

About Nibbāna

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Narada Maha Thera in *The Buddha and His Teachings* (1998) translates and narrates what the Buddha said about the characteristics of Nibbāna:

“What is Nibbāna, friend? The destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion – that, Friend, is called Nibbāna.”

Samyutta Nikāya

In contradistinction to Samsāra, the phenomenal existence, Nibbāna is eternal (*dhuva*), desirable (*subha*), and happy (*sukha*).

According to Buddhism all things mundane and supramundane, are classified into two divisions, namely, those conditioned by causes (*samkhata*) and those not conditioned by any cause (*asamkhata*).

In the Majjhima Nikāya, No. 57 (*The Blessing*, No. 4, pp. 129-132) the Buddha explains:

“Fivefold, Ānanda, are sensual bonds. What are the five? Forms cognizable by the eye – desirable, lovely, charming, infatuating, accompanied by thirst, and arousing the dust of the passions; sounds cognizable by the ear; odours cognizable by the nose; flavours cognizable by the tongue; contacts cognizable by the body – desirable, lovely charming, infatuating, accompanied by thirst, and arousing the dust of passions. These, Ānanda, are the five sensual bonds. Whatever happiness or pleasure arises from these sensual bonds, is known as sensual happiness.

“Whoso should declare: ‘This is the highest happiness and pleasure which beings may experience’ I do not grant him that, and why? Because there is other happiness more exalted and sublime.”

“And what is that other happiness more exalted and sublime? Here a Bhikkhu lives, completely separated from sense-desires, remote from immoral states, with initial and sustained application born of seclusion, in joy and happiness abiding in the First Ecstasy (Pathama Jhāna). This is happiness more exalted and sublime.

“But should anyone declare:— ‘This is the highest happiness and pleasure which beings may experience’ – I do not grant him that, and why? Because there is another happiness yet more exalted and sublime. (Narada 396)

“Here a Bhikkhu, stilling initial and sustained application, having tranquillity within, mind one-pointed, initial and sustained application having ceased, as a result of concentration lives in joy and happiness, abiding in the Second Ecstasy (Dutiya Jhāna). This is the other happiness more exalted and sublime.

“Yet should anyone declare that this is the highest happiness and pleasure experienced by beings – I do not grant it. There is happiness more exalted.

“Here a Bhikkhu, eliminating joy, abides serene, mindful, and completely conscious, experiencing in the body that of which the Ariyas say:— ‘Endowed with equanimity and mindfulness he abides in bliss.’ Thus he lives abiding in the Third Ecstasy (Tatiya Jhāna). This is the other happiness and pleasure more exalted and sublime.

“Still should anyone declare that this is the highest happiness – I do not grant it. There is happiness more exalted.

“Here a Bhikkhu, abandoning pleasure and pain, leaving behind former joy and grief – painless, pleasureless, perfect in equanimity and mindfulness – lives abiding in the Fourth Ecstasy (Catuttha Jhāna). This is the other happiness more exalted and sublime.

“However, were this declared to be the highest happiness – I do not

grant it. There is happiness more sublime.

“Here a Bhikkhu, passing entirely beyond the perception of form, with the disappearance of sense reaction, freed from attention to perceptions of diversity, thinks: ‘Infinity is Space’ – and lives abiding in the Realm of infinite Space (Ākāsānañcāyatana). This other happiness is more exalted and sublime.

“Nevertheless, if this were declared the highest happiness -- I do not grant it. There is happiness more sublime. (Narada 397)

“Here a Bhikkhu, transcending entirely the Realm of Infinite Space, thinks: ‘Infinite is Consciousness’, and lives abiding in the Realm of Infinite Consciousness (Viññānañcāyatana). This other happiness is more exalted and sublime.

“And yet should this be declared the highest happiness – I do not grant it. There is higher happiness.

“Here a Bhikkhu, transcending the Realm of Infinite Consciousness, thinks: ‘There is nothing whatsoever’ and lives abiding in the Realm of Nothingness (Ākiñcaññāyatana). This other happiness is more exalted and sublime than that.

“And still were this declared the highest happiness – I do not grant it. There is happiness more exalted.

“Here a Bhikkhu, passing entirely beyond the Realm of Nothingness, lives abiding in the Realm of Neither-Perception-nor-Non-Perception (N’eva saññān’āsañña-yatana). This other happiness is more exalted and sublime.

“Yet whoso should declare: ‘This is the highest bliss and pleasure which beings may experience’ – I do not grant him that, and why?” Because yet another happiness is more exalted and sublime.

“And what is this other happiness more exalted and sublime?”

Here a Bhikkhu, utterly transcending-the Realm of Neither Perception-nor-Non-Perception, lives, having attained to the Cessation of perception and sensation (Saññāvedayita-Nirodha). This, Ānanda, is the other happiness more exalted and sublime.

Of all the ten grades of happiness this is the highest and the most sublime. This transcendental state is Nirodha Samāpatti, that is, experiencing Nibbāna in this life itself. (Narada 398)

Having said the above, the Buddha anticipated, the following question:

“How can that state be called highest happiness when there is no consciousness to experience it?”

The Buddha replied:

“Nay, disciples, the Tathāgata does not recognize bliss merely because of a pleasurable sensation, but, disciples, wherever bliss is attained there and there only does the Accomplished One recognize bliss.” (Majjhima Nikāya, No. 57)

“I proclaim,” says the Buddha, “that everything experienced by the senses is sorrow.” But why? Because one in sorrow craves to be happy, and the so-called happy craves to be happier still. So insatiate is worldly happiness.”

In conventional terms the Buddha declares:

*“Nibbānam paramam sukham
Nibbāna is the highest bliss.”*

Narada Maha Thera concludes:

“It is bliss supreme because it is not a kind of happiness experienced by the senses. It is a blissful state of positive relief from the ills of life. The very fact of the cessation of suffering is ordinarily termed

happiness, though this is not an appropriate word to depict its real nature.”
(Narada 399)

Reference

Narada Maha Thera. 1998. *The Buddha and his Teachings*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.