

Suffering and Liberation in Theravāda Buddhism

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This paper identifies two themes-suffering and liberation from suffering - as the two key concerns of the teaching of the Buddha. The teaching of the Four Noble Truths contains the Buddha's understanding of human predicament and the solution he discovered for it.

The ultimate liberation from suffering is described in the teaching of the Buddha by such terms as 'diseaseless-ness,' 'decayless-ness,' and 'deathless-ness' which are popularly misunderstood as referring to some kind of eternal existence with all the imaginable blessings lasting indefinitely. The paper shows that the final goal can be characterized by such terms as 'deathless-ness' or immortality only in the sense that one who has realized it has conquered his death, and death no longer is to him what it is to ordinary people who are not enlightened. Subsequently the paper focuses on two crucial concepts that denote the final liberation in the early discourses of the Buddha, namely, purification and liberation. These terms signify the purification of mind of defiling factors and liberation of it from binding factors or psychological shackles or fetters. These also highlight what really happens to the liberated person at the liberation, affirming thereby that liberation is not a form of eternal life bestowed on one through the grace of an omnipotent deity; but it is a state of mind and resultant

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International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture February 2008, Vol.10, pp.87-103.

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state of happiness arising from its purification and liberation. Finally the paper lays emphasis on the fact that by describing human existence as characterized by suffering the teaching of the Buddha does not subscribe to some form of pessimism of life, and shows how the Buddha, as well as the disciples who realized the cessation of suffering were happy in experiencing the blissfulness of nirvana.

Key words: Teaching of the Buddha, Suffering, Purification,
Liberation, Death, Thirst, Pessimism, Nirvana.

I. Introduction

“Anuradha, in the past and even now I teach only suffering and its cessation” (*Samyutta-nikaya* IV: 384; *Majjhima-nikaya* I: 140)—these words of the Buddha to one of his disciples may be taken as summarizing his entire teaching. In the *Dhammacakka-pavattana-sutta*¹ [Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma], his very first public statement to the world, the Buddha revealed the crux of his teaching, namely, the Four Noble Truths—suffering, its origin, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation. In the well-known advice to Malunkyaputta, who challenged the Buddha to answer the ten questions,² known as ‘unexplained,’ the Buddha refused to answer his questions, but laid emphasis on what he taught and what he did not teach. What he taught, the Buddha said, is the four noble truths.³ In another instance the Buddha says: Monks, due to non-comprehension and non-realization of these four noble truths you and I have been wandering in

1 *Vinaya* I: 10-11, Also in *Samyutta-nikaya* [sacca-samyutta] V: 420-424. [Translation: (Bhikkhu Bodhi 2002 vol.II: 1843-1847)].

2 The ten questions are: Is the world eternal? Is it not eternal? Is the world finite? Is it infinite? Are the body and the soul the same? Are they different? Does the enlightened person exist after death? Does he not? Does he both exist and not exist? Does he neither exist nor does not exist? These questions appear as fourteen in the Mahayana literature.

3 *Culamalunkyaputta-sutta*, *Majjhima-nikaya* (63). [Translation: (Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi 2001: 533-537)].

this samsara for a long time” (*Samyutta-nikaya* [sacca-samyutta] V: 431).

The Buddha’s statement to Anuradha is just one among many repeated affirmations by him to the centrality of the theme of suffering and its cessation in his teaching. In what follows I will give a brief analysis of the key aspects of this teaching with the view to highlight the connection between life and death and liberation in the teaching of the Buddha. My analysis will be based on the discourses of the Buddha as found in the Pali canon. Toward the end of the discussion I will say a few words about how these central conceptions of early Buddhism need to be understood in the broader context of Buddhism as a way of life.

