



Nibbāna

And

The Fire Simile

Kaṭukurunde Ñāṇananda Bhikkhu

From the D.G.M.B.

We wish to acknowledge the generous support received from our readers and benefactors who continue to pool in their resources into this 'Ford-of-Nectar'. Convinced of the Buddha's words that the gift of Dhamma is far superior to a gift of material things, some of them even take this opportunity to transfer merit to their departed relatives as a mark of gratitude.

May the merit of this Dhammadāna conduce to their attainment of the supreme Bliss of Nibbāna!

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and
The Fire Simile
(a 'Pahan Kanuwa' Sermon)
by
Bhikkhu Kaṭukurunde Ñāṇananda

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ISBN 978 - 955- 1255 - 37- 4

Published by
Dharma Grantha Mudrana Bhāraya
Sri Lanka
2010

Dhamma is Priceless !

Strictly for free distribution

First Impression - 2010

Copies of this book may be obtained from:

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Hakmana Rd, Matara.
8. The Department of Public Trustee
No. 02, Bullers Road,
Colombo 07.

Printed by
The Quality Printers.
17/2, Pangiriwatta Road, Gangodawila, Nugegoda,
Tel : 011-4870333

About the D.G.M.B.

Rare is the birth of a Buddha in this world. So rare too, is the opportunity to listen to his Dhamma. This conviction has inspired many a devoted Buddhist to cherish the Dhamma as something extremely precious.

The Buddha has declared that salutary friendship (Kalyāna-mittatā) is almost synonymous with his dispensation. The gift-of-Dhamma is the link that moulds the bond of this friendship. Dhamma deserves no price-tag precisely because it is price-less.

It is in this spirit that the D.G.M.B. launched its Dhamma-dāna movement in 1997. Many a parched traveller on the desert path has had a refreshing drink of the nectar of Dhamma free of charge ever since. Many an enthusiastic benevolent heart seized the opportunity to participate in a genuine act of Dhammadāna.

Should we always go for things that sport a price-tag? Is everything that comes free to us, necessarily worthless? What about the air and the sunshine?

It is in point of merit that the gift of-Dhamma excels all other gifts. Dhamma is the nectar that quenches the insatiate samsàric thirst of beings. The gift of Dhamma is therefore of far greater merit than an ordinary gift of food or drink. For the magnanimous-Dhammadāna is for ever an unfailing source of altruistic joy.

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List of Abbreviations

A	Anguttara Nikāya
It	Itivuttaka
Ud	Udāna
M	Majjhima Nikāya
S	Samyutta Nikāya
Sn	Sutta Nipāta

(References are to volume and page number of the PTS edition)

PREFACE

The sermon presented in this little volume under the title 'Nibbāna and the Fire Simile' is the translation of one of the sermons I delivered to the local community at 'Pahan Kanuwa' on Poya days. Incidentally, this happens to be the very first sermon to be translated into English out of more than 160 sermons delivered so far.

As indicated by the title, this sermon has something special to say about the famous fire simile given by the Buddha as an illustration to dispel certain misconceptions about Nibbāna. Though I have done justice to this much debated topic in my earlier works¹, this sermon might have something more conclusive for those who continue to doubt and demur. It is hoped that the term 'extinction' - the biggest bug-bear behind the fire simile - will be understood in its correct perspective in the light of this sermon.

I have already translated the entire series of 33 sermons on Nibbāna, 25 of which have come out in five volumes titled 'Nibbāna – The Mind Stilled'². The 'Pahan Kanuwa' series which was delivered in a lighter vein, covers a wider range of topics relating to the Dhamma. If all goes well, it might be possible to bring out at least a fair selection of these sermons in translation.

I must record my deep appreciation of the invaluable services rendered by our 'Book Trust', the DGMB (Colombo), and our 'Audio Trust', the DSMB (Kandy) in making accessible all my writings and sermons to the Dhamma thirsty world free of charge as Dhammadāna. I wish them many more years of devoted service to the Buddha Sāsana.

Bhikkhu Katukurunde Ñāṇananda
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Kandegedara,
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Sri Lanka.
08.01.2010

1. Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought - 1971

The Magic of the mind - 1974

Nibbāna - The Mind Stilled (Seven volumes)

2. Volume VI will be issued shortly. The seventh and last volume will appear in due course with a comprehensive index.

“Delighting in existence O monks, are gods and men; they are attached to existence. they revel in existence. When the Dhamma for the cessation of existence is being preached to them, their minds do not leap towards it, do not get pleased with it, do not get settled in it, do not find confidence in it. That is how, monks, some lag behind ...”

-It. p 43

'Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa'

'Homage be to the Fortunate One, the Worthy – Fully Enlightened'

*Ayoghana hatasseva
jalato jātavedaso
anupubbūpasantassa
yathā na ñāyate gati*

*Evaṃ sammā vimuttānaṃ
Kāmabandhohatāriṇaṃ
paññāpetuṃ gatī natthi
pattānaṃ acalaṃ sukhaṃ*

- Ud. p.93

Dear Listeners,

That deliverance from Saṃsāra which the Buddha discovered, we generally call 'Nibbāna'. Sometimes the Buddha made a special effort to explain to the world what sort of a deliverance it is. The passing away of the arahant Dabba Mallaputta was one such occasion. The topic we have chosen for our sermon today is a couplet of verses uttered with reference to that occasion.

