

4. Death-free *nibbāna*

I believe that many of the incorrect ideas about *nibbāna* arise from the efforts of modern commentators to explain the epithets which the Buddha used to describe *nibbāna*. In the Pāṭaligāmiyavagga of the Udāna, for example, we read: *atthi bhikkhave ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ, no ce taṃ bhikkhave abhaviṣṣa ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ, na-y-idha jātassa bhūtassa katassa saṅkhatassa nissaraṇaṃ paññāyetha*.¹ Woodward translates,² “Monks, there is a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded. Monks, if that unborn, not-become, not-made, not-compounded were not, there would be apparent no escape from this here³ that is born, become, made, compounded”.⁴ A similar description is given by the Buddha in the Ariyapariyesana-sutta where he explains how, being himself liable to birth (*jāti*), ageing (*jarā*), decay (*vyādhi*), dying (*maraṇa*), sorrow (*soka*), stain (*saṅkilesa*), he won the *ajātaṃ ... ajaraṃ ... abyādhiṃ ... amataṃ ... asokaṃ ...* <218> *asaṅkiliṭṭhaṃ*, which is specifically designated *nibbāna*.⁵ Miss Horner translates, “I won the unborn ... the unageing ... the undecaying ... the undying ... the unsorrowing ... the stainless”.⁶

¹ Ud 80,23-81,1.

² Woodward, 1948, p. 98.

³ The second part of this passage should probably be translated “There would be apparent no escape for one who is born here, become, made, compounded”.

⁴ Masefield, strangely, states (1989, p. li) that the word *amata* occurs in this reference. It is not included at this point in the Pali Text Society’s edition of Ud, or any other edition I have consulted.

⁵ M I 167,9 foll.

⁶ Horner, 1954, p. 211.

The translations “undying” or “deathless” for *amata* are widespread. Harvey, for example, correctly states,¹ “One must therefore see *nibbāna* during life as a specific experience, in which the defilements are destroyed forever, and in which there is a temporary stopping of all conditioned states (Sn 732–79)”, and “During life or beyond death, *nibbāna* is the unconditioned cessation of all unsatisfactory, conditioned phenomena. During life, it is where these phenomena stop, followed by their recurrence in the arising of normal experiences of the world; once attained, this stopping can be returned to. Beyond death, it is where they stop for good”. To this, however, he adds, “Such a destruction of defilements is clearly a transcendent, timeless experience, for it is said to be ‘deathless’ (S V 8) and ‘unconditioned’ (S IV 362)”.

If we consider the translation of the terms in the Buddha’s statement in the Ariyapariyesana-sutta, in the form which I have just quoted, we can see that it produces a false opposition. We should have expected an opposition between *nibbāna* and *saṃsāra*, but the distinction between the translations “unborn” and “being liable to birth” seems to refer to the opposition between *nibbāna* and a being who is in *saṃsāra*. It would be interesting to know how much modern translators have been impressed by the logic of the Buddha’s statements, as they have translated them. They might well have wondered how the existence of something which is unborn, etc., provides release for someone who is born, etc. The solution to this problem is exactly the same as that which I have given elsewhere² to the problem of the word *amata*. It is clear that the epithets must refer, not to *nibbāna*, but to the conditions which pertain in *nibbāna*, which must be the opposite of those which pertain in *saṃsāra*. A later commentary upon the Dhp (quoted by Carter and Palihawadana³) seems to recognise this problem and gives the

¹ Harvey, 1990, p. 62.

² Norman, 1989B, p. 160.

³ Carter and Palihawadana, 1987, p. 431.

information that *nibbāna* is called “deathless” because “it itself is free from old age and death and because it destroys old age and death for the noble ones who have attained it”. Once we realise that these epithets must refer to the condition of those beings who have gained *nibbāna*, then we can see that the translation “immortality” for *amata* gives the wrong impression, because it implies that such beings live for ever, which, of course, is an untenable view in Buddhism.

