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Metaphorical depictions of nibbāna in early Buddhism

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Abstract

This paper explores metaphorical descriptions of nibbāna as provided by early Buddhist scriptures, paying particular attention to the Pāli Canon. Nibbāna is a term frequently applied to describe the ultimate goal Buddhism's practitioners are after. Yet, again and again, nibbāna is described metaphorically rather than in concrete terms as an end to suffering and rebirth cycle. Within these early Buddhist texts, nibbāna is not only expressed but also often in a rich treasure of metaphoric language rather than as some abstract notion of doctrine. Metaphors are used to relate the complex and ineffable nature of nibbāna, providing a set of terms by which such a transcendent and non-conceptual reality can be at least partially comprehended-the better to make it attainable for both practitioners and scholars.

Among early texts the best-preserved range of metaphors is to be found in the Pāli Canon. Here one will find extinguishing a flame: the idea that in it craving, as "fires," is stilled; the idea of the unconditioned: this again is how nibbāna is set as transcendent to the causal sequence of dependent origination; and emptiness, here conceived as a state with no conceptual differences. Other significant metaphors of crossing a flood, coolness, and reaching the farther shore evoke other dimensions of the liberative experience. Every metaphor encapsulates different dimensions of the transformative journey to liberation.

By analyzing these metaphors, the study reveals how early Buddhist texts use figurative language to guide practitioners toward an experiential understanding of nibbāna while being aware of the limitations of language in capturing ultimate truth. This dependence on metaphor shines light on how early Buddhist communities conceptualized and communicated the experience of nibbāna, as well as how they interpreted many different Buddhist teachings over time. What the research here reveals is that metaphor is not merely an instructional device but a pointer beyond conceptual frames into direct spiritual insight.

Keywords: Nibbāna, early Buddhist scriptures, Pāli canon, metaphorical descriptions

Introduction

In the early traditions of Buddhism, the concept of *nibbāna* (Sk: *nirvāṇa*) is fundamental toward understanding the highest spiritual goal which the teachings of the Buddha had set (Wisdom Library n.d.). Nibbāna refers to either a state or attainment which points to the end of suffering, and also to the cycle which repeats birth, death and rebirth (*samsāra*), but, in spite of its critical importance within soteriology of Buddhism; it remains one of its most difficult concepts to definitively define. Within the foundational Buddhist texts, the term *nibbāna* is seldom explicitly delineated using precise terminology. Gethin (1998, 78) ^[22] notes that metaphors pertaining to *nibbāna* do not seek to provide straightforward elucidation; rather, they reference the profound experiential transformation it signifies. It emphasized that early Buddhism fundamentally conceived of *nirvāṇa* as a spiritual goal distinct from the notions developed in subsequent traditions (Doore 1979) ^[21]. As a result, the notion is frequently examined through metaphoric expressions and analogies, which function as crucial instruments for communicating its indescribable essence. These metaphorical characterizations provide not only views on the nature of *nibbāna* but also emphasize what it fundamentally excludes, often accentuating its superiority over traditional conceptual structures.

The use of metaphor in religious and philosophical writings is not exclusive to Buddhism. Again, over time, metaphor has been used to represent ambiguous, intangible concepts that can't be defined or portrayed clearly.

Lakoff and Johnson posited that metaphors, instead of being pure rhetorics, represent thinking and perceiving processes (1980). On this aspect of *nibbāna*, the Buddha, the same texts report, recognized a limit in his words—the describing attempt of the liberation-experience he had had by himself. Most often in the discussions, he warns his readers that one must not take his words seriously because they were only provisional aids (*upāya*) meant to nudge the practitioners toward an immediate confrontation with the truth, not accounts of the final nature of reality. It is for this reason that metaphors are indispensable in early Buddhist literature and give understanding of the nature of *nibbāna* while avoiding dogmatic assertions. This work analyzes the metaphorical usages of *nibbāna*, with the emphasis on the fact that Buddha represented it always in an antidote form that undermines normal modes of thought and cognition inculcated by wordly discourse. The metaphors bring out transcendence above normal experience, unconditionalness and non-conceptuality of *nibbāna* and that it has the possibility to bring much needed interior calmness and liberation. At the same time, such metaphors make it all the more complicated to represent the noumenal quality of *nibbāna* through rhetorical features. Peter Harvey (1995) [25] asserts that the employment of metaphor within early Buddhist literature is not intended to provide a conclusive interpretation of *nibbāna*; instead, it seeks to transcend linguistic expression and conceptual frameworks, facilitating practitioners in their pursuit of direct, personal comprehension of liberation.

The concept of *nibbāna* in the early Buddhist tradition serves as the central theme around which the scriptural texts operate; it presses hard on the need for this metaphor in the light of presentation in the texts. These metaphors are two-edged swords: educative and doctrinal. First, they are effective methods of using comparisons with other events to facilitate the practitioner's understanding of something that cannot be expressed or grasped. On the other hand, they express the epistemological caution of the Buddha in that the final truth is not something that can be expressed in words or conceptually framed. Metaphors related to *nibbāna* in early Buddhist literature provide much insight into the nature of the Buddhist path and the purposes it is intended to achieve, as expressed in the *Samyutta Nikāya*:

It is the Unformed, the Unconditioned, the End, the Truth, the Other Shore, the Subtle, the Everlasting, the Invisible, the Undiversified, Peace, the Deathless, the Blest, Safety, the Wonderful, the Marvellous, Nibbāna, Purity, Freedom, the Island, the Refuge, the Beyond. (SN 43.1-44, Nānamoli Bhikkhu trans).

