

Mistaken Ideas about *Nibbāna*

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1. Introduction

In the *Mūlapariyāya-sutta* of the Pāli¹ Majjhima-nikāya we read² of an uninstructed average person (*assutavā puthujjano*) who is unskilled in the *dhamma* of the pure ones, who considers various objects of cognition. He begins by considering earth, and perceives earth as earth. Having perceived earth as earth, he thinks of³ earth, he thinks in earth, he thinks out of earth,⁴ he thinks, “earth is mine”,⁵ he delights in earth.⁶ He continues with water, fire, air, etc., and finally he considers *nibbāna*.⁷ He perceives *nibbāna* as *nibbāna*, and having perceived *nibbāna* as *nibbāna* he thinks of *nibbāna*, he thinks in *nibbāna*, he thinks out of *nibbāna*, he thinks, “*nibbāna* is mine”, he delights in *nibbāna*.⁸ It would appear that *nibbāna* here signifies the average person’s conception of the highest goal or the ultimate good.⁹ Buddhaghosa’s commentary neatly

¹ Abbreviations of the titles of Pāli texts follow the Epilegomena to Vol. I of *A Critical Pāli Dictionary*.

² M, I, 1, 12 ff.

³ Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Root of Existence*, Kandy, 1980, 7, prefers the translation “conceives” to “thinks of”.

⁴ i.e., he considers earth internally and externally.

⁵ i.e., he totally identifies with earth.

⁶ M, I, 1, 15 ff.: *paṭhavim paṭhavito sañjānāti, paṭhavim paṭhavito saññatvā paṭhavim maññati, paṭhaviyā maññati, paṭhavito maññati, paṭhavim me ti maññati, paṭhavim abhinandati*.

⁷ M, I, 4, 3 ff.: *nibbānaṃ nibbānato sañjānāti, nibbānaṃ nibbānato saññatvā nibbānaṃ maññati, nibbānasmim maññati, nibbānato maññati, nibbānaṃ me ti maññati, nibbānaṃ abhinandati*.

⁸ i.e., he thinks that *nibbāna* is also in the field of perception, and he is totally identified with it. He is, therefore, expressing an ego-centric view of things.

⁹ Clearly, since (the Buddha’s sort of) *nibbāna* is not in the world of *saññā*, the *puthujjana* cannot perceive it in the same way as he perceives earth, and so the deduction to be drawn is that he must be referring to some other sort of *nibbāna*. Miss Horner (*Middle Length Sayings*, I, London, 1954, 5, n. 11) states: “Here *nibbāna* signifies the enjoyment of the five kinds of sensory pleasures. The ‘average man’ regards these as the highest *nibbāna* in this very life. *Nibbāna* is therefore not being used here in its Buddhist sense.”

explains¹⁰ that it means the five kinds of “supreme *nibbāna* here and now”.¹¹ The Buddha states that such a person does not understand properly. The same applies to a learner (*sekha*), because he has still to understand. It does not apply to an *arahat* or a *Tathāgata*, because they have understood properly.¹²

In the explanation of this wrong idea about *nibbāna*, the commentary refers to the various wrong ideas about *nibbāna* (“there are some who hold the doctrine of *nibbāna* here and now”) which are mentioned in the *Brahmajāla-sutta* of the Dīgha-nikāya.¹³ The first of these is the view that “when this self is furnished and supplied with the five strands of sensual pleasures, and revels in them, then it has attained to supreme *nibbāna* in the here and now”.¹⁴ Others are quoted as holding the view that *nibbāna* in the here and now consists of the attainment of the first, second, third or fourth *jhāna*. It would seem, then, that these types of *nibbāna* are either sensory happiness or the attainment of a particular *jhāna*, but they fall short of the actual attainment of *nibbāna*, because they are obtainable in a human existence.¹⁵ This misunderstanding possibly arose from the statement that *nibbāna* was *sukha*, not *dukkha*, which might lead to a situation where anything *sukha* or *adukkha* was thought to be *nibbāna*.

It is clear that these views about *nibbāna* are applicable to the idea of *nibbāna* being happiness, but not to its being extinction or blowing out. In this paper, I wish to give some consideration to this confusion of *nibbāna* as “happiness” and *nibbāna* as “blowing out”, and I wish to consider not only wrong ideas about *nibbāna* held at the time of the Buddha, but also some of those held by modern scholars. I am, of course, proposing to discuss only a handful of the large number of mistaken ideas about *nibbāna*. At this point, I must stress that I am not a philosopher, and I am not even engaged in the study of religion. I regard myself as a philologist. I say what I think the words mean, and it is for others to put them in the context of their studies of Buddhism, or other Indian religions. If I say that I think such and such a claim about the doctrines of Buddhism is wrong, this is an abbreviated way of saying that I think the Pāli or Sanskrit statement

¹⁰ Ps, I, 38, 30–31: *pañcadhā āgataṃ paramadi hadhammanibbānaṃ veditabbaṃ*.

¹¹ i.e., indulgence in sense pleasures and the four *jhānas*, as Bhikkhu Bodhi states (*op. cit.*, 17).

¹² i.e., the Buddha is making a distinction between perceiving and knowing.

¹³ D, I, 36 ff, [*santi bhikkhave eke samaṇa-brāhmaṇā di hadhamma-nibbāna-vādā*].

