddha. The skeptic asked, “Blessed One, I like everything you have said so far except for the part about selflessness. It is too frightening a concept for me to accept.” The Buddha replied, “But within selflessness, you will find a true self.” The true self that the Buddha referred to here is of course our Buddha Nature. When we realize our own Buddha Nature, we are stripped of the delusion of seeing the physical body as permanent and independently existing. When we see Buddha Nature as our true self, we are like a piece of gold that regains its luster after purification.

Nirvana is without blemish and is most wondrous and perfect. The serenity and joy that are experienced in nirvana are not something that can be described in words. Having said this, it is also something that we all can experience, and it is available to us at all times. Once there was a bhiksu who was meditating when a practitioner of a different tradition passed by. He asked the bhiksu, “Are you sitting here cultivating for happiness in your next life?” The bhiksu replied, “No, I am cultivating happiness for this life, right here and

now.” From this, we can see that nirvana is not something that can only be experienced after death. The instant we extinguish the fires of delusion is the instant we experience nirvana.