A close examination of these metaphors makes it possible to gain a more profound appreciation for the richness and complexity of early Buddhist thought, and the important spiritual experiences it hopes to evoke. It can then be hypothesized that metaphoric depictions of *nibbāna* in early Buddhist literature are essential in communicating the complex and often elusive nature of the final goal of Buddhist practice. These metaphors, then, constitute a full and nuanced visual vocabulary, evocative of the possibility of transformation offered by the Buddhist path even as it holds open the limitation of the nature of freedom in respect to language.

Nibbāna and Issue of Definition: In his 2006 work, Soonil Hwang argues that an adequate understanding of the concept

of *nibbāna* requires a thorough study of its doctrinal and historical context before any attempt at its definition is made. Hwang observes that foundational Buddhist texts usually speak of *nibbāna* in an implicit manner (*ābhiprāyika*), rather than making them explicit and comprehensive in expression (*lākṣaṇika*), the difference of which will clearly appear in the following *Abhidharma* tradition (Hwang 2006, 1) [19]. The absence of a clear definition made by the Buddha makes it even harder to understand *nibbāna*, especially when considering its metaphorical expression in earlier texts. This complexity has made it problematic for the early *Abhidharma* thinkers and the later researchers trying to understand and explain *nibbāna* with metaphors used in such texts. For example, the concept of *nibbāna*, which is often regarded as having equivalent meanings, is reported to encompass up to thirty-three distinct definitions, as synthesized by various scholars (SN 43.1-44, edited, Nānamoli Bhikkhu trans, Dhamma Wiki n.d.). Hwang observes that modern academic inquiry often tends to study the historical characteristics and contextual nuances of early Buddhist literature in order to understand the intended implications of *nibbāna*. Without these efforts, it becomes very difficult to gain a comprehensive understanding or to make an accurate explanation of the metaphorical significance of *nibbāna*. This problem is further compounded by the tendency of some exegetes to focus strictly on the literal words of the scriptures, forgetting the intent of the Buddha, the audience whom he was speaking to, and the general atmosphere of the message (Gombrich 1996, 21) [24]. A particularly typical example of this interpretive complexity is found in the *Aditta-pariyaya Sutta* (The Fire Sermon), where the word *pariyāya*, meaning sequence or method is used to describe the manner of teaching by the Buddha through an illustrative and metaphorical use of words (Hwang 2006, 65) [19]. This is a figurative way of speaking, which Yaśomitra agrees with in the *Sphuṭārthā Abhidharmakośavyākhyā*, where he says that early scriptural expositions are implicit and context-dependent (*ābhiprāyika*) rather than explicit and literal, as in *Abhidharma* (Yaśomitra, Saw-w 172).

Comprehending *nibbāna* in the context of early Buddhist texts requires a meticulous examination of the doctrinal and historical background in which it is articulated. This multiplicity of terminologies and metaphors describing *nibbāna* underscores its complexity and diversity. Thus, for example, *nibbāna* is metaphorically described as the extinction of three fires: greed, hatred and delusion (Vibh 72-73, 89; SN IV 251-252, SN 38.1 1.6), while the path leading towards enlightenment is formulated as that by which fetters (*saṃyojana*) (Dhs 74-75, 116-117) are put aside or, alternatively, defilements (*āsava*) are roots eliminated (DN I 156; II 92; MN I 465-467; AN II 238). This has led to two different concepts of *nibbāna* in early Buddhist thought: *nibbāna* with remainder (*sa-upādisesanibbānadhātu / sopadhiseṣanirvānadhātu*) and *nibbāna* without remainder (*anupādisesanibbānadhātu / nir/an-upadhiseṣanibbānadhātu*) (Hwang 2006) [19].

The argument that the metaphorical nature of *nibbāna* must not be overlooked to avoid misunderstandings leads Hwang into etymological analysis of *nibbāna* and the metaphoric texture of the concept itself in his attempt to explain the inherent impossibility of language to express transcendent *nibbāna*. He claims that to understand *nibbāna*, its

metaphorical representation must be accompanied by historical and doctrinal frameworks of early Buddhist teachings. This approach makes for a deeper understanding of the complicated way in which the Buddha used metaphorical language to describe the quality of ultimate liberation. Only by situating these descriptions both historically and doctrinally, argues Hwang (2006)^[19], can an appreciation for the total sense of *nibbāna* within early Buddhist thought be achieved.

In early Buddhist texts, *nibbāna* usually has to do with two key events in the life of the Buddha: enlightenment (*bodhi*) and final emancipation (*parinirvāṇa*) (Norman 1993, 216-217)^[33]. Enlightenment is a kind of *nibbāna* with remainder (*sa-upādisesa nibbānadhātu*), wherein the three fires of greed, hatred, and delusion have been fully extinguished, though the “fuel” represented by the five aggregates (*pañca-khandha*) persists. This is a symbolic visualization of *nibbāna*. On the other hand, *parinirvāṇa* is named “*nibbāna* without remainder” (*anupādisesa nibbānadhātu*); it refers to a situation that has no residual fuel with attachment, thereby symbolizing extinction absolutely (Hwang 2006)^[19]. However, in early Buddhism, enlightenment in life is the attainment of *nibbāna* over *parinirvāṇa*, which is the ultimate liberation realized at the time of death. The emphasis on the attainment of *nibbāna* in life underlines its immediate relevance and transformative potential for those who are practicing (Hwang 2006)^[19]. Since, it believed that Buddhism teaches that karmic consequences come about only through volitional actions (*cetana*); so, when a bhikkhu has perfected his mind and removed all the taints, no other afflictions arise. Early Buddhism, therefore, emphasizes *nibbāna* as an attainable state in this life and presents a path toward liberation culminating in liberation from cycles of samsaric rebirth.

