



Nirvana Immersion

Homework Master

Class Two: Escaping the Wheel

1) Here are the English translations of three traditional Sanskrit synonyms used for the word “nirvana”: *freedom*, *peace*, and *liberation*. Give the Sanskrit original for each, and explain its “flavor” with regard to your own favorite negative emotion.

[The Sanskrit for the English word *freedom* is *moksha*. This synonym for *nirvana* has the flavor of escaping from a bad place, such as a prison.

So let’s say that our own worst negative emotion is jealousy: some part of our mind is disturbed, stirred up, by recurring thoughts about someone else having some good fortune that we would rather they didn’t have. And then imagine that someone has given us a method of escaping from that bad place in our mind, forever. That’s the real feeling of *moksha*.

The Sanskrit for *peace* is *shanti*, a word which has two different flavors: a quiet place, away from noise and bustle; but also “rest in peace”: stopping something permanently. For ourselves, we can imagine the quiet that comes into our mind, when our jealousy has been “killed” forever.

The Sanskrit for *liberation* is *mukti*. This word is often used in the sense of being cured, or freed, from a serious disease. Imagine then that we have found a way to free ourselves from a terrible migraine: from the sick thoughts of jealousy that ruin our day, day after day.]

2) What are the “four seals” which guarantee that a viewpoint is authentic in tradition? Please describe briefly the flow between the four.

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[The four seals which mark a teaching as authentic are the following:

- 1) Anything that was ever brought into being is going to pass away.
- 2) Anything infected by the impurity of negative emotions is going to lead to pain.
- 3) All things are empty; nothing is something in itself.
- 4) Nirvana is the only peace.

The first seal reminds us: Do I really want to spend any more of this short, precious life being jealous of someone else, instead of enjoying their success as much as I do my own?

The second seal tells us: My jealousy is making my day sad right now; but it is also planting seeds in my mind, every moment, for more jealousy and sadness later—for the habit of jealousy.

The third seal shows us how to escape; it gives us a key to unweaving the web of illusion. At some point I will learn that my own success doesn't come from competing with others, from being unhappy when they succeed. That is an illusion. Rather, the dreams I want to achieve can only come to me from seeds which I plant by *enjoying* others' success—and then I destroy the web.

The fourth seal speaks to me of how it feels when I do escape the web. When the jealousy is dead, I have true peace, within me.]

3) Is there any historical basis for the idea that when we reach nirvana we disappear completely into some blissful void? And is there any traditional objection to this idea?

[A lot of us, when we hear the word *nirvana*, get this image in our mind of a place of blissful void that we go to after years of intense practice. And understandably this idea feels a little uncomfortable—what will happen to my friends, and family? Who will feed the dog?

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First of all, it's not true that we disappear when we reach nirvana: if nirvana is the permanent stopping of our negative emotions because we have had a deep insight into where the world is coming from, then our outer physical appearance—how we look to others—won't actually change at all on the day we reach nirvana. We could achieve it this afternoon, and continue with our usual work and home life in the evening.

There is an historical precedent though, within the Buddhist lineage, for this misconception that we disappear when we reach nirvana. This is found in the lowest of the four ancient schools of India—the school of the Abhidharma, or Higher Knowledge. This school describes nirvana as the sudden and permanent termination of both body and mind.

At the same time, this school believes that there is a person left over afterwards: someone *who has achieved this nirvana*. This person they call by the standard name: an *arhat*, or *enemy destroyer* (that is, a person who has destroyed the enemy of their own negative emotions). The higher schools correctly point out that if this person no longer had a body or a mind, then they'd have a problem *being* someone!

Nirvana is the end of the cycle of suffering, but it is not to be a bodyless, mindless being.]

4) Nirvana is sometimes described as stopping the Wheel of Life, the cycle of rebirth. Explain how this relates to the “pen,” and what comes after this stopping.

[Part of why the ancient school of Buddhism which says that we disappear when we reach nirvana got confused is that everybody agrees that a person who has reached nirvana has stopped the Wheel of Life.