II. Search for Liberation from Suffering

Describing his journey in search of liberation from suffering, the Buddha, after his liberation, reminisced in the following manner:

And to me brethren, before I was enlightened, while I was yet unenlightened and was Bodhisatta there came this thought: Alas! This world has fallen upon trouble. There is getting born and decaying and passing away and being reborn. And yet from this suffering, from decay and death, an escape is not known. O, when shall escape from this suffering, from decay and death, be seen (*Samyutta-nikaya* II: 10-11).

This statement makes clear what was behind the Prince Siddhartha’s move to renounce his worldly pleasures and embark on a journey as a seeker after what is wholesome (*kim-kusala-gavesi*). A traditional story occurring in the Jataka says that Prince Siddhartha saw, in four consecutive trips to his pleasure park, an old person, sick person, a dead body and one who had undertaken a life of religiousness. It is clear that the meaning of the story is that the Young Prince was confronted with the realities of life which made him make a drastic change in his way of life. What these textual and traditional accounts highlight is the crucial significance of the perception of

deep-rooted unsatisfactoriness in human existence in motivating Siddhartha to undertake his search for liberation.

As a liberation-seeker Sramana,⁴ Siddhartha followed some well-known teachers of his day and attained jhanic absorptions characterized by increase aloofness from the external world but concluded that such temporary and volatile escape from reality was not what he was after. He wanted to find true liberation of mind resulting from seeing through wisdom. For this purpose, he had to device his own way and no teacher was there to guide him. The path he followed has been described in detail in the Bhayabherava-sutta (Discourse on fear and dread) of the *Majjhima-nikaya* (4). I will not describe it here for the sake of space. Let me quote from the Discourse the Buddha's account of the final liberation-generating knowledge he achieved by following the path:

When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints. I directly knew as it actually is: 'This is suffering'; I directly knew as it actually is: 'This is the origin of suffering'; I directly knew as it actually is: 'This is the cessation of suffering'; I directly knew as it actually is: 'This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering'; I directly knew as it actually is: 'These are the taints'; I directly knew as it actually is: 'This is the origin of taints'; I directly knew as it actually is: 'This is the cessation of taints'; I directly knew as it actually is: 'This is the way leading to the cessation of taints.' When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it was liberated, there came the knowledge: 'It is liberated.' I directly knew: 'Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being'

(Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi 2001: 106).

I will return to this discussion in the last part of this essay. What

⁴ Sramana was the main non-brahmanic religious tradition that comprised liberation seekers of various types.

needs to be highlighted at this point is that the final realization has been seen in the light of cessation of birth, which is the immediate cause of all other forms of suffering including death.

III. Suffering

The Buddhist analysis of human predicament may well be summarized in the word 'suffering' [dukkha]. As the Buddha's statement about his pre-enlightenment stage, quoted above, reveals, suffering characterized by birth, decay and death is the predicament of life that the Buddha [as Prince Siddhartha] found himself and all others in the world have been subjected to and wished to find an answer for. In the very first sermon, referred to earlier, the Buddha described it in the following words:

And what is the noble truth of suffering? Birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; to be associated with the unpleasant is suffering; to be dissociated from the pleasant is suffering, not to obtain what one wants is suffering, in short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering (Bhikkhu Bodhi 2002: 1843).

This analysis refers to various kinds of suffering one is bound to undergo so long as one is under the influence of 'thirst' [tanha: the thirst for the sensual pleasures, for becoming and for destruction] that is described as the cause of suffering.

Due to the complexity of the concept of suffering, the ancient commentators have identified three important aspects of it, namely, (i) dukkha as ordinary suffering [dukkha-dukkha], dukkha caused by change [viparinaama-dukkha], and dukkha as a constructed state [sankhaara-dukkha] (*Visuddhimagga*: 499). Of these three, the first refers to any form of ordinary physical and mental suffering described above as suffering of birth, old-age, disease and death, and the second is what is caused by changing of pleasant conditions and situations into neutrality or unpleasantness. The third, however,

is psychologically and philosophically the most important and it corresponds to this last aspect described in the above analysis of suffering, namely, suffering caused by clinging to the five aggregates of personality. The five aggregates are material form, feeling, perception, conditioned states and consciousness, and combination of these aspects is called a [human] being. The suffering associated with this pentad [as indicated by the phrase ‘in short’] is the totality of suffering. In other words, it shows that there is no difference between the five aggregates affected by clinging and suffering itself.