¹⁴ D, I, 36, 24–27: *yato kho bho ayaṃ attā pañcahi kāmaguṇehi samappito samaṅgi-bhūto paricāreti, ettāvataṃ kho bho ayaṃ attā paramadi hadhamma-nibbānaṃ patto hoti*.

¹⁵ See Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The All-embracing Net of Views*, Kandy, 1978, 198, n. 1.

upon which that claim, whatever it is, is based has been misunderstood or mistranslated.

I should also like in this paper to put forward one or two ideas about *nibbāna*, based upon my views about the correct way to translate some of the Pāli or Sanskrit words and phrases which I shall deal with, and I hope that even if my suggestions are not accepted, they will be of some interest as indicating possible ways of translating statements which are often interpreted in other ways. I would dare to hope that some of my suggestions may be less mistaken than some of the other views which I shall mention. I must also make it clear that in view of the shortness of the time available and my own lack of expertise outside the field, I am restricting myself to statements about *nibbāna* in the oldest Pāli texts.

2. Two sorts of *nibbāna*

There is a problem in connection with the incorrect view that *nibbāna* can be attained in a human existence, because, to the onlooker, it seems clear that the Buddha attained *nibbāna* inside human existence, in as much as he was a living human being when he obtained *nibbāna* and he continued to be a living human being. It is an interesting fact that, with very few exceptions, the Buddha's followers seem to have accepted his views, and his answers to their enquiries, without question. We might wonder whether this was in fact so, or whether some of his followers might not have said: "That is all very well, but" Leaving aside the point that they might have said, illogically: "If *nibbāna* is *sukha*, then surely *sukha* is *nibbāna*", there was the very obvious objection they might have put forward that the Buddha had obtained *nibbāna*, but he was still in the here and now, and had therefore presumably obtained *nibbāna* in the here and now, so what was wrong with other doctrines about the obtaining of *nibbāna* in the here and now?

This is to misunderstand two things: the nature of *sukha* and the nature of *nibbāna*. The Buddha's teaching was clear: "The here and now is *dukkha*." This after all was his first great truth, that "This, i.e., the here and now or *samsāra*, is *dukkha*". The remaining truths continue his teaching: "This is the origin of *dukkha*", "This is the cessation of *dukkha*", and "This is the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*". Anyone who follows the path arrives at the cessation of *dukkha*, release (*mokkha*) from *dukkha*. This must logically be the opposite of *dukkha*, i.e., *sukha*. So *sukha*, i.e., *nibbāna*, cannot be attained in the here and now because the here and now is *dukkha*, and although the ordinary individual might think that he can attain *sukha* in this existence, such *sukha* is merely sensual *sukha*, and the senses, being part of the here and now, are in fact *dukkha*, and everything connected with them must also be *dukkha*.

We can learn something of the Buddha's teaching about *nibbāna* by examining the chain of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). If we start from the end and work backwards, which is probably the way the Buddha first examined it, we find that each link is dependent upon its predecessor until we get back to the beginning, which is *avijjā* "lack of knowledge". If any link of the chain is removed, then all subsequent links do not come into existence. If the first link "lack of knowledge" is removed or destroyed by *vijjā* "knowledge", then the whole chain is destroyed. There are no compounded things (*saṃkhāra*), and birth, old age, death, etc., consequently do not occur. For a person who has knowledge, therefore, existence does not occur again, he has attained release (*mokkha*), he has achieved *nibbāna*.

As is well known, the Buddha describes¹⁶ the way in which he entered successively the four *jhānas* before gaining *bodhi* and *nibbāna*. We must note that the gaining of the four *jhānas* did not in themselves produce *nibbāna*. It was knowledge which prevented the chain of dependent origination working, as a result of which *nibbāna* was attained. This is why the persons I mentioned at the beginning of this paper did not attain *nibbāna*. They attained the various stages of *jhāna*, but they did not have knowledge. They did not understand. In just the same way, the Buddha rejected the views of the two teachers with whom he studied: their doctrines did not lead to higher knowledge, enlightenment and *nibbāna*.¹⁷ But what are we to make of someone who, like the Buddha, does have knowledge, and consequently has nullified the rest of the chain of dependent origination? As a result of that, he has attained *nibbāna*, and has attained *mokkha*, i.e., he has departed from *saṃsāra*, if only for a very short period of time. Nevertheless, he is still in the here and now and is experiencing the fact that it is *dukkha*. After all, the Buddha did have indigestion from eating Cunda's meal. We must conclude that unless the attainment of *mokkha* coincides with the attainment of death, in which case, since there is no rebirth, the individual does not occur again, the released person is still alive, and it is only the next birth which will not happen. So the Buddha was able to say: "This is my last birth."¹⁸ If, therefore, such a person is described as *nibbuta*, we must recognise that *nibbuta* in that case does not mean "one who has attained *nibbāna* and is still in that state", but "one who has attained *nibbāna* (temporarily) but has relinquished it for as long as his life remains". In short, the attainment of (real) *nibbāna*, as opposed to the wrong sorts condemned by the Buddha, has, so to speak, taken the *nibbuta* person out of the here and now, for as long as the

¹⁶ See the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta*, M, I, 237–51.

¹⁷ M, I, 165, 10–12: *ayaṃ dhammo ... na abhiññāya na sambodhāya na nibbānāya saṃvattati*.

