



THE ASIAN
CLASSICS INSTITUTE



Nirvana Immersion



*Reading Two:
Escaping the Wheel*

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Reading Two—Escaping the Wheel

Tracking our thoughts

We've seen that nirvana can be defined as going beyond grief, in the sense of stopping our negative emotions, forever.

We've invested some time in deciding what our own worst negative emotion is.

Our next step is to sit down quietly (pretty much the definition of meditation) and just think a bit about the last few times we had this emotion in our mind. So now run back through the last few days and try to pick out the times that it came up.

If it's really your #1 negative emotion, then it should have popped into your mind several times in the last few days. I just got through checking yesterday for my own favorite—jealousy. And what I found was that I do have it, in a major way, a couple of times a day.

What I also found is that I have an undercurrent of it going on almost constantly. Little thoughts of jealousy or envy, all day long.

Keep watching! For now, just observe where your mind is.

More names for nirvana

There are a variety of different names traditionally used for “nirvana.” Each gives a different flavor of how nirvana feels, although the nirvana in each case is exactly the same.

“Freedom” (*moksha* in Sanskrit, and *tarpa* in Tibetan) is one of the most common. It is often used in the sense of escaping from a bad place, such as a prison. We commonly see it used in the combination of “freedom and the knowledge of all things,” contrasting nirvana from full enlightenment—a distinction we’ll discuss later. For now, we can try to imagine escaping from a part of our own mind which is unhappy, stirred up by our favorite negative emotion.

“Peace” (*shanti* in Sanskrit, *shiwa* in Tibetan) is another very common word for “nirvana.” In these two languages it conveys the feeling not only of a quiet respite from a loud and noisy place, but also the idea of “rest in peace”—meaning to put an end to something, like putting out a fire. Imagine then that the busy clamor of your mind is softly silent, because your favorite negative feelings have been extinguished, completely, forever.

“Liberation” (*mukti* in Sanskrit, and *drulwa* in Tibetan) is sometimes used for “nirvana,” and sometimes for full enlightenment—or for both together. It is commonly used in the sense of being freed or cured of an illness; escaping the cycle of pain; or overcoming spiritual obstacles. We can imagine perhaps that sudden blissful awareness that a very bad headache has suddenly gone entirely away.

“Definite goodness” (*nihsreyasa* in Sanskrit, *ngelek* in Tibetan) is another name we see used for “nirvana.” It is

“There is a deep place, o Subhuti, where you can go. You can call it emptiness, or the end of the signs of things, or the fantasy finished, or no longer making things, or the fact that nothing ever started, or freedom from desire, or the end, or passing beyond grief, or peace, or the real nature of things, or the final end, or the realm of all things. These are the places, deeper far than deep; and all are words for nirvana itself.”

—Lord Buddha,
speaking in *The Exalted Sutra on the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines*

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most common in the combination of “the higher realms and definite goodness,” being two goals of spiritual practice. The former refers to a rebirth either as a human; a lesser, temporary pleasure being; or a full, temporary being of pleasure. The latter then refers collectively to nirvana and full enlightenment. Imagine thus a state of mind, in your own mind, which is 100% good, unquestionably good, and good forever after.

“The final end” (*bhutamoti* in Sanskrit, and *yangdak ta* in Tibetan) is a common technical term for “nirvana.” It has the flavor of having put an end to the third of the three types of suffering. These three are outright suffering, the suffering of change, and what we call “pervasive” suffering. This pervasive suffering is the simple fact that we are subject to the pain—and particularly the bodily pain, aging and death—forced upon us by our past deeds and negative feelings. Imagine then, if you can, reaching a level of spiritual practice where your body actually begins to feel younger, lighter and more like light, with each passing year.

