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# Concept of *Nibbāna* in Buddhism A Fresh Interpretation



Ph.D. Research Scholar, Gautam Buddha  
University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India -

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## INTRODUCTION

Buddhism is a psycho-ethical tradition, proceeding with a system of thought as well as a definite path for realization of the flavor of life in state of existence. The teachings of the Buddha are mainly directed for realization of this bliss state. As great rivers flowing in different directions, ultimately merge into the great ocean, similarly, all his teachings lead towards Nibbāna. It is the only flavor of the Dhamma and Vinaya like the only salty flavor of the great ocean. It has found expression throughout Suttas in the active life of forty-five years and it is through them, it has been made clear as a realizable fact in this very life.

The concept of Nibbāna has been spent various stages in its process and development in the nature of recognition. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the process of development of concept Nibbāna in main periods of Buddhism. It can be listed in four main periods of Buddhism: Early Buddhism, Buddhist Sect Period, Mahāyāna Buddhism and Vajrayāna Buddhism. Especially, with the development of Engaged Buddhist Movement, the concept of Nibbāna has been changed under the form of applied aspects. The prominent personalities of this movement can be counted as Dr. Ambedkar, A.T. Aryaratne, Most Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh...etc.

In this paper, I shall find out a fresh way of interpreting the concept of Nibbāna particularly by modern engaged Buddhists. The modern engaged Buddhists shall be chosen under the aspects of Buddhist schools. They are good exemplars in their respective traditions such as A.T. Aryaratne and Buddhadasa in Theravāda tradition, Most Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh in Mahāyāna Buddhism, H.H. Dalai Lama in Vajrayāna and Dr. Ambedkar in Neo Buddhism.

## 11. Content

### 1. Literature Review

The first research on Nibbāna was done by Prof. La Vallee Poussin in 1917 with the works “The Way to Nirvāna”. In this thesis, the author has resolved various problems pertaining to personality after death. A comprehensive analysis of Nibbāna by the author is worthy of studying and researching. However, he only based on the source of Pali Tipitaka. Other sources have not been taken under consideration.

The second works on Nibbāna is carried out by Satkari Mookerjee in 1935 through “The Buddhist Philosophy of Universal Flux”. He analyzed fully the concept of Nibbāna. However, the author just focuses on the concept of Nibbāna on the basis of two early Buddhist schools: Sautrantika and Vaibhasa. Therefore, other two Mahāyāna schools, i.e. Yogacara and Madhyamaka should be studied for full understanding of the subject if these four schools are classified on the basis of philosophical aspect.

After this works, Prof. Stcherbatsky has done perfectly the concept of *Nirvāṇa* based on Madhyamika Karika by Nagarjuna. His research has the name of “The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāna” done in 1968. It can be said that the author has analyzed this concept in regard to the philosophy of Sunyavada, one of two Mahāyāna schools in India.

Dr. Welbon has written the famous works with the title “The Buddhist Nirvāna and Its Western Interpreters” in 1968. It is an incredibly scholarly and well researched book. The author guides his readers in a tour de force through Buddhist Studies from the 1700s to the early 1900s. The views set forth by different scholars vary considerably. It is considered as the good secondary collection. However, perspective of Buddhist sects and Engaged Buddhism has been not mentioned. It should be more on research in a more full and comprehensive field.

Another good research on the concept of Nibbāna was done by Professor Johansson. In his works “The Psychology of Nirvāna” in 1969, while he agrees with de la Vallée Poussin that too much has been written about *Nirvāna*, he maintains that this “too much” is also too superficial and based on inadequate investigation. He justifies that the Pali Nikayas are rich in psychological terminology and analyses and since all serious study should be helpful, psychology should contribute its share. He states at the outset that his methods are “psychological and semantic, rather than historical and philosophical”. However, this psychology is mainly based on Theravāda Abhidhamma but in other sources, especially in Vijnanavada School of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In my thesis, it will be supplied in a more comprehensive way.

In 1985, Dr. H.S. Sobti has finished his Ph.D thesis on “Nibbāna in Early Buddhism”. He has done perfectly this thesis based on Pali Tipitaka, especially on Visuddhimagga and drew the way to Nibbāna in the same way which has been mentioned by Buddhaghosa. Although the author has inherited various works above, he just pays attention to Pali sources.