Dabba Mallaputta was one of the wonderful disciples of the Buddha. The beginning as well as the end of his life was wonderful. He was born after his mother's death. That is to say, his mother died due to some sudden illness while he was still inside the womb. Relatives took the pregnant mother's dead body into the crematorium and put it on the funeral pyre. When they set fire to it, flames split the embryo and the child dropped on to a log of wood below. As the child was still alive, relatives picked it up and handed it over to the child's grandmother. It is said that the child was named 'Dabba' because its life was saved

by falling on a log of wood. 'Dabba' is a term for 'wood' as well as for 'material'. Because he belonged to the Malla clan he was called 'Mallaputta' – son of Mallas.

When Dabba was seven years old the Buddha visited the country of the Mallas and stayed in the mango grove called Anupiya. On seeing the Buddha, Dabba aroused faith in him and begged permission to get ordained. At the ordination ceremony, as part of the procedure, his preceptor gave him the meditation topic known as the 'skin-pentad' (*tacapañcaka*) – that is to say, the first five in the list of repulsive parts of the body – namely head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth and skin. Dabba attended to his meditation topic while his head was being shaved. It is said that he attained the fruit of Stream-winning (*sotāpattiphala*) when the shaving started, and attained arahant hood by the time it ended. So he was already an arahant when he was ordained, having attained that supreme goal inside the hall of tonsure itself.

Because of this extraordinary achievement, Venerable Dabba Mallaputta while in solitude thought: 'The purpose for which I went forth is already fulfilled. What if I were to take upon myself some duty on behalf of the community?' With this thought he decided to ask permission, to be given an opportunity of serving the community by taking upon himself the duties of two offices – namely, that of an allocator of lodgings to visiting monks (*senāsana paññāpaka*) and that of assigning the requisite number of monks in response to invitations to meals (*bhattuddesaka*). When he expressed his wish, the Buddha approved it with commendation and the two duties were made over to him with the formal sanction of the community. After that it was Venerable Dabba Mallaputta's responsibility to allocate lodgings to visiting monks and to assign the requisite number of monks to respond to the laity's invitations to meals.

He acquitted himself well in the performance of both these duties. Particularly in regard to the duty of allocating lodgings to visiting monks, it is said that he was so efficient as to do it according to their dispositions and predilections. He saw to it that visiting monks who devoted themselves to the preservation of discourses (*suttantikā*) lodged together with the wish : 'Let them spend the night reciting the discourses.' When monks expert in discipline arrived, he made them lodge together thinking : 'Let them spend the night discussing points of discipline.' When preachers of Dhamma came, he gave them lodgings at one spot with the wish : 'Let them pass the night in Dhamma discussions.' When garrulous monks given to frivolous talk, those who had gone forth to fatten their bodies, came visiting, he made them lodge together with the thought: 'Let them waste the night in their accustomed frivolities.'

Not only did Venerable Dabba Mallaputta methodically allocate lodgings according to personality types but adapted an extraordinary technique in conducting visiting monks who arrive late in the evening to their appointed lodgings. He would determine to his fire-kasina attainment and with that light conduct these monks to their lodgings. It is said that some visiting monks purposely arrived late in order to see Venerable Dabba Mallaputta's miraculous powers. When asked for their preferences, they would mention distant lodgings like those in Gijjhakūṭa (Vulture's Peak), Isigili Rock, Vebhara Rock, Maddakucchi Park, and Jīvaka Mango Grove. And how would Venerable Dabba Mallaputta take them there in the darkness of the night? He would attain the Jhāna and determine his thumb to become some sort of a flashlight and holding it before him would lead the way. In that light those monks were shown their places of lodging. Because of his efficiency in performing this duty, the Buddha named him the foremost among monks who allocate lodgings to visiting monks.

Though he was such a highly gifted monk he had a short life span probably due to some past kamma. He was still young

when the time came for his *parinibbāna* (final passing away). The Buddha was dwelling at the Bamboo Grove in Rajagaha at the time. Venerable Dabba Mallaputta approached the Buddha and told him: “ Well-gone One, the time has come for me to attain *parinibbāna*.” The Buddha simply said : “Dabba, you may do whatever you think it is time for.” As soon as the Buddha expressed his approval, he worshipped the Buddha, took his final leave, rose up into the sky and seated in the cross-legged posture attained to the fire-kasina *jhāna* and arising from it attained *parinibbāna*. The extraordinary thing about his passing away was that he set fire to his body through his skill in the fire-kasina and cremated himself. It was such a perfect cremation that no ash or soot remained at the end of it. Venerable Dabba Mallaputta did not even leave any relics for us to worship.

This was such a significant event that the Buddha uttered a paean of joy on the occasion. Whereas nowadays such occasions usually call for expression of condolences, here we find the Buddha giving expression to the following utterance of joy.

*Abhedi kāyo nirodhi saññā
vedanā sītibhavimsu sabbā
vūpasamimsu samkhārā
viññāṇam atthamagamā*

Body broke up
Perceptions ceased
All feelings cooled off
Preparations calmed down
Consciousness came to an end

-Ud. p. 93

This event was of such a great significance that the Buddha when he went to Sāvatti from Rajagaha, related the

incident to the monks at Jetavana monastery and made it an occasion to preach the following two verses as if in memoriam.

*Ayoghanahatasseva
jalato jātavedaso
anupubbūpasantassa
yathā na ñāyate gati*

*Evañ sammā vimuttānañ
kāma bandhohatārinañ
paññāpetuñ gati natthi
pattānañ acalañ sukhañ
- ibid.*

The two verses are of such depth that the traditional commentators have faced difficulties in interpreting them. The simile given in the first verse seems to have puzzled them. As we understand it, the reference here is to a fire, the flame of which resembles a red hot block of iron. So the two verses could be rendered as follows:

'Just as when a fire burning like a red hot block of iron gradually subsides, the path it goes by is not known,

- Even so, of those who are well released, having crossed the flood of sensual bonds and reached the immovable bliss, there is no path whereby to designate.'