Nirvana, as we have seen, is also sometimes compared to objects in the world—like a lovely palace—which reflect how it feels. Very common are “The City of Nirvana” (*Nirvanapura* in Sanskrit, *Nya-ngen le depay drongkyer* in Tibetan) and “The Ship of the Holy Dharma, Nirvana” (*Mahadharmanava Nirvanapuragamini* in Sanskrit, *Dampay chu kyi dru chenpo nya-ngen le depa* in Tibetan). We can think then of a refuge or sanctuary within our own mind—a golden room of sunlight.

The Guarantee of Authenticity

The fact that reaching nirvana is at the very core of spiritual practice is reflected in a Buddhist teaching known as the “four seals which guarantee that a viewpoint is part of the Holy Word” of the Buddha. If a book, for example, addresses the following four issues, then it can be considered the teaching of an enlightened being. And if it doesn’t address them (either directly or by implication), then it is not.

Here are the four:

- 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.

I am a Buddhist monk, and sometimes I get some pretty strange requests for help. A friend who is a hardcore hockey fan recently begged me to come over to watch a playoff game with their favorite team. I sat on the couch looking at the TV (I have never owned one in my entire life), unfamiliar with the scene but keenly aware that my friend had devoted a great deal of their life (outside of work) sitting here and watching hockey games.

They asked me if I would do prayers for their team; I did, and the team lost in a close game. I offered to come back to help the next day, but was gently informed that it would probably be better if I didn’t.

The day before writing these lines, I received news that my friend has been diagnosed with cancer. Suddenly life is a life-or-death affair, and the hockey has paled in importance. I feel my friend’s mind going to the four seals: unless we do something, everything good in our lives will pass—and otherwise it is all suffering. But if we try to understand how things really work, there is a chance we could reach a higher place: nirvana.

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My friend is struggling with these ideas now, but we both feel that there may not be time for them to stop what's happening to them. Perhaps we should judge every activity of our life against the four seals, to see if it's worth our time. It's not that we shouldn't take our rest, or enjoy the things we enjoy—things like a hockey game on TV—but just that we should do so in the larger context of seeking something higher, something beyond the grief that life will otherwise inevitably lead us to.

Let us seek nirvana, here where we are now.

The End of Ourselves

There are some amazing misconceptions in the Western mind about what “nirvana” is. One (reflected in Nirvana as the name of a rock band, or Nirvana as a high-end restaurant) is the idea that—once we reach nirvana—our mind is immersed in a mindless bliss quite similar to the mental state brought on by a lot of marijuana, or cheesecake, or sex.

Another idea is that a person who reaches nirvana simply disappears into nothingness. Or perhaps a combination of the two: passing into a blissful nothingness, never to be seen again.

A variation on this idea actually is found among some of the lowest of the many ancient schools of Buddhism, where it is referred to as *bem rik gyun chepa*: nirvana as the sudden and permanent termination of both body and mind. Perforce, the end of the wheel of rebirth.

The trouble seems to have started from several pronouncements in scripture which were misunderstood. In one famous quotation, Lord Buddha says:

Consider then a person who has reached nirvana—one who is at that point where we say that nothing is remaining. I do not say, o monks, that their mind then goes to the east, or any other direction.

And another oft-quoted selection goes:

Their body has stopped;
They can no longer tell
One thing from another.

Their awareness of the world
Is stilled, and their mind
Has gone completely away—
The flame of the lamp has died.

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The school of ancient Buddhism which interpreted this as meaning that our body and mind are discontinued when we reach nirvana was called the Detailist School, since they followed mainly a scripture called *The Detailed Explanation*. They certainly weren't dummies (none of the great ancient schools were). Their idea of what happens when we reach nirvana was actually pretty sophisticated.

The Detailists were following the four seals pretty carefully. Remember that the first seal states that anything which is ever brought into being is going to pass away. They reasoned reasonably that anything which is going to pass away can't be a part of nirvana: nirvana should be something that stays forever. Now body and mind are things that come and go, so they couldn't be part of nirvana.

