

Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar : A Study of Discourse on Nirvana

**SUMMARY
SUBMITTED TO
BABASAHEB BHIMRAO AMBEDKAR UNIVERSITY
LUCKNOW**



**IN FULFILLMENT FOR THE AWARD OF
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY
IN
HISTORY**

**SUBMITTED BY:
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ENROLLMENT NO: 525/17**

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2019

SUMMARY

The concept of Nirvana is one of the foundational concepts of Buddhism. Generally it is considered as one of the ultimate goal of all Buddhists. But there is no single opinion exists among various sets of Buddhism on the concept of Nirvana. This study entitled: “**Discourse on Nirvana: A Study of Theravada Buddhism**” attempts to capture the doctorial and popular representation of Nirvana in the Theravada Buddhism. In short, this study attempts to document discourse on the concept of Nirvana represented in Theravada literature. Attempt has been made to explore historical trajectory of the idea of Nirvana in history of Buddhism with focus on literature.

Theravada Buddhism claims to be the most authentic Buddhist tradition for it has preserved the teachings of the Buddha. This study attempts to explore the historical evolution of Theravada Buddhist tradition with particular reference to Myanmar. While so doing particular attention has been devoted to the concept of Nirvana and spiritual, structural and functional aspects related to the phenomenon of Nirvana. Historical and theological analysis of Nirvana is useful as it helps us to understand the evolutionary trajectory of Nirvana over a period of time and its doctrinal importance for Buddhist monastic system and lay Buddhist as well.

Context of Study

Undoubtedly the relevance of Buddhism as religion and spiritual belief system has been gaining relevance in the contemporary world. The consumerist society encouraged by capitalist economic system and oppressive political systems wherein concentration of power exists has brought about immense suffering to humanity across the globe. At the same time the competitive oriented human society is giving

least priority to ethical and humanist values. On account of these serious changes, the relevance of Buddhism which gives priority to ethical and moral dimensions of human society acquired prominence all over world.

Buddhist way of life emerged as one of the fascinating response to the consumerist or materialistic society. The ideas of non-violence, compassion for living forms, minimum needs for survival and minimising the craving for more desires are some of the popular tenets Buddhism. These concepts attracted the attention of academicians and general public as well. The fact however is the concept of Nirvana is one of the most controversial concepts in the history of Buddhism. While some sections claims that Nirvana is a pessimist notion which kills the human spirit and make them as lazy beings and other sections also claims that Nirvana is not all about renouncing the world, rather a training to live in this world with peace and magnanimity. This study attempts to document multi-dimensionality of Nirvana expressed in Theravada Buddhism as a discourse.

Objectives of Study

The objectives of the proposed study as follows:

- (1) To document the historical evolution of Theravada Buddhism and its spiritual and philosophical doctrines.
- (2) To propose an analysis and explanation on the question of how and why Theravada Buddhism considered to be authentic version of Buddhism.
- (3) To depict importance of Nirvana as an important component of Buddhist philosophy.
- (4) To explore the concept of Nirvana as an important principle of Theravada Buddhism.

- (5) To propose a comparative study of Nirvana both Theravada and other forms of Buddhism.
- (6) To analyze the centrality of the concept of Nirvana.
- (7) To capture the changing nature of the ideas of Nirvana in Theravada Buddhism
- (8) To document the historical context in which the concept of Nirvana acquired different meanings.
- (9) To document Burmese popular perception of Nirvana.

Hypothesis of Study

The hypothesis of the proposed study as follows:

- (1). Theravada Buddhism is the authentic version of the Buddhism as it has preserved the teachings of the Buddha without distortion and deviation.
- (2). The spiritual and philosophical teachings of the Buddha are carefully preserved and practiced by Theravada Buddhism.
- (4). The concept of Nirvana has been of the core doctrines of Buddhism which has not been explored extensively by academic studies.
- (5)Theravada Buddhism involves a distinctive form of Nirvana as a doctrine and concept.
- (6). The concept of Nirvana evolved and acquired different meanings in the due course of time.
- (7). There exists multiple opinions on the nature of Nirvana among various schools of Buddhism.
- (8). Burmese society defines its own version of Nirvana inspired by Theravada Buddhism.