Remember that this Wheel was designed by the Buddha himself, in order to depict the cycle of negative emotions in which we are caught, and how these emotions throw us into a rebirth into one of six different realms: humans, animals, hellbeings, and so on.

At the center of the wheel is a drawing which is meant to show the three great patterns of the negative emotions. First there is a pig, who represents misunderstanding the world around us. Out of the mouth of this pig come two other animals: a rooster, and a snake.

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The rooster represents all of the variations of desire which flow from misunderstanding things. We might for example pull some ice cream from the freezer and eat two bowls full, leaving none for our roommates. We believe that in this way we get more ice cream for ourselves; but actually refusing to share means that we are failing to plant the seeds which will produce many bowls of ice cream for us in the future. In terms of the six negative emotions that we are dealing with in this Nirvana Immersion course, the rooster stands for our addictions, and busyness.

The snake represents all the variations of anger which flow from our misunderstanding. We don't understand that our yelling boss is coming from seeds within our mind, and so we yell back at him—creating more of these seeds, and more incidents with this boss. That is, we set the Wheel in motion one more time; we perpetuate it. Here we can include two of our six “key” negativities: jealousy and anger.

And the last two of our six favorites come with the pig; that is, judging other people, and procrastination, can be considered manifestations of wrong knowledge, or misunderstanding the world around us.

So what does all this have to do with the pen, and with ending the cycle of rebirth, and with what we will be afterwards?

It's important to realize that a rebirth isn't a rebirth, any more than a pen is a pen. It's not that we die, and our soul goes to seek a new body. The way that we perceive our own body at this very moment is flowing, like everything else, from karmic seeds within our mind. In the instant that the seeds to see our body as human wear out, we will see this body die. And then other seeds “behind” these seeds will take over.

If for example these new seeds cause us to see the pen as a chew toy, then we will be a dog—we will have been reborn as a dog. If though we have already reached nirvana—if we have reached such a high level in our understanding of how the world works that we no longer have any negative emotions at all (and not even the very worst of them, our inborn tendency to misunderstand the world)—then this “short circuits” the old “mortal” seeds that would have opened up in the moment after our seeds for this human birth wear out.

That is, the knowledge in our mind by this point is so powerful that these old, mortal seeds cannot open. Pure seeds open instead, and we perceive our body as a diamond body of light; and that means we are enlightened, and have escaped from the cycle of rebirth.]

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5) The ancient Chinese translators chose the word *niepan* to render the Sanskrit word *nirvana*. What are two reasons for this choice, and how does it relate to the mother book of all yoga, the Yoga Sutra?

[When the ancient Chinese translators encountered the word *nirvana*, they chose the Chinese rendering *niepan* (涅槃, nie4 pan2). Of the six classical types of characters, this one is what is known as a “pronunciation” form—meaning that translators decided that the word *nirvana* had such a unique meaning that it should be left in the Sanskrit sound, and they used two sounds that were close to the sounds for *nirvana*, without much conscious regard for original meaning of each character.

There is however a way that the *meaning* of these two characters can be read to arrive at an important meaning of *nirvana*. The *ni* can be read as a black dye, which in traditional usage can also imply a moral darkness. And the *pan* can mean *to bend*, or *to twine*.

The combination of the two then can mean *to turn away from the dark*, which is exactly the meaning of the Sanskrit word *nivirta*, a synonym for *nirvana*. This “turning away” then would be the same as the *virtti* that we find in the famous definition of “yoga” by Master Patanjali in the opening lines of the Yoga Sutra: *Yogash chitta virtti nirodhah*: “We become whole (*yoga*) by stopping how the mind turns.”

The way that the mind “turns” things here is that it sees things in the wrong way: a yelling boss is seen as coming from their own side, and not from how we ourselves have treated people in the past. When we stop this “turning” forever (*nivirta*), then we have reached *nirvana*.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn’t know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, bringing to mind your favorite negative emotion, and reviewing the last few times it has interrupted the happiness of your day. Begin thinking about any “web of illusion” that might have been woven at the time.

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Please write here the two times that you started these meditations (homeworks without these times will not be accepted):