In trying to understand human suffering, we need to pay special attention to the specification of the five aggregates as ‘affected by clinging,’ which, according to the doctrine of Dependent Co-origination, is caused by ‘thirst’ [tanhaa], which is mentioned as the cause of suffering. This indicates that the human existence characterized by the five aggregates itself is not suffering. What makes it sorrowful is the fact of its being affected by clinging. It is to such existence characterized by thirst and clinging that all forms of suffering mentioned in the analysis of the first noble truth pertain.

In the Buddhist analysis, there is no being over and above or apart from the five aggregates. The traditional belief in a soul [aatma/atta] postulates something imperishable and permanent in [human] beings, which is believed to be the factor that secures one’s so-called identity. The materialists of the time of the Buddha accepted the validity of matter only and consequently they held that life will be over with its physical destruction. Those who believed in an everlasting soul held that it transmigrates from birth to birth retaining one’s personal identity intact. Very often the last aspect of the five aggregates, namely, the consciousness, was taken as representing this soul. One of the followers of the Buddha himself held the view that ‘it is consciousness that runs through and roams around unchanged.’⁵ The Buddha rebuked the disciple for holding this wrong view and clarified his position pointing out that ‘I have described consciousness as dependently arisen.’⁶ Within a dependently arisen reality there cannot be anything independent

⁵ *vinnanam sandhavati samsarati anannam Majjhima-nikaya* (63).

⁶ *paticca-samuppannam vinnanam vuttam maya* (Ibid.).

which agrees with the traditional characterization of *aatma* as ‘unborn, permanent, everlasting, ancient; not destroyed at the destruction of the physical body.’⁷

In the *Sabbaasava-sutta* [Discourse on all taints] of the *Majjima-nikaya* (2) the Buddha traces the origin of the self-view to our unnecessary agonizing over our own existence. According to this analysis, we do not attend to things fit for attention but attend to things that are not fit for attention, and consequently we both generate taints [aasava] that are not in us and increase the taints that are already in us. The unwise attention is sixteen-fold and relates to the psychological agony about the past, the present and the future of our own existence. They are as follows:

Was I in the past?
 Was I not in the past?
 What was I in the past?
 How was I in the past?
 Having been what, what did I become in the past?

Shall I be in the future?
 Shall I be not in the future?
 Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future?
 How shall I be in the future?
 Having been what, what shall I become in the future?

[Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the present thus]:
 Am I?
 Am I not?
 What am I?
 How am I?
 Where has this being come from?
 Where will it go?

⁷ *Ajo nityam shasvatoyam purano – na hanyate hanyamane sharire:* (Chandogya Upanishad. VIII.7.1).

Subsequently, the Buddha explains how this kind of agonizing causes six different views on self:

When he attends unwisely in this way, one of six views arises in him:

- the view ‘I have a self’ arises in him as true and established;
- the view ‘I have no self’ arises in him as true and established;
- the view ‘I perceive self with self’ arises in him as true and established;
- the view ‘I perceive not-self with self’ arises in him as true and established;
- the view ‘I perceive self with not-self’ arises in him as true and established;
- the view ‘This my self, which speaks and feels, which experiences the fruits of good and bad actions now here and now there, this self is permanent, stable, everlasting, unchanging, remaining the same for ever and ever.

The agonies connected to our own existence and the self-view are mutually connected, each feeding on to the other. The anxiety over one’s existence and clinging to oneself are the results of this self-generating process.

