

Cetovimutti

Liberation of mind

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Cetovimutti

Cetovimutti is a term of the Pāli language, which was used by the Buddha to describe the goal of his teachings.

Ceto means mind.

Vimutti means liberation.

The prefix 'vi' in the Pāli language means, diverse, or also special or profound. '*Mutti*' comes from the verb *muñcati* (*muccati*), which means to liberate, to release, to relieve, to let go, to give up, to abandon.

So one could say that liberation in this sense means that one abandons something.

What can one abandon? What prevents ultimate happiness, what makes unfree?

Unwholesome states of mind, also called mental defilements make unfree, because they cause unpleasant results. Therefore the liberation lies in overcoming unwholesome states of mind.

Unwholesome states of mind also include the view of an ,I'. This view is unwholesome, because it is the foundation for the appearance of other mental defilements, as ignorance, greed and hatred. The view of a compact ,I' is also unwholesome, because this ,I' does not exist in the ultimate sense.

The ,I', the idea of a compact personality, which we hold since beginningless time, makes us suffer repeatedly, it makes us frustrated and unhappy.

The liberation therefore lies in comprehending what this ,I' really is , to understand its non-existence completely and to see this. To do this we need to examine systematically what constitutes our life, what existence is in general. This path, the Buddha, a completely liberated human being, taught us.

If the liberation is to understand this ,I' fully, to overcome it, to abandon it, it is clear that liberation has nothing to do with the idea that everything is allowed, whatever and whenever one wants it, that one can do everything one wants and with a snap of the fingers gets everything what one wants.

The abandoning of the perception of an ,I' is not connected with aversion. It is a way of tolerance and acceptance (*sati*) towards all phenomena in body and mind, accompanied by a happy feeling and joy, a process of deep understanding. Happy feeling and joy arise only when one practices correctly.

The **final liberation of mind** is the complete overcoming of the three unwholesome roots craving (*lobha*), aversion (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). These three states of mind were called unwholesome or unskillful (*akusala*) roots by the Buddha, because they cause unpleasant results.

As the roots of a tree bring forth the fruits appropriately, those roots bring out unpleasant fruits. Only when these roots are completely overcome by insight (*vipassanā*), the mind is free, because the roots for unpleasant experiences have been overcome. This goal of the Buddhist teachings, overcoming unsatisfactory conditions (*dukkha*) without remainder, is the final awakening (arahatship).

The fruit experiences of an Arahāt are the liberation of mind in the highest sense. The fruit experiences have *Nibbāna*, the Peaceful, the Unconditioned as object.

This mental liberation is also identical with the liberation by wisdom (*paññāvimutti*). It is also called unlimited mental liberation (*appamāṇā cetovimutti*), mental liberation through nothingness (*ākiñcaññā cetovimutti*), signless liberation of mind (*animittā cetovimutti*) because it is free from craving, aversion and delusion. Because it is empty of these unwholesome states (*cetovimutti suññā rāgena, suññā dosena, suññā mohena*), it is also referred to as emptiness-mental liberation (*suññata cetovimutti*).

This mental liberation is also known as empty or signless because it has *Nibbāna* as object, and *Nibbāna* is free or empty of conditionally arisen phenomena and also empty of craving, aversion and delusion.

The liberation of mind of an Arahāt is also called unshakable, secure mental liberation (*akuppā cetovimutti*) by the Buddha.

He says, “*So this holy life, bhikkhus, does not have gain, honour, and renown for its benefit, or the attainment of virtue for its benefit, or the attainment of concentration for its benefit, or knowledge and vision for its benefit. But it is this unshakeable deliverance of mind (akuppā cetovimutti) that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood, and its end.*” MN 29.7

These are thus different names for the final liberation of mind.

They are names for arahatship. The mind of an Arahāt is finally liberated, and defilements can no longer occur.

The Buddha says of himself:

“I understand Nibbāna, and the path and way leading to Nibbāna. And I also understand how one who has entered this path will, by realising for himself with direct knowledge, here and now enter upon and abide in the deliverance of mind and deliverance by wisdom that are free from influxes with the destruction of the influxes.”

MN 12

“... attained to deliverance himself, he talks to the bhikkhus on the attainment of deliverance; attained to the knowledge and vision of deliverance himself, he talks to the bhikkhus on the attainment of the knowledge and vision of deliverance; he is one who advises, informs, instructs, urges, rouses, and gladdens his companions in the holy life’.

