

## What is Nirvana?

“Nirvana” is a Buddhist term of art. It is a Sanskrit word that has crossed over into English, like (to take a related example) the word “karma.” The Buddha, in fifth century BCE Northern India, first used it as a term of art. So the story goes. “*Nibbana*” is the Pali equivalent and the Buddha’s own word was probably close to this. It meant (roughly speaking) to blow out or to go out. But what did the Buddha mean in using this word as a term of art? This is what my title asks.

Nirvana is commonly discussed in terms such as these: seeking nirvana, the discovery of nirvana, attaining nirvana, entering into nirvana. And these ways of talking tend to encourage thinking of nirvana as a something – possibly a condition, if not an actual place – and something of a rather special, perhaps indescribable, sort. So we hear that “the rational teachings of the Buddha terminate in the ineffable condition of nirvana.”<sup>1</sup> And we learn that “human language is too poor to express the real nature of \* \* \* Ultimate Reality which is Nirvana.”<sup>2</sup> Indescribable though it may be, we are nonetheless told that it is “the final goal to which the Buddhist strives as an escape from the sorrows of the world.”<sup>3</sup> Or that: “Nirvana is the *summum bonum* of Buddhism – the final and highest good.”<sup>4</sup>

Our reifying tendency in speaking of nirvana seems almost inexorably to lead to conceiving of it in otherworldly terms. But then what is it that we are talking about and how is it that we know of what we speak? Etienne LaMotte succinctly provides the Theravada answer: “Early Buddhism accepted the reality of conditioned things and hence deduced the reality of

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<sup>1</sup> Feuerstein, Georg., *The Yoga Tradition: Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice* (1998), p. 161.

<sup>2</sup> Rahula, Walpola., *What the Buddha Taught* (1959), p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Oldenburg, Hermann, *Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order* (1882), p. 222.

<sup>4</sup> Keown, Damien, *Buddhism, A Very Short Introduction* (1996), p. 44.

the unconditioned, especially Nirvana.”<sup>5</sup> But what does LaMotte mean by “the reality of the unconditioned”?

The Buddha, so it is said, maintained that everything in the natural world around us, including us, was simply a contingently existing assemblage of various parts or aspects. We, and all else, are conditioned things that are ever changing and caught up in a great web of mutually affecting relations. From this idea of conditioned things arises that of the unconditioned – “the unborn, ungrown, and unconditioned,” in the words of Walpola Rahula.<sup>6</sup> And given then the reality of conditioned things – there really are people and tables and rivers and such – the unconditioned (it is said) must likewise be. And this unconditioned is (or includes) nirvana. This is the Theravada deduction that LaMotte adduces.

On the Buddha’s behalf, however, I for one resist the reification of nirvana. So let’s go back to our initial talk about seeking or attaining nirvana. Can this be appropriately used to describe the Buddha? Did he seek and ultimately find nirvana? And, if so, did he then, as a result, urge upon others the goal of similarly seeking and attaining nirvana themselves? I would say that he did not. What moved him to give up family and society for the road and the forest was the problem of suffering. And somewhere along the way he came to understand that this was a human problem, a problem that was in some way endemic to human existence. So for him it was a problem for which only a solution achievable within a human life would be solution enough. This is what he sought and found. And it was a solution that, to all appearances, changed him forever. So we should not say that he was seeking something else, some nirvana.

But might it not be retorted that this disposition is rather too quick? Could we not justly say that he *did* seek nirvana, just not by that name? The name of course was new. But when he discovered a solution to the problem of suffering and therewith achieved his enlightenment, can we not say that this was his discovery of nirvana?

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<sup>5</sup> LaMotte, Etienne, “The Buddha, His Teachings and His Sangha,” in Bechert, Heinz and Gombrich, Richard, ed., *The World of Buddhism* (1984), p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> Rahula, p. 37.