Therefore, there is lacking of a large number of sources in relation to Buddhist sects, Mahāyāna and especially Engaged Buddhist movement. As a result, a comprehensive study of the concept Nibbāna or *Nirvāna* should be studied and analyzed from early time till modern age. If so, all aspects of the concept shall be understood fully and comprehensively.

## 2. Ancient Concept of *Nibbāna*

### a. Terminology

Nirvāṇa (Sanskrit) or Nibbāna (Pali) is the earliest and most common term used to describe the goal of the Buddhist path<sup>1</sup>. The literal meaning is “blowing out” or “quenching.”<sup>2</sup> It is the ultimate spiritual goal in Buddhism and marks the stereological release from rebirths in saṃsāra.

Within the Buddhist tradition, this term has commonly been interpreted as the extinction of the “three fires”<sup>3</sup>, or “three poisons”<sup>4</sup>, passion (raga), aversion (dvesha) and ignorance (moha or avidyā). When these fires are extinguished, release from the cycle of rebirth (saṃsāra) is attained.

*Nirvāṇa* has also been deemed in Buddhism to be identical with anatta (non-self) and sunyata (emptiness) states<sup>5</sup>. In time, with the development of Buddhist doctrine, other interpretations were given, such as the absence of the weaving (vana) of activity of the mind, the elimination of desire, and escape from the woods, the five skandhas or aggregates.

In Indian religions, *Nirvāṇa* is synonymous with moksha, vimoksha, vimukti and mukti<sup>6</sup>. All Indian religions assert it to be a state of perfect quietude, freedom, highest happiness.

<sup>1</sup> Buswell, Robert E.; Lopez, Donald S., *the Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, Princeton University, 2013, pp. 589 - 590.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> Gombrich, Richard F., *How Buddhism Began*, Second edition, Routledge, 2006, p.65.

<sup>4</sup> According to Gombrich, the use of the term “three fires” alludes to the three fires which a brahmin householder had to keep alight, and tend daily. In later Buddhism, the origin of this metaphor was forgotten, and the term was replaced with “the three poisons”.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 82-84.; Genjun Sasaki, *Linguistic Approach to Buddhist Thought*, Motilal Banarsidass, 1986, pp. 124-125; Sue Hamilton, *Early Buddhism: A New Approach : the I of the Beholder*, Routledge. 2000, pp. 18-21.

<sup>6</sup> Also called vimoksha, vimukti and mukti. The Soka Gakkai Dictionary of Buddhism: “Vimoksha” means emancipation, release, or liberation. The Sanskrit words vimukti, mukti, and moksha also have the same meaning. Vimoksha means release from the bonds of earthly desires, delusion, suffering and transmigration. While Buddhism sets forth various kinds and stages of emancipation, or enlightenment, the supreme emancipation is nirvana.

Along with it being the liberation from samsara, the repeating cycle of birth, life and death.<sup>7</sup>

However, Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions describe these terms for liberation differently. In the Buddhist context, *Nirvāṇa* refers to realization of non-self and emptiness, marking the end of rebirth by stilling the fires that keep the process of rebirth going. In Hindu philosophy, it is the union of or the realization of the identity of Atman with Brahman, depending on the Hindu tradition. In Jainism, it is also the stereological goal, but unlike Buddhism, it represents the release of a soul from karmic bondage and samsara.

### **b. Position of Concept of *Nirvāṇa* in Buddhist Doctrinal System**

#### **Four Noble Truths**

*Nirvāṇa* is part of the Third Truth on “cessation of *dukkha*” in the Four Noble Truths<sup>8</sup>, and the summum bonum destination of the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Four Noble Truths are “the truths of the Noble Ones,”<sup>9</sup> the truths or realities which are understood by the “worthy ones” who have attained *Nirvāṇa*<sup>10</sup>. The truths are *dukkha*, the arising of *dukkha*, the cessation of *dukkha*, and the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*.

The four truths express the basic orientation of Buddhism: we crave and cling to impermanent states and things, which is *dukkha*, “incapable of satisfying” and painful. This keeps us caught in samsara, the endless cycle of repeated rebirth, *dukkha* and dying again. But there is a way to reach real happiness and to end this cycle, namely following the eightfold path.

<sup>7</sup> Gavin Flood, *Nirvana*, Oxford Dictionary of World Religions, p. 214.

<sup>8</sup> Sanskrit: catvāri āryasatyāni; Pali: cattāri ariyasaccāni.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, Paul, *Buddhist Thought*, 2002, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Warder, A.K., *Indian Buddhism*, Delhi, 1999, p.67.