¹⁸ *ayam antimā jāti*, M, I, 167, 28–29.

attainment lasted. Nevertheless, when he returns to the here and now, he is not precisely as before: he has extinguished the *kilesas* (*rāga*, *dosa* and *moha*), his *āsavas* are destroyed and he is, therefore, *khīṇāsava*.

There are, therefore, two aspects of *nibbāna*. The first is the *nibbāna* obtained at enlightenment, which clearly is not the “blowing out” of the individual, since the individual continues to exist (although it could be regarded as the blowing out of the three fires of *rāga*, *dosa* and *moha*). The other is the *nibbāna* gained at death, when the individual (we presume) is not reborn, and from that point of view could be regarded as being blown out, although such a view would lay us open to the charge of seeing Gotama Buddha as an annihilationist—a charge which he himself emphatically denied.

The earliest Pāli texts realised that there were two *nibbānas* and differentiated them as *nibbāna sa-upādisesa* and *nibbāna an-upādisesa*, normally translated as “*nibbāna* with and without a remnant of clinging”, taking *upādi* as from *upa* + *ā* + *dā* “to take”. The Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit equivalent, however, is *sopadhiśeṣa* and *an-* or *nir-upadhiśeṣa*, “with and without a remnant of substrate” (to use a very common translation for *upadhi*¹⁹). The difference between the two designations was of course noticed long ago, although little effort has been made to explain why they are different. I think most modern commentators assume that *upādi* and *upadhi* mean much the same thing, and they do not try to explain how and why the difference arose.

If we are to believe that these two phrases must originally have had the same meaning, then it is not impossible that the original form was **upādhiśeṣa* (or **upātiśeṣa*, with a replacement of *adhi-* by *ati-*,²⁰ and the subsequent voicing of *-t-* to *-d-*²¹). The Sanskrit form with short *-a-* would indicate a confusion with *upadhi*, which perhaps had its origin in the written form of the language before long vowels were written. Its meaning is, then, not “with a remainder of clinging”, but “with a remainder (of something unexpressed, perhaps of life or of *kamma*)”. The first *nibbāna* is the *nibbāna* of the *kilesas*—*rāga*, *dosa* and *moha*²²—but the individual is still alive because he still has an *atiseṣa* or *adhiśeṣa* of *karma* or life left to him.²³ The second *nibbāna* is the *nibbāna* of the *khandhas* at death.

¹⁹ More correctly, *upadhi* means “acquisitions” or “belongings”, attachment to which leads to rebirth.

²⁰ For the alternation of *ati-* and *adhi-*, see CPD, s.v. *ati*.

²¹ For such voicing in Pāli see K.R. Norman, “Dialect Forms in Pāli”, in C. Calliat, ed., *Dialectes dans les littératures indo-aryennes*, Paris, 1989, 371.

²² As Gombrich says (*Theravāda Buddhism*, London, 1988, 64), “*nibbāna* is not a ‘thing’ but the experience of being without greed, hatred and delusion”.

²³ If the preposition *upa* which is prefixed to these two words has its usual meaning “subordinate, minor”, then the meaning might be “with a small remainder (of life or *kamma*)”, as opposed to the complete residue which anyone who had not attained *nibbāna* would have.

3. Two sorts of *parinibbāna*

There are also two sorts of *parinibbāna*. According to the oldest Pāli texts we have about them, they are identical with the two sorts of *nibbāna*. It is clear, therefore, that the difference between *nibbāna* and *parinibbāna* is not that of *nibbāna* in life and *parinibbāna* at death. Nevertheless, the idea that *nibbāna* applies to an experience in life, whereas *parinibbāna* applies to the experience at death, is widespread. Gombrich states: “In Pāli literature *parinibbāna* is sometimes a synonym of *nibbāna* (technically called *sa-upādi-sesa*); but modern Sinhalese usage, to which I have conformed, confines it to the death of an *arhat* (technically *an-upādi-sesa*)”.²⁴

In a previous paper which I read in this Buddhist Forum²⁵ I stated that I would regret any errors of facts, however trivial [in a study of Buddhist doctrines], or of the interpretation of those facts, if they arose from an error in an edition of a Pāli text, just as no New Testament scholar worthy of the name would be happy about anyone working with a text which he knew to be less than perfect.

E.J. Thomas once wrote:²⁶ “Even the Buddhists of Ceylon have the same idea [that *parinirvāṇa* means final *nirvāṇa* or *nirvāṇa* attained at death with the complete dispersal of the *skandhas*], probably because they follow Rhys Davids [i.e., the Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary] more closely than the Pāli texts”. For me, as the current President of the Pali Text Society, it is a worrying thought that the Society’s Pali-English Dictionary is probably responsible for all the Buddhists of Ceylon getting it wrong, although it is flattering to think that so many people in Ceylon read, or have read, that Dictionary and are influenced by it. I think the reason is simpler than that. Because the text in which the death of the Buddha is related is called the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, listeners to the story assumed that *parinibbāna* is *nibbāna* at death (only), with the corollary that *nibbāna* must be *nibbāna* at *bodhi*.

Various attempts have been made to explain the difference between the words *nibbāna* and *parinibbāna*. When Warder says: “The prefix *pari* is generally used when referring not to *nirvāṇa* itself as a state, but to the event of an individual’s (final) attainment of it at the end of his worldly life, and especially to the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha himself”,²⁷ I believe that he is wrong in stressing the

²⁴ R. Gombrich, *Precept and Practice*, Oxford, 1971, 70, n. 14.