I think not. If he had discovered a pool of crystal clear water and it turned out that this was the Fountain of Youth, then, sure, we could appropriately say that he had discovered the Fountain of Youth, even if he was not looking for it. (He had only sought something to drink, not the source of eternal youth.) But we cannot similarly say that the Buddha discovered nirvana in seeking a solution to the problem of suffering unless we can independently identify and explain what we mean by nirvana, what nirvana is (or would be), whatever we *call* it. And what I wish to suggest is that the Buddha at no point came to think of nirvana (as he used that term) as any thing whatsoever. That is, I agree with Gombrich when he concludes that the Buddha did not reify the idea of nirvana.<sup>7</sup>

My suggestion is that the Buddha did not use “nirvana” as a name at all. There is nothing that “nirvana” names, in the Buddha’s usage. Rather, it was a short hand way for him to refer to himself as he had become as a result of his enlightenment, his arriving at an end of suffering.

I find support for this idea in an unexpected place. It is well known that the Buddha, after his enlightenment generally referred to himself as the Tathagata. It is commonly understood that the literal meaning of this term – it is the same in Pali and Sanskrit – is something like “thus gone.” But this, in English at least, is rather puzzling, and people have long puzzled over it. Gombrich, however, in the 2006 Numata Lectures (as yet unpublished), offered an alternative translation. He suggested, in effect, that “Tathagata” was not used by the Buddha as a name, like the name “Siddhartha,” for instance. Nor did its meaning unpack into the equivalent of a definite description which (properly understood in context) is intended to pick out a single individual such as “the man who shot Liberty Valence” or “the most compassionate being of all.” Rather for Gombrich the Buddha understood “Tathagata” to contain an irreducible indexical element that picked out the speaker and referred to how he was; it meant, that is, something like: “the one who is like I am.”

Gombrich suggested in the Numata Lectures that the Buddha, in referring to himself as Tathagata, was giving voice to the ineffability of his enlightened state. All he could do in this respect was to point to himself.

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<sup>7</sup> Gombrich, Richard, *How Buddhism Began* (1996), p. 43.

But I would not take this understanding of “Tathagata” in such a Theravada fashion, in a manner that echoes, for instance, the way that Rahula writes of nirvana. I do not understand the Buddha to be saying, or alluding to, any idea of a reality or truth that language is inherently unable to express. I take his “Tathagata” more at face value. What he wants to say, or to convey – I would suggest – is that realizing nirvana or being in nirvana is (simply) “how I am, right here, right now.” In this way he was directing attention to how he was changed by his enlightenment; he was implicitly contrasting his before enlightenment (BE) self with his after enlightenment (AE) self.

And in this he was not – I want also to suggest – picking out some defining aspect of his AE self. He was not saying that it is *this* – the smile on his face, say – that constitutes what it is to be enlightened, to be in nirvana, to be living with Brahma (see comments on the *Tevijja Sutta* in “Compassion as Means to Nirvana”). Even less was he saying anything like “nirvana is a place and I am there,” or “nirvana is a condition and I have attained that condition.” Nirvana was not for him something apart from him that he could partake of, or enter into.

Of the AE Buddha it is sometimes written that, for instance, “when people observed the way he behaved and responded to events, they could see nirvana in human form.”<sup>8</sup> But this, I want to say, is not how the Buddha saw himself. Nirvana is how he is, not something that he embodies.

Moreover – and this is where my suggested understanding of “Tathagata” begins to make a difference – I would also suggest that AE the Buddha was multidimensionally different: he was (relevantly) different in many different ways, or in several different dimensions; ways that may not all have a common denominator.

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Before moving to explore this last thought, I want to pause to acknowledge a question or objection to the idea that in speaking of nirvana the Buddha was speaking of how he was upon enlightenment. “Nirvana” (or “*nibbana*”), after all, literally means, “blowing out.” This has historically led to considerable discussion of just what it is that needs to be done away

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<sup>8</sup> Armstrong, Karen, *Buddha* (2001), p. 55.

with, blown out (if you will), for nirvana to ensue. Yet I seem to be bypassing this question altogether. This is correct, I am; I regard that question as misplaced. But, even if we were to set aside the question of what gets blown out, or goes out, we would still have the one of why the Buddha chose the word he did. That is, why the word “nirvana”? And what do I have to say on this?

