# RECONSTRUCTING NIBBĀNA AS A SOCIAL IDEAL

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## I. Introduction: The Social Context of Buddhist Ideals

Many years ago I was struck by the following passage written by the late Venerable Walpola Rahula:

> Those who think that Buddhism is interested only in lofty ideals, high moral and philosophical thought, and that it ignores the social and economic welfare of people, are wrong. The Buddha was interested in the happiness of men....The Buddha did not take life out of the context of its social and economic background; he looked at it as a whole, in all its social, economic and political aspects.[1]

I think Venerable Rahula was profoundly right in saying this. The Buddha had no intention of founding a religious tradition that ignores or tries to escape from the social dimensions of human life. Quite the opposite is the case: human life, as the Buddha saw it, is so thoroughly social that even religious dimensions of meaning arise out of and impact the social context. But if we grant all this, then we should be quite confused by the treatment of Buddhist ideals at the hands of many, if not most, interpreters (East as well as West). Many scholars of Buddhism describe the highest

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[1] Ven. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught,* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1959) p. 81.

religious achievements in terms of social escapism or social apathy, as a "going beyond" social concerns.

This is particularly true of the descriptions one finds of the highest ideal in Buddhism, namely, *nibbāna* (more commonly known by its Sanskrit form: *nirvana*). Nibbāna is most often described as the solitary achievement of an individual who rises to a transcendental plane of blissful existence; a plane that is disconnected from, if not opposed to, the sphere of human social activity. Furthermore, these interpretations of nibbāna confirm a false stereotype of Buddhism as a kind of mysticism that turns its back on the natural and social worlds where people actually live. On my view, such treatments of nibbāna have done great harm to our understanding of Buddhist traditions and have formed a hindrance to the application of Buddhist ideals to contemporary social problems.

In this essay, I will argue against those interpretations of Buddhism which construe nibbāna as a mystical achievement of a higher plane of reality that transcends social affairs. Concisely expressed, my thesis is as follows:

> **Nibbāna, as conceived within early Buddhism, the Buddhism of the Pāli Nikāyas, is a radically transformed way of living *in this world*—a world that is largely *social* in meaning for human beings. Nibbāna is the fruit of living a life of heightened ethical engagement with the world, not an "other-worldly" withdrawal to a higher plane of existence. In short, nibbāna is a socially ideal way of living.**

On my view, it is a considerable distortion of Buddhism to interpret its highest goal as an escape into a mystical realm of transcendental being that ignores the concerns of humankind in this world. As I will argue here, *nibbāna* has everything to do with the perfection of human possibilities in this world and nothing to do with a transcendent reality (if there is such a reality—and I have serious doubts that there is any such thing). It is a strange irony, bordering on paradox, that all Buddhist scholars acknowledge that the Buddha warned against fruitless metaphysical speculation, but then many of these same scholars conceptualize the highest goal of Buddhism in terms of mystical or transcendental metaphysics. Of course, some of the

disagreement among scholars may simply be over semantics. "Transcendence" is a philosophically loaded word. And it is surely the case that nibbāna is "transcendent" in the sense of rising above normal unenlightened experience of the world—that is so by definition.

There are certain passages in the Canon–most famously a few lines from the Udāna—that seem to suggest to some scholars a metaphysically transcendental interpretation of nibbāna. Those lines read that nibbāna is "unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned."[2] The use of such passages will be discussed further below. However, in this essay I will be arguing that nibbāna is *psychological* transcendence (or better yet, to avoid misunderstanding, "psychological transformation"), a radical change in the mind or experience of the person, rather than a transcendent reality. In particular, it is the interpretation of nibbāna as metaphysically transcendent —that nibbāna removes a person from the natural and social worlds—that I object to. Far from being a transcendent reality in the metaphysical sense, I will try to show that nibbāna is best understood as the perfection of living in and by means of the social dimensions of human life—very much a "this-worldly" phenomenon, if we allow that even an enlightened person lives in *this* world of dynamic change.

The thesis of the essay has important practical implications. The widely held interpretation of nibbāna as a metaphysically transcendent and antisocial goal of the religious life flies directly in the face of recent movements to give Buddhism a social direction—what is commonly referred to as "engaged Buddhism." If nibbāna is given a metaphysically transcendent interpretation, it is hard to see why a Buddhist would have any concern for the social, economic, political, and environmental dimensions of human life, since the goal would be an attempt to escape all of these. Is showing compassion and kindness toward another human being just a stepping stone to escape from the social plane of existence? Isn't the social dimension of human existence the only place where compassion and kindness seem possible? To argue for a conception of nibbāna that undermines or dispenses with Buddhism's most cherished values seems difficult to accept

[2] *Udāna* 8:3/80.