Among the sufferings of life listed in the analysis of suffering, the most devastating is death, which is the final blow on life. Death signifies the loss of everything associated with life. Although it is the loss of everything, both good and bad associated with life, driven by our desire for life, we do not take into account the fact that at death we are relieved not only from pleasant things but also from all unpleasant things in life. Nevertheless, what seems to matter to us is that at death our losing all that we consider as pleasant. Death simply is the total destruction of the entire universe one has been building throughout one’s life time placing oneself at its centre. In this sense, death is not mere physical act of breathing the last but the severest possible blow on our ego-centred universe constructed in the course of our whole life time: we are separated from the pleasant and the pleasant is separated from us without our willingness. One’s eternal hope is to have everything that one wishes to possess although such expectation can be utterly unrealistic. The Venerable Sariputta describes this unrealistic human desire in

the following words:

And what, friends, is ‘not to obtain what one wants is suffering?’ To beings subject to birth there comes the wish: ‘Oh, that we were not subject to birth! That birth would not come to us!’ But this is not to be obtained by wishing, and not to obtain what one wants is suffering. To beings subject to ageing, ... subject to sickness, ... subject to death, ... subject to sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair, there comes the wish: Oh, that we were not subject to sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair! That sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair would not come to us!’ But this is not to be obtained by wishing, and not to obtain what one wants is suffering.⁸

The analysis by Sariputta highlights the nature of ordinary human psychology characterized by unrealistic expectations: we expect the impossible to happen; we expect a life without any sorrow—this, as Sariputta shows, cannot be attained by mere wish, which implies that it can be attained by following a path of mental development. As we will see later, the end result of such a path will be to get rid of the unrealistic desire by seeing the folly of it.

Furthermore, looking from a more realistic point of view we would see that everything that is mentioned as suffering is part of human life. It is natural for one to be born to reach old-age gradually, to be subject to various kinds of illness, sooner or later, and finally to die. Thus old-age, disease and death are natural phenomena of human life. In the course of life people undergo loss of hope, frustrations and all kinds of unpleasant situations in life. The important question is: why we need to be devastated by these natural phenomena?

Traditionally the religions have provided an answer to the problem of death—it is the ever-lasting existence in a paradise to be born after one’s death, without any further death. This, furthermore, is claimed to be granted to one through the grace of an all-powerful God. In other words, this is a

⁸ Saccavibhanga-sutta, *Majjhima-nikaya* (141). [Translation: (Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi 2001: 1099)].

promise for everlasting life without having to fear about dying and any other calamity such as ageing, getting sick or any form of mental or physical agony. We are given a promise of a transcendental existence where, once born, one will never die again, as opposed to the worldly existence, which is full of all forms of suffering. As indicated earlier, this is not the Buddha's solution to the problem. Now we turn to the solution proposed in the teaching of the Buddha.

IV. Liberation from Suffering

As found in the passage I quoted at the beginning of this discussion the cessation of suffering was one of the two key aspects of the teaching of the Buddha. It was also revealed through those passages that the motivation for the Buddha's noble quest was the suffering characterized by old-age, decay and death. Consequently one would expect the Buddha to come up with a solution similar to one advocated in many other religions, a prospect of unending blissful life, but this is not to be. As the liberation from suffering the Buddha did not postulate a state or a paradise characterized by ever-lasting life, in which, once born one would never die. Such a belief would go against the very idea of dependent origin of suffering according to which there cannot be birth without association of suffering.

In the exposition of the four noble truths, the Buddha described the origin of suffering as the thirst for pleasurable objects, continued existence and destruction. Following this way of describing the cause of suffering the Buddha described the liberation from suffering as "the complete cessation and detachment without residue" of the very same thirst. With the cessation of thirst all the other dependently arisen phenomena, such as clinging, becoming, birth, decay and death come to an end. This, in brief, is the liberation from suffering as taught by the Buddha.