²⁵ K.R. Norman, “Pāli Philology and the Study of Buddhism”, *Buddhist Forum*, I, 1990, 33.

²⁶ E.J. Thomas, “Nirvāṇa and Parinirvāṇa”, in *India Antiqua* (Festschrift for Jean Philippe Vogel), Leiden, 1947, 294–95.

²⁷ A.K. Warder, *Introduction to Pali*, London, 1963, 49, n. 1.

final attainment at the end of worldly life. I prefer to follow the view of Thomas, who more than once reminded us that the difference between *nibbāna* and *parinibbāna* is a grammatical one. He clarified the relationship between *nibbāna* and *parinibbāna* long ago, referring²⁸ to E. Kuhn's explanation²⁹ that “*pari* compounded with a verb converts the verb from the expression of a state to the expression of the achievement of an action”. He states, “*Nirvāṇa* is the state of release; *parinirvāṇa* is the attaining of that state. The monk *parinirvāṇi* ‘attains *nirvāṇa*’ at the time of enlightenment as well as at death”. He pointed out that although the Pali-English Dictionary defines *parinibbāna* as “complete *Nirvāṇa*”, it immediately goes on, in fact, to show that the same term is used of both kinds of *nibbāna*. Thomas later returned to, and elaborated, the same explanation,³⁰ “He *parinibbāyati*, attains the state, and then *nibbāyati*, is in the state expressed by *nibbāna*”.

4. Death-free *nibbāna*

I believe that many of the incorrect ideas about *nibbāna* arise from the efforts of modern commentators to explain the epithets which the Buddha used to describe *nibbāna*. In the Pāṭaligāmiyavagga of the *Udāna*, for example, we read: *atthi bhikkhave ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ, no ce taṃ bhikkhave abhaviṣṣa ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ, na-y-idha jātassa bhūtassa katassa saṅkhataṃ nissaraṇaṃ paññāyetha*.³¹ Woodward translates,³² “Monks, there is a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded. Monks, if that unborn, not-become, not-made, not-compounded were not, there would be apparent no escape from this here³³ that is born, become, made, compounded”.³⁴ A similar description is given by the Buddha in the *Ariyapariyesana-sutta* where he explains how, being himself liable to birth (*jāti*), ageing (*jarā*), decay (*vyādhī*), dying (*maraṇa*), sorrow (*soka*), stain (*saṅkilesa*), he won the *ajātaṃ ... ajaraṃ... abyādhiṃ ... amataṃ ... asokaṃ ...*

²⁸ E.J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, London, 1933, 121, n. 4.

²⁹ Although Thomas, *ibid.*, states, “It has already been explained ... (I think by E. Kuhn)”, later (“*Nirvāṇa* and *Parinirvāṇa*”, 294) he states, “... though it was long ago refuted by E. Kuhn”, without any expression of doubt about the name of the refuter. I regret that I have not been able to trace the location of Kuhn's explanation.

³⁰ E.J. Thomas, “*Nirvāṇa* and *Parinirvāṇa*”, 294–95.

³¹ Ud, 80, 23–81, 1.

³² F.L. Woodward, *Udāna: Verses of Uplift and Itivuttaka*: As it was said, London, 1948, 98.

³³ The second part of this passage should probably be translated “There would be apparent no escape for one who is born here, become, made, compounded”.

³⁴ P. Masefield, strangely, states (*The Commentary on the Vimāna Stories*, London, 1989, li) that the word *amata* occurs in this reference. It is not included at this point in the Pali Text Society's edition of Ud, or any other edition I have consulted.

asankiliṭṭham, which is specifically designated *nibbāna*.³⁵ Miss Horner translates, “I won the unborn ... the unageing ... the undecaying ... the undying ... the unsorowing ... the stainless”.³⁶

The translations “undying” or “deathless” for *amata* are widespread. Harvey, for example, correctly states: “One must therefore see *nibbāna* during life as a specific experience, in which the defilements are destroyed forever, and in which there is a temporary stopping of all conditioned states (Sn, 732–79)”, and “During life or beyond death, *nibbāna* is the unconditioned cessation of all unsatisfactory, conditioned phenomena. During life, it is where these phenomena stop, followed by their recurrence in the arising of normal experiences of the world; once attained, this stopping can be returned to. Beyond death, it is where they stop for good”.³⁷ To this, however, he adds: “Such a destruction of defilements is clearly a transcendent, timeless experience, for it is said to be ‘deathless’ (S, V, 8) and ‘unconditioned’ (S, IV, 362)”.

If we consider the translation of the terms in the Buddha’s statement in the *Ariyapariyesana-sutta*, in the form which I have just quoted, we can see that it produces a false opposition. We should have expected an opposition between *nibbāna* and *samsāra*, but the distinction between the translations “unborn” and “being liable to birth” seems to refer to the opposition between *nibbāna* and a being who is in *samsāra*. It would be interesting to know how much modern translators have been impressed by the logic of the Buddha’s statements, as they have translated them. They might well have wondered how the existence of something which is unborn, etc., provides release for someone who is born, etc. The solution to this problem is exactly the same as that which I have given elsewhere³⁸ to the problem of the word *amata*. It is clear that the epithets must refer, not to *nibbāna*, but to the conditions which pertain in *nibbāna*, which must be the opposite of those which pertain in *samsāra*. A later commentary upon the *Dhammapada* (quoted by Carter and Palihawadana³⁹) seems to recognise this problem and gives the information that *nibbāna* is called “deathless” because “it itself is free from old age and death and because it destroys old age and death for the noble ones who have attained it”. Once we realise that these epithets must refer to the condition of those beings who have gained *nibbāna*, then we can see that the translation “immortality” for *amata* gives the wrong impression, because it implies that such beings live for ever, which, of course, is an untenable view in Buddhism.