So now we have before us the question of parinibbāna. The parinibbāna of Venerable Dabba Mallaputta is an exemplary one. Why ? Because he did not leave behind anything. Nor did he – it seems – preserve for himself anything to be taken along with him, because all what he had namely, form, feelings, perceptions, preparations and consciousness, came to an end. He did not leave for us any remains like relics, to be enshrined. It was a perfect parinibbāna in every sense. That must be the reason why the Buddha, as we saw, uttered paeans of joy about it on two occasions.

But when we say this, some might feel a trace of fear coming up. Why so ? Because as we see so often, funeral banners display in bold letters:

"May the late Mr. 'So-and-So' attain Nibbāna"

We generally believe that it is after death that 'Mr. Sovanso' attains Nibbāna which he could not attain here. It is supposed to be something that happens 'hereafter'. In fact, more than 95% of those who think, reason out, speculate, and preach about Nibbāna believe in a 'Mr. Sovanso's Nibbāna'. For them all Buddhas and arahants or whoever is said to have attained Nibbāna end up in a holy citadel called the Great City of Ambrosial Nibbāna ('Amā-maha-nivanpura'). "Only don't ask us where it is" they say, "It is for sure our true destination. We should one and all try to go there". This is the whole story they tell us.

How far we are justified in believing this story is the question before us now. We can find an answer by analyzing the two verses we have already quoted as the heading.

'Ayoghana hatasseva – jalato jātavedaso'

We have here the word 'ghana' (compact, dense, solid) which has a deep significance. As a matter of fact, the reason for all this delusion in the worldlings is the personality view which virulently holds on to existence. It takes as self one or the other of the five aggregates – form, feeling, perception, preparations and consciousness. In particular, it clings to consciousness as self – invisible as it is. So then we are in a fix. On the one hand we want to put an end to suffering in this existence. On the other we want to remain existing somehow or other. We are working with a contradiction. We are running with the hare and hunting with the hound. To justify our stand we somehow try to posit a city of the Deathless by some clever legerdemain.

But here the Buddha has given a meaningful hint about the fire that went out in the phrase '*Ayoghana hatasseva*'. A fire that is ablaze appears as compact (solid) as a red-hot block of iron. The notion of the compact ('*ghana saññā*') represents the worlding's deluded point of view. Even such a 'realistic' flame when it goes out cannot be traced. It is by means of the rhetoric question 'where does a fire go when it goes out?' that the Buddha answered the questions relating to the after-death state of an arahant.¹ In short many tend to forget the fact that the obvious meaning of the term '*nibbāna*' is extinction, i.e. going out of a fire.

According to the Buddha the totality of existence is comparable to a fire. It is a fire which, as a rule, is dependent on some fuel or other, which is called '*upādāna*' – the term for grasping as well as for fuel. A fire grasps, grabs, seizes or holds on to the fuel which it consumes. Its extinction – the proverbial 'going out' – is Nibbāna. For the Buddha, *nibbāna* is not a destination after death. The most telling evidence we get is his lion's roar in the *Udumbarika Sīhanāda Sutta*.

Buddho so Bhagavā bodhāya dhammaṃ deseti
Danto so Bhagavā damathāya dhammaṃ deseti
Santo so Bhagavā samathāya dhammaṃ deseti
Tiṇṇo so Bhagavā taraṇāya dhammaṃ deseti
Parinibbuto so Bhagavā parinibbānāya dhammaṃ
deseti

Enlightened as he is, the Fortunate One preaches
the Dhamma for enlightenment
Tamed as he is, the Fortunate One preaches
the Dhamma for taming
Calm as he is, the Fortunate One preaches
the Dhamma for calming
Crossed over as he is, the Fortunate One preaches
the Dhamma for crossing over

Perfectly extinguished as he is, the Fortunate One preaches the Dhamma for perfect extinguishment

If we take the term Buddha to mean 'Enlightened' (though there is also the nuance 'Awakened'), having attained enlightenment he preaches the Dhamma for the enlightenment of others. Tamed or disciplined as he is, he preaches the Dhamma for the taming or disciplining of others. Calm and tranquil as he is, he preaches the Dhamma to make others calm and tranquil. Having crossed over the floods (of sense desire, becoming or existence, views and ignorance) he preaches the Dhamma to make others cross over. But now comes the statement which might appear problematic. **Perfectly extinguished as he is**, the Fortunate One preaches the Dhamma for perfect extinguishment. If as is commonly believed the term parinibbāna refers to an after-death state, how can the Buddha preach after he has passed away? This is clear proof of the fact that parinibbāna is a state realized in this very world – here and now, and not hereafter.

As regards the arahants too, this is the norm. Even in the case of Venerable Dabba Mallaputta when it is said that he first determined to the fire-kasina and attained parinibbāna, we have to understand by it that he brought his mind to the released state. Then he set fire to his body as if setting fire to a dress taken off. That is why instead of a heat we are told of a cooling-off of all feelings. That cooling off was due to parinibbāna. In fact that is the state of parinibbāna.

However, there are many who hold that the Buddhas, Pacceka Buddhas, and arahants who pass away go and lodge somewhere in some nondescript realm. There is a particular discourse they draw upon to prove it – namely *Pahārāda Sutta*.³ In that discourse we find a discussion between the Asura king Pahārāda and the Buddha. First of all Pahārāda, the Asura king, enumerates eight wonderful and marvellous qualities of the

ocean seeing which the Asuras delight in the great ocean. Out of them we shall mention here the fifth as it is relevant to our discussion.

