

Awakening and nirvana¹

Distinctions should be made between these two terms as used in the early Buddhist texts: awakening and nirvana.

Awakening (*bodhi*) is a cognitive, psychological and teleological event.

Nirvana (*nibbāna*) is an affective, soteriological and eschatological state.

Technically, then, we can say that while **bodhi** (from √BUDH, “to wake”) is best understood as a spiritual or mental event, **nibbāna**, on the other hand, should be understood as an existential state in relation to space and time. The “buddha” (the nomen agentis or personal noun of *bodhi*) or the arhat awakens to true knowledge and freedom, and on account of that, attains or realizes nirvana, which is rebirth-free and timeless.

In terms of **time**—but only so, without any distinction in grade or status—awakening occurs first, while nirvana is a sustained state that follows, so to speak, and is also the final ending of the awakened event. This last statement refers to the passing away of the Buddha or an arhat, which entails no more rebirth: they are liberated in terms of **space**.

AWAKENING (*bodhi*) is cognitive in the sense that the Buddha and arhats cognize or know true reality in a more direct, fuller and clearer manner than the unawakened. Indeed, whatever the awakened cognize *is* true reality. They see and experience things as they really are, seeing into the truth and beauty of everything. The Pali word for “to know” in this sense is *paṭisaṃvedeti*, which significantly encompasses “to feel,” in the sense of “to experience directly.”²

Awakening is the cognitive and experiential dimension of buddhahood and arhathood. It is the direct knowledge and clear insight of true reality, and total freedom from the unwholesome roots of lust, aversion and ignorance. It is sometimes said to be “omniscience” (*sabbaññutā ñāṇa*) in the sense that the Buddha knows “all” (*sabba*), or rather, *the* all.

According to **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23), the “all” are the 6 sense-faculties (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind) and their respective objects (forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts).³ In short, our senses are the tools of knowing, and the sense-objects, our sources of knowledge. This is *all* that we can possibly know.

Awakening totally transforms us into true individuals in **psychological** and **spiritual** ways. For the awakened—and also for the saints of the path—their minds are *clarified* and their hearts *purified*. They have full clarity of mind—mindfulness (*sati*) and full comprehension (*sampajañña*)⁴—and a mind that fully and directly sees the truth of a person or a state—this is highlighted by the arhat’s accomplishment in the various superknowledges (*abhiññā*), including psychic powers (*iddhi*).⁵

¹ This reflection is extracted from [SD 50.13](#) (2.4.2).

² On the significance of the verb, “to feel,” meaning to experience directly, see [SD 36.1](#) (1.6.0.2). On feeling during meditation, see [SD 38.3](#) (4.5).

³ S 35.23 ([SD 7.1](#)).

⁴ On mindfulness and full comprehension (*sati, sampajañña*), see [SD 13.1](#) (3.6).

⁵ On the 6 superknowledges (*abhiññā*), [SD 27.5a](#) (5).

Mindfulness and full comprehension *purify the heart* (the affective or feeling aspect) of the awakened and, to some extent, that of the path saint, too. This pure heart is able to fully and directly sense beauty in a being, a state or a thing. The suttas, for example, often speak of the Buddha and the arhats appreciating the beauty of nature,⁶ or simply enjoying the bliss of their own experiences.⁷

Teleologically (in terms of spiritual goal), awakening is the culmination or end of our spiritual training, the end of the noble quest.⁸ **The Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), for example, declares that these things are difficult to see, that is, “the stilling of all formations, the giving up of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, fading away (of lust), cessation (of suffering), nirvana.” (M 26,19.3), SD 1.11.

Furthermore, in **the Uddham,bhāgiya Sutta** (S 45.180), in the “path schedule 3,” the practitioner is said to cultivate each factor of the eightfold path—eg, right view—“that plunges into the death-free, that crosses over to the death-free, that ends in the death-free.” In other words, as we practise the path, any of the factors of the supramundane path can lead us to nirvana.⁹

Nirvana is seen to be **affective** in the sense that it is freedom from desire, passion, agitation, hate, birth and death, and rebirth. The Buddha and arhats are, as such, free from all negative emotions. Even before attaining nirvana, the meditator experiences profound *joy* and *peace* through the dhyanas, which are the bases for his mental efforts to reach awakening. After attaining nirvana, the Buddha and the arhats continue to regularly meditate into the dhyanas as a natural part of their daily routine.

