

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF NIBBANA

*“What is Nibbana, friend? The destruction of lust,
the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion
—that, friend, is called Nibbana.”*

~ Samyutta Nikaya

- 33.1.1 In contradistinction to *Samsara*, the phenomenal existence, Nibbana is eternal (*dhuva*), desirable (*subha*), and happy (*sukha*).
- 33.1.2 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*).
- 33.1.3 “These three are the features of all conditioned things (*samkhata-lakkhanani*) — arising (*uppada*), cessation (*vaya*), and change of state (*thitassaannathattam*).”¹
- 33.1.4 Arising or becoming is an essential characteristic of everything that is conditioned by a cause or causes. That which arises or becomes is subject to change and dissolution. Every conditioned thing is constantly becoming and is perpetually changing. The universal law of change applies to everything in the cosmos —both mental and physical — ranging from the minutest germ or tiniest particle to the highest being or the most massive object. Mind, though imperceptible, changes faster even than matter.

- 33.1.5 Nibbana, a supramundane state, realized by Buddhas and *Arahants*, is declared to be not conditioned by any cause. Hence it is not subject to any becoming, change and dissolution. It is birthless (*ajata*), decayless (*ajara*), and deathless (*amara*). Strictly speaking, Nibbana is neither a cause nor an effect. Hence it is unique (*kevala*).
- 33.1.6 Everything that has sprung from a cause must inevitably pass away, and as such is undesirable (*asubha*).
- 33.1.7 Life is man's dearest possession, but when he is confronted with insuperable difficulties and unbearable burdens, then that very life becomes an intolerable burden. Sometimes he tries to seek relief by putting an end to his life as if suicide would solve all his individual problems.
- 33.1.8 Bodies are adorned and adored. But those charming, adorable and enticing forms, when disfigured by time and disease, become extremely repulsive.
- 33.1.9 Men desire to live peacefully and happily with their near ones, surrounded by amusements and pleasures, but, if by some misfortune, the wicked world runs counter to their ambitions and desires, the inevitable sorrow is then almost indescribably sharp.
- 33.1.10 The following beautiful parable aptly illustrates the fleeting nature of life and its alluring pleasures.
- 33.1.11 A man was forcing his way through a thick forest beset with thorns and stones. Suddenly to his great consternation, an elephant appeared and gave chase. He took to his heels through fear, and, seeing a well, he ran to hide in it. But to his horror he saw a viper at the bottom of the well. However, lacking other means of escape, he jumped into the well, and clung to a thorny creeper that was growing in it. Looking up, he saw two mice — a white one and a black one — gnawing

at the creeper. Over his face there was a beehive from which occasional drops of honey trickled.

- 33.1.12 This man, foolishly unmindful of this precarious position, was greedily tasting the honey. A kind person volunteered to show him a path of escape. But the greedy man begged to be excused till he had enjoyed himself.
- 33.1.13 The thorny path is *samsara*, the ocean of life. Man's life is not a bed of roses. It is beset with difficulties and obstacles to overcome, with opposition and unjust criticism, with attacks and insults to be borne. Such is the thorny path of life.
- 33.1.14 The elephant here resembles death; the viper, old age; the creeper, birth; the two mice, night and day. The drops of honey correspond to the fleeting sensual pleasures. The man represents the so-called being. The kind person represents the Buddha.
- 33.1.15 The temporary material happiness is merely the gratification of some desire. When the desired thing is gained, another desire arises. Insatiate are all desires.
- 33.1.16 Sorrow is essential to life, and cannot be evaded.
- 33.1.17 Nibbana, being non-conditioned, is eternal (*dhava*), desirable (*subha*), and happy (*sukha*).
- 33.1.18 The happiness of Nibbana should be differentiated from ordinary worldly happiness. Nibbanic bliss grows neither stale nor monotonous. It is a form of happiness that never wearies, never fluctuates. It arises by allaying passions (*vupasama*) unlike that temporary worldly happiness which results from the gratification of some desire (*vedayita*).
- 33.1.19 In the Bahuvédaniya Sutta² the Buddha enumerates ten grades of happiness beginning with the gross material pleasures which

result from the pleasant stimulation of the senses. As one ascends higher and higher in the moral plane the type of happiness becomes ever more exalted, sublime and subtle, so much so that the world scarcely recognizes it as happiness. In the first *Jhana* one experiences a transcendental happiness (*sukha*), absolutely independent of the five senses. This happiness is realized by inhibiting the desire for the pleasures of the senses highly prized by the materialist. In the fourth *Jhana* however, even this type of happiness is discarded as coarse and unprofitable, and equanimity (*upekkha*) is termed happiness.

