1. Introduction

In the Mūlapariyāya-sutta of the Pāli Majjhima-nikāya we read 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 of earth, he thinks in earth, he thinks out of earth, he thinks, "earth is mine", he delights in earth. He continues with water, fire, air, etc., and finally he considers nibbāna. 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.

It would appear that nibbāna here signifies the average person’s conception of the highest goal or the ultimate good. Buddhaghosa’s commentary neatly

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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.: paṭhaviṃ paṭhavito sañjānāti, paṭhaviṃ paṭhavito saññatvā paṭhaviṃ maññati, paṭhaviyā maññati, paṭhavito maññati, paṭhavim me ti maññati, paṭhaviṃ abhinandati.
7 M, I, 4, 3 ff.: nibbānam nibbānato sañjānāti, nibbānam nibbānato saññatvā nibbānam maññati, nibbānasmiṃ maññati, nibbānamo maññati, nibbānam me ti maññati, nibbānam 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.”

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explains that it means the five kinds of “supreme nibbāna here and now”. 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

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10 Ps, I, 38, 30–31: pañcadhā āgatām paramadi hadhamman nibbānam 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].
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 saṃsāra, 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 describes 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. 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.” 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

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16 See the Mahāsaccaka-sutta, M, I, 237–51.
17 M, I, 165, 10–12: ayaṃ dhammo ... na abhiññāya na sambodhāya na nibbānāya saṃvattati.
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, khīnāsava.

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 sopadhiśesa and an- or nir-upadhiśesa, “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 *upādiśesa* (or *upātiśesa*, 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 atisesa or adhiśesa of karma or life left to him.\(^{23}\) The second nibbāna is the nibbāna of the khandhas at death.

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\(^{19}\) 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.


\(^{22}\) 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)”.

In a previous paper which I read in this Buddhist Forum 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: “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”, I believe that he is wrong in stressing the

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, referring to E. Kuhn’s explanation that “parī” 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 parinirvātī ‘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, “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 Pātaligāmiyavagga of the Udāna, for example, we read: atthi bhikkhave ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akatam asaṅkhataṃ, no ce tam bhikkhave abhavissa ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akatam asaṃkhataṃ, na-y-idha jātassa bhūtassa katassa saṅkhatassa nissaraṇaṃ pāṇḍāyetha. Woodward translates, “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 here that is born, become, made, compounded”. A similar description is given by the Buddha in the Ariyaparīyesana-sutta where he explains how, being himself liable to birth (jāti), ageing (jarā), decay (vyādi), dying (marana), sorrow (soka), stain (saṅkilesa), he won the ajātaṃ ... ajaraṃ ... abyādhiṃ ... amataṃ ... asokaṃ ...

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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.
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 nibbāṇa. Miss Horner translates, “I won the unborn ... the unageing ... the undecaying ... the undying ... the unsorrowing ... the stainless”.

The translations “undying” or “deathless” for amata are widespread. Harvey, for example, correctly states: “One must therefore see nibbāṇa 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, nibbāṇa 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”. 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 nibbāṇa and samsāra, but the distinction between the translations “unborn” and “being liable to birth” seems to refer to the opposition between nibbāṇa 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 elsewhere to the problem of the word amata. It is clear that the epithets must refer, not to nibbāṇa, but to the conditions which pertain in nibbāṇa, which must be the opposite of those which pertain in samsāra. A later commentary upon the Dhammapada (quoted by Carter and Palihawadana) seems to recognise this problem and gives the information that nibbāṇa 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 nibbāṇa, 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.
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

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\(^{40}\) 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 uncompounded form.

\(^{41}\) āhaṁi amatadudrabhiṃ, Sp 8, 26 ≠ āhaṁcha amata-dundubhiṃ, M, I, 171, 12. The phrase occurs as a split compound (amatā vāditā bheriḥ) at Ap, 75, 26, which might misleadingly be translated “the deathless, or immortal, drum has been sounded”.