The distinction between the two types of *nibbāna*-*nibbāna* with remainder (*sa-upādisesa nibbānadhātu*) and *nibbāna* without remainder (*anupādisesa nibbānadhātu*)-is central to these discussions. In *sa-upādisesa nibbānadhātu*, the three fires have been extinguished, but the fuel of the aggregates persists. In *anupādisesa nibbānadhātu*, no fuel or aggregates remain, representing a state of complete cessation (Gombrich 1996, 68-69; Norman 1993, 215)^[24, 33]. Through the extinguishment of the three fires, a monk attains the state of an Arahant, one who has eradicated the mental defilements. Gombrich (1988, 64)^[23] emphasizes that *nibbāna* is not a “realm” but rather a mental state free from greed, hatred, and delusion. This state results in liberation, ensuring that the individual is no longer bound to the endless cycle of rebirth (Norman 1993, 214)^[33]. This liberation is often described in the scriptures as a source of profound joy, characterized by statements such as the outflows have been destroyed, the holy life has been fulfilled, and what was to be done has been done (SN II, 22). Such descriptions underline the transformative and final nature of *nibbāna*, portraying it as the culmination of the Buddhist path and the ultimate freedom from samsaric existence.

Etymology and Its Literal Meaning

In the Pali Canon tradition, the *Ādittasutta* (*The Fire Sermon*) uses the metaphor of the five aggregates (*pañca-khandha*) as fuel for the three fires of greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). *Nibbāna*, literally meaning “extinguishing,” is thus defined as the extinguishment of

these three fires and the fuel provided by the aggregates (SN III, 71). In the Northern Buddhist tradition, the equivalent text to the *Ādittasutta* is the *Nibbānasutta* from the *Āgamas*, where *nibbāna* is similarly described as the extinguishment of the three fires. However, this definition is expanded to include the cessation of the outflows (*āsavas*), encompassing a broader scope of liberation (SN IV, 251-252). T.W. Rhys Davids (1974)^[36] noted that Western scholars tend to favor an etymological interpretation of *nirvāṇa* such as “going out” or “extinguishment.” *Ñāṇamoḷi*, however, presents a different perspective, which is about the original sense of *nirvāṇa* that the flame is put out, just like the fire of a blacksmith which stops burning because of the lack of any wind blowing it (*Ñāṇamoḷi* 1976, 319)^[30]. In his opinion, *nibbāna* functions as a verb intransitively because the flame puts itself out when set on the absence of the essential conditions that are fuel or wind. Also, the word *nirvāṇa* comes from the prefix *nir-* (a negation) added to the root *vā* (to blow).

Conversely, Hwang (2006)^[19] argues that the traditional etymology of *nirvāṇa* is not true. Instead of coming from *nir√vā* (be blown out) that is taken to be a verbal root, it really comes from *nir√vr̥* (to cover or conceal) which is the default derivative. This alternative derivation implies that the meaning of the word *nirvāṇa* is to stop or to show the truth, which is consistent with its broader application in Buddhist philosophy.

In the *Mahāvibhāṣāśāstra*, *nirvāṇa* is described through nine etymological interpretations, each of which underscores the spiritual and doctrinal significance of the concept:

- **Cessation of defilements (*kleśanirodha*):** *Nirvāṇa* means the discontinuation of the afflictions where it is symbolic of the uprooting of the so-called three (greed, hatred, and delusion) poisons.
- **Extinction of the three fires:** The word refers to the peaceful extinction of the three poisons.
- **Separation from impurities (*durgandha viyoga*):** The separation is the exclusion of moral and mental dirt and damage.
- **Release from the realms of existence (*gati viyoga*):** *Nirvāṇa* means the state of not returning to life afterlife in different ways.
- **Escape from the forest of the five aggregates (*pañca-skandha*):** In this verse, *vāna* is the “forest,” while *nir-* is the leaving signifier, which points to the overcoming attachment to the five aggregates.
- **Cessation of weaving afflictions and rebirth:** The term alludes to the cessation of creating further karmic entanglements and samsaric existence, likened to ceasing the act of weaving. A person with karmic tendencies weaves the fabric of rebirth, whereas one free from afflictions ceases this cycle.
- **End of rebirth (*vāna as rebirth*):** The negation (*nir-*) indicates the absence of future rebirths.
- **Freedom from bondage (*vāna as binding*):** It represents liberation from all forms of attachment and constraint.
- **Surpassing the troubles of saṃsāra (*vāna as troubles*):** It signifies transcendence of the inherent unrest and turmoil of the samsaric cycle.

These interpretations underscore the multifaceted nature of *nirvāṇa*, as each elucidates a specific doctrinal or

metaphorical aspect. The term *nirvāṇa* encapsulates a broad spectrum of meanings, from the cessation of defilements to the ultimate transcendence of the existential cycles of suffering and rebirth. This rich variety of interpretations highlights the nuanced and layered understanding of *nirvāṇa* within Buddhist thought, reflecting both its etymological roots and its profound soteriological significance (Mv, TD27, 147b) ^[1].