33.1.20 The Buddha says:

“Fivefold, Ananda, 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, Ananda, 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.”³

33.1.21 “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 Jhana*). 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.”

33.1.22 “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 Jhana*). 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.”

33.1.23 “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 Jhana*). 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.”

33.1.24 “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 Jhana*). 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.”

33.1.25 “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

(*Akasanancayatana*). 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.”

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

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

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

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

33.1.28 “Here a *Bhikkhu*, passing entirely beyond the Realm of Nothingness, lives abiding in the Realm of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception (*N’eva sanna n’assanayatana*). 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.”

33.1.29 “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 (*Sannavedayita-*

Nirodha). This, Ananda, is the other happiness more exalted and sublime.”

33.1.30 Of all the ten grades of happiness this is the highest and the most sublime. This transcendental state is *Nirodha Samapatti*, that is, experiencing Nibbana in this life itself.

33.1.31 As the Buddha Himself has anticipated, one may ask:
“How can that state be called highest happiness when there is no consciousness to experience it.”

33.1.32 The Buddha replies:
“Nay, disciples, the *Tathàgata* 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.”⁴

33.1.33 “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 crave to be happier still. So insatiate is worldly happiness.

33.1.34 In conventional terms the Buddha declares:
“*Nibbanam paramam sukham* — Nibbana is the highest bliss,” 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.

33.1.35 The very fact of the cessation of suffering is ordinarily termed happiness, though this is not an appropriate word to depict its real nature.

33.2 WHERE IS NIBBANA?

33.2.1 In the *Milinda Panha* the Venerable Nagasena answers this question thus:

“There is no spot looking East, South, West, or North, above, below or beyond, where Nibbana is situate, and yet Nibbana is, and he who orders his life aright, grounded in virtue and with rational attention, may realize it whether he lives in Greece, China, Alexandria, or in Kosala.”

“Just as fire is not stored up in any particular place but arises when the necessary conditions exist, so Nibbana is said not to exist in a particular place, but it is attained when the necessary conditions are fulfilled.”

33.2.2 In the *Rohitassa Sutta* the Buddha states:

“In this very one-fathom-long body, along with its perceptions and thoughts, do I proclaim the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world and the path leading to the cessation of the world.”⁵

33.2.3 Here world means suffering. The cessation of the world, therefore, means the cessation of suffering which is Nibbana.

33.2.4 One’s Nibbana is dependent upon this one-fathom body. It is not something that is created nor is it something to be created.⁶

33.2.5 Nibbana is there where the four elements of cohesion (*apo*), extension (*pathavi*), heat (*tejo*), and motion (*vayo*) find no footing.

33.2.6 Referring to where Nibbana is, *Samyutta Nikaya*⁷ states:

“Where the four elements that cleave, and stretch, And burn, and move no further footing find.”

33.2.7 In the *Udana* the Buddha says:

“Just as, O *Bhikkhus*, notwithstanding those rivers that reach the great ocean and the torrents of rain that fall from the sky, neither a deficit nor a surplus is perceptible in the great ocean, even so despite the many *Bhikkhus* that enter the remainderless *Pari-Nibbana* there is neither a deficit nor a surplus in the element of Nibbana.”

33.2.8 Nibbana is, therefore, not a kind of heaven where a transcendental ego resides, but a Dhamma (an attainment) which is within the reach of us all.

33.2.9 An eternal heaven, which provides all forms of pleasures desired by man and where one enjoys happiness to one’s heart’s content, is practically inconceivable. It is absolutely impossible to think that such a place could exist permanently anywhere.

33.2.10 Granting that there is no place where Nibbana is stored up, King Milinda questions Venerable Nagasena whether there is any basis whereon a man stand and, ordering his life aright, realize Nibbana.

“Yes, O King, there is such a basis.”

“Which, then, Venerable Nagasena, is that basis?”