Dhyana meditation is no more a *tool* for awakening for the arhats because they are already awakened. Dhyana now becomes their natural tendency, just as a healthy Olympic champion sportsman continues to do his routine of exercises even after retirement. Even outside of meditation, the awakened mind is happy, peaceful and clear. However, such a meditation helps to keep the decaying physical body comfortably functional.¹⁰

The **soteriological** aspect of our concept of nirvana is famously defined in **the Bāhiya teaching** (U 1.10), which is also given to Māluṅkya,putta—which is the occasion for their respective awakenings. The passage goes thus:

“When, Māluṅkya,putta, in things to be seen, heard, sensed and known by you,
in the seen there will only be the seen;
in the heard there will only be the heard;
in the sensed there will only be the sensed;
in the known there will only be the known,

⁶ See, eg, **Mahā Kassapa** (Tha 1062-1065); **Tālapuṭa** (Tha 1102-1103).

⁷ In **(Sāriputta) Nibbāna Sutta** (A 9.34), eg, Sāriputta describes nirvana as being “blissful”: “Where nothing is felt, that is truly happiness!” (A 9.34/4:414 f), SD 55.1; also [SD 17.3](#) (7.8.4).

⁸ On the 4 kinds of noble quests, see **(Catukka) Pariyesanā Sutta** (A 4.252), [SD 50.9](#).

⁹ For an eschatological understanding of nirvana, see [SD 50.1](#) (3.4).

¹⁰ On how the Buddha keeps himself physically fit, such as with walking exercises, see **Caṅkama Sutta** (A 5.29), SD 76.3. See also **Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** (M 18,3), [SD 6.14](#); **Danta,bhūmi Sutta** (M 125,2.2) n, [SD 46.3](#).

then, Māluṅkya,putta, you are ‘not by that.’¹¹
When Māluṅkya,putta, you are ‘not by that,’ then, you will ‘not be therein.’¹²
When Māluṅkya,putta, you are ‘not therein,’
then, you will ‘be neither here nor beyond nor between the two.’¹³
This is itself the ending of suffering.” S 35.95,13 (SD 5.9) = U 1.10,13 (SD 33.7)

The first 5 lines of the verse above describes how, through mindfulness, the meditator is fully aware and comprehends what he sees, hears, senses and knows objectively. He simply knows things *as they really are*, as being mind-made, rising and falling phenomena that are impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-self.

In the last 5 lines the phrase, “You are ‘not by that’” means that the arhat is controlled neither by any thought or emotion nor by any of his sense-experiences. He is no more what he thinks or feels. Since he is neither controlled nor concocted by his sense-experiences, he is not *in* such experiences, not overwhelmed by them.

There is no “I,” “me” or “mine” in any of his senses or experiences. There is no sense of self or selfishness whatsoever underlying his experiences. Since he is now certain that there is no abiding self or soul, his mind is free from any wrong view. As such, he will not be reborn anywhere, neither in the sense world nor in the suprasensual worlds (the form and the formless worlds), nor in an in-between state. He is totally free from rebirth because he has attained nirvana.¹⁴

In an **eschatological** sense, nirvana is our truly ultimate destiny from which we do not return to the suffering world, or to any kind of existence or non-existence. When the bark-dress ascetic **Bāhiya Dāru, cīriya** has attained final nirvana, the Buddha utters this *udāna* (inspired utterance):

Where neither water nor earth, | nor fire nor wind finds a footing,
there, no stars shine, | nor the sun blazes,
there, the moon glows not, | nor is there darkness.
And who knows this for himself, | through sagehood, he is a sage, a brahmin,
then, from form and formless¹⁵ | freed is he, from joy and pain, too. (U 1.10,27-28/9), SD 33.7

R498 Revisioning Buddhism 180

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

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2016

¹¹ *Na tena*, that is, one would not be aroused “by that” lust, etc. See [SD 33.7](#) (1.3).

¹² *Na tatta*, that is, one would not be “therein,” i.e. in the seen, etc. See [SD 33.7](#) (1.3).

¹³ “Be neither here ... nor in between the two,” *n’ev’idha na huram na ubhayam antarena*, meaning that one would not be reborn anywhere. See [SD 33.7](#) (1.3).

¹⁴ See [SD 5.9](#) (3).

¹⁵ These 2 last lines apparently allude to the 9 progressive abodes (the 4 dhyanas, 4 formless attainments, and the cessation of perception and feeling): see **Raho,gata Sutta** (S 36.11/4:216-218), [SD 33.6](#).