

Why we can't define nirvana¹

Nirvana as a concept

From the start, it helps us to understand that the sutta teachings on nirvana are all worded in such a way as to avoid any kind of definite conception of nirvana, and to discount any speculation about it. Our conception of nirvana is *not* nirvana, but merely a view, a private reality (*pacceka,sacca*), or at best, a view-truth (*ditṭhi,-sacca*),² of nirvana.

“To seek to know more is only to manufacture obstacles,” warns Cousins.³ Our knowledge is all sense-based—dependent on the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind—and based on their corresponding objects: what is seen, heard, smelt, tasted, felt and thought. Nirvana is none of these—it is unconditioned, independent of causes and effects, free of relatedness and relativity.

What we know tends to “fix” and finalise our understanding. Once we know, we are likely to stop investigating; we may not allow that there are other ways of seeing something, or simply that we could be wrong. Knowledge also tends to be a “snapshot,” a freeze-dried version, of what is real and living, something that needs to be experienced in the moment, every moment.

In this sense, nirvana can never be known; it can only be felt, experienced. It is “felt” in the sense of a personal and direct experience—even this is saying too much, stretching the limits of language precariously into unknown and unknowable territory.

It's like we are going on a long journey to visit a fabulous city. Our guide is describing to us various fascinating details about the city. We are shown maps and given guide-books, and even told how best to live in that city. The point is that we are not there yet. We are only preparing for the journey.

This study—any study of nirvana—is at best only a preparation for reaching the path that leads to nirvana. Whatever we discuss here, then, should help us, less to form ideas about nirvana, but more so to progressively clear our minds of our views about nirvana. Whatever ideas of nirvana we form at this stage is *not* nirvana—they are merely provisional visions of a fabulous place that we have not yet been to.

Our task—we must constantly remind ourselves—is that of clearing our mind of whatever views we have of nirvana. We need to lose ourselves in this study so that we can feel the truth and beauty, the vision and joy, of the experience of nirvana that the Buddha and the arhats have experienced. An important purpose in this study, then, is for us to try to feel at least some of that joy.

The ground around us is thick with mist, and the sky clouded up. We are gingerly moving on—guided by our reading and understanding—watching our path, and looking around, and ahead at times. We may suddenly, momentarily, see the clearing of the mist or even a parting of clouds. Then, we may have a vision of where we are heading, even of the ancient city of Nirvana that is our goal.

¹ This is a slightly edited version of “Describing nirvana,” SD 50.1 (2).

² Or, private truth (*pacceka,sacca*) and view-truths (*ditṭhi,sacca*): see [SD 40a.8](#) (5.2); [SD 48.1](#) (6.1.2.5-6.1.2.10). On the nature of views and abandoning them, see **The notion of *ditṭhi***, [SD 40a.1](#).

³ L S Cousins, “Nibbāna and the Abhidhamma,” 1984:79.

But the mists and clouds are still there, and we have to mindfully keep on moving. Our study here, then, has the key purpose of helping us clear ourself of any views of nirvana, and to try to feel how the Buddha and the arhats experience nirvana.

The **joy** arising in us from such an exercise should be augmented by our constant cultivation of lovingkindness, which should further inspire us to be mindful of our breath for the sake of inner calm and clarity. Such exercises will keep up our mental health to expedite this inner journey towards the path to nirvana.

Meantime, this joy will prevent our preconceptions and views from getting the better of us, so that when we read the suttas, we are able to tease out their sense and taste as intended by the Buddha, or, at least, to keep us heading in that onward direction as we search the scriptures and as we present these texts and teachings for the benefit of others. Above all, we can notice how our views evolve—change and clarify—as we know the Dharma and make Dharma known.

Even as a concept, nirvana is difficult to explain, even more so to think about. However, the sutta teachings about nirvana are clear enough. The difficulties in understanding nirvana often arise from our own preconceptions and predilections—trying to fit our view of nirvana into some concept we have been conditioned with—or not having a thorough or sufficient understanding of the suttas and their practice.

In the English translations of the suttas, we usually see the sentences, “He attains nirvana,” or, more commonly, “He attains parinirvana.” In Pali, this is *nibbuti* literally, “He nirvana-s,” that is, attains nirvana, or, more commonly, *parinibbuti*, “He attains full nirvana.”

Notice that *nibbuti* and *parinibbuti* are action nouns, which are practically synonyms of *nibbāna* and *parinibbāna* respectively. While action words are often verbs referring to events, nouns express states, which are more or less “fixed” or stable things. However, a fundamental idea in early Buddhism is that there is neither any fixed nor stable state or “thing”: all things in this universe are conditioned (made up of inter-related parts) and, as such, impermanent. Hence, we need to use the word “state” here with some reservation, that is, it refers to an unconditioned state: we will return to this important point later.

Consciousness

What divides samsara (our worldly existence of unsatisfactoriness) from nirvana is our own consciousness. Technically, samsara or the world (*loka*) refers to our 5 physical senses (*pañc'indriya*) and the mind—together known as the 6 sense-bases (*saḷ-āyatana*)—these are the bases for consciousness. Our consciousness is said to find their “footing” (*gādhati*) here, in these 6 sense-bases.⁴ In other words, our consciousness must have its objects—it is conscious *of* them.⁵

As long as our consciousness finds a footing (is able to express itself), we “exist,” caught up in a maelstrom of sense-experiences: we live and feel unsatisfactoriness here and now. We are nothing but these 6 sense-bases, their external sense-objects, and their respective sense-consciousnesses.

⁴ See, eg, **Kevaḍḍha Sutta** (D 11,85.3), [SD 1.7](#). On how this occurs, see **Viññāṇa**, [SD 17.8a](#).

⁵ On this aspect of consciousness, see **Viññāṇa**, [SD 17.8a \(7\)](#).

From the contacts (*phassa*) of the sense-bases and their respective objects and consciousnesses arise feelings, from which arise craving, and so on leading on to suffering. This is our “world,” the virtual reality we have created for ourselves—this is the meaning of our life. Simply put, nirvana is the opposite of all this—the purpose of our life is to attain nirvana.

The “world” is our person and personality—our body and mind. We can, for the sake of convenience, as a convention, simply refer to all this interactivity of body and mind as a “person.”⁶ This “person” is the actor in samsara—the stage of our existential drama—full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Hence, linguistically at least, we are referring to people as “actors,” not to any entity in this samsaric drama. This understanding is helpful when we translate the Pali texts into English. When we refer to a *person* (such as the Buddha), we say that “He attains nirvana.” We use a verb (“attains”) that connects to the noun (“nirvana”). We must remember that in the Pali context, there is only the verb: “(He) nirvana-s,” with neither noun nor pronoun, without any concept of an abiding state—only one that is impermanent and fluctuating.

When we speak of a person “attaining nirvana,” we are referring to his mind *changing*, becoming fully free from all defilements. In this sense, we say, “He attains nirvana.” But this is thinking and communicating in English: there is no such sentence in Pali. As we read the English sentence, we need to *think* in Pali, thus: “He nirvana-s.” Then, it makes good Pali sense and better Dharma sense: thus we have a good idea of the early Buddhist idiom. This is a significant way of preventing wrong views with which language can trap us.

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⁶ For further discussion, see **The person in Buddhism**, [SD 29.6b](#).