Methodology of Study

The main objective of this study is to document the historical and evolutionary trajectory of Theravada Buddhism with particular reference to the concept of Nirvana. The phenomenon of Nirvana as an important component of Buddhist thought and practice has been the centrality of this topic. Since this study mainly deals with Nirvana as a theological concept the source material has obviously been drawn mainly from the Buddhist literature preserved in the form of teachings and commentaries by the Buddha himself and subsequent Buddhist teachers. To explore the doctrinal position of Nirvana the sources that are translated from Pali to English have been consulted. These sources throw light on various dimension of Nirvana. Besides this, Buddhist texts and commentaries translated from Burmese language to English are also been used to document the version of Nirvana that the Buddhism in Myanmar has evolved and practiced. This study essentially aims at exploring and understanding the category of nirvana as evolved as a discourse in the writings and commentaries of Buddhist literature.

In order to evolve conceptual framework, attempt has been made to consult several books and articles not only to gain access to theoretical inputs but also for information on various aspects of Nirvana as a philosophical issue. By using both primary and secondary sources, this study attempts to explore and document the category of nirvana from various perspectives such as linguistic, philosophical, sociological, theological and spiritual. In short this study is an attempt to evolve a framework to explore the multiple meanings of the concept of Nirvana and its changing relevance from historical perspective.

Conceptual Framework of Study

This study aims to capture the multiple perceptions and meanings of Nirvana represented in the canon of Buddhism from the Buddha to subsequent Buddhist

teachers. The concept of Nirvana has never been a static phenomenon. Originally propounded by the Buddha as one of the important component of his Dhamma travelled long way and acquired several meanings in due course of time. The main thrust of this study is to track the theological and historical trajectory of phenomenon of Nirvana however with particular reference to Theravada Buddhism.

Capturing the evolutionary trajectory of Nirvana is indeed a difficult task as it is a concept mainly discussed and dwelt at philosophical and theological level. On account of this fact, mention and engagement with the phenomenon of Nirvana was mainly by the celebrated Buddhist teachers. Hence, study of Nirvana can effectively be conducted by the discourse analysis method which enables us to capture the evolutionary trajectory of Nirvana and its historical context.

The method of Buddhist Hermeneutic is used to explore the contextual and complicated meaning of Nirvana. This method is combined with discourse analysis mainly proposed by Mitchell Foucault which enable us to explore the how regimes of truths are constructed by multiple discourses emerges in historical contexts. The combination both Buddhist Hermeneutics and discourse analysis is combined by historical narrative method to construct a picture the Nirvana as a conceptual domain that evolved in the history of Theravada Buddhism.

Review of Literature

Buddhism is one of the established religions of the world. Even though it originated in India, but mainly flourished in south East Asia. Particularly South the Theravada form of Buddhism emerged as main religion in Sri Lanka and Myanmar.¹ The fact however is that Buddhism with its rich religious heritage and formidable philosophical

¹Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby, (ed), Religions of South Asia: An Introduction, Rutledge, London, 2006.

disposition remained as an enigma to academia and public life as well. Particularly Buddhist philosophy became a sought after domain in the academic circles.

Buddhism as religion, philosophy and practice had attracted the attention of academia and general public. The fact is that Buddhism has been represented as one of the global religions which had rich philosophical tradition.² At the same time, Theravada form of Buddhism gained prominence as one of authentic Buddhist traditions that still exist.³ This tradition considered to be not only authentic but also consist of rich philosophical legacy. This study mainly confine to exploration into doctrinal study with particular reference to the concept of Nirvana.