Pahārāda says that even if all the rivers in the world flow into the ocean and torrents of rain fall on it, there is no apparent decrease or increase in it, and that the Asuras delight in this quality of the great ocean. By way of comparing his dispensation (lit. 'doctrine and discipline' – '*dhammavinaya*') with the great ocean, the Buddha enumerates eight wonderful and marvellous qualities to be found in his dispensation. Out of them the fifth is worded as follows:

'Just as there is no apparent decrease or increase in the waters of the great ocean even if all the rivers of the world flow into it and torrents of rain fall from the sky, even if many monks pass away in the Nibbāna Element without residual clinging (*Anupādisesā Nibbānadhātu*), there is no decrease or increase apparent in the Nibbāna Element without residual clinging.'

On the strength of this comparison many scholars try to argue it out that *Anupādisesā Nibbānadhātu* is some sort of a spacious destination for the Buddhas and arahants when they pass away. But the fallacy of this argument is exposed when we examine the eighth wonderful and marvellous quality of this dispensation.

As the eighth wonderful and marvellous quality of the great ocean Pahārāda states that there are enormous creatures in it such as whales, sharks, Asuras, Nāgas and Gandhabbas. The Buddha by way of comparison says that in his dispensation too there are enormous creatures. Who are they? The eight Noble Persons in the community, namely, the Stream-winner, the one who is treading the Path for the realization of the Fruit of

Stream-winning, the Once-returned, the one who is treading the Path for the realization of the Fruit of Once-returning, the Non-returned, the one who is treading the Path for the realization of the Fruit of Non-returning, the Arahant, and the one who is treading the Path to Arahantship. Only the eight Noble Persons are mentioned. The arahant who has passed away or attained Parinibbāna is not mentioned here, though this is the proper context for it. He it seems is conspicuous by his absence. Why is that ? How then are we to understand the problematic fifth quality of this dispensation ?

Let us suppose that there are whirlpools in the great ocean. If for some reason or other they cease and disappear, there is no consequent decrease or increase in the waters of the great ocean.⁴ As a matter of fact, there is a very deep concept in the Dhamma – namely that existence is a perversion. 'What the worldlings take as the truth, that for the noble-ones is an untruth.'⁵ The Buddha has declared this fact on a certain occasion. Though the world attributes so much importance to existence, the Buddha points out that it is only a pervert state of affairs. According to him all concepts of birth, death, and existence are traceable to a vortex or a whirlpool which is called 'vaṭṭa'. As he puts it: '*ettāvatā vaṭṭam vaṭṭati itthattam paññāpanāya*'⁶ – in so far does a whirlpool whirl, for the designation of a 'thisness' (i.e. this state of existence). It is as if to indicate some spot that a whirlpool whirls. In the great ocean there is a possibility of pointing out a 'this spot' and a 'that spot' only when there are whirlpools. But a whirlpool is a manifestation of some pervert activity. It is when some runaway current of water tries to go against the mainstream and is foiled in its attempt that it turns round only to get pushed back to come round again. When it cannot progress, it spirals downwards to form a vortex or an eddy with its abyss.

In the same way, beings '**ignore**' the true state of affairs in the world. Impelled by ignorance and craving, their

consciousness goes in search of permanence in a world of impermanence, beauty in a world of ugliness, pleasure in a world of suffering, and a self in a world of not-self. It is due to this perversion that this whirlpool or eddy of a person comes to be. Even the Buddha as a Bodhisatta has been a whirlpool in *Samsāra*. So also are Pacceka Buddhas and arahants. In the end, by wisdom, they see the futility of this whirling round. It is when the vanity of this whirling round between consciousness and name-and-form is understood, and the mind is weaned away from it, that the whirlpool ceases. However many whirlpools cease in the ocean, there is no decrease or increase in the water. It is this simile of the whirlpool that holds the answer to the question about the after-death state of the arahant.

The answer is already implicit in the statement: 'The fire has gone out.' How ridiculous it is to conclude that the fire goes somewhere when it goes out.⁷ If one asks whether the extinguished fire has gone to the East or West or North or South, it is a foolish question. If something exists depending on causes and conditions, when those causes and conditions are removed, it has to cease. This truth is implicit in the dictum 'bhavanirodho nibbānaṃ'. 'Cessation of existence is extinction (or Nibbāna).'⁸ The cessation of existence itself is Nibbāna. Apart from this there is no other Nibbāna. What the Buddha points out to us is the fact that this Nibbāna is to be realized here and now.

That is why we come across in the Ratana Sutta the following lines which you all are familiar with in your chanting.

*Khayaṃ virāgaṃ amataṃ paṇītaṃ
yadajjhagā Sakyamunī samāhito
na tena dhammena samatthi kiñci ...*⁹

'That destruction (of craving), that detachment, that excellent Deathlessness, which the concentrated Sakyan sage attained, there is nothing comparable to that Dhamma.'

The Deathless experience is something to be realized here and now. That is why the arahants are said to partake of that 'ambrosia'. Deathlessness is not an experience that comes **after** death.

It is by putting his mind to this Deathlessness that the Venerable Arahant Dabba Mallaputta experienced no pain of death. Pain of death comes due to grasping (upādāna) because of attachment to aggregates of form, feeling, perception, preparations and consciousness. Where there is not even a trace of attachment there is extinction. It is due to that grasping conditioned by the fire of craving that rebirth occurs. 'Conditioned by grasping is existence.'¹⁰ With the cessation of grasping there is parinibbāna. That is called '*Anupādā Parinibbāna*'. So now we have to understand what is meant by '*parinibbāna*', what this perfect extinction amounts to.