MN 24 Rathavinīta Sutta

But the Buddha speaks in his teachings also from a **temporary mental liberation**, which is not the ultimate, but ceases when the conditions for its appearance end.

This can be achieved by different stages of concentration.

In this sense of temporary mental liberation the Buddha speaks of unlimited mental liberation (*appamāṇā cetovimutti*), as the four immeasurables, which are:

- loving-kindness (*mettā*),
- compassion (*karunā*),
- sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and
- equanimity (*upekkhā*),

if they are developed for all beings, as to oneself without any restrictions.

He describes this state as

- abundant (*vipulo*)
- exalted (*mahaggato*)
- immeasurable (*appamāṇo*)
- without hostility (*avero*)
- without ill will (*abyāpajjo*).

The word *mahaggato* is used for mental absorption (*jhāna*). This mental liberation is therefore attained in mental absorptions in these states of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. Only when the mind is completely absorbed in the wish and the beings to which the wish is addressed, we can speak of a temporary mental liberation. Only these states of deep concentration can be maintained for long periods of time without other thoughts intervening. The mind is then released at this time, because craving, aversion and delusion cannot occur.

In this relative sense of spiritual liberation the Buddha talks also about the third immaterial attainment, the base of nothingness (3rd immaterial *jhāna*) as the liberation free of anything (*ākāṅkhaṇā cetovimutti*). This sphere has conceptual nothingness as an object, so it is free of any appendages. As long as the mind remains in this state it is freed from craving, aversion and delusion. This mental liberation is reversible, it only lasts as long as the mind dwells in this immaterial *jhāna*.

In the middle length collection of suttā in the sutta 'The Long Series of Questions and Answers' MN 43, these different types of liberation of the mind are distinguished.

There also the neither-painful-nor-pleasant liberation of the mind (*adukkhamasukha cetovimutti*) is mentioned. It is described with the standard description of the fourth finematerial *jhāna* (mental absorption, states of deep concentration and serenity). This mental liberation is described with 4 conditions which are: overcoming happiness and pain, the disappearance of joy and sorrow, pure mindfulness and equanimity. It is a state of sublime, subtle equanimity, but this is also only temporary. As long as the mind dwells in it, it is freed from all mental defilements.

In MN 25.9. the Buddha describes, how one can lose this temporary liberation of mind:

"... when they had lost their strength and energy, they lost their deliverance of mind; with the loss of their deliverance of mind, they returned to that same bait that Māra had laid down and those material things of the world."

In a state of deep mental tranquility (*samādhi*) the mind is free from all impurities. However, this is not the ultimate goal of the Buddha's teachings. The ultimate liberation can only be achieved through the development of wisdom (*paññā*) in *Vipassanā*-meditation. But the temporary liberation of mind through deep tranquility and concentration (*samādhi*) is a prerequisite for the development of liberating wisdom. In a state of deep mental calm the mind is completely one-pointed (*ekaggata*). Based on this state of mind profound understanding can arise and thereby the impurities can be cut off forever.

Only a mind, which is temporarily freed from mental impurities, as craving, aversion and ignorance, can see things as they really are. If the mind is not freed from these unwholesome states, the perception is influenced by them and clear comprehension and liberating wisdom cannot be developed.

As the empty liberation of mind (*suññata cetovimutti*) in the relative sense one also understands the liberation of mind by contemplation of emptiness of a personality in *Vipassanā*-meditation. This can only be seen in a longer state of *Vipassana-samādhi*. Only ultimate realities are perceived and thus the view of *anatta*, emptiness of a person, emptiness of 'I', can be realized. One can only speak about liberation of mind when unwholesome states of mind, rooted in craving, aversion and delusion, do not occur for a longer time. As long as the ultimate goal of the Dhamma, final

awakening, arahatship, is not achieved, also this condition is temporary. If the conditions for this state cease, the liberation of mind also ceases.

The Buddha also used another term for mental liberation, the Pāḷi term *vimokkha*. We find repeatedly an enumeration of eight kinds of liberation (*vimokkha*) in the Suttā.