\(^{42}\) P. Masefield, op. cit., 1–li.
Dhammapada explains the compound amatapada as amatapadā ti amataṃ vuccatī nibbānaṃ; taṃ hi ajātattā na jīvāti na miyāti, tasmā amataṃ 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 samsāra, 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 samsāra 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 state\(^{44}\) 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).\(^{48}\)

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\(^{43}\) Dhp-a, I, 228, 19–21. Carter and Palihawadana (op. cit., 110) translate: “Nībbāna, 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 māreyya, 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”.  

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“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, 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 samsāra. The nature of samsāra is entirely linked to time; samsāra is essentially in time. To attain nibbāna is to be freed from the eternity of samsāra, to be freed from the passage of time; nibbāna is not connected with past, present or future.

It is the opposition to the conditions which prevail in samsāra which explain the other epithets which are applied to nibbāna: it is nicca, dhuva, sassata, aviparīṇāmadhamma “permanent, firm, eternal, not subject to development” because everything in samsāra is the opposite—anicca, adhuva, asassata, viparīṇāmadhamma. As a concept or abstraction, nibbāna is permanent, firm, eternal, not subject to development, because at any time in the samsāra, 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. nibbāyatī; nibbāna; nibbuta

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

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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. The verb nibbāyati means “to be blown out, to be extinguished”, and so the noun nibbāna, 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 Pāli [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, 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 *nibbā-aggi or *nibbā'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 Kiśāgotamī 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”. 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”, 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. parinirvāti).
55 Nor does Monier-Williams quote nirvāta as the past participle of nir-vā in Sanskrit.
57 Ja, I, 60, 30–33: nibbuta nūna sā mätā, nibbuto nūna so pitā, nibbutā nūna sā nārī, yass-āyam īdiso pati.
58 Ja, I, 61, 5–6: rāgagīmhi nibbute nibbutaṃ nāma hoti, dosagīmhi mohagīmhi nibbute nibbutaṃ nāma hoti.
being used in the same sense of “quiet, peaceful, at rest” in the Dhammapada,\(^\text{59}\) where it occurs as the opposite of \textit{attada\~{n}a}. Since \textit{nibbuta} could be used as a description of someone who had gained the extinction of his triple fire, i.e., \textit{nibb\~{a}na}, and also as a description of the fire, it came about that \textit{nibbuti}, which meant “satisfaction, happiness, bliss, pleasure, delight”, could also be used in two ways. It was regarded as a synonym of \textit{nibb\~{a}na}, 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,\(^\text{60}\) or to the removal of the wick.\(^\text{61}\)

As the converse of this, \textit{nibb\~{a}na} is used of human beings as the equivalent of \textit{nibbuti}. It seems quite probable that there was a homonym *nibb\~{a}na\(^\text{62}\) < *nibba\~{n}na < *nirvar\~{n}a or *nirv\~{n}\~{a}na from the verbal root \textit{nirv}-\(^\text{63}\) which underlies \textit{nibbuta} and \textit{nibbuti},\(^\text{64}\) so that in a number of passages where we find \textit{nibb\~{a}na} used of both persons and lamps, there is very possibly a pun upon the two words, just as we sometimes find a pun upon \textit{nibb\~{a}na} and \textit{nibbana} “without desire”. We also find that the verb \textit{nibb\~{a}ti} is used intransitively or passively of persons, very often in a comparison with a fire or a lamp, e.g., \textit{nibbanti dh\~{i}r\~{a}yath\~{a}yam dipo} (Sn, 235), “The wise gain \textit{nibb\~{a}na}, just as this lamp goes out”. This usage seems to be more frequent in the later texts, e.g., in the \textit{Apad\~{a}na}, which perhaps supports the view that at an earlier time the verb was thought to be inappropriate for human beings.

6. \textit{The city of nibb\~{a}na}

Doubtless because of the idea that there was a road leading to \textit{nibb\~{a}na} and there was a way into \textit{nibb\~{a}na}, which (metaphorically speaking) had doors (\textit{amata}-

\(^{59}\) Dhp, 406, where the opposition between \textit{aviruddha} and \textit{viruddha} in \textit{p\~{a}da} a, and \textit{s\~{a}d\~{a}na} and \textit{an\~{a}d\~{a}na} in \textit{p\~{a}da} c make the usage clear. Here the meaning can only be “quiet, peaceful, at rest”, as opposed to “violent”.