In that quotation we brought up it was said that the Fortunate One, **perfectly extinguished as he is**, preaches the Dhamma for perfect extinguishment. But today the moment one hears the word '*parinibbāna*' one is reminded of the after-death state of the arahants. As a matter of fact, the last thought of the arahant gets connected with the experience of the Fruit of Arahant hood. It is an attainment an arahant has already gone through. At the moment of death it invariably comes up. That is what helps him to overcome the pain of death. In addition to the verse we cited above, the following verse in the Ratana Sutta also refers to that concentration.

*Yam Buddha settho parivaṇṇayī sucim
samādhimānantarikaññamāhu
samādhinā tena samo na vijjati ...*¹¹

'That pure concentration the Supreme Buddha extolled in particular, which they call 'Immediacy' – there is no concentration comparable to it. This too is an excellent quality of the Dhamma ...'

It seems, no worldly concentration can excel this wonderful concentration which is supramundane. We might as well say something about this 'Immediacy Concentration'. What is known as the Supramundane Path comes at the peak of insight knowledges and immediately one falls into the Fruit of it. That is why that concentration is called '*?nantariko Samādhi*' ('Immediacy Concentration'). All the eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path occur as a single thought at the supramundane moment. It cuts through the worldly defilements and 'shows the other shore' as it were. So it is called the Supramundane Path. It is an extraordinary concentration. In fact there is a particular discourse¹² which highlights the extraordinariness of this supramundane concentration.

Once when Venerable ?nanda was staying at Ghositārāma in Kosambi, Venerable Bhaddaji came to see him. In the course of conversation Venerable ?nanda put the following questions to him as if to test his acquaintance with the Dhamma.

“ What is the highest seeing ?
What is the highest hearing ?
What is the highest bliss ?
What is the highest perceiving ?
What is the highest level of being ? “

To these questions Venerable Bhaddaji gave the following answers :

“There is a great Brahmā called Vasavatti. Seeing him is the highest seeing.

There is a class of Brahmas called ?bhassarā (The Radiant). From time to time they let out a joyous exclamation 'O! What bliss! O! What bliss!' Hearing it, is the highest hearing.

There is a class of Brahmas called Subhakinnā. They experience a wonderful bliss. That is the highest bliss.

There is a formless attainment of Brahmas in the Realm of Nothingness which has as its object the perception : 'There is nothing. There is nothing.' Their perception is the highest perception.

There are Brahmas who have attained to the realm of neither-perception nor non-perception. This is the highest level of being.”

When Venerable Bhaddaji gave these answers, Venerable ?nanda simply remarked: “Friend Bhaddaji, your answers tally with the view of the majority of people.” Venerable Bhaddaji understood the hint that his answers are not acceptable from the point of view of Dhamma. So he invited Venerable ?nanda to express his own view, saying “Venerable ?nanda is very erudite. May the answers occur to yourself, Venerable ?nanda.”

Venerable ?nanda now gives the correct answers to the five questions:

“Seeing in whatever manner, friend, there comes to be the immediate destruction of influxes – that is the highest seeing.

Hearing in whatever manner, friend, there comes to be the immediate destruction of influxes – that is the highest hearing.

Being happy in whatever manner, friend, there comes to be the immediate destruction of influxes – that is the highest bliss.

Perceiving in whatever manner, friend, there comes to be the immediate destruction of influxes – that is the highest perception.

Being in whatever state, friend, there comes to be the immediate destruction of influxes – that is the highest (form of) being.”

From the last statement here, one can form an idea as to what the highest or ultimate point of existence is. From the dictum, 'Bhavanirodho nibbānaṃ' – 'Cessation of existence is Nibbāna', it is clear that the Buddha has called the cessation of existence itself Nibbāna. But this cessation of existence is a **realization**. The ultimate point from which one falls into this realization is that Immediacy Concentration ('?nantarika samādhi'). Immediately after that concentration, one falls into the cessation of existence which is Nibbāna. That is a **REALIZATION**. So the cessation of existence itself is Nibbāna – an experience here and now. It is not Mr. Sovanso's 'hereafter-Nibbāna', but a perfect experience an arahant goes through in this world. That experience comes in as the unfailing resort and refuge at the last moment of the arahant's life as it is said in the following verse of the Ratana Sutta :

*Khīṇaṃ purāṇaṃ navaṃ natthi sambhavaṃ
virattacittā āyatike bhavasmim
te khīṇabījā avirūḥhicchandā
nibbanti dhīrā yathāyampadīpo*

'*Khīṇaṃ purāṇaṃ*' - Whatever past karma there was, all that is exhausted,
'*navaṃ natthi sambhavaṃ*' – there is no new karma to bring about any existence,
'*virattacittā āyatike bhavasmim*' – detached in mind as regards future existence,
'*te khīṇabījā avirūḥhicchandā*'- they whose seed (of consciousness) is destroyed and desire does not sprout forth,

'nibbanti dhīrā yathāyampadīpo' those wise ones get extinguished like this lamp.

The ordinary person's consciousness seed has that germinating power to bring about rebirth in the field of karma, watered by craving – true to the dictum: *'Kammaṃ khettaṃ, viññāṇaṃ bījaṃ taṇhā sineho'*¹³ – 'Karma is the field, consciousness is the seed, and craving the moisture'. But an arahant's consciousness has lost that germinating power, and there is no moisture of craving for desire to grow up. It is a foolish question to ask: “Where does the flame of a lamp go, when it goes out?” When the oil is exhausted and the wick is burnt out, there is perfect extinction. There is nothing to lament because all suffering has ended.