Steven Collins (1998, 195-196) offers four distinct etymological interpretations of *nirvāṇa*, each illuminating different dimensions of its meaning within the Buddhist tradition:

- **Absence of Craving:** Collins interprets *nirvāṇa* as “absence of craving,” with *nir-* functioning as a negation (meaning “not”) and *vāṇa* referring to craving, derived from the verbal root *√van* (to desire). This interpretation aligns with the commentary in the *Sammohavinodanī*, which states, “Craving, also called desire, is no longer present; therefore, it is called the absence of craving” ^[2]. (Collins 1998, 195).
- **State of Detachment from Desire:** In this interpretation, *nir-* signifies “abandonment” or “detachment,” linked to the root *ni-kkham* (to renounce), while *vāṇa* again denotes craving. Thus, *nibbāna* is understood as a state of having relinquished or escaped from craving and sensual desire (Collins 1998, 195).
- **Escape from the Aggregates (Skandhas):** According to the commentary in *Dhammapada Atthakatha* (Dhp-a III 424), *vāṇa* is interpreted as “wood” or “forest,” symbolizing the aggregates (*pañca-skandha*). Therefore, *nirvāṇa* refers to liberation from the “forest” of the aggregates, which are the basis of suffering.
- **Cessation of the Weaving of Existence:** In this interpretation, *vāṇa* is understood as “weaving.” Consequently, *nirvāṇa* is explained as the cessation of weaving future lives through the fabric of craving, karma, and its resultant effects. It signifies the renunciation

These etymological interpretations underscore the multifaceted and metaphorical nature of *nibbāna*. By linking the term to various symbolic and doctrinal elements—craving, detachment, the aggregates, and the cessation of karmic continuity—Collins highlights the profound soteriological implications of *nibbāna* as the ultimate goal of Buddhist

practice. This approach reflects the richness of Buddhist thought and its reliance on metaphor to convey the ineffable aspects of liberation. Later, Buddhaghosa offered a reinterpretation of the term *nibbāna* in the *Visuddhimagga* (Path of Purification), departing from its earlier etymology as the extinguishing of the three fires—greed, hatred, and delusion. Instead, he proposed an explanation based on the meaning of *vāṇa* as “weaving,” derived from the root *√vā* (to weave). In this framework, *nibbāna* is understood as the cessation of the “weaving” of existence:

“What is called *nibbāna* (extinction) is so called because it has gone out (*nikkhanta*), escaped (*nissata*), and is removed from craving, often referred to as ‘binding’ (*vāna*). This craving, through its successive continuity, serves as the essential factor binding beings together, binding the four types of beings, the five realms, the seven stations of consciousness, and the nine abodes of existence.” (Vism p. 242, Ñāṇamoli trans., 1976, 248) ^[30].

This interpretation reflects the metaphorical richness of the term *nibbāna*, as Buddhaghosa emphasizes its role as liberation from the cyclical binding of craving. In this context, craving is likened to a thread that “weaves” and entangles sentient beings within the fabric of samsaric existence, connecting them to the realms and states of being. By transcending this craving, *nibbāna* represents a state where the “threads” of attachment are completely severed, allowing for ultimate liberation. Buddhaghosa’s reinterpretation underscores the doctrinal flexibility and evolving understanding of *nibbāna* in Buddhist thought, moving beyond the earlier emphasis on the extinguishing of fires to incorporate broader existential and metaphorical dimensions. It highlights the role of craving not only as a source of suffering but as a force that perpetuates the interconnected cycles of rebirth, making *nibbāna* the ultimate cessation of this karmic “weaving.”

Metaphor of Nibbana and Its meaning Nibbāna as the Quenching of Fire

The concept of *nibbāna*, central to Buddhist philosophy, is often encapsulated in the metaphor of “extinguishing a fire.” This metaphor, rooted in the Buddha’s teachings, serves as an allegory for the cessation of suffering and the end of cyclical existence (*samsāra*). The Buddha frequently employed imagery associated with fire to illustrate the dynamics of human existence. A key reference appears in the *Ādittapariyāya Sutta* where he declared:

“The eye, forms, eye-consciousness, eye-contact, and whatever feeling arises with eye-contact... these are burning with the fire of lust, the fire of hatred, the fire of delusion” (SN 35.28, Bodhi 2000, 1147) ^[11].

In the *Ādittapariyāya Sutta*, the Buddha addressed fire-worshipping ascetics (*jaṭilas*), emphasizing liberation through the recognition and extinguishment of the three fires. In ancient Indian culture, fire (*agni*) held profound symbolic significance, representing creation, transformation, and destruction. The Buddha recontextualized fire as a symbol of suffering and attachment, marking a philosophical departure from the Vedic sacrificial tradition, where fire served as a medium for sacred offerings. Instead of sustaining existence through ritual, the Buddha proposed extinguishing the fires of craving and clinging. This inversion of the fire metaphor reflects Buddhism’s emphasis on cessation over perpetuation. As Gombrich (1988, 66) ^[23] points out, the three fires may also serve as a metaphorical