If nirvana though is something that never changes, the question comes up of how we can achieve it—since getting nirvana to start for us would imply a nirvana that changes. The Detailists then drew a distinction between nirvana (unchanging) and the possession of nirvana (which we achieve, and which changes, and which “keeps” the nirvana on us in the way that a belt keeps our pants on).

A person who achieved nirvana then necessarily had nothing about them that was changing, except the possession of it, which they had created through their spiritual practice. Think pants (nirvana) and a belt (its possession) keeping it on the person.

Problem being (as the higher schools are quick to point out) there is nobody left to be wearing the pants—and the Detailists are never able to answer this question satisfactorily.

Which raises the question of what the scriptures have in mind when they talk about lamp flames going out for a person who reaches nirvana, or the mind disappearing.

What we learn, from Master Kedrup Tenpa Dargye (1493-1568), is that these words—attributed to the coming Buddha, Maitreya—are referring to something else completely. The flame of the lamp is a metaphor for that third form of suffering, the pervasive pain which is hard-wired into our very being.

Some practitioners attain to a lower kind of nirvana, where they reach the end of this kind of suffering and consider that alone to be the final goal. This though is a deeper form of the dying of the light, for in this condition they can be of no great service to others.

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The point here then is certainly not that the practitioner's mind and body disappear. Their old way of thinking does disappear, and this allows them to reach nirvana. But then, as we will see, they need to go further, to total enlightenment.

And of course this applies to our own practice as well. If nirvana is simply disappearing, or disappearing into some kind of self-centered bliss, then obviously we cannot be of any great help to others. Nirvana must be something else, something which truly contributes to the welfare of others.

The feeling of grief

So far in our actual practice we've been following our favorite negative emotion—seeing how often it comes up in our mind. Now we take another, very powerful step.

In your meditations for the next few days, try to review how you feel inside when you are having your favorite negative thought.

As for myself, I was recently asked to do a short video piece to help with a needy cause. Halfway through the video I thought of someone that I was jealous of—just for a few seconds, and then I went on fine.

Later on I had a chance to see the finished video, and I decided to watch and see if I looked any different during the few moments that I knew I was having my favorite negative emotion.

It was amazing! I watched my expression change, I watched myself lose my train of thought, recovering only with difficulty—and as I watched I really realized how this emotion always makes me feel.

Off balance really, and not at all able to be who I want to be. My mind subtly confused, my sense of contentment shattered, a shadow passing over myself.

Some old ideas from India about nirvana

When certain of the Buddhist classics of ancient India begin a presentation of the different ideas regarding nirvana, they often start with some very old ones which existed before the Buddha appeared. From these descriptions, it seems that one of these older ideas of nirvana consisted of undertaking spiritual practices that would help us become one of the very powerful, godlike beings who were thought to rule and run the universe. Here is how an extraordinary Mongolian master from the 1800's, Chujey Ngawang Pelnden, summarizes these ideas of nirvana, from a much older text.

Those who wish to achieve nirvana first decide between the different godlike beings they could possibly become. If they are looking for a sense of authority—on the order of being universally recognized as the ruler of the world—then they aim their practice at becoming the being named Brahma.

If what they what they wish for is extraordinary personal power, on the level of a creator of worlds, then they undertake practices to become the divine being named Ishvara. An equal level of power would result from becoming other high beings such as Shakra and Vishnu.

There are also very special beings such as nagas (mighty dragon-like creatures) or yakshas (powerful spirits); their special ability is to amass great amounts of personal wealth.

The practices to become these beings are described as being very difficult. If we hope to attain nirvana as Brahma, then we must sit in a circle of five great fires, day and night. To reach nirvana and become Ishvara, we must throw our bodies off a cliff onto a trident, allowing its sharp points to pierce our body in a very specific way.