Many brahmins who held on to a soul theory accused the Buddha for being an annihilationist. But now not only such brahmins, even Buddhists level such accusations at us when we highlight these controversial issues. The Buddha answers those accusations fairly and squarely pointing out that their criticism is groundless. “They are falsely accusing me for something I do not say. For monks, formerly as now, I make known only a suffering and a cessation of suffering. *“Pubbecāhaṃ bhikkhave etarahica dukkhañceva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ.”*¹⁴

The teaching of the Four Noble truths is extremely wonderful in that the five aggregates of grasping without exception are equated to suffering. The five aggregates are as a whole comparable to the pervert activity of a whirlpool. The whirlpool whirls between consciousness and name-and-form (*'ettāvataṃ vaṭṭaṃ vaṭṭati'* – in so far does the whirlpool whirl). In those discourses where the doctrine of Dependent Arising (Paṭicca Samuppāda) is explained, it is mentioned that there is a vortex or a whirlpool between consciousness and name-and-form. It is as a result of this turning round or whirling that the five aggregates of grasping get accumulated. As we know,

when a whirlpool is whirling, initially there is an attempt to push forward. When the pervert current of water fails in its attempt to go against the mainstream it turns round and round gradually forming an abyss as it spirals downward. The centripetal force created in the process attracts as if by some magnetic force, all the jetsam and flotsam it can lay hold of.

So also is our conscious body. From the day of conception inside our mother's womb, we were drawing upon and assimilating the nutritional essence while inside the womb through the umbilical cord. This miniature vortex when it comes out of the womb draws upon all the essence of the world just to build up the five aggregates – not only food but other things too, even the neighbour's land and others' property. Now it is this personal vortex or whirlpool that we call a being, a person, or an individual. Even the Buddhas and arahants are such whirlpools that have been whirling through *Samsāra*. Despite our honour and respect for them, we cannot escape the conclusion that they too have been whirling round for aeons upon aeons in this *Samsāra* before they found release by understanding the secret of it in the light of wisdom.

How did they find release ? They understood the interrelation between consciousness and name-and-form. Instead of taking name-and-form as self they understood the mutual relationship between them. If consciousness is there because of name-and-form and name-and-form is there because of consciousness, neither can arise by itself. The simile given by Venerable Sāriputta to illustrate this is that of two bundles of reeds.¹⁵ When two bundles of reeds are made to stand supporting each other at the top, if you draw one the other would fall. The mutual inter-relation (*aññamaññapaccayatā*) between consciousness and name-and-form is like that. Only a Buddha discovers this norm. Till then ascetics grasped something or other as self. At least the subtle attainment of neither-perception-nor-non-perception they would identify as self. It

was only the Buddha who pointed out that there is nothing that can be regarded as a unit. Even if we call something a sphere, still it involves a conflict – a struggle. That itself is the suffering in it.

Now at whatever moment this conflict – this revolving of the whirlpool – settles down, only the great ocean remains. There is no decrease or increase in the great ocean as a consequence. So all what was said about the great ocean in the Pahārāda Sutta is in perfect symmetry with the image of the vortex. Apart from that there is no mysterious non-descript realm or conclave where all arahants after their demise find eternal repose.

In order to clarify this point further, we may hark back to the statement that the consciousness seed can lose its germinating power ('*khīṇabījā* .. '). It can germinate so long as it is involved or entangled in name-and-form. Consciousness usually clings to name-and-form – its object. There is a particular term in the Dhamma to indicate the consciousness which lacks germinating power – namely '*Anidassana viññāṇa*'¹⁶ – non-manifestative consciousness. There is nothing in that consciousness that can manifest itself or show up. This is the state that the Buddha made known to the world as an extraordinary sphere (*āyatana*).¹⁷ The world is familiar with only the six sense spheres – eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. They become spheres when they are involved in activity with their respective sense objects. That activity is similar to what is going on in the whirlpool mentioned above. According to the Buddha it is in these six sense spheres where this activity is going on, that the whole world is to be found. Whatever modern science may say, the Buddha has proclaimed that the world is something that arises and ceases in the six sense spheres.¹⁸ That is why the Buddha declared that within this fathom-long physical frame with its perception and mind he would point out the world, the arising of the world, the

cessation of the world and the path leading to the cessation of the world.¹⁹

Sometimes the Buddha preached about a state wherein the six sense spheres cease. That cessation of sense spheres itself is called a sphere – a sphere one can realize.²⁰ He even gives a description of it. “Monks, there is that sphere” – what sort of sphere? In that sphere the Buddha has described, there is nothing of those elements like earth, water, fire and air with which we associate matter or form, none of the formless realms like the realm of infinity of space, no this world, no other world, no sun, no moon, no coming, no going, no standing, no passing away, no being born. In short, as the Buddha sums it up, that state is unestablished (*appatitṭham*), non-continuing (*appavattam*) and objectless (*anārammanam*).²¹ The long list of negations is suggestive of the absence of all Sāmsāric bonds – everything that mattered including 'matter' itself. It is this non-manifestative consciousness that the arahants experience in the attainment of the Fruit of Arahant hood. By way of an illustration we may cite an instance from the Buddha's life itself. In the *Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta* we find the Buddha coming out with such an experience.²²

“Monks, when I was once staying in the chaff - house at *ṭumā*, there was a torrential downpour with flashes of lightning and peals of thunder. Two farmers – brothers – and four bulls were struck down by lightning. A large crowd had gathered there. I came out of the chaff house and asked a man who came up to me why such a crowd has gathered there. He told me that there was a torrential downpour of rain with flashes of lightning and peals of thunder and that two farmers and four bulls were struck down dead by lightning. He then asked me :

“But where were you Venerable Sir?”

“I was here itself, friend.”