\(^{60}\) cf. \textit{aggi ... an\~{a}h\~{a}ro nibbuto} (M, I, 487, 28–30), “Without fuel the fire went out”.

\(^{61}\) cf. \textit{tato s\~{u}ci\~{m} gahetv\~{a}na va\~{t}\~{t}i\~{m}okassay\~{a}na va\~{t}\~{t}i\~{m}okassay\~{a}m aha\~{m} o\~{m}pa\~{n}a nibb\~{a}na\~{m} vimokkho ahu cetaso} (Th\~{i}, 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 -\textit{n}\- in \textit{nibb\~{a}na}, instead of the retroflex -\textit{\text{n}n}\- to be expected from Sanskrit \textit{nirv\~{a}na}, is an Eastern form in P\~{a}li (cf. bh\~{u}\~{n}ahu < Sanskrit bh\~{r}\~{u}\~{n}ahan).

\(^{63}\) E.J. Thomas, \textit{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. \textit{nibbuta}), sees here the root \textit{var} “to cover”, but none of the occurrences of the verb \textit{nirv}- in Sanskrit supports the idea of “covering” for \textit{nibbuti}.

\(^{64}\) PED sees a direct connection between \textit{nibb\~{a}yati} and \textit{nibbuta}. It states (s.v. \textit{nibb\~{a}yati}) that it is the passive of \textit{ni(r)varati}, which I find difficult to accept. The fact that the word also occurs in the form \textit{nibb\~{a}ti}, which can only come from Sanskrit \textit{nirv\~{a}ti}, would seem to rule this explanation out.
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 saṃsāra”. Charles Hallisey has recently produced an edition of the Tuṇḍilovāda-sutta, 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 sundaraṁ nibbānam gato in the Saddanīti. This is probably a reminiscence on Aggavamsa’s part of such phrases as sobhanagamanattā sundaram hānam gatattā sammā gatattā sammā ca gatattā sugato, in Buddhaghosa’s Samantapāsādikā: “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 ṭhānam gato amatam nibbānan ti sundaram hānam gatattā pi sugato, 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 (ṭhānam) gato, and an explanation of sundaram as nibbānam, i.e., we should translate, “‘well-gone’ means gone to the good thing, i.e., death-free nibbāna”. As, however, it is part of Aggavamsa’s explanation that the verb gacchati means “to know” as well as “to go”, we should rather understand this as “‘the one who knows well’ means the one who knows the good thing, i.e., death-free nibbāna”.

\[\text{apāpur’} etam amatassa dvāra, M, I, 168, 27; apārutā tesam amatassa dvārā, I, 169, 24.\]
\[\text{Pj, II, 365, 19 (ad Sn, 371): niyāmadassī ti, saṃsārakāntāramūlhe loke amatapura-gāmino sammatta-niyāmabhūtassa maggassa dassāvī, diṭhamaggo ti vutto hoti.}\]
\[\text{Sadd, 315, 15–16.}\]
\[\text{Sp, 116, 32–33; cf. Sadd, 580, 18 ff.}\]
\[\text{The PTS edition omits ṭhānam.}\]
\[\text{Sp, 117, 2–4.}\]
\[\text{cf. gatimā ti gamana-samatthāya paññāya samannāgato, Sv, 893, 21; nāṇagatiyā gatimā, Ja, VI, 287, 10.}\]
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 samsāra, which is dukkha, cala, full of birth, old age and death. One who gains release from samsāra 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 samsāra. 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 samsāra. The texts make it clear that for one who had gained nibbāna there was no referent by which he could be referred to: tam vadāmi te, yattha nāmañ ca rūpañ ca asesaṁ uparujjhati; viññāṇassa nirodhena etth’ etam 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 nāma vañju, tam tassa n’ athhi; sabbesu dhammesu samūhatēsu samūhatā vādapatē 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.”

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\(^{74}\) Sn, 1037.

\(^{75}\) Sn, 1076.