To reach nirvana as Vishnu we are required to torture our own body in numerous ways; and to become an entire star or planet we must undertake the “asceticism of the dog,” which would mean to walk and act like a dog for an extended period of time. It is said that the source for these practices is the *Vedas*, the ancient Hindu books of wisdom.

Now I have spent some time in recent years with Hindu masters studying their beliefs, and I don't feel that they would limit their idea of personal spiritual liberation to

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becoming, for example, a wealthy dragon. But I think the traditional descriptions of these ancient beliefs can be taken as advice for our own pursuit of nirvana.

We've seen how the beliefs of the lower Buddhist schools about a nirvana where we disappear into a personal oblivion fail in the crucial measure of how we will be able to serve others from nirvana. Just so, these older descriptions of a nirvana fail in a worldly sort of way.

Spiritual principles can be applied to the pursuit of wealth, and authority, and even good personal health and relationships. It's not wrong to be successful, and I think we all have the intuition that as we approach nirvana we will also gain success, in a worldly way—it's just part of that karma.

But, as the great masters of ancient times have pointed out, we don't need to focus on the grass that grows between the rows of corn. We can use that for hay later on, but the important thing is the corn. If we pursue a nirvana where we are ultimately able to serve the world, our own needs will automatically be fulfilled, along the way.

Nirvana as the end of rebirth

We often hear people speak of nirvana as the end of rebirth in the self-perpetuating cycle of pain; as the end of sansara (this is the correct pronunciation, not *samsara*), or the Wheel of Life—where pain continues on in a perfect (*san*) flow (*sara*).

The roots for this idea of what nirvana is can be found in many scriptures, as in the following pronouncement by Lord Buddha himself, in *The Exalted Sutra of the Greater Way Requested by Gaganaganja* (although it's important to note that he continues immediately to discuss how a bodhisattva can serve others from this state):

We can describe nirvana in the following way. Everything to do with our negative emotions is ended. The flow of all our feelings is stopped. There is no longer anything that we look upon, and we no longer cross the border into a new life, with all the parts to a person; the categories that make them up; the doors of their senses.

And then later commentators such as Master Vinitadeva pick up this thread, saying that “What we call ‘total nirvana’ is a state where we no longer cross the border into a new rebirth—where we no longer come back.”

This is then applied to the idea of sansara, or the Wheel itself. Lord Buddha himself says, for example, in the *Sutra of the Great Nirvana*—

We call it “nirvana,” or passing beyond all grief, simply because we have put a stop to the Wheel.

Let's look a bit closer at the Wheel, and perhaps we can understand this version of nirvana a bit better.

Freedom from the Wheel



The Wheel of Life (*Sansarachakra* in Sanskrit, or *Sipay Korlo* in Tibetan) is the most famous visual representation of the cycle of pain overcome when we reach nirvana. It was designed by Lord Buddha himself 2,500 years ago, and the first person who laid eyes on it is said to have then seen emptiness directly—a crucial step, as we will see, towards attaining nirvana.

In the middle section we see the five realms of rebirth: working counter-clockwise from noon, these are (1) the realm of the full pleasure beings and near pleasure beings; (2) the realm of animals; (3) the realm of the hells; (4) the realm of the craving spirits; and (5) the realm of humans.

Just viewing this representation of the Wheel is enough to give us the idea that escape from the Wheel—nirvana—would mean no longer taking birth. The question though that has always come up in my mind, and in yours as well, I suspect, is where I go if I don't get reborn.

The deeper meaning of the Wheel

As we read and study more about the Wheel of Life though, we begin to see that it has been understood in different ways. The Wheel is a big theme in the lower schools of Buddhism; there are lines in the *Vinaya Sutra*—the classic commentary upon monastic life—which tell us to “see that a painting of the Wheel of Life is placed in the entry way of every temple; and see that it includes the five realms of existence.”