<219> The translation “deathless” would be satisfactory as applied to *nibbāna* as long as this meant “where there is no death”, but that is not the usual meaning of the word in English. In such phrases as “deathless fame”, it means “fame which does not die”, and it is therefore the same as “immortal”. The CPD translates *amatapada*¹ as “the abode of immortality (*nibbāna*)”, but if it were correct to translate *amata* as “immortality”, then it would mean that those who gain *nibbāna* live for ever. I cannot see that there is any justification for this translation. In the case of the Buddha, it is not clear what its precise meaning might be after his *parinibbāna* at the time of his death, since there seems to be some incompatibility between dying and becoming immortal. Furthermore, since the Buddha’s aim was to gain release from the endless stream of existences in *saṃsāra*, we might doubt that he would wish to live for ever.

Although Masefield is correct when he says of *amata*, “The Deathless — or perhaps better the Death-free”, he nevertheless seems to be slightly off the mark when he goes on to state: “[It] thus signifies a place, *padam* (Vv I.16.8), and a place, moreover, which can be heard when, in the first Sermon, the Buddha fulfils his intention of sounding

¹ CPD, s.v. *amatapada*. Strangely enough, it translates *amata*, when used as an epithet of *pada* or *dhātu*, as “free from death, beyond the reach of death”. I do not understand why such different translations should be given for the compound and the uncompound form.

the Deathless-drum,¹ the roar of the timeless beyond. It is, of course, a synonym for *nibbāna*.² The “roar of the timeless beyond” is a fine piece of purple prose, but it is, unfortunately, inaccurate. The “deathless-drum” is nothing to do with a place which can be heard. What the phrase actually means is that the Buddha was going to make an announcement about *nibbāna*, the state where there was no death. He used the common imagery for one making an announcement, that of beating a drum in the streets, to attract attention, in the same way that a town-crier in England used to ring a bell. The common phrase is *bheriṃ carāpeti* “to cause the drum to wander about (the city), i.e. to proclaim”. “To beat the drum of the death-free”, therefore, means “to proclaim the death-free, the state where there is no death”.

It is such a misunderstanding of the meaning of the word *amata* which has led to the idea that *nibbāna* does not die, and is an eternal place, or undying place. I am not certain whether the early Pāli commentators were misled about this, or whether they knew the correct meaning of the word. The commentary on the <220> Dhammapada explains the compound *amatapada*: *amatapadan ti amataṃ vuccati nibbānaṃ; taṃ hi ajātattā na jīyyati na miyyati, tasmā amatan ti vuccati*.³ If this is to be translated “because of not being born, it (*nibbāna*) does not grow old and die” then it shows the commentary has misunderstood the word, because the same can be said of *saṃsāra*, and yet that is not called *ajāta* or *amata*. If, however, we take the verbs as impersonal and translate this as, “Because there is no birth there, there is no growing old

¹ *āhañhi amatadudrabhiṃ*, Sp 8,26 ≠ *āhañchaṃ amata- Dundubhiṃ*, M I 171,12. The phrase occurs as a split compound (*amatā vāditā bherī*) at Ap 75,26, which might misleadingly be translated “the deathless, or immortal, drum has been sounded”.

² Masefield, 1989, pp. 1–11.

³ Dh-p-a I 228,19–21. Carter and Palihawadana (1987, p. 110) translate: “*Nibbāna*, because of being unborn (i.e. without beginning), is not subject to decay and death. Hence it is called the Deathless.”

and dying," then we can see that the commentary has understood the situation.

