

Comparative Conceptions of the Self

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Lecture 5

Nibbāna/Nirvāṇa

The “Fire Sermon”

What is meant by *Nibbāna/Nirvāṇa*?

“The Fire Sermon”

“The Way of Putting Things as Being on Fire.”

Fire is being used as a metaphor.

“All is burning,” everything is on fire.

https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/SN/SN35_28.html

“The Fire Sermon”

What is “everything”?

The totality of experience, specifically:

Six senses,

Their objects,

Their operation/functioning (via contact),

Six consciousnesses (based on senses, objects, and contact),

Six types of associated feelings.

“The Fire Sermon”

What is the fire?

Threefold (the defilements):

Passion (greed, lust)

Hatred

Delusion

Connection to *Nirvāṇa*

Nibbāna/ *Nirvāṇa* means “going out”

From the verbal root, *vā*, “to blow,”. with the prefix, *nir*, hence “cease to burn, go out.”

Intransitive, not implying any agent that causes the going out; rather, it happens given the right conditions.

So *Nirvāṇa* is the going out of the three fires – passion, hatred, delusion – that are consuming everything.

Why are the fires three?

An example of the Buddha's imposing a new meaning on Vedic ideas:

The brahmin householder has a duty to keep lit and to tend daily three sacrificial fires.

These fires came to symbolize life in the world, life as a householder.

Why are the fires three?

In one *sutta* (teaching), the Buddha reinterprets these fires in the following positive way:

The eastern fire stands for one's parents.

The western fire for one's household and dependents.

The southern fire for holy men (brahmins and renunciates) worthy to receive offerings.

The implication is that the householder should “tend the fires” by supporting people.

Why are the fires three?

In the “Fire Sermon” he reinterprets the three sacrificial fires in a negative way:

One fire is passion (greed, lust)

One fire is anger

One fire is hatred

Connection to the five aggregates

The Buddha says that the five aggregates are “aggregates of grasping” (or “clinging”), and he identifies existential suffering with the five aggregates of grasping.

The word translated as “grasping” (*upādāna*) more concretely means “fuel.”

So each of the five aggregates is being likened to a bundle of fuel—a burning bundle of firewood.

Connection to *Nirvāṇa*

Nirvāṇa is the “going out” of the three fires of passion, anger, and hatred via the elimination of craving and ignorance.

This can only happen during one’s life (there’s nowhere else for *Nirvāṇa* to take place except in life).

Connection to *Nirvāṇa*

At the moment of the fires being extinguished, the five aggregates continue to exist, but they're no longer burning.

When the five aggregates cease to exist—when the awakened person dies—all the fuel is gone and rebirth no longer occurs.

Nirvāṇa

But does a Buddha or arahant exist after death or does he no longer exist?

The Buddha declares that “is reborn,” “is not reborn,” “is both reborn and not reborn,” and “neither is reborn nor not reborn,” “do not apply,” i.e., none of them is applicable or can express how things are.

(see “The Shorter Instructions to Mālunkyaputta,”
<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.063.than.html>)

Nirvāṇa: two modes of description

Psychological

Destruction of passion, anger, hatred.

Elimination of craving and ignorance.

Resultant exalted feeling of psychological well-being.

Genuine peace and happiness, pervaded by loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, equanimity (four “Divine Abodes”)

Metaphysical

Transcendent state that is “unborn, unmade, unbecome, and unconditioned.”

Inexpressible in positive language; indicated through negative expressions (as above).