These liberations are based on the practice of *jhānā* (mental absorptions) with *Kasiṇa*-objects.¹

For example in *Mahāsakuludāyi Sutta*, The Greater Discourse to Sakuludāyin, MN 77, the Buddha says:

- ”1. Possessed of material form, one sees forms: this is the first liberation.
2. Not perceiving form internally, one sees forms externally: this is the second liberation.
3. One is resolved only upon the beautiful: this is the third liberation.
4. With the complete surmounting of perceptions of form, with the disappearance of perceptions of sensory impact, with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that ‘space is infinite,’ one enters upon and abides in the base of infinite space: this is the fourth liberation.
5. By completely surmounting the base of infinite space, aware that ‘consciousness is infinite,’ one enters upon and abides in the base of infinite consciousness: this is the fifth liberation.
6. By completely surmounting the base of infinite consciousness, aware that ‘there is nothing,’ one enters upon and abides in the base of nothingness: this is the sixth liberation.
7. By completely surmounting the base of nothingness, one enters upon and abides in the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception: this is the seventh liberation.
8. By completely surmounting the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, one enters upon and abides in the cessation of perception and feeling: this is the eighth liberation.”

The eight deliverances or liberations (*vimokkha*) are liberations, which are based on each other. They lead to the cessation of perception and feeling (*nirodha samāpatti*). They lead temporarily and step by step to liberation of mental defilements (*kilesa*).

For the first exercise one takes up the colour of an internal part of the body after having seen this by concentration out of the 4th *jhāna* with the mind-eye. One takes up the yellow colour from the urine, the red colour from the blood etc.. With this colour as sign (*nimitta*) one practices the four finematerial colour-*kasiṇa-jhānā*.

For the second exercise one practices the four *kasiṇa-jhānā* based on an external object, for example with a coloured disk, with which one develops the *nimitta*. One can also take up the colour externally from the parts of the body of another being.

For the third exercise one takes a ‘beautiful’ object, for example a flower or a precious piece of cloth with the respective colour and develops based on this the *nimitta*. Like this it is explained in *Atthasālinī*, the commentary of the first *Abhidhamma*-book. The beauty is related to the beauty of the colour.

In *Paṭisambhidāmagga* this exercise is described in a different way. As the beautiful objects the 4 immeasurables (*Brahmavihārā*) are described.

Then, with overcoming these forms, the four immaterial *jhānā*, followed by the cessation of perception and feeling, are described. The latter is an attainment only non-returner and Arahats based on all eight *jhānā* and with these as objects for *vipassanā* practice, can attain.

In detail we find an explanation of 68 kinds of mental liberation in *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (The Path of Discrimination), a part of *Kuddhaka Nikāya*.

Beside the already mentioned kinds of liberation, the liberation by emptiness, the signless liberation, the desireless liberation, there are enumerated 68 further kinds of liberation.

¹ *Kasiṇa* are objects for samatha-meditation which we can find repeatedly in the discourses. There are four colours as white, yellow, red and black, as also the elements earth, water, fire, air in their conventional appearance, as also limited space and light.

The liberation by emptiness, the signless liberation, the desireless liberation are described there like this:

“What is liberation by voidness?

Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty place, considers thus: ‘This is void of a self or of what belongs to a self.’ He contrives no misinterpretation thereon, thus it is liberation by voidness. This is liberation by voidness.

What is liberation by signlessness?

Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty place, considers thus: ‘This is void of a self or of what belongs to a self.’ He contrives no sign thereon, thus it is liberation by signlessness. This is liberation by signlessness.

What is liberation by desirelessness?

Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty place, considers thus: ‘This is void of a self or of what belongs to a self.’ He contrives no desire thereon, thus it is liberation by desirelessness. This is liberation by desirelessness.”²

The further 68 liberations include as well final as also timely limited liberations, as for example:

- the liberation as emergence internally: the four mental absorptions,
- the liberation as emergence externally: the four immaterial attainments.
- the liberation as emergence in both ways: the four noble paths.

These are then described and categorized according to certain aspects as shakable and unshakable, mundane liberation and supramundane liberation, with influxes and without influxes etc..

“What ist occasional liberation?

The four jhanas and the four immaterial attainments. This occasional liberation.

What ist non-occasional liberation?

The four noble paths, the four fruits of asceticism an nibbana. This is non-occasional liberation.

What is assailable liberation?

The four jhanas and the four immaterial attainments. This assailable liberation.

What is unassailable liberation?

The four noble paths, the four fruits of asceticism an nibbana. This is unassailable liberation.

What is mundane liberation?

The four jhanas and the four immaterial attainments. This mundane liberation.

What is supramundane liberation?

The four noble paths, the four fruits of asceticism an nibbana. This is supramundane liberation.”³

² KN, Paṭisambhidāmaggo, 1. Paṭhamo paṇṇasako, 5. Vimokkhakathā

³ Ebd., § 213