³⁵ M, I, 167, 9 ff.

³⁶ I.B. Horner, *Middle Length Sayings*, I, London, 1954, 211.

³⁷ P. Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Cambridge, 1990, 62.

³⁸ K.R. Norman, “On Translating the Dhammapada”, *BSR*, 6, 1989, 160.

³⁹ J.R. Carter & M. Palihawadana, *The Dhammapada*, New York, 1987, 431.

The translation “deathless” would be satisfactory as applied to *nibbāna* as long as this meant “where there is no death”, but that is not the usual meaning of the word in English. In such phrases as “deathless fame”, it means “fame which does not die”, and it is, therefore, the same as “immortal”. The *Critical Pāli Dictionary* translates *amatapada*⁴⁰ as “the abode of immortality (*nibbāna*)”, but if it were correct to translate *amata* as “immortality”, then it would mean that those who gain *nibbāna* live for ever. I cannot see that there is any justification for this translation. In the case of the Buddha, it is not clear what its precise meaning might be after his *parinibbāna* at the time of his death, since there seems to be some incompatibility between dying and becoming immortal. Furthermore, since the Buddha’s aim was to gain release from the endless stream of existences in *samsāra*, we might doubt that he would wish to live for ever.

Although Masefield is correct when he says of *amata*: “The Deathless—or perhaps better the Death-free”, he nevertheless seems to be slightly off the mark when he goes on to state: “[It] thus signifies a place, *padam* (Vv, I, 16, 8), and a place, moreover, which can be heard when, in the first Sermon, the Buddha fulfils his intention of sounding the Deathless-drum,⁴¹ the roar of the timeless beyond. It is, of course, a synonym for *nibbāna*”.⁴²

The “roar of the timeless beyond” is a fine piece of purple prose, but it is, unfortunately, inaccurate. The “deathless-drum” is nothing to do with a place which can be heard. What the phrase actually means is that the Buddha was going to make an announcement about *nibbāna*, the state where there was no death. He used the common imagery for one making an announcement, that of beating a drum in the streets, to attract attention, in the same way that a town-crier in England used to ring a bell. The common phrase is *bherim carāpeti* “to cause the drum to wander about (the city), i.e., to proclaim”. “To beat the drum of the death-free”, therefore, means “to proclaim the death-free, the state where there is no death”.

It is such a misunderstanding of the meaning of the word *amata* which has led to the idea that *nibbāna* does not die, and is an eternal place, or undying place. I am not certain whether the early Pāli commentators were misled about this, or whether they knew the correct meaning of the word. The commentary on the

⁴⁰ CPD, s.v. *amatapada*. Strangely enough, it translates *amata*, when used as an epithet of *pada* or *dhātu*, as “free from death, beyond the reach of death”. I do not understand why such different translations should be given for the compound and the uncompound form.

⁴¹ *āhañhi amatadudrabhiṃ*, Sp 8, 26 ≠ *āhañchaṃ amata- Dundubhiṃ*, M, I, 171, 12. The phrase occurs as a split compound (*amatā vāditā bherī*) at Ap, 75, 26, which might misleadingly be translated “the deathless, or immortal, drum has been sounded”.

⁴² P. Masefield, *op. cit.*, l–li.

Dhammapada explains the compound *amatapada* as *amatapadan ti amataṃ vuccati nibbānaṃ; taṃ hi ajātattā na jīyati na miyyati, tasmā amatan ti vuccati*.⁴³ If this is to be translated “because of not being born, it (*nibbāna*) does not grow old and die” then it shows the commentary has misunderstood the word, because the same can be said of *saṃsāra*, and yet that is not called *ajāta* or *amata*. If, however, we take the verbs as impersonal and translate this as: “Because there is no birth there, there is no growing old and dying,” then we can see that the commentary has understood the situation.

We must remember that the Buddha was trying to gain release from *saṃsāra* with its endless series of rebirth, old age, death and rebirth, i.e., he was trying to find a state where there was no rebirth, and therefore no old age, and therefore no death leading to further rebirth. This is *nibbāna*, and it must, therefore, be the state⁴⁴ which does not have birth, or old age, or death. Taken literally, the epithets *amata* and *ajāta* as applied to *nibbāna* could be interpreted as compounds of the past participles with the negative prefix *a-* making negative possessive (*bahuvrīhi*) compounds: “possessing nothing born”, “possessing nothing dead”. I would suggest, however, that the grammatical explanation of these epithets when they are applied to *nibbāna* to indicate the absence of birth and death is that they are based upon past participles which are being used as action nouns,⁴⁵ i.e., *jāta* = “being born, birth”, *mata* = “dying, death”,⁴⁶ etc. From these action nouns, negative possessive adjectives are formed by prefixing *a-*: “(*nibbāna*) which has no birth, where there is no birth”⁴⁷, “(*nibbāna*) which has no death, where there is no death”.

