

## WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT?

By Ven. Dr. Medagama Vajirana

*Enlightenment or Nibbana is the ultimate goal to which all Buddhists aspire. "No man can explain 'enlightenment' to another, and the Buddha was no exception," says Nancy Wilson Ross, a noted Buddhist scholar. However, the Buddha discovered the means by which the fetters that bind man to the unrealities of human existence could be severed once and for all; he discovered a basic formula for the deliverance of humanity from samsara's painful grip – the Noble Eightfold Path. After he had attained enlightenment, he burst forth into a 'triumphant song of victory' –*

*'Many a house of life  
Hath held me – seeking ever him who wrought  
These prisons of the senses ....  
Sore was my ceaseless strife!  
But now  
Thou builder of this dwelling – Thou!  
I know Thee! Never shall thou build again  
These walls of pain ....  
Broken Thy house is, and the ridge-pole split.'*

*In the following article, Dr. Medagama Vajiranana, Director of the Buddhist Association and Principal of the Bhikkhu Teachers' College, Sri Lanka, gives a detailed and erudite viewpoint on 'enlightenment'.*

*Ed.*

The word we find in the texts for enlightenment is **Bodhi**. This means supreme knowledge of the true nature of life. It is penetrative wisdom. With this knowledge, Siddhartha Gotama comprehended life in its proper perspective and in as much found it was unsatisfactory by nature or Dukkha. Since he gained this penetrative wisdom or insight he was known as the **Enlightened One** or **Awakened One**.

His awakening to the **Truth** came about after six long years of austerities as a wandering ascetic in the valley of the Ganges in search of the Truth. He met many religious teachers, studied and followed their systems and methods giving himself up to rigorous practices. But he found them all to be in vain, disappointing and useless for gaining the wisdom he sought. He thus

abandoned them and followed his own method of moderation which is the **Middle way**.

One evening as he sat in meditation at the foot of a tree on the banks of the Neranjarā River he gained the insight into the problem he had struggled with for six years. This penetrative wisdom showed him the Truth of suffering, its arising, its cessation and the means of its cessation.

So what is this enlightenment? All literature states that it is knowledge of the supramundane or Supreme Wisdom and the like and a more detailed inquiry reveals this state to be **Not something**. Most of the descriptions of Nibbāna are couched in negative terms. It seems that the attainment of Nibbāna is the losing of some very deep-rooted concepts we have of ourselves. The danger is that in the midst of all our negative terms there is a real danger that the experience of Nibbāna may be misconstrued as something negative and hence undesirable. It is difficult for many Westerners to appreciate that the Goal of the Buddhist is to lose one's concept of the self. They cannot conceive of an experience of a happy state without a self, having been nurtured in a culture that raises individuality above all things.

Some definition at this point may help. According to the Buddhist dictionary, Nibbāna is Extinction, Absolute Extinction of that life-affirming will manifesting in Greed, Hate and Delusion .... Deliverance from all future rebirth, old age, disease and death, the Full Extinction of Defilements. The Buddha described it thus, "Verily there is an unborn, unoriginal, uncreated, unformed... if there were not these then escape (from them) would not be possible." A few positive terms may be helpful; it is knowledge, understanding, penetrative wisdom, the supreme knowledge or comprehension of the true nature of life. With this knowledge the Buddha comprehended life in its proper perspective in as much as it is unsatisfactory, full of conflict and pain.

Existentialism in modern psychology also accepts that existence is full of misery, sorrow, and pain. It admits that life is unsatisfactory, but it does not go further to explain how or why life is this way, much less offer remedy.

The Buddha realized with this supreme knowledge that the cause of this was selfish desire, self-centredness and egocentricity. The foundation of all misery is in the false view that "I am". In the Theravāda texts this is known as Ālaya and in Mahāyāna texts as Asraya. Both mean egocentricity.

Not only did the Buddha realise that the wrong idea of self was the cause of suffering but he comprehended that there was liberation, freedom from the ills

of life and emancipation from selfish desire. This comprehension is Enlightenment.

The Buddha further realised that there was an encouraging way to freedom from misery and selfishness and it promotes love, compassion and charity without discrimination; a way that encourages every individual to self-realisation by means of insight, moral, spiritual and intellectual perfection.

Enlightenment is an analytical knowledge which explains everything as conditionED and conditionING and reveals that everything is relative, interdependent and inter-connected; that nothing is absolute or independent of cause. This is the so-called doctrine of Conditioned Genesis or Dependent Origination (**Paticca samuppāda**) according to which, existence, its arising and its ceasing are realised. This realisation is what is meant by Enlightenment. With this realisation comes complete freedom from ego-consciousness, detached from ego-concept or Ālaya.

All of this philosophy sounds very monastic and seems to be the domain of only a few near-perfect beings. The texts, however, are full of descriptions of the attainment of Arahatsip and in many places in the texts the numbers of Arahats present at various places number many hundreds. The attainment of Nibbāna then is not a remote elitist heaven, it can be realised in this life, conditions permitting, by perseverance, effort and practice of the teaching of the Buddha. Moreover the attainment of Nibbāna is not restricted to monks living in seclusion and devoted to meditation. It can be achieved by the lay person as well, although the necessary conditions in lay life are not conducive to the purification of the mind and the practice of higher morality. Nevertheless a number of lay persons have achieved Nibbāna, the summum bonum of Buddhism, not least of who was King Suddhodana who attained Nibbāna on his death-bed, and the texts are overflowing with accounts of lay people who attained one of the four stages of sainthood.

The Goal at the end of the Path then, is not an ideal only, nor is it elitist, nor is it negative. When the fires of craving are quenched there remains a clear vision, seeing things directly, experiencing the world directly AS IT IS. One sees in proper perspective – YATHA BHUTAM – the nature of the world as being impermanent and soulless. Far from being depressed at the prospect, the Arahant is possessed of **PITI** or rapture, **PASSADDHI** or tranquility and **UPEKKHA** or equanimity, these being three of the seven factors of Enlightenment. Thus possessed he can make his way in life untouched by suffering. This surely is the Highest Blessing.