Nirvana itself is even represented in the painting; as the Tibetan savant Jamyang Shepa Ngawang Tsundru (1648-1721) describes it,

We are told to paint a pure white orb—shining in light, faultless, and removing all darkness—above the monster of impermanence. This represents nirvana, the ultimate form of the truth of the end of pain. And across from the moon we paint the form of Lord Buddha, pointing to this moon, teaching us how to reach it.

If you look at the drawing of the Wheel here, you can indeed see the Buddha in the upper right, pointing to the moon in the upper left. Below the moon are verses which instruct us how to reach nirvana; we’ll get to them later. First let’s see if the Wheel is something more than it appears.

We begin with *A Gift of Liberation, Thrust into Our Hands*, the masterful presentation on the steps to enlightenment by Pabongka Rinpoche Dechen Nyingpo (1878-1941), the teacher of the teacher of His Holiness the current Dalai Lama, and of my own teacher Khen Rinpoche Geshe Lobsang Tharchin. He says:

What is the nature of this wheel of pain in which we live? The wheel is both the outer world, and the beings who inhabit this world. We are fleeting, fragile, like a reflection of the moon upon the surface of a lake, constantly shattered by the whims of the wind. Taking refuge in the pleasures and possessions of the world is like seeking shade from the sun by sitting in the shadow of a cobra’s hood—little comfort, and tremendous danger.

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Try to see then how—regardless of which of the five realms we take our rebirth in—we are tortured there by suffering, without a break. People who are trapped within a burning building, people who are locked in prison, have no wish to stay there, but rather conceive of a great desire to escape. We must be the same, and come to a sincere hope to escape this wheel of pain.

Here we begin to see an answer to the question of where we go from the Wheel, what we will become after our nirvana.

Beyond the Wheel

Lobsang Gelek, a master of Tibet's Sera Jey Monastery from the 1700's, helps us explore the Wheel of Life not as an outside place of five realms, but rather as our own personal being:

When we say that we have been circling aimlessly within the wheel of pain for time with no beginning, we have to ask the question of where, exactly, this wheel is located. It is in fact nothing other than the five impure parts to ourselves, which we have taken on when we came into this life.

And the reason we have circled around and around in a body and mind like this is that it is something forced upon us by our own past deeds and negative emotions.

His Holiness the First Dalai Lama, Gendun Drup (1391-1474), concurs:

Consider now the five parts to ourselves which we took on when we were born into this world. These are in fact what we call the "wheel of pain," for within them we circle, continuing on from one birth to another.

How then do we escape this particular wheel, and what do we become afterwards? Jetsun Chukyi Gyeltsen (1469-1546), another great scholar from Sera Jey Monastery, starts us off with—

What exactly are we escaping from? From the wheel of an entire universe of pain. And where do we escape to? To freedom, to nirvana—beyond all grief. What is it that empowers us to do so? It is the power of keeping our morality purely. And how will this happen? With complete certainty.

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What is it that keeps us in the wheel? Je Tsongkapa (1357-1419), surely the greatest thinker of all of Buddhism, puts it this way in his *Great Book on the Steps to the Path of the Secret Word*:

Here is how our protector, Nagarjuna, expressed his position in the
String of Precious Jewels—

So long as we grasp
To our body and mind,
We grasp as well
To “me”.

And as long as we grasp
To me,
We create karma.

From karma then
We are born again.

He said as well, in the *Root Text on Wisdom*,

Freedom is where
We stop our karma
And negative thoughts;

Karma and negative thoughts themselves
Are born from misunderstanding,
And imagining things are there.

The emptiness of what we imagine
Is the way we put an end
To karma and our negative thoughts.

We begin to have a feeling of what we could be beyond the Wheel; not nothing, where we have lost all body and mind, but rather in a body and mind that we no longer misunderstand—which in fact are born from understanding. It’s not that we no longer have any body and mind, but rather that we no longer have those that we have been forced to take on, compelled to do so by our past karma and negative thoughts.