¹問：以何義故名曰涅槃？答：煩惱滅故名為涅槃。

復次三火息故名為涅槃。復次三相寂故名為涅槃。復

次離臭穢故名為涅槃。復次。

離諸趣故名為涅槃。復次涅槃名稠林。槃名為出。

出蘊稠林故名涅槃。復次槃名為織。涅槃為不。以不織故名為涅槃。如有縷者便有所織。無則不然。如是若有業煩惱者便織生死。無

學無有業煩惱故不織生死。故名涅槃。復次槃名後有。涅槃為無

。無後有故名為涅槃。復次槃名繫縛。涅槃名為離。

離繫縛故名為涅槃。復次槃名一切生死苦難。涅槃名超度。

超度一切生死苦難故名涅槃。

² “vāṇaṃ vuccati taṇhā. sā tattha natthi ti nibbānaṃ”. Vibh-a 314 of craving, which metaphorically “weaves” the cycles of birth and rebirth (Collins 1998, 196).

critique of the Brahmanical ritual practice, wherein a Brahmin tended three sacred fires daily as a symbol of their commitment to worldly and ritual life. In contrast, the three fires of greed, hatred, and delusion in Buddhism are to be abandoned. This reinterpretation resonated deeply with the fire-worshipping ascetics, challenging their established beliefs. Understanding the historical and metaphorical context of *nibbāna* provides valuable insights for addressing interpretative and ontological questions surrounding *nibbāna*. The fire imagery not only conveys the Buddha's teachings but also sets them in contrast to Brahmanical doctrines. The deliberate use of fire, a central symbol in Vedic culture, allowed the Buddha to make a profound philosophical impression on his audience, particularly the *jaṭilas*, by framing fire in a radically different context.

Here, the fire metaphor is applied to sensory experiences, emphasizing their transient and combustible nature. Fire, fueled by craving (*taṇhā*), sustains *saṃsāra*. This metaphor is among the most prominent depictions of *nibbāna*, likening it to the extinguishment or "blowing out" of a fire. The image symbolizes the cessation of craving, the driving force behind *saṃsāra*, and liberation from suffering. As the Buddha explained, *nibbāna* entails extinguishing the fires of greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*), the three "unwholesome roots" (*akusala-mūla*) that perpetuate cyclical existence (Bodhi 2012, 102) ^[12]. Gombrich (1988, 63) ^[23] concurs, noting that in early Buddhist tradition, *nibbāna* refers to the extinguishment of these three fires. The metaphor of extinguishment highlights the cessation of the three poisons, emphasizing the peace and stillness that arise when they are eradicated. The process of extinguishing these fires parallels the literal extinguishing of a flame: without fuel (desire), the fire naturally ceases. This comparison underscores the Buddha's pragmatic approach to liberation, focusing on cessation rather than creation. The image of an extinguished flame conveys both the cessation of suffering and the tranquility that arises when the mind is no longer consumed by defilements.

By extinguishing these fires, the practitioner experiences coolness as the absence of mental turmoil. This metaphor encapsulates the essence of Buddhist ethics and psychology, which prioritize the gradual calming of the mind through ethical conduct, mindfulness, and wisdom. It resonates with the practice of mindfulness, where phenomena are observed without attachment or aversion, allowing the flames of reactivity to subside. In Buddhist cosmology, the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*) is often likened to wandering in a burning desert. *Nibbāna*, as coolness, represents the oasis where this wandering ends. This symbolism aligns with the Buddhist view of *saṃsāra* as inherently unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), with *nibbāna* serving as the ultimate cessation of suffering. Through this lens, the metaphor of coolness not only emphasizes the experiential relief of liberation but also reinforces the practical pathway of detachment and mindfulness, central to achieving peace in the Buddhist tradition as in the Dhammapada 202 the verse states:

"There is no fire like passion; there is no evil like hatred; there is no ill like (the burden of) khandhas; there is no bliss that surpasses the Perfect Peace (i.e., Nibbana)."

The metaphor of coolness also signifies the state of equanimity (*upekkhā*), a central quality cultivated on the path to *nibbāna*. The absence of heat suggests a mind no longer reactive to the vicissitudes of life. This metaphor emphasizes that *nibbāna* is not merely an abstract or

metaphysical concept but a tangible experiential reality attainable through practice. The calming of the "fires" of defilement illustrates the practical benefits of meditation and ethical living. For practitioners, the image of coolness provides a vivid representation of the relief that accompanies liberation. Just as entering the shade is a relief from the heat of the sun, the attainment of *nibbāna* represents a profound release from the burden of craving and ignorance.

The metaphor of coolness is very close to the Stoic ideal of *apatheia*, a state of freedom from destructive emotions. Just as the Buddhist conception of *nibbāna*, Stoic tranquility is also an inner peace achieved through reason and virtue. Both views consider liberation as a process of overcoming attachment and emotional turmoil to achieve a state of profound mental clarity and balance. In Christian mysticism, liberation is often described as "the peace of God," which surpasses human understanding. While *nibbāna* as coolness is atheistic and grounded in self-transformation, both traditions share a common focus on alleviating existential suffering. In Christianity, this peace derives from divine grace and union with God, whereas in Buddhism, it emerges from the extinguishment of craving (*taṇhā*) and delusion (*moha*). Similar Taoist metaphors on water flowing so effortlessly, easily, and without resistance bears the Buddhist imagery of coolness. The water signifies adaptability, humility, and natural alignment with the Tao. Complementary to the Buddhist emphasis on non-attachment and the naturally cessation of suffering when the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion are extinguished. Both these traditions underlined the value of spontaneity, non-resistance, and harmony with the given processes of nature as being essential to liberation. But, all these cross-cultural parallels refer back to the common expectation of humankind toward inner peace and freedom from suffering. Though separated by different metaphysical frameworks and ultimate goals, the traditions nonetheless seem to merge at the level of what was common in practice—the attainment of serenity through virtue, detachment, and alignment with broader truths of existence.