This final goal is known in the Theravada tradition as nirvaana/nibbaana which is understood as the blowing out of the all the defilements. In the

discourses it is more frequently referred to as ‘comprehensive extinguishment.’ The relevant Pali term is ‘pari-nibbaana’ which is intimately connected with the idea of nibbaana. It is important at this juncture to study this concept in a little more detail. The term ‘parinibbaana’ or ‘parinirvaana’ (in Sanskrit) is usually used in current Buddhist parlance to refer to the passing away of the Buddha or an arahant. The mistaken idea is that the Buddha or an arahant really attains nirvana only along with his parinirvaana which is understood to be the death of such enlightened person. Contrary to this belief, in fact, the discourses make it quite clear that the idea of parinibbaana is basically connected to what happens in this very life to one who realizes cessation of suffering. Let me give some examples: In the Rathavinita-sutta of the *Majjhima-nikaya* (24) there is recorded a discussion between two great disciples of the Buddha, Sariputta and Punna Mantaniputta on the issue of the purpose of the holy life lived under the Buddha. When questioned by the former on this matter, the latter admits that it is lived not for the sake of any one of the seven types of purification.⁹ When questioned further by Sariputta as to what purpose, if not for any one of the seven purifications, Punna Mantaniputta answers by saying that it is for the sake of ‘*comprehensive extinguishment without clinging*’¹⁰ The point of the discussion is to show that each of the seven purifications leads to the subsequent purification and that all seven together lead to the final goal, which is comprehensive extinguishment without clinging. The usage of the concept in this context shows that the goal is achieved within this life itself and the attainment does not mean the physical death of the person. In many instances, for example, the attainment of the final goal has been described as ‘mind was liberated from influxes without clinging.’¹¹ The concept of parinibbaana without clinging and the

9 The seven purifications outline the gradual process of purification taught by the Buddha. They are: purification of virtue (*sila-visuddhi*), mind (*citta*), view (*ditthi*), overcoming doubt (*kankha-vitarana*), and knowledge and vision (*nana-dassana*), purification by knowledge and vision of what is the path and what is not the path (*magga-amagga-nanadassana*), purification by knowledge and vision of the way (*patipada-nanadassana*) and purification of knowledge and vision (*nanadassana*).

10 In their translation Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, translate ‘anupaadaa-parinibbaana’ as ‘final Nibbana without clinging.’ I would, however, translate ‘parinibaana’ not as ‘final nibbaana’ but as ‘comprehensive extinguishment,’ which is closer to the original etymology.

11 The relevant Pali phrase is: *anupadaya asavehi cittam vimucci* (*Majjhima-nikaya* I: 501; *Vinaya* I: 17).

concept of liberation without clinging, no doubt, are synonymous in these contexts. The concept of parinibbaana has been used in the same sense in places such as: “That Exalted One, being himself comprehensively extinguished, teaches the doctrine for comprehensive extinguishment”;¹² and “comprehensively extinguished in here itself.”¹³ It is emphasized that the goal of being without thirst is to be achieved ‘before the break of the body.’¹⁴

This characterization of final liberation is closely connected to the two most common terms used in the discourses to refer to it, namely, purification (*visuddhi*) and liberation (*vimutti*). In the *Dhammapada*, the insight into the three signata, namely, impermanence, sorrowfulness and non-substantiality are described as ‘the path to purification.’¹⁵ This reminds us of Buddhaghosa’s monumental work, the *Path of Purification* (*Visuddhi-magga*), detailing the path to cessation of suffering. The concept of emancipation (*vimutti*) is equally used in the discourses to refer to the release one achieves by freeing one’s mind from influxes. In the *Theragatha* and the *Therigatha*, two anthologies included in the *Khuddaka-nikaya* of the Pali canon, in which the joyous utterances of the liberated monks and nuns are recorded, it is almost customary to these liberated people to describe their attainment as ‘liberation of mind from influxes.’¹⁶ Furthermore, the Buddha and the arahants (those who have realized the cessation of suffering) are often described as spending