My suspicion – it is just that, for I can offer no direct evidence for it – is that the Buddha never intended enlightenment to be understood in terms of the literal meaning of “nirvana.” Gombrich has detailed many instances where Buddhist tradition has gone awry in understanding the Buddha through taking too literally words that had been tailored to specific occasions, to debates or discourses with particular audiences. This scholasticism (as Gombrich calls it) generally occurs, at least in part, where the original context of a particular usage (or family of usages) had been lost sight of. Gombrich has emphasized the importance of appreciating the views that the Buddha was contending with, particularly those of brahminism. More specifically, he has convincingly pointed to particular instances in which the Buddha would jokingly play with brahminical ideas or terminology, sometimes turning these on their head, as a way of leading an audience of brahmins away from received views, perhaps unreflectively accepted, towards his own teachings. Without reviewing here specific examples of this, my suspicion is that the genesis of using “nirvana” to refer to his enlightenment traces to something like this type of conversational dynamic.

For brahmins, suffering ends when someone becomes one with brahmin, or, as this was otherwise expressed, when one comes to be living in Brahma’s abode. Imagine, then, that the Buddha was speaking with a group of brahmins and leading his interlocutors along with a series of questions which, we shall suppose, they were (at least in the moment) inclined to answer as he expected them to. And so he says:

Does not suffering result from our existence in this world around us, or do you think otherwise?

So then the cause of *dukkha* lies here and not somewhere else, does it not?

And is it not also true that we suffer because of how we are,

that the cause of our suffering, whatever it is, must lie with us?

But then if we were to bring this with us when we went to Brahma's abode, would we be free from suffering?

And if we could be rid of this in the here and now, would we not be free from suffering in the here and now and have no need to journey to Brahma's abode?

So I say that the true way to be living with Brahma is to here and now get rid of what causes our suffering. To just blow it out! Shall we not say that this "getting rid of," this "blowing out," is our true salvation?

And then isn't this what we all seek, even when we speak of seeking to abide with Brahma?

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So much for my speculation on what might have been the original context of the Buddha's speaking of his enlightenment in terms of nirvana. Let me return to the notion that strictly speaking for the Buddha "nirvana" refers self-referentially to how he was AE. He was profoundly different AE from BE, and different in lots of different ways. And here I would caution that we perhaps should not be too quick to assume that we have a ready-at-hand vocabulary by which to itemize and describe all of the AE contrasts. That said, I nonetheless tender a listing of several possible, even likely, differences, without pressing too hard on issues of overlap or interconnection.

1. Compassion. From the point of view of understanding the Buddha and his teachings, what is most important is the fact that he had become inclined to act for the well being of all in his interactions with others. He had, in this sense, come to embody compassion. (See "Compassion as Means to Nirvana.")

2. Mudita (pleasure). I would argue (though not here) that each of the four so-called *brahma-vihara* (ways of living with Brahma) of *karuna*, *metta*, *mudita* and *upekkha* is properly understood as a description of nirvana, of how the Buddha was AE. Concerning *mudita* in particular, I

suggest that this describes the fact that the Buddha displayed pleasure in acting compassionately. Being compassionate involved enjoying, taking pleasure in acting compassionately. It felt natural, and so pleasurable, to act for others and not just for himself. And this would have shown itself in ways that others could sense. (I discuss this way of understanding *mudita*, which is commonly rendered – mistakenly, I think – as sympathetic joy, in a book-length essay titled *Compassion, A Naturalistic Portrait of the Historical Buddha*.)

3. Moksa (liberation). From the Buddha’s own point of view, what was likely most important (at least at the AE outset) was the cessation of suffering, his liberation from the *dukkha* previously attendant to his human existence. The way he had been (and the way we all are) caused strife, conflict, clashes (actual and anticipated) with others so that he was – and poignantly felt himself to be – alienated from his like and so from the world in which we all are. This suffering was now gone. (I discuss this idea in my book-length essay.)

