

NON-CLINGING, NIBBĀNA, AND THE DEATHLESS

Introduction to Readings for June 12th Class

MN 131, 143, 138, 22.20-35, 22.40-41, 147, 64, 68.8-24, 73.7-12
(Optional 70.14-22, 76.51)

Nothing is worth adhering to. MN 37.3

*It is for the sake of final Nibbāna without clinging
that the holy life is lived under the Blessed One.* MN 24.10

*Open are the doors to the Deathless!
Let those with ears now show their faith.* MN 26.21

In describing his awakening the Buddha said he attained the “deathless supreme security from bondage, Nibbana” (MN 26.18). When he decided to teach he proclaimed that the doors of the Deathless stand open. Explaining that he we would start teaching he declared he was going to “beat the drum of the Deathless” (MN 26.25). In thus describing his Awakening and the goal of practice in terms of the “Deathless” the Buddha was relying on a concept that had a long and significant history in ancient India.

In the ancient Vedic times, the Deathless (Sanskrit: *amrita*) referred both to the idea of becoming immortal and to the ambrosial drink that made someone immortal. In the centuries immediately preceding the Buddha, the idea of the Deathless became increasingly important in the *Upanishads*. In these texts the Deathless did not refer to an immortal life that people could attain. Rather it came to refer to a timeless state realized at the time of liberation. This Deathless state was equated with the macrocosmic being/god called *brahman*. The realization of the Deathless occurs when one realizes that the microcosmic self (the *ātman* in Sanskrit; *atta* in Pali) is identical to the *brahman*.

The Buddha continued the Indian tradition of using “deathless” as a word for the ultimate goal, for liberation. At the same time, his concept of the deathless differed significantly from the earlier traditions because it was not defined in terms of ‘self.’ However, the records of the Buddha’s teachings do not provide us with any unambiguous understanding of what he meant by the deathless. Because of this, Buddhists down through the centuries, including some in our modern times, have debated this issue. The most common controversy is whether the deathless exists as some kind of unconditioned existent thing or state. Should the word be considered a noun or an adjective? When a debate has continued for over two thousand years it is probably safe to assume that no final answer is possible, at least not without a new perspective on the topic.

Together with the Deathless, the other common term for the ultimate goal is nirvana (Pali: *nibbāna*). It is clear that nirvana is reached through the complete ceasing of clinging: “*A bhikkhu without clinging attains Nibbāna*” (MN 106.12). It is also certain that nirvana, as the ultimate goal, involves the ending of suffering: “*What I teach is suffering and the end of suffering*” (MN 22.38). However, as with the Deathless, almost no discussion exists in the Middle Length Discourses about what Nirvana is. When it is described it is explained by what it is not, by what is absent. For example, in discussing

the truth he had attained with his Awakening, the Buddha describes it as *nibbāna* and a string of seeming synonyms for *nibbāna*:

It is hard to see this truth, namely, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all acquisitions/attachments (upadī), the destruction of all craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbāna. (MN 26.19)

It is likely that *nibbāna*, like the other items in this list, refers to the absence of something. This is not obvious; because *nibbāna* is a noun, it is easy to assume it is a thing or state. However, as a noun, it is an action noun describing cooling, quenching, extinguishing and releasing. Its likely etymological meaning is ‘un-binding.’ The challenges of translating Pali into English often reinforce a tendency to see *nibbāna* as a noun. Sometimes what appears in English translations as *nibbana* is in Pali the passive verb *nibbāyati* meaning something like “to be nirvanized” or ‘to be cooled’ or ‘blown out.’ So, for example, the quote from MN 106.12 cited earlier in this paragraph should more accurately be translated as “A *bhikkhu* without clinging is completely nirvanized (*parinibbāyati*).”

Being that liberation is explained in terms of absence, it is difficult to describe what that absent state is actually like. Certainly, the suttas provide very little help with this. Perhaps this is because explaining it by what remains may not be the point. Perhaps freedom from clinging is experienced or described differently for the different people who attain it. Perhaps the same person may even experience it differently at different times. It may be like the condition of prisoners released from prison: each ex-prisoner shares the same freedom from incarceration, but each may vary widely in how they experience their life of freedom.

More important than what nirvana may or may not be is the function that it has for a practitioner. When we are in a burning room, what an open door is like is less important than how it helps us escape the fire. The attainment of nirvana functions as the ultimate escape from suffering. Once one has escaped, it might not be so important to know what nirvana is. To read more about the function of nirvana, please see my essay titled *Nirvana* posted on the article page of IMC’s website.

As you read the suttas for our next class, please make a list of the various things that are said to be abandoned or extinguished in order to attain nirvana. Please also consider what reservations you might have concerning an ideal described as the absence of clinging. In what way is it helpful for you that the goal is described in these terms?

*Fearful they look upon clinging and the production of birth and death.
Not clinging, they are freed through the destruction of birth and death.
Attaining safety and peace here and now **they are the happy ones.**
They have gone beyond all fear and hate;
they have gone beyond all suffering. MN 130.30*

This Dhamma I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. MN 26.18