A side trip to the Chinese

Perhaps we're in a position now to appreciate how the Chinese translated the word "nirvana," and thus what it meant to them. Remember that Buddhism came to China almost a thousand years before it reached Tibet. Looking at how the Chinese translated this word should give us a peek into some of its earliest meanings. (I'd like to thank Ms. Xia Liyang, a Chinese scholar from Shanghai, for providing the information for this section.)

Chinese has many translations of the word "nirvana." The most common of these is *niepan* (涅槃, *nie4 pan2*). This is considered a case (see right, from a Chinese translator who tackled *nirvana* in the *Heart Sutra*) where it would be better to leave the original Sanskrit word than to translate it—that is, the two Chinese characters here are not directly conveying the meaning of *nirvana*, but rather just giving the closest sound in Chinese. There were just too many cool senses of the Sanskrit word that they didn't want to preclude any of them by choosing a single one.

Now the Chinese love puns, and it may be that—consciously or unconsciously—a Chinese translator who chose to simply give the Sanskrit sound may have selected characters for those sounds (and there were many, many similar sounds to choose from) which also gave some indication of the meaning of the word.

In the case of *niepan*, the character used for the first half, *nie*, can refer to a stone which is used for a black dye, and in later phrases such as *ni er bu zi* (涅而不淄, *ni4 er2 bu4 zi1*) it takes on a moral meaning: a person whose morals are so elevated that they can be "soaked in black dye and not get black."

The second character of *niepan*—the *pan*—can refer to many things, but the one which is interesting here is "to bend," or "to

There are five cases in which one of the old Sanskrit words should not be translated into a foreign language, but rather simply left as it is:

- 1) When the meaning of the word is secret, as in mantras
- 2) When the Sanskrit word has so many different wonderful shades of meaning that it would be a shame to translate it with one foreign word which would restrict it to a single meaning
- 3) When the word refers to something that doesn't exist in the foreign land (such as a *jambu* tree)
- 4) When so many people in the foreign culture are already used to using the original Sanskrit word that it would confuse things
- 5) When using a new word would help people keep a sense of the awesomeness of the new idea it refers to

—Master Xuanzang, one of the earlier translators of the *Heart Sutra* into Chinese (7th Century)

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twine,” in the way that a road or a posture would. Remember that an early Sanskrit synonym for *nirvana* is *nirvarta*, which can mean “turning away from the wrong,” and indeed this Sanskrit word was also translated by the Tibetans as “passing beyond grief.” And so our Chinese translator may have been aware of these shades of meaning, and included them for his “sound” translation. (Students of yoga can explore the parallel with Master Patanjali’s famed definition of the deeper meaning of yoga as stopping the way the mind turns things around the wrong way—a subject we are soon to encounter.)

When the Chinese did do a “meaning” translation of the word *nirvana*, they made choices which reflect how we have already seen the idea considered. One such translation is *mie* (灭, mie4), which means *to blow out*, and has also been used for the truth of the end of suffering. Sometimes they used *ji* (寂, ji4), which means *peace*, and then sometimes the combination *ji-mie*, “peace and blowing out.”

We also see, as one might expect, *jie-tuo* (解脱, jie3 tuo1), meaning *liberation*—where *jie* is *to untie*, and *tuo* is *to escape*. But returning to that less satisfactory meaning of disappearing altogether, we also see *wu-sheng* (无生, wu2 sheng1), meaning “no longer alive” (although this same combination, within the *Heart Sutra*, refers to the fact that nothing starts—a view which as we will see is actually the path to nirvana.) Most Chinese scholars though will state that *niepan* was meant to convey the sound of the original Sanskrit word, while *mie* conveyed its import.

Happily, we do see one case where *nie* is explained as *chu* (出, chu1), which means *to go out, to leave*; and the corresponding *pan* explained as *qu* (趣, qu4), which means *negative emotions*. We leave behind our bad thoughts—including our jealousy, and we have a few more steps ahead on that.