“But didn't you see it Venerable Sir?”

“No friend, I did not see it.”

“But didn't you hear the sound Venerable Sir ?”

“No friend, I did not hear the sound.”

“But then, Venerable Sir, were you asleep ?”

“No friend, I was not asleep.”

“But, Venerable Sir, were you conscious ?”

“Yes friend.”

That man then expressed his surprise at the fact that the Buddha had not seen or heard anything though he was conscious (or percipient – '*saññī*'). The Buddha was in that extraordinary samādhi at the time. When the mind is fully detached from the world, there is no seeing or hearing.

Though there are several instances of arahants in *arahattaphalasamādhī* mentioned in the discourses, those who believe in a 'Mr. Sovanso's Nibbāna' interpret them as referring to some mysterious non-descript realm. According to them, that is the final destination of arahants. The majority of Buddhists today are imprisoned in this pernicious view. We have to emphasize that this view only reasserts the personality view, encourages craving for existence and reaffirms the brahmin prejudices.

If we are to resolve this conflict of views we must be ready to grant the fact that according to the Buddha even the notion of existence is a perversion. Whereas for the worldling existence is a blessing, for the Buddha it is a manifestation of a pervert tendency. It is like that runaway current of water trying to do the impossible. Though it tries to go its own way it has to turn back. When it fails after repeated attempts to forge ahead, it starts digging down into an abyss. But one significant thing emerges from all this. That is to say, we get an opportunity to indicate and designate. There is nothing in the great ocean to point out. But when there is a vortex or a whirlpool we can point out as 'there' or 'here' – as 'that one' or 'this one'. We can use all these designations because there is a whirlpool. However,

simply because we get such an opportunity we should not jump to the conclusion that it is some sort of a self or soul. What we get there is only a conflict – not an integral unit. The Buddha has proclaimed to the world that it is only suffering. No other religious teacher has revealed that truth. They were blind to it because they tenaciously clung to a view of a self.

The Buddha expounded this truth through his teaching on the law of Dependent Arising (*Paṭicca Samuppāda*). Due to ignorance there arise a multiplicity of preparations. The discrimination between consciousness and name-and-form is itself the outcome of these preparations. This discrimination is something like getting involved in a game of chess. When we want to play chess we have to have two sides – even if we are the best of friends. That is a precondition for any competition. Even friends have to agree to disagree and appear as opponents.

The process of existence is something similar. There is a competition going on between consciousness and name-and-form. It is a going round, a whirling round, that never ends. The Buddha saw this as a conflict – a suffering. The same conflict, the same whirling round goes on within our body all the time. Can we stop breathing after taking in one breath? We are forced to breathe out. Can we finish with that? No. We are forced to breathe again. We took a meal in the morning; can we hold onto it? Is that the end of our eating? So this is the story of the body, prided on as 'I' and 'mine'.

If we form a concept of a 'here', a 'there' comes in as a matter of course. If we conceive of a 'there', a 'here' too haunts somewhere. 'This one' implies 'that one', and 'that one' implies 'this one'. The world is imprisoned within this duality. That is why the Buddha declared:

“Monks, I will teach you a dyad. What 'monks' is the dyad? The eye and forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and

odours, the tongue and tastes, the body and tangibles, mind and mind-objects. This is called the dyad.

If anyone, monks, were to say : 'Having rejected this dyad I shall make known another dyad' – that would be a mere vain boast. When questioned he would not be able to substantiate it, and further he would end up clueless.”²³

In this way, inside our body and in our life process, there is a constant transaction – a give and take. This give and take never becomes even. The Buddha therefore equated the entirety of existence to suffering – i.e. the five aggregates of grasping as a whole. Many scholars who get down to explaining the Noble Truth of Suffering go on citing: 'birth is suffering, decay is suffering, death is suffering,' and so on, but forget that the Buddha concludes with the statement: “In short, the five aggregates of grasping is suffering”.

Let us now direct our attention to the perception of the compact (*ghanasaññā*) we mentioned earlier. Here we have a concept relevant to insight meditation. The worldling holds on to the perception of the compact. That is why he takes a flame as one. A little child might mistake a flame for something solid and try to catch it. Perception of the compact determines the worldling's reactions. But the insight meditator with a concentrated mind awakens radical attention according to the Buddha's instructions. With mindfulness and full awareness, he discerns name-and-form. What appeared as compact now appears as a heap. It is with this perception of the heap that one gradually gets on to the path of insight. As one progresses on it, dejection or disenchantment sets in. Knowledge and vision of things as they are (*yathābūtañāṇadassana*) invariably gives rise to dejection. One cannot see things as they are and not be dejected or disenchanted. This dejection leads to detachment. It is then that parinibbāna or perfect extinction is realized. Even the four elements, earth, water, fire and air, highly prized by the world, do not get a footing in that released mind.

This is an age in which materialistic views are predominant. Talking about matter, we are again reminded of Venerable Dabba Mallaputta. As we mentioned earlier, 'dabba' means matter in general – not only wood. Venerable Dabba Mallaputta's life is a challenge to matter. Because of his power of merit, flames of his mother's funeral pyre could not burn him, but by his power of determination, he cremated his own body with his skill in fire kasina leaving no ash or soot. There too he gave a challenge to matter. That is what elicited from the Buddha, some special utterances of joy.

As a matter of fact, we find such a challenge to matter implicit in the Dhamma proclaimed by the Buddha. If we compare the entire Dhamma to a library, the portals of this library open with the two significant lines of the first two verses of the Dhammapada.