Fires refer to metaphors metaphorically, and they are compared with Western philosophical traditions where, mostly, passion and transformation are likened to fire. For instance, in Heraclitean philosophy, fire represents the extremely and constantly changing outward manifestation of existence itself. This example, however, contrasts with Buddha, who with a fire metaphor refers to cessation and peace. That is precisely how it points towards the unique soteriological literalism of Buddhist thought, directing itself at liberation rather than accepting eternal change. The fire metaphor successfully captures the essence of *nibbāna* in representation and yet, it is problematic in terms of association. Some scholars supposed that such focus on extinguishment might mean nihilism in *nibbāna*-annihilation in all probability. However, textual evidence suggests otherwise, affirming that *nibbāna* is not nonexistence but a transcendent state beyond dualistic conceptualization. The Udāna 8.1 describes it thus:

"There is that sphere, monks, where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no air, no sphere of infinite space, no sphere of infinite consciousness, no sphere of nothingness, no sphere of neither perception nor non-perception, no this world, no world beyond, neither Moon nor Sun. There, monks, I say there is surely no coming, no going, no

persisting, no passing away, no rebirth It is quite without support, unmoving, without an object,-just this is the end of suffering.”

Such descriptions affirm *nibbāna* as a state that transcends simple categories of being and non-being. It represents the ultimate cessation of suffering, a condition that eludes ordinary conceptual frameworks. By reinterpreting fire from a ritualistic origin-as in the Vedic tradition, where it symbolized existence and sacrifice-into a symbol of existential entanglement, the Buddha articulated a path of liberation rooted in cessation. This transformation changed fire from an object of worship to a metaphor for human suffering caused by greed, hatred, and delusion. The end of such “fires” indicates a state of very deep peace and freedom, inherent to the Buddhist image of liberation. Reassessing this metaphor thus again underlined the possibly transformative power of Buddhist teachings, putting fire in discipline to show the practical and experiential end of *nibbāna*: Absolute cessation of suffering, realization of last peace.

“This truly is the most peaceful and refined, that is to say, the stilling of all formations, the forsaking of all acquisitions and every substratum of rebirth, the fading away of craving, cessation, Nibbāna.” (AN 10.60 1.7).

Nibbāna as the Unborn, Unconditioned and Deathless

The concept of *nibbāna* is often defined in Buddhist texts as the “Unborn” (*ajāta*), the “Unmade” (*abhūta*), and the “Unconditioned” (*asaṅkhata*), standing in contrast to the conditioned existence of the cyclical processes of birth, death, and rebirth (*saṃsāra*). These descriptions are not merely ontological assertions emphasizing that *nibbāna* transcends time and causality, but also carry profound metaphorical significance in the Buddha’s teachings. In the Udāna (8.3), the Buddha declares:

“There is, monks, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned. If, monks there were not that unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, you could not know an escape here from the born, become, made, and conditioned. But because there is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, therefore you do know an escape from the born, become, made, and conditioned.”

Here, terms like *ajāta*, *abhūta*, and *asaṅkhata* not only delineate *nibbāna* from *saṃsāra* but also convey the ultimate liberation it represents. The term *ajāta* evokes the absence of cause and effect, a hallmark of conditioned phenomena. In Buddhist philosophy, dependent origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*) teaches the rise of all phenomena from conditions. *Nibbāna*, by contrast, signifies that this causation stops, a state outside beginning and end. Metaphorically, it encourages practitioners to picture *nibbāna* as a kind of state untouched by birth and death. As Śāntideva writes in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* that because birth is the root of suffering, the wise seek the Unborn (Śāntideva 1997, 128). The term *abhūta* emphasizes *nibbāna*’s transcendence of the artificial constructs of thought and perception. Conditioned phenomena are inherently unstable, shaped by the five aggregates (*pañca-khandha*): form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental formations (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāna*). *Abhūta* metaphorically incites abandonment of mental constructs and illusions through insight (*vipassanā*) into impermanence (*anicca*). Such freedom gives rise in the

practitioner from the artificial nature of conditioned existence.

Asaṅkhata shows the unchanging quality of *nibbāna*, which is defined as being not affected by conditional phenomena. It means severing completely the craving (*taṇhā*), being the chief cause of suffering in *saṃsāra*.

“The remainderless fading, cessation, Nibbāna comes with the utter ending of all craving. When a bhikkhu reaches Nibbāna thus through not clinging, there is no renewal of being; Māra has been vanquished and the battle gained, since one who is Such has outstripped all being.” (Ud 3.10). Metaphorically, “the Unconditioned” conveys an image of boundless freedom from desires, afflictions, and fears. This freedom is not merely an abstract concept but a living reality realized through ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom. The Dhammapada (203) declares: “*Hunger is the greatest ailment, khandhas are the greatest ill. The wise, knowing them as they really are, realize Nibbana, the greatest bliss.*” Another metaphor used to describe *nibbāna* is the “Deathless” (*amata*). The Dhammapada (114) states: “*Better than a hundred years in the life of a person who does not perceive the Deathless (Nibbana), is a day in the life of one who perceives the Deathless (Nibbana).*” Here, *amata* represents transcendence over the cycles of birth, aging, illness, death, and suffering. *Amata* not only symbolizes a transcendent state but also serves as a source of existential comfort, encouraging practitioners to live virtuously, mindfully, and wisely. This metaphor underscores *nibbāna* as the ultimate refuge, in alignment with the Buddha’s vision of liberation.

