



## The Concept of Salvation in Buddhism

(Prepared for WRC 2010, Victoria, Canada; Jan 10, 2010 3-7PM,  
David Lam Auditorium, UVIC)

The word 'Salvation' is an English connotation for saving one from sins.

Buddhism is not a religion through which one is saved from inherited and/or acquired sins and their consequences, as professed by the familiar 'saving from sin' in most religions. The word sin in Pali is Papa. In Buddhism sin is not an unconditioned phenomenon. In the Dhamma, the root of sin is the Kilesas, namely the defilements as Lobha which is greed, Dosa which is hatred and Moha which is usually translated as delusion. So while most other religions offer to save human beings from sin, what Buddhism does, it offers to save one from the Kilesas – the root of all sins.

The word save means an act which is done by someone, a positive act, including rescue. But the Dhamma saves not in that sense. The Dhamma teaches the human being to save oneself. It is not an act that other can do for someone. It is what one does to oneself. Therefore the term "Salvation" itself is not much relevant in the Buddhist concept. The Buddhist concept is Nibbana.

Nibbana or Nirvana implying extinction, freedom, emancipation, liberation, release, deliverance, etc. However, the word 'Salvation' can also be used as an umbrella for Nibbana or Nirvana.

The Buddhist tradition is a psycho-ethical analysis of self as propounded by the familiar systems of ancient Indian philosophy including Sankhya, Yoga, Mimamsa, Vedanta, Vaisheshika, Nyaya).

Buddhism has definite definition for problem, definite goal, and a definite path between the two.

### The Four Noble Truths

1. Life means suffering.: Five fold clinging to existence is suffering i.e. Birth is suffering, death is suffering, illness is suffering, presence of objects which we dislike is suffering and the separation is suffering.
2. The origin of suffering is attachment.. It is due to the thirst or tanha for worldly objects. Thirst is caused by the notion of I-ness which leads to self centeredness. Nothing is unconditional, the existence of everything depends on some conditions.
3. The cessation of suffering is attainable. The complete cessation of this thirst is the absence of passion, complete detachment from desires, etc.
4. The path to the cessation of suffering. The four truths is the Path of eightfold path which I will speak later in my talk.

Thus, the definite problem is that of suffering and the definite goal is the attainment of a state of non-attachment where prevails the eternal bliss and this state is called Nibbana.

Nirvana is the summum bonum of Buddhism. Buddhism is unthinkable without the guiding principle of Nibbana. Buddha said: As the vast ocean, O Monks is impregnated with one flavour, the flavour of salt, so also, O Monks is my teaching and discipline impregnated with just one flavour, the flavour of emancipation".

In the words of Milinda-Panha-Nirvana is profound like an ocean, lofty like a mountain peak, and sweet like honey.

Nirvana is commonly derived from the root Va plus the prefix Ni which together carry the sense of

extinction as of a fire or “dying out” .

The term Nirvana is older than Buddhism and is one of the many words used by Gautama Buddha in a special sense. In the Upanishad it does not mean the dying out of anything but rather self-realization; to those in whom the darkness of ignorance has been dispersed by perfect knowledge –Nirvanam.

Buddha attained the state of Nirvana under the bodhi tree. However, there has been a great diversity of interpretations concerning the nature of Nirvana. Sometimes it is regarded as a positive fulfillment and sometimes as a negative extinction.

From the etymological standpoint, Nirvana has three meanings, the first is a naturalistic interpretation meaning cooling of the cravings, passions or lust; second meaning of Nirvana is a flame blown out by the wind and the third meaning of nirvana is extinction of pain and suffering. Sometimes it is also interpreted as the extinction of psycho-physical complex which is the root cause of pain and sorrow. A careful study of the Buddhist literature reveals Nirvana not as the extinction of psycho-physical being, but rather the extinction of the factors which are conducive to suffering, viz. (they are) greed, hatred and ignorance. Nirvana as cessation or extinction (nirodha) is better constructed as the cessation of turmoil in one's life, rather than of life itself.

“The whole world is in flames, says the Buddha. “By what fire is it kindled? By the fire of lust, hatred and ignorance, by the fire of birth, old age, death, pain, lamentation, sorrow, grief and despair it is kindled.”

“O Monks, what is Nirvana? It is the cessation of desire, cessation of hatred, and cessation of ignorance. This, O Monks, is called Nirvana. Nirvana means the end of all agonies; one who has attained it is immune against all dualities and is not contaminated by the perversities of the ego. He attains equanimity and peace. The attainment of balance, poise and an unruffled state of mind which is a positive fulfillment of feelings and the state of highest happiness. Nirvana is a dhamma which is ‘unborn, unorganized, uncreated and unformed. Hence it is eternal (dhuva), desirable (subha) and happy (paramam sukham). In Nibbana nothing is ‘eternalized’ nor is anything ‘annihilated’ besides suffering.

We find references of two kinds of Nibbana as Sopadisesa (nirvana with residue) and Anupadisesa (nirvana without residue). These, in fact, are not two kinds of Nibbana, but one singly Nirvana, receiving its name according to the way it is experienced before and after death. Nirvana is not situated in any place nor is it a sort of heaven where a transcendental ego resides. It is a state which is dependent upon this body itself. It is an attainment which is within the reach of all. Nirvana is a supramundane state attainable even in this present life. Buddhism does not state that this ultimate goal could be reached only in a life beyond. “Here lies the chief difference between the Buddhist conception of Nirvana and the non Buddhist conception of an eternal heaven attainable only after death or a union with a god or Divine Essence in an after life” When Nirvana is realized in this life with the body remaining, it is called Sopadisesa Nibbana-dhatu. This is the nirvana attained by Buddha at the age of 35 under the Bodhi tree. When a Perfect saint or Arahat attains Parinibbana, after the dissolution of his body, without any remainder of physical existence, it is called Anupadisesa Nibbana-dhatu.

On the nature of Nirvana without a residue or final nirvana Buddha said it is profound, indescribable, hard to comprehend, and beyond the sphere of reasoning. He urged his followers not to be entangled in metaphysical arguments but to strive for “Truth” and “Nirvana” here in this life. The attainment of Nirvana is consonant with noble emotions and with action for the good of the community. This aspect of compassion was emphasized in Mahayana Buddhism. Thus Nirvana signifies the annihilation of the notion of ego substantially. It is produced by the actualization of the essence of wisdom.

### **Now the question arises how is Nirvana to be attained?**

It is by following the Noble eight fold paths which consist of Right Understanding, Right Thoughts, Right Speech, Right Actions, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. Of these eight factors of the Noble eight fold paths the first two (Right Understanding and Right thoughts) are

grouped under the heading of Wisdom; Right speech, right action and right livelihood grouped under Morality; Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right concentration come under Concentration. Morality is the first stage on the path to Nirvana. It is the first state which curtails the physical and vocal misdeeds. Samadhi or Concentration curtails the mental misdeeds. Wisdom or Panna makes the right understanding under the light of which nature of reality is realized. Attainment of Nibbana is the result of Enlightenment. Enlightenment is a result of morality and wisdom which are inter-dependent in the sense that they cleanse each other.

Let me finish my talk stressing on the fact that Buddha made Nirvana/Salvation universally achievable understanding and practicing Buddhist methodology of four noble truths and eight fold paths.

**Radha Banerjee Sarkar**

10.1.2010.

844 Royal Oak Ave, Victoria, BC V8X 3T2; Tel: 250-412-2896

E-mail: [rbsarkar@uvic.ca](mailto:rbsarkar@uvic.ca)