*'Mano pubbaṅgamā dhammā
manoseṭṭhā manomayā'*

'Mind is the fore-runner of mind objects
mind is their chief, mind-made are they'

These two lines occurring in both verses express a first principle in this Dhamma. In the Dhamma proclaimed by the Buddha, mind is primary, **not** matter. Mind precedes all things. Mind is superior to them. In the last analysis they are made by mind itself. According to this mind-oriented vision, even the so-called matter has no impact on that supramundane concentration. It is as if the elements earth, water, fire and air are non-existent. Concepts relating to them such as coming, going, staying, being born and passing away, do not register themselves in that non-manifestative consciousness. That is why the term '*khīṇabījā*' (with the consciousness seed destroyed) is used with reference to arahants. Their consciousness seed cannot germinate in a mother's womb.

That incident at ?tumā mentioned above is also suggestive of this non-manifestative consciousness. Yet another instance is the occasion the Buddha's foot was wounded by a splinter from a rock hurled on him by Venerable Devadatta. Initially the Buddha did experience grievous pain so much so that the physician Jīvaka had to be called in. But we are told that subsequently he bore up the pain by overcoming it with that supramundane concentration.²⁴ Particularly at the last moment of an arahant's life this extraordinary concentration steps in as a matter of course. That is what enabled venerable Dabba Mallaputta to cremate his body as if taking out one's dress and setting fire to it.

All this goes to prove that 'parinibbāna' is something to be realized here and now. If it is conceived as something that comes after death, no one will make a genuine effort to realize it. There is nothing wrong in a wish like this:

'May the merits accumulated by Mr. Sovanso in this life and whatever merits we make over to him to rejoice in, conduce to his attainment of Nibbāna!'

But to wish him some sort of eternal Nibbāna after death is contrary to the spirit of the Dhamma. It is also wrong to attribute such a Nibbāna to Buddhas and arahants. They too are whirlpools which have been whirling for aeons upon aeons in *Samsāra*. Understanding the vanity of this whirling round - this conflict – they put an end to it. Nibbāna is its very cessation.

'*Dukkha nirodho nibbānam*' – cessation of suffering is Nibbāna. When brahmins disparaged the Buddha for preaching annihilationism he pointed out that he is simply showing the path to the cessation of that suffering which everybody is complaining about. "Formerly as now, I point out suffering and its cessation." Some scholars try to tag on something to this definition of Nibbāna under the influence of their virulent attachment to existence. They want to keep back some trace of

existence somewhere. But that is diametrically opposed to the spirit of this wonderful Dhamma. The following thematic statement of Reflection on Peace (*upasamānussati*) highlights the spirit of this unique Dhamma:

“Etaṃ santam etaṃ paṇītam yadidaṃ sabbasaṃkhāra samatho sabbūpadhipaṭṭinissaggo taṇhakkhayo virāgo nirodho nibbānam” ²⁵

“This is peaceful, this is excellent, namely, the stilling of all preparations, the relinquishment of all assets, the destruction of craving, detachment, cessation, extinction.”

Therefore dear listeners, we must not forget the fact that if the aiming is wrong the arrow will not reach the target. If in the name of Right View one entertains a wrong view one will never attain Nibbāna. So we only hope that this sermon has helped you to purify your view.

Today you have observed the higher precepts and practised meditation. Making use of this sermon may you be able to forge ahead in your meditation to reach the end of this perilous *Samsāra* – the end of this vortex, and realize the bliss of Nibbāna. May you be able to understand that Nibbāna is an experience here and now. Whatever beings there are from the lowest hell to the highest Brahma world who wish to rejoice in the merits accrued from preaching and listening to this sermon – may they all realize the sublime peace of Nibbāna !

NOTES

1. eg . M I 484 *Aggivacchagotta Sutta*
2. D III 54.
3. A IV 197.
4. Note that the vortex simile is in perfect consonance with the implications of the phrase '*na tena nibbānadhātuyā ūnattaṃ vā pūrattaṃ vā paññāyati*' – 'by that there is no apparent decrease or increase in the Nibbāna element.'
5. Sn p. 147 *Dvayatānupassanā Sutta*.
6. D II 63f *Mahā Nidāna Sutta*.
7. There is a flush of Buddhist literature thriving in the West which attempts to interpret this fire simile in the light of the Vedic myth that the extinguished fire 'goes into hiding'. Though the Buddha succeeded in convincing the Brahmin interlocutors of the dependently arisen nature of fire by the reductio-ad-absurdum method, these scholars seem to be impervious to his arguments. What is worse, misinterpretations have even sought refuge in blatant mis-translations of sacred texts.
8. The term 'extinction' is anathema to the West in general. Perhaps as a euphemism, 'extinguishment' might be 'passable'. But rather than playing with the 'fire-simile' it is better to accept the obvious conclusions, willy nilly.
9. Sn v.225.

10. 'upādāna paccayā bhavo' – S II 1. passim.
11. Sn v.226.
12. A III 202 *Baddaji Sutta*.
13. A I 224.
14. M I 140 *Alagaddūpama Sutta*.
15. S II 114 *Naḷakaḷāpiya Sutta*.
16. D I 223 *Kevaḍḍa Sutta*, M I 329 *Brahmanimantanika Sutta*.
17. Ud 80, M III 219.
18. S II 73 *Loko Sutta*.
19. S I 61, A II 49 *Rohitassa Sutta*.
20. S IV 98 *Kāmaguna Sutta*.
21. Ud 80.
22. D II 131.
23. S IV 67.
24. S I 27.
25. A V 358.

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* Buddhist Publication Society, P.O.Box 61, Kandy.
බෞද්ධ ගුණ ප්‍රකාශන සමිතිය, තැ.පො. 61, මහනුවර.

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