

## NIRVANA: SPACE AND TIME

[Source: Nibbāna,dhātu Sutta (It 2.2.7), SD 50.13 (2.4.3) ]

In discussing such subtle and abstruse ideas relating to the concepts of nirvana, figurative language often helps. Poetically, we can speak of awakening in terms of our mind freeing itself from the limitation of **space**, while nirvana refers to our overcoming the limitations of **time**. Awakening frees up our mind in terms of “inner space”—the freedom from the “confined” or crowdedness of worldly life.<sup>1</sup> Notice that in Buddhist cosmology, **the hells** are most crowded environment there is for sentient beings, and **the heavens**, on the other hand, are the most spacious realms. Nirvana is beyond even this cosmic space.

One good way to see **Buddhist renunciation**—becoming a monastic to work for awakening in this life itself—is the giving up of the crowdedness of family and worldly life for the **spaciousness** of spirituality. This is an *inner* spaciousness that is accessed through proper meditation, based on peace and love. With proper training and diligence, we will be able to free our body from the physical senses so that the mind is liberated to be what it really is.

This profoundly blissful mental state is known as “**dhyana**” (*jhāna*), of which there are 4 ascending stages, each becoming more refined in mental joy and clarity. When the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana is properly cultivated, we go on to experience the boundlessness of space; then, rising from that state, our consciousness is free from all bounds. We go on to see the joy of “nothingness,” or better, “no thingness.” In the 4<sup>th</sup> “formless” dhyana (as these 4 higher states are called), we enjoy a mental state where our consciousness is so *refined* that it is said to neither exist nor not exist.<sup>2</sup>

However, even with the mastery of these **8 attainments** (*aṭṭha samāpatti*)—the 4 form dhyanas and the 4 formless dhyanas—we are still caught in the round of existence. Even after being reborn in the highest heavens, we can and will fall into any of the subhuman states, even the lowest, the hells, when the force of our good karma is exhausted.<sup>3</sup> The only way we can avoid this cosmic snakes-and-ladders (an ancient Indian board-game about karma and liberation)<sup>4</sup> is to attain at least *streamwinning* in this life itself.<sup>5</sup>

A related but more developed set of meditation states is called **the 8 liberations** (*aṭṭha vimokkha*).<sup>6</sup> The term *vimokkha* refers both to the method and the attainment. The first 3 are dhyana meditations using the *kaṣiṇa* (meditation-disc) method; then, there are the 4 formless attainments, and the 8<sup>th</sup> is the cessation of perception and feeling.<sup>7</sup> The full-fledged arhats have developed and mastered all these 8 liberations.

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<sup>1</sup> See (**Pañcāla,caṇḍa**) **Sambādha Sutta** (A 9.42) + [SD 33.2](#) (1.2); **Sambādho’kāsa Sutta** (S 6.26), [SD 15.6](#).

<sup>2</sup> On the 4 form dhyanas and the 4 formless dhyanas, see **Dhyana**, [SD 8.4](#).

<sup>3</sup> On that even the gods eventually fall into the hells, see (**Nānā,kaṛaṇa**) **Puggala Sutta 1** (A 4.123), [SD 23.8a](#).

<sup>4</sup> Snakes and Ladders is a board game that originated in India. The Jain version is called Gyan Chauper (the game of wisdom) has more snakes than ladders, signifying the difficulty of doing good. It serves as a pleasant tool for teaching karma and liberation (*mokṣa*), or the cycle of samsara. A Buddhist version prob existed during the Pāla-Sena period in Bengal (11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> cent). See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snakes\\_and\\_Ladders](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snakes_and_Ladders).

<sup>5</sup> See (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1) + [SD 16.7](#) (1.7.3.2).

<sup>6</sup> On the 8 liberations, see [SD 5.17](#) (10); [SD 49.5b](#) (3).

<sup>7</sup> See [SD 50.13](#) (2.4.3.4).

All such methods can be seen as ways of transcending crowded worldliness for spiritual space. This “space” is not *ākāsa* (“empty space”), but *okāsa*,<sup>8</sup> meaning space as the opportunity for personal development, freedom and awakening, that is, nirvana itself. However, nirvana is neither space nor place: it is located neither anywhere nor anywhen.<sup>9</sup>

If we envision the 8 liberations as opening up for us the inner space that culminates in total mental and spiritual freedom, then, the 8<sup>th</sup> liberation—that of the cessation of perception and feeling (*saññā, vedayita nirodha*) or cessation attainment (*nirodha samāpatti*) or, simply, cessation (*nirodha*)—is the highest liberation from time itself. In practical terms, time, as we know it, is already transcended in the preceding dhyanas, even in the 1<sup>st</sup> dhyana. The ultimate transcendence of time, however, is only experienced by the Buddha, the arhat or the non-returner, that is, those who have mastered all the dhyanas and overcome their emotions, both unwholesome and wholesome.

**Cessation** is an arhat’s dwelling in nirvana here and now, while still living. It is not that the arhat has “come out” of nirvana after his awakening or that it has left him. It is that nirvana is “time-free” (*akālīka*): it has nothing to do with time.<sup>10</sup> For the arhat to get out of the world of space-time, he goes into “cessation” (*nirodha*).

**Awakening** means that the arhat is fully liberated in his mind, but his body remains just as it is—as the 5 aggregates. But the clinging (*upādāna*, or *upādi*, to use the ancient term), the mind’s attraction to the body and distraction by it, is totally gone. In other words, the arhat still feels the body the way we feel it, but he knows what he is experiencing and is not overwhelmed by it.

**The Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) records the Buddha both as appreciating natural beauty,<sup>11</sup> and suffering excruciating bodily pains on account of his age. To deal with the pain, he goes into deep meditation, known as “the signless concentration of mind.”<sup>12</sup>

The cessation of feeling (or simply, “cessation”), however, is a profound mental state where all the life-signs as we know them medically, and scientifically measurable, simply cease in the meditator. In other words, he is clinically dead, but actually he is in stasis, and will emerge alive and well at the end of the cessation state.<sup>13</sup>

R493 Revisioning Buddhism 176

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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<sup>8</sup> On *okāsa*, see **Sambadh’okāsa Sutta** (A 6.26) @ [SD 15.6](#) (2.3.3).

<sup>9</sup> On nirvana not being a place, see SD 45.18 (2.5.6). On spirituality as “space,” see [SD 10.16](#) (1.4.1.5); [SD 11.4](#) (1.3); [SD 49.19](#) (1.2.3).

<sup>10</sup> The Dharma as the path (*magga*) is also said to be *akālīka*: this is also an allusion to nirvana. See SD [15.9](#) (2.3).

<sup>11</sup> D 16,3.1-2/2:102 ([SD 9](#)), also at [SD 17.3](#) (7.5).

<sup>12</sup> D 16,2.25.3/2:100 ([SD 9](#)).

<sup>13</sup> On the cessation of perception and feeling, see [SD 48.7](#) (3.2).