If this analysis of the epithets is correct, it enables us to suggest translations which avoid the difficulties which are present in renderings such as “immortality”, “unborn” and “uncreated”. I have suggested that the correct translation for *amata padam* is “the state where there is no death”, and we can translate the other epithets in a similar way: “where there is no birth” (*ajāta*), “where there is no old age” (*ajara*), “which is not a place of rebirth” (*agati*),⁴⁸

⁴³ Dhpa, I, 228, 19–21. Carter and Palihawadana (*op. cit.*, 110) translate: “*Nibbāna*, because of being unborn (i.e., without beginning), is not subject to decay and death. Hence it is called the Deathless.”

⁴⁴ Or perhaps “non-state”, as Warder (*Introduction to Pali*, 49, n. 1) suggests.

⁴⁵ For other examples of this usage, see Norman, *Elders’ Verses* I, London, 1969, 129 (ad Th, 36) and *Elders’ Verses* II, London, 1971, 115 (ad Thī, 261).

⁴⁶ e.g. *matam eyya*, M, III, 159, 26; this is glossed *mareyya*, Ps, IV, 208, 16.

⁴⁷ cf. T. Stcherbatsky, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa*, Leningrad, 1927, 20, n. 2: “The epithet [*amatapada*] means a place where there is no death ... ; it is likewise called a place where there is no birth”.

⁴⁸ CPD (s.v. *agati* (1)), would seem to be off the mark with its translation “not coming, not admittance”.

“where nothing has come into existence” (*abhūta*), “where there is nothing made” (*akata*).

The incorrect view that *nibbāna* is immortal seems to be supported by the epithet *akālika* which is sometimes ascribed to *nibbāna*,⁴⁹ and is often translated as “timeless” as in the passage from Harvey which I have just quoted. Since “timeless” can be taken in the sense of “unending” in English, this is taken by some as though it meant “immortal”. If we see that *akālika* means “not connected with time, out of time”, we can see that, as frequently in epithets ascribed to *nibbāna*, it is intended as an opposite to the epithets which can be applied to *saṃsāra*. The nature of *saṃsāra* is entirely linked to time; *saṃsāra* is essentially in time. To attain *nibbāna* is to be freed from the eternity of *saṃsāra*, to be freed from the passage of time; *nibbāna* is not connected with past, present or future.⁵⁰

It is the opposition to the conditions which prevail in *saṃsāra* which explain the other epithets which are applied to *nibbāna*: it is *nicca*, *dhuva*, *sassata*, *avipariṇāmadhamma*⁵¹ “permanent, firm, eternal, not subject to development” because everything in *saṃsāra* is the opposite—*anicca*, *adhuva*, *asassata*, *vipariṇāmadhamma*. As a concept or abstraction, *nibbāna* is permanent, firm, eternal, not subject to development, because at any time in the *saṃsāra*, which is impermanent, unfirm, non-eternal, subject to development, it has been, is and will be possible to step out of time and attain *nibbāna*, which is always the same, unchanging. The most important of the various epithets of *nibbāna* is *asaṅkhata*, “unconditioned”, for in Theravāda Buddhism *nibbāna* is the only thing which is spoken of as being *asaṅkhata*, and clearly it is correct in certain contexts to translate the word in that way. In the context with *amata*, *ajāta*, etc., however, I believe that a translation such as “without conditioned things, where there are no conditioned things” is correct. Perhaps one reason for the problem about the translation of this word is that *nibbāna* can be described by both meanings: it is unconditioned, because it is not the product of any part of the *paṭicca-samuppāda*, and it also has no conditioned things in it.

5. *nibbāyati*; *nibbāna*; *nibbuta*

It would seem to be worthwhile examining the relationship between the three Pāli words *nibbāyati*, *nibbāna* and *nibbuta*, since it is sometimes stated that *nibbuta*⁵² is the past participle of the verb *nibbāyati*, which underlies the noun

⁴⁹ A, I, 158, 37 ff.

⁵⁰ Mil, 323, 5–7.

⁵¹ Kv, 121, 3–4.

⁵² Since this article is being written in the context of Pāli studies, I use the Pāli form of this and other words in this section, without any implication about the form in which they were first used in Buddhism.

nibbāna. This is not true, although it must be agreed that the two words are sometimes used as though they were connected.⁵³ The verb *nibbāyati* means “to be blown out, to be extinguished”, and so the noun *nibbāna*,⁵⁴ which is derived from it, means “blowing out, extinction (of a lamp, or fire)”. The past participle *nibbāna* or **nibbāta* (which seems not to occur in Pāli⁵⁵ [it is not listed in the *Pali English Dictionary*, although this is not conclusive]), would therefore mean “blown out, extinguished”. It would not be appropriate to use this of human beings, for as Gombrich emphasises,⁵⁶ *nibbāna* is not the “blowing out” of the person or the soul, but the blowing out of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion. It would be possible to speak of someone as being **nibbān’-aggi* or **nibbāt’-aggi*, using the word as a *bahuvrīhi* compound, in the sense of “one who has extinguished his fire(s)”, but I have not come across this usage in Pāli.