## Two Truths

Conventional Truth (Sammuti Sacca) and Ultimate Truth (Paramattha Sacca) are two kinds of truths recognised in the Abhidhamma according to which only four categories of things namely, mind (consciousness), mental concomitants, materiality and *Nibbāna* are classed as the Ultimate Truth; all the rest are regarded as apparent truth.

The four categories of dharmas in Abhidhamma are: Citta (Mind, Consciousness, awareness), Cetasika (mental factors, mental events, associated mentality), Rūpa

physical occurrences, material form), and *Nibbāna* (Extinction, cessation). This dharma is unconditioned; neither arises nor ceases due to causal interaction. It can be said that the ultimate goal of the Abhidhamma is *Nibbāna*.

In this aspect, *Nirvāṇa* is regarded as an un compounded or unconditioned state of being which is “transmundane”<sup>11</sup>, and which is beyond our normal dualistic conceptions.

The Buddha sometimes unequivocally uses the word Truth in place of *Nibbāna*: “I will teach you the Truth and the Path leading to the Truth.”<sup>12</sup> Here Truth definitely means *Nibbāna*. What is Absolute Truth? According to Buddhism, the Absolute Truth is that there is nothing absolute in the world, that everything is relative, conditioned and impermanent, and that there is no unchanging, everlasting, absolute substance like Self, Soul, or Ātman within or without. This is the Absolute Truth.

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<sup>11</sup> Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Grove Press, 2007, p. 197.

<sup>12</sup> SN. 5. 369.



## Classification of *Nibbāna*

Saupādisesa *Nibbāna*, “*Nirvāṇa* with remainder”, “*Nibbāna* with residue.”<sup>13</sup> *Nirvāṇa* is attained during one’s life, when the fires are extinguished. There is still the residue of the five skandhas, and a residue of fuel, which however is not burning. *Nirvāṇa*-in-this-life is believed to result in a transformed mind with qualities such as happiness, freedom of negative mental states, peacefulness and non-reactiveness.

Anupādisesa *Nibbāna*, “*Nibbāna* without remainder,” “*Nibbāna* without residue”.<sup>14</sup> This is the final *Nibbāna*, or *parinibbāna* or “blowing out” at the moment of death, when there is no fuel left.

### 2.A Glimpse Understanding for *Nibbāna* from Theravāda to Mahāyāna

In Theravāda Texts, *Nibbāna* is described as identical to *anatta* (anatman, non-self, lack of any self). *Anatta* means there is no abiding self or soul in any being or a permanent essence in any thing.<sup>15</sup> This interpretation asserts that all reality is of dependent origination and a worldly construction of each human mind, therefore ultimately a delusion or ignorance.

*Nirvāṇa* in Madhyamaka, one of two main Mahāyāna Buddhist Sects in India, is described as the realization of *sunyata* (emptiness or nothingness).<sup>16</sup> Madhyamika

<sup>13</sup> Gombrich, Richard F., *How Buddhism Began*, Second edition, Routledge, p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Sue Hamilton Blyth, *Early Buddhism: A New Approach: The I of the Beholder*, Routledge. 2013, pp. 19-28.

<sup>16</sup> Mun-Keat Choong, *The Notion of Emptiness in Early Buddhism*, Motilal Banarsidass, 1999, pp. 85-88.

Buddhist texts call this as the middle point of all dualities or Middle Way, where all subject-object discrimination and polarities disappear, there is no conventional reality, and the only ultimate reality of emptiness is all that remains.

In Yogacara tradition, luminous consciousness is *Nirvāṇa*. For liberated ones the luminous, unsupported consciousness associated with *Nirvāṇa* is directly known without mediation of the mental consciousness factor in dependent co-arising, and is the transcending of all objects of mental consciousness.<sup>17</sup>

It can be said that in early Buddhism, *Nirvāṇa* is used as a synonym for *vimutti*, release from *samsara*, as the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path. This goal is still prevalent in contemporary Theravāda Buddhism. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the attainment of *Nirvāṇa* is seen as a lesser goal; the highest goal is the attainment of Buddhahood.<sup>18</sup> According to Mahāyāna Buddhism, a Buddha does not dwell in *Nirvāṇa*, but engages actively in enlightened activity to liberate beings for as long as *samsara* remains.<sup>19</sup>

It is possible to take a viewpoint of Christopher S. Queen as a short conclusion in relation to the brief development of the concept of *Nirvāṇa* as follows: “In traditional Buddhism, *Nibbāna* as liberation has also meant many things, from the Theravāda freedom from desires, passions and delusion to the Mahāyāna freedom from conventional views of reality to the Vajrayāna freedom from moral and ethical dualism.”<sup>20</sup> All of these meanings have been tied to the ultimate promise of a personal, spiritual liberation that transcends the material, psychological and social confines of this world.