The Buddha’s use of metaphors such as “the Unborn,” “the Unmade,” “the Unconditioned,” and “the Deathless” not only describes the nature of *nibbāna* but also provides practical guidance for practitioners seeking liberation. These metaphors are simultaneously philosophical and experiential, bridging the abstract concept of *nibbāna* with the lived experiences of practitioners. Apart from that, they insist on the incomprehensible nature of *nibbāna*, and they oppose any reification of it as a conditioned phenomenon. This shows the middle way, or *madhyamā-pratipadā*, which is all-important for the empirical tradition in Buddhism. It conveys that *nibbāna* isn’t the kind of concept to be rationalized, but rather a reality to be realized experientially. Using this metaphor, the Buddha easily led the practitioner over the edge of dualistic thinking into the realization of ultimate freedom.

Nibbāna as Liberation, End of Dukkha

Nibbāna denotes full cessation of craving (*taṇhā*)-the root cause of suffering (*dukkha*)- and the complete goal of all spiritual practice, as mentioned in the Pali Canon. Suffering, the First Noble Truth, is to state the very core of existence: being born, growing old, being sick, dying, and the mental agony that results from craving and aversion (DN.22). The Buddha exhibited *dukkha* not only as physical or mental suffering, but as an existential state born out of ignorance (*avijjā*) and three poisonous - craving (*taṇhā*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*) (AN 3.61). *Nibbāna* in this scenario conveys the cessation of suffering and transcendence in conditioned modalities. The Buddha has made use of different kinds of metaphors to show the inexpressible nature of *nibbāna*: the extinction of a fire, the laying down of a burden, crossing a river, and so on. For example, in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, he emphasized: “*And this, monks, is the*

noble truth of the cessation of *dukkha*: the remainderless fading & cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, & letting go of that very craving.” (SN 56.11). These metaphors illustrate *nibbāna* not as annihilation of existence but as liberation from the conditioned phenomena that perpetuate suffering. What emerges is not suffering, still it does not imply nihilism, for there is freedom from those binding conditions of *samsāra*.

In the Majjhima Nikāya 43, *nibbāna* is also described as unshakeable release of the mind (*akuppā cetovimutti*) that symbolizes ultimate freedom from mental bondage. But those who follow the instruction of the ten-powered Buddha and strive for the elimination of birth and death can achieve ultimate bondage-free. But the metaphors of the Buddha express incomprehensible experience because of the limitations of language. In the Dhammapada 21, the Buddha declared: “Mindfulness is the way to the Deathless (*Nibbana*); unmindfulness is the way to Death. Those who are mindful do not die; those who are not mindful are as if already dead.” This portrayal reflects *nibbāna* as not merely a metaphysical state but the end result of ethical refinement through right conduct, meditation, and wisdom.

Ultimately, *nibbāna* represents not only individual liberation but also a universal ethical ideal. From a psychological perspective, *nibbāna* symbolizes the cessation of self-referential thoughts and the dissolution of attachments rooted in ego. As the Dhammapada 285 advises: *Cut off your craving as one plucks an autumn lily with the hand. Nibbana has been expounded on by the Buddha; cultivate that Path which leads to it*. It symbolizes the highest spiritual transformation-wisdom combined with compassion. Therefore, it is not a mere end of suffering; it is a realization of deep spiritual harmony, a practical as well as timeless guide to freedom within and to ultimate peace.

Nibbāna as the Ultimate Shelter, Safe Island, Other Shore, Peace

The Buddha employed profound metaphors to convey the meaning of *nibbāna*, an ultimate state of abiding beyond the constraints of language and definition. Imagery such as a “refuge”, a “safe island,” the “farther shore,” or “absolute peace” was used to illustrate his enlightenment and guide practitioners on the path to liberation. Here it is refer to taking refuge in the Triple Gem- the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha-not only forms the foundation of Buddhist faith but also reflects the aspirational quest for eternal stability in *nibbāna*, a state beyond all suffering. For example, the Dhammapada (238) “*Make a firm support for yourself; hasten to strive hard, and be wise. Having removed impurities and being free from moral defilements you will no longer be subject to rebirth and decay*”. This encourages practitioners to build their own “spiritual island,” free from cravings and defilements, leading to inner peace. The metaphor of a “safe island” symbolizes the stark contrast between *nibbāna*-a state unbound by impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*)-and the perilous ocean of *samsāra*, a symbol for the suffering inherent in cyclic existence.

The “safe island” is not merely a physical place but a stable spiritual state that enables practitioners to transcend the challenges of clinging (*upādāna*) and ignorance (*avijjā*). *Nibbāna* is portrayed as an unconditioned realm where wisdom (*paññā*) and mindfulness (*sati*) guide one out of mental defilements. Relatedly, the metaphor of “peace”

captures *nibbāna* as freedom from affliction. In the Itivuttaka (68), peace is described as: “*Anyone whose passion, aversion, & ignorance have faded away, is said to be composed in mind, Brahma-become, awakened, Tathāgata, one for whom fear & hostility are past, one who’s abandoned the All.*” Here, peace is more than the absence of suffering; it is a state of inner freedom where the mind, no longer dominated by craving or aversion, achieves equanimity (*upekkhā*). This dynamic liberation allows practitioners to engage compassionately with the world without being ensnared by it.