12 *Parinibbuto so bhagava parinibbanaya dhammam deseti: (Digha-nikaya III: 55).*

13 *Idheva parinibbuto or idheva parinibayati:* Also look at the usage, by the Buddha, of the concept ‘parinibbaana’ in the *Sallekha-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikaya* (8): That one who is himself untamed, undisciplined, [with defilements] *unextinguished*, should tame another, discipline him, and help *extinguish* [his defilements] is impossible; that one who is himself tamed, disciplines, [with defilements] *extinguished*, should tame another, discipline him, and help *extinguish* [his defilements] is possible. So too: A person given to cruelty has non-cruelty by which to *extinguish* it ... [emphasis added] (Translation from Bhikkhu Nanmoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi 2001: 130).

14 The relevant concept is ‘*viita-tanho puraa-bhedaa*’ [before break-up] and found emphasized in the *Purabheda-sutta* of the *Sutta-nipata* (853).

15 When one sees with wisdom that all the constructed phenomena are impermanent then he becomes disgusted in suffering; this is the path to purification. When one sees with wisdom that all the phenomena are sorrowful ... when one sees with wisdom that all phenomena are non-substantial...this is the path to purification (*Dhammapada: 277-279*).

16 “*Cittam aasavehi vimucci* = mind was freed from influxes” or similar expressions (*Vinaya I: 17; Majjhima-nikaya I: 501*).

their leisure time “experiencing the happiness of emancipation.”¹⁷

These two concepts respectively refer to defiling phenomena, which are usually described by such terms as defilements and related concepts, and hindrances,¹⁸ and binding phenomena, described as influxes, cankers, bondages, and engagements.¹⁹ Defilements are basically attachment, hatred and delusion and related phenomena. The five factors that obstruct the smooth practice of the path, namely, sensual desire, extreme aversion, sloth and torpor, confusion and regret and doubting mentality are called hindrances [niivarana]. The concept of purification becomes meaningful in the context of these defiling phenomena. In addition to being a deep psychological analysis, the two mutually related concepts reveal how the Buddha gave a new meaning to the deep-rooted belief of ritualistic purity and impurity prevalent among the Brahmins during his time. The concept of emancipation derives its meaning from the presence of influxes or characteristics of mind that infatuates it, binds it or enslaves it to pleasures. The predominant character of these phenomena is to create bondage or bounded nature in human mind. Emancipation is to liberate one’s mind from these phenomena. The Buddha’s analysis of these two phenomena, purification and emancipation and the related characteristics, in addition to making his teaching one of the most psychological of all religious teachings hitherto available, also makes clear how liberation from suffering has been perceived in the early Buddhist tradition.

The discussion up to this point shows clearly that liberation according to the teaching of the Buddha is a result of purification of mind and liberating one’s mind from defiling factors. The final knowledge that gives birth to this liberation is called ‘the knowledge of the extinction of influxes (aasava-kkhaya-naana),’ and in a passage quoted earlier, it was described as knowing what influxes are, how they originate, their cessation and the path leading to their cessation. The arising of this knowledge is the liberation-generating knowledge and with the dawn of it one knows that one is

17 *Vimuttisukha-patisamvedi* (Vinaya I: 3).

18 Concepts such as *kilesa*, *upakkilesa*, *sankilesa* (all meaning different shades of defiling factors) and *niivarana* (hindrances) are some examples.

19 *Aasava*, *sannojana*, *bandhana*, *yoga* are some examples.

liberated. To quote again:

When it was liberated, there came the knowledge: ‘It is liberated.’
I directly knew: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived,
what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any
state of being.’