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Harvey, *Consciousness Mysticism in the Discourses of the Buddha*, Curzon Press, 1989, p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> Clarke, *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, Routledge, 2004, p. 88.

<sup>19</sup> Duckworth, *Jamgon Mipam: His Life and Teachings*, Shambhala, 2011, p. 122.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 9.



## 2. Fresh Interpretations of *Nibbāna*

The liberation that Engaged Buddhist leaders envision and articulate in their addresses and writings is consistently based on their own distinctive readings of traditional Buddhist doctrines, selflessness, interdependence, five precepts, nondualism, emptiness and especially the Four Noble Truths. Virtually all of these leaders have written creatively and copiously on the contemporary application of traditional Buddhist teachings.

### *a. Nibbāna in view of Dr. Ambedkar*

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar popularly known as Babasaheb was an Indian jurist, economist, politician and social reformer who inspired the Dalit Buddhist movement and campaigned against social discrimination against Untouchables, while also supporting the rights of women and labour<sup>21</sup>. He was Independent India's first law minister and the principal architect of the Constitution of India.

Dr. Ambedkar was also the founder of Navayana in India. Navayana (new vehicle) refers to the idea that a Buddhist movement may represent a new *yāna*, i.e. major branch of Buddhism, in addition to the traditionally recognized branches of Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna. This status has been claimed both for the Dalit Buddhist movement. For this idea, Dr. Ambedkar says:

*“I will accept and follow the teachings of Buddha. I will keep my people away from the different opinions of Hinyana and Mahāyāna, two religious orders. Our Bouddha Dhamma is a new Bouddha Dhamma, Navayana”*<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Bryant, Edwin, *the Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture*, Oxford University Press, 2001. pp. 50-51.

<sup>22</sup> Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Press interview on 13 October 1956 at Sham Hotel, Nagpur.

Dr. Ambedkar's "the Buddha and his Dhamma" was conceived and written as a kind of Buddhist bible for the Untouchable converts to Buddhism.

In his "The Buddha and His Dhamma", Dr. Ambedkar rejects the traditional Buddhist emphasis on suffering as internally caused. He replaces this with an emphasis on eliminating the external causes of the Untouchables' suffering: social, political and economic. Suffering is not chiefly the product of mental attachments but the result of social exploitation and poverty. In addition, Dr. Ambedkar also rejects the traditional understanding of enlightenment and reinterprets it. It is as the amelioration of material conditions and social relationships in this life.

We reach the furthest end of the spectrum with reinterpretation of the goal going beyond reform to the radical level of change. Dr. Ambedkar goes further than the rest in negating tradition, as we have seen, rejects the traditional version of the Four Noble Truths as blaming the victim.

According to Dr. Ambedkar, the Eightfold Noble Path is not a means to *Nirvāṇa* but as the way "to remove justice and inhumanity that man does to man"<sup>23</sup>. Of the Four Noble Truths, the first and fourth truths appear in recognizable formulations as elements in the First Sermon, but the second and third are mistakably reinterpreted as social teachings. Dr. Ambedkar defines the cause of suffering as violence of class struggle "blows and wounds, strife, contradiction and retorts; quarrelling, slander and lies"<sup>24</sup>.

As for *Nirvāṇa*, Dr. Ambedkar writes of a "kingdom of righteousness on earth" and describes the Buddha's enlightenment not as the ripening of an individual's cosmic potential but as a simple realization of the plight of others"

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<sup>23</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, *the Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 83.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

*“On the night of the last day of the fourth week, light dawned upon him. He realized that there were two problems. The first problem was that there was suffering in the world and the second was how to remove this suffering and make mankind happy”<sup>25</sup>.*

We noted that Dr. Ambedkar presents both the traditional truths of *samudaya* (arising of suffering) and *nirodha* (cessation of suffering) as well as accounts of *Nirvāṇa* and *Parinirvāṇa* else where in “the Buddha and His Dhamma”:

*“What makes man unhappy (he has the Buddha say) is his falling prey to his passions. These passions are called fetters which prevent a man from reaching the state of Nibbāna. The moment he is free from the sway of his passions, i.e., he learns to achieve Nibbāna, man’s way to happiness is open to him.”*

And again:

*“As the Udāna says, PariNibbāna occurs when the body becomes disintegrated, all perceptions become stopped, and all sensations die away, the activities cease and consciousness go away. Thus PariNibbāna means complete extinction. Nibbāna can never have this ending. Nibbāna means enough control over passion so as to enable one to walk on the path of righteousness”<sup>26</sup>.*

Therefore, it is recognizable that the emphasis is redirected to ethical life in society; cessation of passions is seen as a precondition for righteousness, as if the third truth of the traditional formula leads casually and temporally to the practice of the fourth truth, a clear reversal of the traditional order.

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<sup>25</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, *the Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 166-167.

### ***b. Nibbāna in viewpoint of Dalai Lama***

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, describes himself as a simple Buddhist monk. He is the spiritual leader of Tibet. He was born on 6 July 1935, to a farming family, in a small hamlet located in Taktser, Amdo, Northeastern Tibet. At the very young age of two, the child who was named Lhamo Dhondup at that time, was recognized as the reincarnation of the previous 13th Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso.

The Dalai Lama is believed to be manifestation of Avalokiteshvara or Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion and the patron saint of Tibet. Bodhisattva is believed to be enlightened being who has postponed their own *Nirvāṇa* and chosen to take rebirth in order to serve humanity.

His Holiness has three main commitments in life. Firstly, on the level of a human being, His Holiness' first commitment is the promotion of human values such as compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, contentment and self-discipline. All human beings are the same. His Holiness refers to these human values as secular ethics. Secondly, on the level of a religious practitioner, His Holiness' second commitment is the promotion of religious harmony and understanding among the world's major religious traditions. Despite philosophical differences, all major world religions have the same potential to create good human beings. It is therefore important for all religious traditions to respect one another and recognize the value of each other's respective traditions. Thirdly, His Holiness is a Tibetan and carries the name of the 'Dalai Lama'. Therefore, his third commitment is to work to preserve Tibet's Buddhist culture, a culture of peace and non-violence.

In regard to the concept of *Nirvāṇa*, the Dalai Lama has given a systematic meanings on two main levels. True cessations are the cessations of various levels of afflictions actualized by progressing through the paths to Arhatship and full awakening. Afflictions are of two types: innate (*sahaja*) afflictions continue uninterruptedly from one lifetime to another, and conceptually acquired (*parikalpita*) afflictions are learned from incorrect philosophies. The final true cessation of an arhat, *nirvāṇa* - eradication of both acquired and innate afflictions - is the example of true cessations.

Nirvāṇa is the cessation of *duḥkha* because, being a state in which the origins of *duḥkha* have been abandoned, it ensures that *duḥkha* will no longer be produced. Understanding that attaining true cessation is possible by eliminating the continuity of afflictions and karma dispels the misconception that afflictions are an inherent part of the mind and liberation is impossible. The knowledge that liberation exists inspires us with optimism and energy to attain it.

Nirvāṇa is peace because it is a separation in which afflictions have been eliminated. This attribute counteracts the belief that refined yet still polluted states, such as the meditative absorptions of the material and immaterial realms are cessation. While more tranquil than human life, these states have only temporarily suppressed manifest afflictions and have not abandoned innate afflictions from the root. Not understanding that the cessation of all craving is ultimate peace, some people remain satisfied with such superior states within *saṃsāra*. People convinced of the harm of craving and karma knows that their cessation is lasting peace and joy.

Nirvāṇa is magnificent because it is the supreme source of benefit and happiness. As total freedom from all three types of *duḥkha*, true cessation is completely nondeceptive. No other state of liberation supersedes it; it is supreme and magnificent. Knowing this prevents thinking that there is some state superior to the cessation of *duḥkha* and its origins. It also prevents mistaking certain states of temporary or partial cessation as final *Nirvāṇa*.

Nirvāṇa is definite emergence because it is total, irreversible release from *saṃsāra*. Liberation is definite emergence because it is an irrevocable release from the misery of *saṃsāra*. This counters the misconception that liberation is reversible and the ultimate state of peace can degenerate. Because true cessation is the elimination of all afflictions and karma, there no longer exists any cause for rebirth or *saṃsāric duḥkha*<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> The Dalai Lama on Four Aspects of Nirvana, <http://www.wisdompubs.org>, Accessed 14 June 2016.