The area of Buddhist philosophy broadly deals with doctrinal position of Buddhism as a religion and value system. Besides this, Buddhism has also been perceived as a science which liberates human beings with path of meditation and enlightenment.⁴ Buddhist Philosophy also represented as a spiritual domain that allowed rationalist thought to coexist.⁵ At the same time the philosophy and belief system of Theravada Buddhism attracted the attention of scholars.⁶

While exploring spiritual and philosophical aspects of Buddhism, scholars mainly focused on meditation as a means to follow the true Buddhist tradition.⁷ The non violence as a value advocated by the Buddha also explored by studies as represented it as great virtue inculcated by the Buddha.⁸ The domain of morality is

² Gerald L. Berry, *Religions of the World*, Branes & Noble, New York, 1954.

³ *Essays on the History and Buddhism of Burma*, Edinburgh, 1988.

⁴ Robert Wright, *Why Buddhism is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2017.

⁵ Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as a Philosophy: An Introduction*, Hackett, London, 2007.

⁶ Kate Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity and Identity*, Welly Blackwell, London, 2013.

⁷ Lorry Rosenberg, *Breath by Breath: The liberating Practice of Insight Meditation*, Shambhala, 2004.

⁸ Kenneth Kraft, *Inner Peace and World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Non-violence*, Sunny Press, 1992.

perceived as ultimate message of Buddhist teaching and philosophy.⁹ The notion of compassion towards fellow human beings and all living beings as well has also been documented by studies.¹⁰ Among several aspects these are some of the aspects dwelt by studies on Buddhist philosophy. In spite constituting a core doctrinal position, the concept of Nirvana has not received adequate attention of scholars as a conceptual category.

Apparently we do have studies on the concept of Nirvana and various aspects of it. These studies can broadly be classified into two categories. Firstly studies represent Nirvana as means to attain enlightenment by following teachings of Buddha and secondly, studies documenting Theravada Buddhist perspective of Nirvana. Let us see the first category of books on Nirvana. It has been proposed that Buddhism has immensely contributed for advancement of civilisations in several Asian countries and especially the concept of Nirvana exercised deep impact on the ethical life of Asian people.¹¹ Among the teachings of Buddhism the path of Nirvana has occupied very special place. It has been proposed that the path of Nirvana laid down the foundations for moral life among the followed of Buddhism.¹²

The concept of Nirvana has deeply attracted the attention of western scholars. There have been several commentaries on the nature of Nirvana offered by western scholars. The broad agreement among them is that Nirvana is a path for complete liberation of human existence.¹³ Practicing Buddhism, it has been proposed that can

⁹ Christopher W. Gowans, *Buddhist Moral Philosophy: An Introduction*, Rutledge, London, 2014.

¹⁰ Jeffery Hopkins, *Cultivating Compassion: A Buddhist Perspective*, Broadway, 2001.

¹¹ L.M. Joshi, *Aspects of Buddhism in Indian History*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1973.

¹² NaradaMahathera, *The Buddha and his Teachings*, Colombo, 1980.

¹³ Richard Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvana and its Western Interpreters*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1963.

only be possible by the path laid down by the way of Nirvana. Thus Nirvana has been perceived as a complicated path to be followed to realise the Buddha Dhamma.¹⁴

The second category of studies deal with the concept of Nirvana is mainly from studies on Theravada Buddhism. It has often claimed that Theravada Buddhism represent the original and authentic version of teachings of Buddhism. Naturally the concept of Nirvana that was evolved by the Buddha also preserved in Theravada Buddhism. Central importance has been given in the doctrines of Theravada Buddhism to the concept of Nirvana.¹⁵ It has been believed that the true Buddhist life is needed to be devoted to practicing Dhamma and prepare himself/herself for attaining the path of Nirvana.

