

Spiritual Freedom in Buddhism

Bhante Pannasara

Resident monk of Indiana Buddhist Temple

What is Spiritual Freedom?

In Buddhism, **spiritual freedom** (cetovimutti – liberation of the mind) is not just about external independence but about inner liberation from suffering, delusion, and attachments. True freedom is achieved through wisdom (paññā), ethical conduct (sīla), and meditation (samādhi), leading to **Nibbāna**—the ultimate liberation.

What are the barriers to spiritual freedom?

- Spiritual freedom is the liberation of the mind from suffering, ignorance, and attachment. However, several barriers (බාධක) prevent this **realization**. According to Buddhist teachings, the main obstacles include

- **1. Ignorance (Avijjā – අවිද්‍යා)**
- Lack of understanding of the Four Noble Truths.
- Clinging to false beliefs and misconceptions about the self and reality.
- **2. Craving & Attachment (Taṇhā – තණ්හා)**
- Desire for material things, relationships, and sensory pleasures.
- Attachment to identity, opinions, and ego.
- **3. The Five Hindrances (Pañca Nīvaraṇa – පඤ්ච නීවරණ)**
- These mental defilements prevent deep concentration and wisdom:
- **Sensual desire (Kāmacchanda)** – Attachment to pleasure.
- **Ill will (Vyāpāda)** – Anger, hatred, and resentment.
- **Sloth and torpor (Thīna-middha)** – Laziness and dullness.
- **Restlessness and worry (Uddhacca-kukkucca)** – Mental agitation.
- **Doubt (Vicikicchā)** – Uncertainty about the path.



- **4. Ego & Pride (Māna – මාන)**
- Seeing oneself as superior, inferior, or equal in a way that reinforces self-identity.
- Prevents true humility and wisdom.
- **5. Fear & Attachment to Views (Ditṭhi – දිට්ඨි)**
- Fear of letting go of conditioned beliefs.
- Clinging to religious, political, or philosophical views without direct experience.
- **6. Lack of Ethical Conduct (Sīla – සීල) & Mindfulness (Sati – සති)**
- Unethical behavior leads to guilt and suffering.
- A restless mind prevents clarity and insight.

- **Overcoming These Barriers**
- Develop **wisdom (paññā)** through learning and reflection.
- Practice **meditation (bhāvanā)** to calm the mind.
- Cultivate **ethics (sīla)** to purify actions and thoughts.
- Let go of **attachments** and embrace impermanence (anicca).



- **Spiritual Freedom According to the Kalama Sutta**
- The **Kalama Sutta (AN 3.65)** is one of the most famous discourses of the Buddha, often called the "**Charter of Free Inquiry.**" It emphasizes **intellectual and spiritual freedom** by teaching people not to accept beliefs blindly but to rely on direct experience, critical thinking, and ethical living.

- **1. Freedom from Blind Faith**
- The Buddha advised the Kalamas not to accept teachings based on:
- **Oral tradition** (anussava)
- **Lineage** (paramparā)
- **Hearsay** (itikirāya)
- **Scriptures** (piṭaka-sampadāna)
- **Logical reasoning** (takkaheṭṭu)
- **Inference** (nayaheṭṭu)
- **Superficial appearances** (ākāraparivittakkena)
- **Agreement with personal views**
(ditṭhinijjhānakkhantiyā)
- **Seemingly convincing reasoning** (bhabbarūpatāya)
- **Respect for a teacher** (samaṇo no garūti)

- Instead, the Buddha encouraged personal **investigation, reasoning, and direct experience.**
- **Pāli Quote:**
"Mā anussavena, mā paramparāya, mā itikirāya..."
(Do not go by tradition, by lineage, by hearsay...) –
AN 3.65
- This teaching promotes **freedom from dogma** and reliance on **wisdom (paññā).**

- **2. Freedom Through Ethical Living**
- After rejecting blind faith, the Buddha advised examining teachings based on their effects:
-  If a belief or action leads to **greed, hatred, or delusion** → It should be abandoned.
-  If a belief or action leads to **compassion, wisdom, and peace** → It should be followed.
- **Pāli Quote:**
"Yaṃ taṃ tumhe, Kālāma, attanāva jāneyyātha..."
(Whatever you know for yourselves to be wholesome, blameless, praised by the wise, and leading to benefit and happiness, should be practiced.) – AN 3.65
- This is **freedom from moral confusion**, allowing one to cultivate a life based on wisdom and compassion.

- **3. Freedom Through Direct Experience (Ehipassiko)**
- Buddhism is not about **believing** but about **experiencing**. The Buddha invited people to test his teachings, like gold being tested by fire.
- **Pāli Quote:**
"Ehipassiko" – (Come and see for yourself.)
- This teaching encourages **self-exploration**, particularly through meditation, rather than relying on external authorities.

- **4. Freedom from Fear and Anxiety**
- The Buddha reassured the Kalamas that by practicing **ethical conduct and mindfulness**, they would experience peace **regardless of metaphysical beliefs**. Even if there were no rebirth, a good life brings happiness **here and now**.
-  If there is rebirth, good actions lead to good results.
-  If there is no rebirth, a virtuous life still leads to peace and happiness.
- **Pāli Quote:**
"Diṭṭheva dhamme averaṃ abyāpajjamāno sukhaṃ so pāssa" – (In this very life, one who is free from hatred and ill will experiences happiness.) – AN 3.65
- This teaching gives **freedom from existential fear**, allowing people to focus on the present moment.

- **Conclusion: Spiritual Freedom in the Kalama Sutta**
- According to the **Kalama Sutta**, spiritual freedom means:
- **Freedom from blind faith** – relying on wisdom, not dogma.
- **Freedom from moral uncertainty** – following what leads to happiness and well-being.
- **Freedom through direct experience** – testing teachings for oneself.
- **Freedom from fear** – living ethically leads to peace in this life and beyond.
- This aligns with the **Buddha's broader path of liberation**, where true freedom comes from wisdom (paññā), meditation (samādhi), and ethical living (sīla), ultimately leading to **Nibbāna – the highest freedom.**