Besides that, looking at the matter from a comparatively traditional perspective, the Dalai Lama sees worldly goals (e.g. regaining the home land) and supramundane, traditional Buddhist goals (*Nirvāṇa*) as mutually reinforcing for virtuous action on behalf of the oppressed creates merit and aids in the task of mental purification, while the more traditional spiritual exercises, especially the practice of compassion and wisdom, are seen as providing the basis that insures the moral goodness of an action and its efficacy.

Significantly, this conception of the relationship between worldly and supra mundane goals is in marked contrast to the theory that assumes the *kammatic* and *nibbanic* distinction in which social action belongs in the *kammatic* (secular realm) and is therefore related primarily to the goal of higher rebirth, as opposed to the *nibbanic* aspect of the religion whose goal is emancipation from all birth.

#### **a. *Nibbāna* in perspective of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh**

History shows a paucity of ethically based social action in most of East Asian Buddhist history. However, in Vietnam, the massive suffering caused by the recent wars convinced many Vietnamese Buddhist monastic and laypersons that it was imperative for them to actively engage in the political and social struggles of their country. To determine the form this engagement should take required the forging of a new Buddhism. Arguably the most important theoretician of this Vietnamese movement was the monk Thich Nhat Hanh<sup>28</sup>.

Thich Nhat Hanh is a contemporary Vietnamese Zen master and poet. He was the chair of the Vietnamese Buddhist peace delegation during the war and was nominated by Dr. Martin Luther King for the Nobel Peace Prize. He is the author of over eighty books ranging from scholarship to poetry, from mindfulness training to engaged Buddhism. He is a leader of the international “engaged Buddhism” movement which seeks to create and nurture vehicles for social action among Buddhists.

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<sup>28</sup> Sallie B. King, *Thich Nhat Hanh and the unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam: Nondualism in Action*, p. 1.



As we have known, Vietnamese Buddhism has long embraced both Theravāda and Mahāyāna (especially Pure Land and Zen) with Theravāda more popular in the south and Mahāyāna in the north. Thus, Most Venerable has inherited valuable doctrines from both traditions with emphasis on mindfulness, *gatha* (short verses) and *koan*<sup>29</sup>. His own teachings emphasize mindfulness and *gatha* practices, while his philosophy is a blend of Theravāda and Mahāyāna.

It can be said that Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh's work break a new ground for Buddhist thought and action. He has modernized Buddhism, making it appropriate to contemporary culture and conditions while adhering to the basic tenets of Buddhism. He has significantly contributed to the forging of a way to bring Buddhism out of monastic seclusion to engage with and serve all aspects of ordinary life.

In relation to the concept of Nirvāṇa, Most Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh has given various lectures and Dhamma talks on this special topic<sup>30</sup>.

Buddhism speaks of Nirvāṇa, which is the cessation of all suffering. Nirvāṇa means the cessation, the extinction, of all suffering. But our suffering comes from our wrong perceptions, *avidya*, misunderstanding. And that is why the practice of meditation, the practice of looking deeply, has the purpose of removing wrong perceptions from us. If we are able to remove our wrong perceptions, we will be able to be free from afflictions and sufferings that always arrive from wrong perceptions.

You have wrong perception on your self and on the other. And the other has wrong perception on themselves and on you, and that is the cause of fear, of violence, of hatred. That is why trying to remove wrong perceptions is the only way to peace, and that is why Nirvāṇa is, first of all, the removal or wrong perceptions. And when you remove wrong perceptions, you remove the suffering.

To meditate deeply, you find out that even ideas like being and non-being, or birth and death, or coming and going, are wrong ideas. If you can touch reality in depth, you realize that suchness, which means ultimate reality, is free from from birth,

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<sup>29</sup> *Koan* is a story, dialogue, question, or statement which is used in Zen practice to provoke the "great doubt" and test a student's progress in Zen practice.

<sup>30</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *What is Nirvana and How Does It End Suffering?*, <http://www.plumvillage.org>, Accessed on 16 June 2016.

from dying, from coming, from going, from being, from non-being. That is why Nirvāṇa is first of all the removal of notions, of ideas, that serve the basis of misunderstanding and suffering.

If you are afraid of death, of nothingness, of non-being, it is because you have wrong perceptions on death and on non-being. The French scientist Lavoisier said that there's 'no birth, there's no death.' He just observed reality around him and came to the conclusion that 'rien ne se crée, rien ne se perd.'