If one falls into hell, the animal world, the titan world, and the ghost world, one has to suffer immensely. One doesn’t have protection even among the gods; therefore there is nothing superior to the happiness of *Nibbāna*. (Therīgāthā 475) (*Verses of the Elder Nuns*)

Another frequently used metaphor is the farther shore (*pāra*), illustrating the transcendence of *nibbāna* over the constraints of worldly existence. The Buddha likened the journey toward *nibbana* to crossing a turbulent river of *samsāra*, encumbered by craving (*taṇhā*), ignorance, and suffering. This journey requires effort (*vīriya*), mindfulness, and concentration (*samādhi*), culminating in the attainment of the shore of liberation. In the Udāna (8.3), *nibbāna* is emphasized as an “unconditioned state” beyond all concepts of birth and death. However, these metaphors necessitate careful interpretation. The image of the farther shore as a place is misleading; it really ought to indicate a transformation perceptual and existential. The Buddha countered such misconceptions by stressing the experience of *nibbāna* as entailed in the teachings of the Middle Way and dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) to emphasize that *nibbāna* is, according to the cessation of defilements and suffering occurring here and now.

Contemporary scholars of Buddhism or monk, such as Bhikkhu Bodhi (2000)^[11] and Peter Harvey (1995)^[25], have come to advocate *nibbāna* as an end to mental defilements - that very, very deep level of inner peace. In Mahayana Buddhism, however, the added dimension of non-duality through emptiness, *sūnyatā*, gives depth to *nibbāna*, unearthing that liberation is no negation of the world but harmony with its interdependent and empty nature. The Heart Sutra famously states, “*Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form,*” (Dalai Lama XIV 2005)^[17] illustrating that peace is not avoidance but a harmonious engagement with reality. The definition of *nibbāna* supplied by metaphors such as “refuge” or “peace” or “farther shore” etc, has both educational and inspirational values for the student. These inevitably demystify the actual idea of *nibbāna*, demystifying it and bringing it closer to practitioners. Beyond such illustration, such metaphors can also serve as therapies for the practitioner to an inner shaping of the course of his spiritual journey.

Conclusion

By metaphorical approach, I refer broadly to a method of interpreting biblical texts that transcends literal readings. A metaphorical interpretation does not confine itself to the literal, factual, or historical dimensions of a text. Instead, it extends beyond the question, What does this story signify as a narrative, independent of its historical factuality? (SuttaCentral Discourse n.d.) The Buddha often used vivid metaphors to explain the ineffable nature of *nibbāna*, fully cognizant of the limitations of language and the intellectual

diversity of his audience. In the *AggiVacchagotta Sutta* (MN 72), he likened *nibbāna* to the extinction of a flame, emphasizing the cessation of the conditions that feed suffering-craving (*taṇhā*) and ignorance (*avijjā*). When the post-mortem condition of an enlightened being was questioned, the Buddha did not indulge in metaphysical explanations but instead employed the metaphor of an extinguished flame (*nibbuta*) to indicate the finality of the end of suffering. In the *Udāna* (8.1), the Buddha described *nibbāna* as an “island” apart from the turbulent currents of *samsāra*, thus underlining its character as a safe haven that could be reached through mindfulness and effort. These metaphors transform the abstraction of *nibbāna* into accessible symbols while conserving its transcendence. They not only reflect an experiential dimension but also serve as motivational tools, offering practitioners concrete guidance on their path to liberation.

The interpretations and accesses of *nibbāna* varied with the development of Buddhism into the Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions. In the Pali Canon, *nibbāna* is defined as complete cessation of suffering and defilements, which again emphasizes individual effort through the Noble Eightfold Path. Nirvāna, according to the *Visuddhimagga*, is “the ultimate goal, unconditioned and deathless.” This view emphasizes the fact that *nibbāna* can be achieved by anyone if they strictly practice the Dhamma, but that householders are at greater disadvantage because of their daily-life liabilities. The Mahāyāna extended the concept of *nibbāna* with the help of the Bodhisattva ideal, in which followers delay their own liberation in order to save all the sentient beings. It states that *nibbāna* and *samsāra* are non-dual, inseparable things as expounded by the *Lotus Sutra* and *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*. This is democratization of the path to salvation; compassion and self-less action are regarded as preeminently important for attaining the sublime stage. Vajrayāna Buddhism emphasizes that it can indeed attain *nibbāna* in this life itself, through esoteric practices, visualization meditations, and so on. In bringing together the application of *prajñā* with that of *upāya*, Vajrayāna gives accelerated ways toward the attainment of *sūnyatā*, reconciling phenomenal reality with absolute experience, that of *nibbāna*. In this manner, it further emphasizes the dynamic interaction of relative and absolute reality.

The various interpretations of *nibbāna* across Buddhist traditions, while differing in emphasis, all agree on its status as the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path. Modern scholars and practitioners emphasize that it is both the end of mental defilements and the attainment of profound inner peace. It means there is now an addition that has an aspect in Mahāyāna teaching of *sūnyatā* regarding non-duality - the theory is the accomplishment of harmony with this deposing interdependence with emptiness. That was transcendence joined by immanence; what defines *nibbāna* also is as inspirational across space, time and cultures-then as more than the height of perfection: the present possibility. The metaphors continue to resonate with the Buddhists, guiding individuals to the deeper understanding of the freedom and a life in wisdom, compassion, and peace.

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