The word *nibbuta*, on the other hand, is to be derived from Sanskrit *nirvṛta*, of which the early meanings are “satisfied, happy, tranquil, at ease, at rest”. The cognate noun is *nibbuti* (Sanskrit *nirvṛti*), which means “happiness, bliss, rest, ceasing”, and the extinction or extinguishing (*nibbāna* < Sanskrit *nirvāṇa*) of a lamp was sometimes used as an explanation of it. This led to the feeling that *nibbuti* and *nibbāna* were synonymous. This parallelism between *nibbuti* and *nibbāna* led to a situation where *nibbuta* could be used of both persons and fire. In the verse uttered by the *khattiya* maiden Kisāgotamī at the time when Gotama was still a Bodhisatta, we find the past participle *nibbuta* being used in its original sense: “Happy is the mother, happy is the father, happy is the woman who has a husband like him”.⁵⁷ Gotama was able to make a play upon words in his reply: “She says that the mother’s heart is made happy/tranquil ... , but what should first be tranquil/at rest for the heart to be tranquil/at rest?” His answer to his own question is: “When the fire of passion, etc., is at rest/extinguished, then the heart is tranquil/at rest”,⁵⁸ i.e., after gaining *kilesa-nibbāna*. We find *nibbuta*

⁵³ The usage of Prakrit *nivvua* for the past participle but Prakrit *nivvāṇa* for the noun is found in Jainism, so that we can deduce that the concept was earlier than both religions.

⁵⁴ In origin *nibbāna* is a past participle (see the next note), although it seems not to be used as such in Pāli. Monier-Williams lists *nirvāṇa* and *parinirvāṇa* as past participles in Sanskrit, and the latter is attested for *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit* in F. Edgerton’s *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*, New Haven, 1953 (s.v. *parinirvāṇi*).

⁵⁵ Nor does Monier-Williams quote *nirvāta* as the past participle of *nir-vā* in Sanskrit.

⁵⁶ R. Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, London, 1988, 63. See also E.J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, London, 1933, 187.

⁵⁷ Ja, I, 60, 30–33: *nibbutā nūna sā mātā, nibbuto nūna so pitā, nibbutā nūna sā nārī, yass-āyaṃ īdiso pati.*

⁵⁸ Ja, I, 61, 5–6: *rāgaggimhi nibbuta nibbutaṃ nāma hoti, dosaggimhi mohaggimhi nibbuta nibbutaṃ nāma hoti.*

being used in the same sense of “quiet, peaceful, at rest” in the *Dhammapada*,⁵⁹ where it occurs as the opposite of *attadaṇḍa*. Since *nibbuta* could be used as a description of someone who had gained the extinction of his triple fire, i.e., *nibbāna*, and also as a description of the fire, it came about that *nibbuti*, which meant “satisfaction, happiness, bliss, pleasure, delight”, could also be used in two ways. It was regarded as a synonym of *nibbāna*, and consequently it was actually used in the sense of “extinction (of a lamp)”, and even “destruction, death”. The usage in connection with a lamp was possibly helped by the fact that the extinction of a lamp is often due not to blowing out, but to shortage of fuel,⁶⁰ or to the removal of the wick.⁶¹

As the converse of this, *nibbāna* is used of human beings as the equivalent of *nibbuti*. It seems quite probable that there was a homonym **nibbāna*⁶² < **nibbaṇṇa* < **nirvarṇa* or **nirvārṇa* from the verbal root *nirvṛ-*⁶³ which underlies *nibbuta* and *nibbuti*,⁶⁴ so that in a number of passages where we find *nibbāna* used of both persons and lamps, there is very possibly a pun upon the two words, just as we sometimes find a pun upon *nibbāna* and *nibbana* “without desire”. We also find that the verb *nibbāti* is used intransitively or passively of persons, very often in a comparison with a fire or a lamp, e.g., *nibbanti dhīrā yathāyaṃ dīpo* (Sn, 235), “The wise gain *nibbāna*, just as this lamp goes out”. This usage seems to be more frequent in the later texts, e.g., in the *Apadāna*, which perhaps supports the view that at an earlier time the verb was thought to be inappropriate for human beings.

6. The city of *nibbāna*

Doubtless because of the idea that there was a road leading to *nibbāna* and there was a way into *nibbāna*, which (metaphorically speaking) had doors (*amata-*

⁵⁹ Dhṛ, 406, where the opposition between *aviruddha* and *viruddha* in *pāda* a, and *sādāna* and *anādāna* in *pāda* c make the usage clear. Here the meaning can only be “quiet, peaceful, at rest”, as opposed to “violent”.

⁶⁰ cf. *aggi ... anāhāro nibbuto* (M, I, 487, 28–30), “Without fuel the fire went out”.

⁶¹ cf. *tato sūciṃ gahetvāna vaṭṭiṃ okassayāṃ’ ahaṃ; padīpasseva nibbānaṃ vimokkha ahu cetaso* (Thī, 116), “Then taking a needle I drew out the wick; the release of my mind was like the going out of the lamp”.

⁶² The dental *-n-* in *nibbāna*, instead of the retroflex *-ṇ-* to be expected from Sanskrit *nirvāṇa*, is an Eastern form in Pāli (cf. *bhūnahu* < Sanskrit *bhrūṇahan*).

⁶³ E.J. Thomas, *The Life of the Buddha as Legend and History*, London, 1927, 187, n. 2, perhaps following The Pali Text Society’s *Pali-English Dictionary* (s.v. *nibbuta*), sees here the root *var* “to cover”, but none of the occurrences of the verb *nirvṛ-* in Sanskrit supports the idea of “covering” for *nibbuti*.

⁶⁴ PED sees a direct connection between *nibbāyati* and *nibbuta*. It states (s.v. *nibbāyati*) that it is the passive of *ni(r)varati*, which I find difficult to accept. The fact that the word also occurs in the form *nibbāti*, which can only come from Sanskrit *nirvāti*, would seem to rule this explanation out.