We must remember that the Buddha was trying to gain release from *samsāra* with its endless series of rebirth, old age, death and rebirth, i.e. he was trying to find a state where there was no rebirth, and therefore no old age, and therefore no death leading to further rebirth. This is *nibbāna*, and it must therefore be the state¹ which does not have birth, or old age, or death. Taken literally, the epithets *amata* and *ajāta* as applied to *nibbāna* could be interpreted as compounds of the past participles with the negative prefix *a-*, making negative possessive (*bahuvrīhi*) compounds: "possessing nothing born", "possessing nothing dead". I would suggest, however, that the grammatical explanation of these epithets when they are applied to *nibbāna* to indicate the absence of birth and death is that they are based upon past participles which are being used as action nouns,² i.e. *jāta* = "being born, birth", *mata* = "dying, death",³ etc. From these action nouns, negative possessive adjectives are formed by prefixing *a-*: "(*nibbāna*) which has no birth, where there is no birth",⁴ "(*nibbāna*) which has no death, where there is no death".

If this analysis of the epithets is correct, it enables us to suggest translations which avoid the difficulties which are present in renderings such as "immortality", "unborn" and "uncreated". I have suggested that the correct translation for *amatapadaṃ* is "the state where there is no death", and we can translate the other epithets in a similar way: "where there is no birth" (*ajāta*), "where there is no old age" (*ajara*), "which is

¹ Or perhaps "non-state", as Warder (1963, p. 49 note 1) suggests.

² For other examples of this usage, see Norman, 1969, p. 129 (ad Th 36) and 1971, p. 115 (ad Thī 261).

³ e.g. *matam eyya*, M III 159,26; this is glossed *mareyya*, Ps IV 208,16.

⁴ cf. Stcherbatsky, 1927, p. 20 note 2: "The epithet [*amatapada*] means a place where there is no death ... ; it is likewise called a place where there is no birth".

not a place of rebirth" (*agati*),¹ <221> "where nothing has come into existence" (*abhūta*), "where there is nothing made" (*akata*).

The incorrect view that *nibbāna* is immortal seems to be supported by the epithet *akālika* which is sometimes ascribed to *nibbāna*,² and is often translated as "timeless" as in the passage from Harvey which I have just quoted. Since "timeless" can be taken in the sense of "unending" in English, this is taken by some as though it meant "immortal". If we see that *akālika* means "not connected with time, out of time", we can see that, as frequently in epithets ascribed to *nibbāna*, it is intended as an opposite to the epithets which can be applied to *saṃsāra*. The nature of *saṃsāra* is entirely linked to time; *saṃsāra* is essentially in time. To attain *nibbāna* is to be freed from the eternity of *saṃsāra*, to be freed from the passage of time; *nibbāna* is not connected with past, present or future.³

It is the opposition to the conditions which prevail in *saṃsāra* which explain the other epithets which are applied to *nibbāna*: it is *nicca*, *dhuva*, *sassata*, *avipariṇāmadhamma*⁴ "permanent, firm, eternal, not subject to development" because everything in *saṃsāra* is the opposite — *anicca*, *adhuva*, *asassata*, *vipariṇāmadhamma*. As a concept or abstraction, *nibbāna* is permanent, firm, eternal, not subject to development, because at any time in the *saṃsāra*, which is impermanent, unfirm, non-eternal, subject to development, it has been, is and will be possible to step out of time and attain *nibbāna*, which is always the same, unchanging.

¹ CPD (s.v. *agati* (1)), would seem to be off the mark with its translation "not coming, not admittance".

² A I 158,37 foll.

³ Mil 323,5-7.

⁴ Kv 121,3-4.

The most important of the various epithets of *nibbāna* is *asaṅkhata* “unconditioned”, for in Theravāda Buddhism *nibbāna* is the only thing which is spoken of as being *asaṅkhata*, and clearly it is correct in certain contexts to translate the word in that way. In the context with *amata*, *ajāta*, etc., however, I believe that a translation such as “without conditioned things, where there are no conditioned things” is correct. Perhaps one reason for the problem about the translation of this word is that *nibbāna* can be described by both meanings: it is unconditioned, because it is not the product of any part of the *paṭicca-samuppāda*, and it also has no conditioned things in it.