4. Comportment. From the perspective of others whom he would meet, who would see him and listen to him or speak with him, it was the change in his appearance that was so striking: the way he walked, the way he talked, his rather regal, strong-yet-calm bearing. He was different, and different in ways that were appealing to the eye and appealing to the ear, even if it may have been hard to say just what this difference consisted in. (This comes through many of the stories of the canon.)

5. Detachment. There was about him a sense that he was not overly involved in whatever was happening to him and with him – or with whether, in particular instances, his advice or his actions gained the results that he had intended or would have anticipated or wished for. He would have felt this and it would have been manifest to others (those with the eyes to see).

6. Peacefulness. There was a sense that he inhabited and moved out of a space of inner calm that some, both early and late, have been inclined to identify with nirvana itself. It commonly goes with this idea that the Buddha’s “end of suffering” was his discovery of this place of inner peace from which he was able to bear the pains and misfortunes of life with a sense of equanimity. The sense of calm was real; calling it nirvana is misguided, I would say.

7. Bliss. Might it not well have been the case that the Buddha's transformation at enlightenment left him more readily able to access states of meditative bliss or that meditative states he had first experienced when studying with his two yoga masters came to take on a different cast or quality?

8. Resetting the "affect meter." For the unenlightened, those who are (largely) governed by egoistic impulse, the world is seen in terms of what will likely advance or hinder one's own interests. What is registered as personally beneficial gets a positive valuation; what is not, gets a neutral or negative valuation, where here positive value tends to translate into "approach" and negative value into "avoidance." The Buddha's enlightenment reset his affect meter, his approach-avoidance inclinations. After enlightenment, value is distributed in the world in a much more complicated fashion; the prior linear scale has been blown up into potentially indefinitely many dimensions. So that, for example, if BE someone who has a fondness for ripe pears is in a situation in which he can either eat one or give it to a hungry child, his first impulse will be to eat the pear, for that will have a high positive value for him and responding to the child's hunger will not. AE, however, it is more likely that his first impulse might be to feed the child. (Of course, AE he might not have given it to the child and BE he might not have eaten it. Life is not so simple.) And most situations will involve more than one other being – hence the indefinitely many dimensions of valuation.

9. Feelings of connectedness. I take it that BE the Buddha had arrived at his idea that everything is impermanent and interconnected. Insight into such fundamental features of how things are did *not*, however, bring the Buddha to enlightenment; becoming compassionate did, on my view of things. (See "Compassion as Means to Nirvana.") Nonetheless AE, as a result of the transformation of his conative nature from rather egoistic to largely altruistic, it may well be that he was more susceptible to feelings of interconnectiveness with others – feelings both of an everyday sort and also at a deeper level at which he may (on occasion) have experienced a profound sense of connection or interweaving with all things. And if so, these feelings may have continued to resonate with him when he was no longer experiencing them. This too could be a dimension of his difference.

So we have a variety of (possible) differences in the Buddha arising as a result of his enlightenment. Moreover, each of these various listed marks or

accompaniments of enlightenment – of how he was AE – may, in addition, be considered valuable in its own right. And each, we might come to think, could be fostered or encouraged by means other than the regimen of meditation that I presume the Buddha employed to achieve his enlightenment, his end of suffering. Perhaps only compassion meditation (as discussed in my essay) can serve as the basis for the *elimination* of suffering. I am inclined to suppose that this was the Buddha's view of things. But there may be ways of *reducing* suffering, without actually eliminating it, of ameliorating the lives we lead in this here and now world. And perhaps other of the desirable items on our listing may also be developed in one or another fashion quite apart from them showing up (as it were) as an accompaniment of enlightenment.

If something like this was the Buddha's understanding of nirvana and (as we may suppose) he exercised his AE compassionate nature through his teaching, then we should not be surprised to recognize that he had teachings that went beyond, or were other than, his dharma – those of his teachings directed specifically to achieving enlightenment and an end of suffering. And if this is so – and I think we can indisputably see it in his discourses with lay folks, individuals whom he did not expect or encourage to leave society and take up his path to enlightenment – then might not this go some way towards addressing why it is that different understandings of nirvana show up in discussions of what nirvana is?