As a country which has been practicing Theravada Buddhism, Myanmar has evolved its own version of the ideas of Nirvana with strict adherence to the original teachings of the Buddha. The concept of Nirvana has received the serious attention in the circles of Buddhist sangha in Myanmar.¹⁶ Nirvana as an ideal and authentic way of preparation of human life for ultimate liberation propagated among Buddhists in general and monks in particular. On account of this, the idea of Nirvana has occupied an important place in Buddhist society of Myanmar.¹⁷ The concept of nirvana some studies claims that is the centrality of the teachings of the Buddha.¹⁸ The occupation of Theravada Buddhism with the ideas of Nirvana and several aspects associated with it went to such an extent that a comprehensive manual has been prepared which is expected to be a guide for practitioners of Buddhism.¹⁹

¹⁴RadhikaAbeysekera, *Practicing the Dhamma with a View to Nibbana*, New York Buddhist Vihara, New York, 1993.

¹⁵MahasiSayadaw, *A Discourse to Nibbana via Noble Eightfold Path*, Rangoon, 1980.

¹⁶ Robert Lawson Slater, *Paradox and Nirvana: A Study of Religious Ultimates with Special Reference to Burmese Buddhism*, University of Chicago, Illinois, 1951.

¹⁷ E.J. Thomas, *The Road to Nirvana: A Selection of Buddhist Scriptures Translated from The Pali*, John Murray, London, 1950.

¹⁸MahasiSayadaw, *Nibbanapatisamyutta Kata or the on the Nature of Nibbana*, Rangoon, 1981.

¹⁹LediSayadaw, *A Manuel of Nibbana*, Government of Myanmar, Rangoon, 2004.

Apparently the concept Nirvana has been one of the important doctrinal aspects of Buddhism in general and Theravada Buddhism in particular. It has been perceived as a way to life and achieve ultimate object of Buddhist life i.e. liberation. Buddhology which is a study of Buddhist philosophy, history and religious practices mainly focus on doctrinal aspects such as ethical living, compassion, moral being, etc. The concept of Nirvana has received less attention in comparison with other doctrinal aspects. However, we do have several commentaries, discourse and manuals on Nirvana and various aspects related to it.

Having reviewed some of the important studies that are dealing with Nirvana as a phenomenon and important doctrinal aspect, this study attempts highlights the following points which are not being adequately covered in the existing studies: a comparative analysis of the concept of Nirvana from various schools of Buddhism: to explore the changing nature of Nirvana as a concept and doctrine: to capture the concept of Nirvana in the theological history of Theravada Buddhism and essential features of it. The main ambition of this study is to document the multiple versions of Nirvana and its changing nature of meaning in the history of Myanmar.

A brief note on Chapters of Study

In order to capture the discourse on Nirvana in Buddhism in general and Theravada Buddhism in particular, this study has been organised into four chapters. The following section narrates the brief note on chapters of the study.

The first chapter entitled introduction proposes the schematic and thematic structure of this study. This chapter has been organised into the following sections: introduction of study, context of the study, objective of study, hypothesis of study, methodology of study, review of literature and note on chapters of study. The main objective of this chapter is to propose a thematic picture of this study.

The second chapter entitled ‘Evolution of Buddhism with particular reference to Theravada Buddhism’ focus on the evolutionary trajectory of doctrinal position of Buddhism that has evolved with passage of history. In this process attention has been given to evolution of Theravada Buddhism and its doctrinal position. This exercise has been narrated with the help of Buddhist council popularly known as sangitis which were held in different parts of Asia in different time periods. It was with the help of these councils a attempt has been made in this chapter capture the evolution of Buddhist doctrines and its preservation and dissemination in India and Myanmar.

The third chapter entitled ‘The concept of Nirvana as a ‘doctrine’ in Theravada Buddhism’ designed and narrated to capture the meaning and essence of the phenomenon of Nirvana with particular reference to doctrine of Theravada Buddhism. The main objective of this chapter is to document the evolutionary trajectory of the concept of Nirvana from the Buddha to the recent times at one level and documentation of multiple meanings of Nirvana as concept at another level. This chapter also attempts to analyse the concept of Nirvana in Buddhist that has been believed and practiced in Buddhism in Myanmar.

The forth chapter entitled ‘Conclusion and findings’ documents the observations and findings on the topics. In a way this chapter also proposes the summery version of this study by the way of highlighting the significant findings.