“Virtue, O King, is that basis. For, if grounded in virtue, and careful in attention, whether in the land of the Scythians or the Greeks, whether in China or in Tartary, whether in Alexandria or in Nikumba, whether in Benares or in Kosala, whether in Kashmir or in Gandhara, whether on a mountain top or in the highest heavens, — wherever he may be, the man who orders his life aright will attain Nibbana.”⁸

33.3 WHAT ATTAINS NIBBANA?

33.3.1 This question must necessarily be set aside as irrelevant, for Buddhism denies the existence of a permanent entity or an immortal soul.

33.3.2 The so-called being of which we often hear as the “vestment of the soul” is a mere bundle of conditioned factors.

33.3.3 The Arahant Bhikkhuni Vajira says:
*“And just as when the parts are rightly set,
The word chariot ariseth (in our minds).
So doth our usage conveniennnt to say
A being when the aggregates are there.”*²

33.3.4 According to Buddhism the so-called being consists of mind and matter (*nama-rupa*) which constantly change with lightning rapidity. Apart from these two composite factors there exists no permanent soul or an unchanging entity. The so-called “I” is also an illusion.

33.3.5 Instead of an eternal soul or an illusory “I” Buddhism posits a dynamic life-flux (*santati*) which flows ad infinitum as long as it is fed with ignorance and craving. When these two root causes are eradicated by any individual on attaining *Arahantship*, they cease to flow with his final death.

33.3.6 In conventional terms one says that the *Arahant* has attained *Parinibbana* or passed away into Nibbana.

33.3.7 “As right now, and here” there is neither a permanent ego nor an identical being it is needless to state that there can be no “I” or a soul (*atta*) in Nibbana.

33.3.8 The Visuddhi Magga states:
*“Misery only doth exist, none miserable;
Nor doer is there, nought save the deed is found;*

*Nibbana is, but not the man who seeks it;
The path exists, but not the traveller on it.”¹⁰*

33.3.9 The chief difference between the Buddhist conception of Nibbana and the Hindu conception of Nirvana or *Mukti* lies in the fact that Buddhists view their goal without an eternal soul and creator, while Hindus do believe in an eternal soul and a creator.

33.3.10 This is the reason why Buddhism can neither be called Eternalism nor Nihilism.

33.3.11 In Nibbana nothing is ‘eternalised’ nor is anything ‘annihilated.’

33.3.12 As the saying goes:

*“If any teach Nirvana is to cease,
Say unto such they lie.
If any teach Nirvana is to live,
Say unto such they err.”*

33.3.13 It must be admitted that this question of Nibbana is the most difficult in the Teaching of the Buddha. However much we may speculate we shall never be in a position to comprehend its real nature. The best way to understand Nibbana is to try to realize it with our own intuitive knowledge.

33.3.14 Although Nibbana cannot be perceived by the five senses and lies in obscurity in so far as the average man is concerned, the only straight path that leads to Nibbana has been explained by the Buddha with all the necessary details and is laid open to all. The goal is now clouded. But the method of achievement is perfectly clear and when that achievement is realized, the Goal is as clear as “the moon freed from clouds.”

33.4 NOTES ON CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

1. Gradual Sayings, i, p. 135.
2. Majjhima Nikaya, No. 57.
3. Majjhima Nikaya, No. 57 The Blessing, No. 4, pp. 129-132.
4. Majjhima Nikaya, No. 57.
5. *Imasmim byamamate y'eve kalebare sasannimhi samanake lokai ca pannapemi, lokasamudayan ca, lokanirodhan ca, lokanirodhagaminim patipadan ca, pannapemi* — Samyutta Nikaya, i, p. 62.
6. *Pattabbam eva h' etam maggena, na uppadetabbam.* Verily this (Nibbana) is to be attained (or realized) by means of the four Paths of Sainthood, and is not to be produced — Visuddhi Magga.
7. *Yattha apo ca pathavi tejo vajo na gadhati* — Kindred Sayings, pt. i, p. 23.
8. Questions of King Milinda, pp. 202-204.
9. Kindred Sayings, part 1, p. 170.
10. *Dukkham' eva hi na koci dukkhito
Karako no kiriya', va vijjati
Atthi nibbuti na nibbuto puma
Maggam atthi gamako na vijjati*