When you look at a cloud, you think that the cloud has being. And later on when the cloud becomes the rain, you don't see the cloud anymore and you say the cloud is not there. You describe the cloud as non-being. But if you look deeply, you can see the cloud in the rain. And that is why it is impossible for the cloud to die. The cloud can become rain, snow, or ice. But the cloud cannot become nothing. And that is why the notion of death cannot be applied to the reality. There is a transformation. There is a continuation. But you cannot say that there is death, because in your mind, to die means from something you suddenly become nothing. From someone you suddenly become no one. And so the notion of death can not apply to reality, whether to a cloud or to a human being.

The Buddha did not die. The Buddha only continued by his *Samgha*, by his dharma, and you can touch the Buddha in the here and the now. And that is why ideas like being born, dying, coming and going, being and non-being, should be removed by the practice of looking deeply. And when you can remove these notions, you are free and you have non-fear. And non-fear is the true foundation of great happiness. As so far fear is there in your heart, happiness cannot be perfect.

And that is why Nirvāṇa is not something that you get in the future. Nirvāṇa is the capacity of removing the wrong notions, wrong perceptions, which is the practice of freedom. Nirvāṇa can be translated as freedom: freedom from views. And in Buddhism, all views are wrong views. When you get in touch with reality, you no longer have views. You have wisdom. You have a direct encounter with reality, and that is no longer called views. Nirvāṇa is available in the here and now<sup>31</sup>.

#### **b. *Nibbāna* under interpretation of Buddhadasa**

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu is a Thai Buddhist monk whose dedication in service to the Lord Buddha has produced the largest and most innovative body of work of any Bhikkhu in recent Thai history. He has been pioneer in the application of Buddha Dhamma to the realities of the modern world and has forthrightly criticized the immorality and selfishness of many modern social structures. Further, he has been Thailand's most vocal proponent of open mindedness toward other religions.

Buddhadasa has interpreted the Pali Tipitaka of Theravāda Buddhism in light of its primary principles: noble truths, no-self, voidness and dependent origination so that all the core teachings fit together and are more deeply understood through each other. In doing so, he moved away from some cherished, albeit secondary, dogmas of orthodox Theravāda itself.

As for *Nibbāna*, Buddhadasa emphasized social goods and acting for benefit of society are prerequisites of traveling beyond *Nibbāna*<sup>32</sup>. According to him, the Buddhist goal of quenching or ending *dukkha* is not to be falsely spiritualized into an other worldly end because the genuinely spiritual does not denigrate or reject the body. *Nibbāna* can only be found right here in the middle of samsara, the whirlpool of birth and death. So when we talk about ending *dukkha*, we mean both personal and social problems<sup>33</sup>.

Therefore, social and spiritual peace are deeply interconnected for Buddhadasa insofar as neither can be found without getting to the root of the problem at the level of human desires. Buddhadasa always gave primacy to absolute peace of *Nibbāna* but came to believe and articulated with increasing clarity and strength over the years that social peace is to be reached by the same path. So he says “world peace is the Buddha's purpose”<sup>34</sup>.

In short, the traditional goal is reconceived only slightly, leaving behind transmundane language but retaining language of enlightenment and freedom from desire. With the transmundane gone, it becomes possible to articulate a concept of *Nibbāna* that incorporates world peace while retaining much of the traditional meaning of personal peace and awakening.

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<sup>32</sup> Buddhadasa, *Buddhism and Society*, Suhkapapjai, Bangkok, 1989, p. 167.

<sup>33</sup> Buddhadasa, *Teaching for Those Gone Forth*, Sublime Life Mission, Bangkok, p.6.

<sup>34</sup> Buddhadasa, *Interview with Endo Otohiko in Tokyo*, July 9, 1992.

### **c. *Nibbāna* as per Ariyaratne's Understanding**

Sri Lankabhimanya Ahangamage Tudor Ariyaratne is the founder and president of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka.

Ariyaratne, a strong believer in Gandhian principles of non-violence, rural development and self-sacrifice, has shaped the Sarvodaya Movement in ways that forged a significant link between secular principles of development and Buddhist ideals of selflessness and compassion. As a devout Buddhist, he has led tens of thousands of “family gatherings” and meditations with millions of people throughout Sri Lanka and other parts of the world.