*dvāra*⁶⁵), people sometimes thought of it as a city. So we find statements such as: “seeing the way means a seer of the road, i.e., the path of righteousness leading to the city of the death-free (or the death-free city) in the world which is confused (lost) in the wilderness of *samsāra*”.⁶⁶ Charles Hallisey has recently produced an edition of the *Tuṇḍilovāda-sutta*,⁶⁷ which ends with an extended simile of the city of *nibbāna*, in which the city’s gate, for example, is identified with perfect generosity (*dānapāramī*). Professor Hallisey points out that the basic idea of the city of *nibbāna* is quite common in the Buddhist literature of medieval Sri Lanka, but the term also seems to be a conventional form of reference rather than a live metaphor. The *Tuṇḍilovāda-sutta*’s long application of the parts of a city, standard in poetic imagination, to *nibbāna* is thus of some interest.

The view that *nibbāna* is a place seems to be supported by such phrases as *sundaram nibbānaṃ gato* in the *Saddanīti*.⁶⁸ This is probably a reminiscence on Aggavaṃsa’s part of such phrases as *sobhanagamanattā sundaram hānaṃ gatattā sammā gatattā sammā ca gadattā sugato*, in Buddhaghosa’s *Samantapāsādikā*⁶⁹: “He is ‘well-gone’ because of his beautiful way of going, because of having gone to a beautiful place, because of having gone properly, because of speaking properly”. This continues: *sundaram c’ esa thānaṃ*⁷⁰ *gato amataṃ nibbānaṃ ti sundaram hānaṃ gatattā pi sugato*,⁷¹ which might be translated: “ ‘He is well-gone because of having gone to a beautiful place’ means he has gone to a beautiful place, i.e., death-free *nibbāna*”. To give such a translation is to misunderstand the purpose of what is intended here. We are dealing with a grammarian’s explanation of *sugato* as *sundaram (thānaṃ) gato*, and an explanation of *sundaram* as *nibbānaṃ*, i.e., we should translate, “ ‘well-gone’ means gone to the good thing, i.e., death-free *nibbāna*”. As, however, it is part of Aggavaṃsa’s explanation that the verb *gacchati* means “to know” as well as “to go”,⁷² we should rather understand this as “ ‘the one who knows well’ means the one who knows the good thing, i.e., death-free *nibbāna*”.

⁶⁵ *apāpur’ etaṃ amatassa dvāraṃ*, M, I, 168, 27; *apārutā tesam amatassa dvārā*, I, 169, 24.

⁶⁶ Pj, II, 365, 19 (ad Sn, 371): *niyāmadassī ti, saṃsārakantāramūlḥe loke amatapura-gāmino sammatta-niyāmahūtassa maggassa dassāvī, diṭṭhamaggo ti vuttaṃ hoti*.

⁶⁷ C. Hallisey, “The Tuṇḍilovāda Sutta”, *JPTS*, 15, 1990, 155–95.

⁶⁸ Sadd, 315, 15–16.

⁶⁹ Sp, 116, 32–33; cf. Sadd, 580, 18 ff.

⁷⁰ The PTS edition omits *thānaṃ*.

⁷¹ Sp, 117, 2–4.

⁷² cf. *gatimā ti gamana-samatthāya paññāya samannāgato*, Sv, 893, 21; *ñāṇagatiyā gatimā*, Ja, VI, 287, 10.

Once the idea grew that *nibbāna* was a place, then it was thought to have a location, with the possibility of describing it, at least metaphorically. In reality, it is a non-place or a non-state, with people non-existing in it. The Buddha's refusal, or inability, to define the position of anyone who was *nibbuta*, or even the state of *nibbuti/nibbāna* itself, is thoroughly understandable. We are in *saṃsāra*, which is *dukkha*, *cala*, full of birth, old age and death. One who gains release from *saṃsāra* is, therefore, in a state which is the opposite of these. He, or his state, is *sukha*, and he or it has no birth, old age or death. It is, therefore, very easy to say what he or it does not have. It is not at all clear what he or it has—nor does it matter. The important thing is that he is free from *saṃsāra*. This is perhaps why the Buddha refused to say whether the *Tathāgata* lived after death or not, etc.⁷³ He was simply unable to define the state of one who was *nibbuta*, having attained *nibbāna*. It could only be done by saying what his state was not—it was not like being in *saṃsāra*. The texts make it clear that for one who had gained *nibbāna* there was no referent by which he could be referred to: *taṃ vadāmi te, yattha nāmañ ca rūpañ ca asesañ uparujjhati; viññāṇassa nirodhena etth' etaṃ uparujjhati*,⁷⁴ “I shall tell you wherein name-and-form is completely stopped. By the stopping of consciousness, therein this (i.e., name-and-form) is stopped”; *yena naṃ vajju, taṃ tassa n' atthi; sabbesu dhammesu samūhatesu samūhatā vādapathā pi sabbe*,⁷⁵ “That no longer exists for him by which they might speak of him. When all phenomena have been removed, then all ways of speaking are also removed.”

⁷³ See K.R. Norman, “Death and the Tathāgata”, *Studies in Buddhism and Culture* (In honour of Professor Dr. Egaku Mayeda), Tokyo, 1991, 1–11.

⁷⁴ Sn, 1037.

⁷⁵ Sn, 1076.