Now we need to connect this account with the suffering characterized by old-age, decay and death—the obvious question being: how this liberation liberates one from such suffering? Does this mean that the person so liberated would not be subject to old-age, decay and death? In the Discourse of Noble Search [*Majjhima-nikaya* (26)] the Buddha says to monks not to search for things that are subject to old-age, decay, disease, death, grief and defilement, being oneself subject to these phenomena already. Instead, he advises them to search for that which is not old-age, decay and death. He says thus:

Here someone being himself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, seeks the unborn supreme security from bondage, Nibbaana; being himself subject to ageing, having understood the danger in what is subject to ageing, he seeks the unageing supreme security from bondage, Nibbaana; being subject to sickness, ... he seeks the unailing supreme security from bondage, Nibbaana; being himself subject to death, ... he seeks the deathless supreme security from bondage, Nibbaana; being himself subject to sorrow, ... he seeks the sorrowless supreme security from bondage, Nibbaana; being himself subject to defilement, ... he seeks the undefiled supreme security from bondage, Nibbaana (Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi 2001: 255-256).

Any literal understanding of this passage may be interpreted as Buddha referring to some state of existence without birth, old-age, decay and death. In fact the popular understanding of nirvana is not without this difficulty. What the Buddha means is something quite different: it is to liberate oneself from the mentality obsessed by thirst which makes natural phenomena of life, such as old-age, decay and death disastrous for oneself. For example, old-age,

disease or death become a disaster to the amount of thirst one has toward gratification of one's senses. Once the thirst is removed from the mind, or once the mind is liberated or purified of one's thirst these phenomena will no longer bear the same dreadful meaning as they used to. In addressing, after his enlightenment, the skeptical five ascetics, who were his early companions during the time he was striving to attain the Buddha-hood, the Buddha announced to them that 'the Deathless [amata] has been attained' by him.²⁰ Now it is clear that this deathless or immortality is a state of mind achieved in this very life. Such a state is further described as blindfolding the Mara [the personification of death]; to have become invisible to him; depriving the eyes of the Evil One [=Mara] of the opportunity of seeing; and going beyond the hunter's range.²¹

V. Concluding Remarks

Suffering and liberation from suffering constitutes, in this manner, the central thrust of the teaching of the Buddha. Sometimes this emphasis on suffering has earned the teaching of the Buddha an undeserved reputation as a form of pessimism. I do not wish to answer anew this question already answered by many Buddhist scholars. It is, important however to note that in the Buddha's own admission [as we quoted at the very outset of this discussion], his teaching is on suffering and its cessation and not on suffering alone.

It is also equally important to remember that the Buddha talked about what can be called 'social suffering' or suffering that exists in society, such as poverty, discrimination based on caste, wars and the like. These questions were discussed not merely as examples of suffering justifying renouncing the worldly life but as issues to be dealt with as required by happy and good worldly life of ordinary men and women. It is clear that the Buddha did not

²⁰ Ariyapariyesana-sutta: *Majjhima-nikaya* (26).

²¹ See Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (2001: 266-267) for details.

envisage a society in which everyone renounces household life to become monks or nuns. He envisaged a prosperous householder life in which people abide by basic ethical norms characterized by the five precepts (panca-siila).

The Buddha and his monastic followers in particular were not gloomy people who only saw the dreadfulness of life. They were required to see suffering in order to comprehend it,²² and not to be put-off by it. At one place the Buddha advises his followers that they, irrespective of whether they were monks or nuns or men or women, should reflect on death. The reason for this is that such a reflection tends to make one's life much more meaningful, considerate and humane; but not gloomy, withdrawn and apprehensive of death all the time. Having achieved the deathless the Buddha was always happy and with a mild smile (mihita-pubbangama) as observed by his contemporaries (Rahula 1978: 27). The secret of the Buddha's smile was that he had comprehended suffering and realized its cessation-the liberation.

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²² According to the Dhammacakka-pavattana-sutta (*Samyutta-nikaya* V: 420-424; for translation: bhikkhu Bodhi 2002 vol.II: 1843-1847), dukkha is to be comprehended [parinneyyam], cause of it to be given [pahaatabbam], the cessation of it to be realized [sacchikaatabbam], and the path is to be practiced [bhaavetabbam].

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