Sarvodaya founded by him represents one of the oldest and most celebrated Buddhist social liberation movements. The goal of the path for Sarvodaya is signified by its name which it translates to mean “the awakening of all” or “the lift of all”. It represents a dual liberation because it is the awakening of both the individual and the society. Ariyaratne explains this dual process saying “*I can not awaken myself unless I help awaken others. Others can not awaken unless I do*”<sup>35</sup>.

George Bond describes Sarvodaya as an interpretation of Buddhism with a this-worldly focus and a form of social and economic development with a spiritual base. In the Sarvodaya view, development needs to be reinterpreted by Buddhism, but Buddhism also needs to be reinterpreted in the context of Sri Lanka's contemporary development needs. The path that Sarvodaya volunteer embraces also is articulated in the “betwixt and between” language, insofar as it is described as one of selfless service, worldly asceticism and mundane awakening.

Ariyaratne says “to change society we must purify ourselves, and the purification process we need is brought about by working in society. In this view, the social and spiritual goals are interdependent.

Ariyaratne teaches that before people can awaken to the supreme, supramundane dimension of truth, they must awaken to the mundane dimensions of truth that surround them in society. Before people can see the supramundane meaning of the traditional Four Noble Truths, for example, they must see the mundane meaning of these truths. Thus, Ariyaratne has given these truths social interpretations.

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<sup>35</sup> *A People's Agenda for Global Awakening*, Ninth Niwano Peace Prize Ceremony, 1992, p.3.

The first truth, *dukkha*, suffering or unsatisfactoriness, is translated as “there is a decadent village”. This concrete form of suffering becomes the focus of mundane awakening. Villagers should recognize the problems in their environment, such as poverty, disease, oppression and disunity.

The second truth, *samudaya*, the origin of suffering, now signifies that the decadent condition of the village has one or more causes. He teaches that the causes lie in factors such as egoism, competition, greed and hatred.

The third truth, *nirodha*, understood in traditional Buddhism as an indicator of *Nibbāna*, becomes hope that the villagers’ suffering can cease. The means to solving the problem lies in the fourth, the eight noble path<sup>36</sup>.

While Ariyaratne acknowledges that this is not the equivalent of the Buddha’s teaching, he defends this approach as one that can be meaningful to villagers in their present condition and one that has the potential to improve their spiritual condition sufficiently that they may go on to follow the path in the direction of the more traditional goal. In this way, though most of their activities seem to be of a social nature, spiritual goals remain the most important for Sarvodaya and the traditional goal continues to be respected, but certainly the rhetoric and action of Sarvodaya focuses upon the very new concept of mundane awakening.

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<sup>36</sup> Ariyaratne, *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, Sarvodaya Research Institute, Srilanka, 1991, p. 133.





## Conclusion

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In this paper, various ways of understanding the concept of Nibbāna by modern engaged Buddhists such as Dr. Ambedkar, A.T. Ariyaratne, Most Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh...etc. have been given in a possible way for a comprehensive recognition. The modern engaged Buddhists are chosen under the aspects of Buddhist schools. They are good exemplars in their respective traditions such as A.T. Ariyaratne in Theravada tradition, Most Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh in Mahayana Buddhism, H.H. Dalailama in Vajrayana and Dr. Ambedkar in Neo Buddhism.

As for Nirvāṇa, the Buddhist goal of liberation, Dr. Ambedkar writes of a “kingdom of righteousness on earth” and describes the Buddha’s enlightenment not as the ripening of an individual’s cosmic potential but as a simple realization of the plight of others. A.T. Ariyaratne, the founder of Sarvodaya Movement, has also defined four noble truths in a new way. The third truth or Nirvāṇa becomes hope that the villagers suffering can cease. Nirvāṇa of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh’s perspective is here and now...

The study of this topic will help the practitioners understand deeply the true nature of final goal in this life. It also opens a new approach to attain the ultimate truth in Buddhism. Besides that, the concept of Nibbāna reflects the reachable target of all sentient beings who possess the potential of becoming Buddha.

Through this paper, one can make a close connection of the concept of Nibbāna among Buddhist schools from the Buddha time until nowadays. In addition, the skillful means of application of this concept has been changed as long as being suitable to various contexts and particular levels of people. Most of engaged Buddhist leaders play a great role in the help of beings free from suffering and passion. It may be noted that the concept of Nibbāna has been changed from the personal enlightenment and salvation to social and universal realization in modern age.



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