*prima facie*. "Engaged Buddhism" would be an oxymoron if transcendence of the social dimensions of life were the right conception of Buddhism's highest ideal. So one significant implication of this essay is that a socially reconstructed conception of nibbāna (based as it is on the early canonical literature) supports the contemporary practices of engaged Buddhism.

One further point needs to be made by way of setting the context of this essay. The essay is meant to be an exercise in *philosophy*, rather than in intellectual history. What I mean is that I am not making the strictly historical claim that the Buddha held precisely the interpretation of nibbāna I argue for in this essay. The canonical literature allows for a range of possible interpretations of nibbāna. And we can never know for certain which interpretation comes closest to the Buddha's own view of the matter. So, from the point of view of intellectual history, the conception of nibbāna will always be underdetermined by the textual evidence. But this is no reason not to reconstruct a conception of nibbāna that is textually viable and adds something valuable to our current philosophical discussions. Therein, I believe, lies the difference between intellectual history and philosophy. The philosopher aims not at a definitive interpretation of what the Buddha himself thought, but fashions out of the viable interpretations (always remaining faithful to the texts) a reconstructed understanding of a doctrine or concept that can be put to best use in contemporary philosophical discourse. To suggest that such a philosophical approach is illegitimate would be like saying that we have no right to use an ancient cutting tool for our contemporary purposes, no matter how useful it is to us now, simply because we don't exactly know how the ancients themselves used the tool. In just this way, I justify the following attempt to reconstruct nibbāna for our contemporary philosophical purposes.

## II. Revisiting the basic understanding of "nibbāna" from the Pāli texts

Despite nibbāna's central place within the Buddhist tradition, scholarly accounts of nibbāna remain widely divergent on key issues. For this reason, it is useful to start with a brief review of what is relatively uncontroversial about the term—and what should be familiar to anyone who has studied early Buddhism.

As a religious goal, nibbāna is the aim of both the Buddhist layperson and the *bhikkhu*, although there are many Buddhists in South and Southeast Asia who believe it is beyond the reach of any but the most spiritually advanced *bhikkhu*. The word "nibbāna" has a Sanskrit etymology which means "to blow out", such as blowing out a flame. It is also commonly thought that the flame referred to is the flame of desire, of craving, that keeps a person bound to an unsatisfactory existence (*dukkha*).[3] The *Saṃyutta Nikāya* relates that nibbāna is "the complete fading away and extinction of craving [for a permanent self and sensual pleasures], its forsaking and giving up, liberation and detachment from it."[4] At another place in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, it is referred to as "the extinction of greed, hatred and delusion."[3] In other words, nibbāna is described in the Pāli texts as a state of moral purification based on the elimination of the defiling characteristics of the mind. The canonical sources indicate that nibbāna is synonymous with "liberation," "peace," "calm" (literally "cooled" (*sītibhūta*)), and "tranquility." It is often used to refer to freedom, a state of stability, a state without fear, and a state of stable happiness. On these points, most scholars seem to agree. It is important to note further that none of these terms requires a *metaphysically* transcendent interpretation.

## III. Some Common Misinterpretations of Nibbāna

From various scholarly discussions of nibbāna I have created a list of six common misinterpretations of the term/concept. These misinterpretations do not form one theory of nibbāna, but they do sometimes overlap. Nibbāna is said to be:

1. a transcendent metaphysical reality, an absolute, behind or above the mundane, changing world

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[3] The fire image associated with nibbāna derives from the Buddha's famous third sermon, "The Fire Sermon" (*Vinaya* 1. 34-35), in which the Buddha relates that everything in unenlightened human experience is on fire. See Richard Gombrich's *What the Buddha Thought* (London: Equinox, 2009, p. 111ff) for further elaboration of the centrality of fire as a metaphor in early Buddhism.

[4] *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 4. 251.

2. a higher kind of knowledge or mystical intuition of the absolute
3. ineffable, beyond any form of conceptualization or logical thinking
4. the extinction of life, an escape from the cycle of suffering which is equivalent to annihilation
5. an "other-worldly" or "life denying" goal—e.g., Heinz Bechert writes that it is a "release *from* the world"[5]
6. an individual attainment that has neither social dimensions nor social ramifications—e.g., Max Weber wrote that for Buddhism "Salvation is an absolutely personal performance of the self-reliant individual."[6]

Before taking a closer look at a social reconstruction of nibbāna, let me briefly set aside the more obvious misinterpretations among these six chracterizations. Most scholars agree that nibbāna is not the extinction of *the person* but only the extinction of *the flames of craving* that corrupt a person's character and lead to suffering—thus the fourth interpretation is fairly easy to eliminate. But one of the main reasons many scholars consider *nibbāna* as a world-denying, anti-social, ideal is the interpretation of it as a mystical and metaphysical concept, as the achievement of a transcendental reality. As a first response, I would argue that such an interpretation seems to not only defy the prevailing spirit of Pāli Buddhism, but also misrepresents the scriptural record. As I mentioned earlier, the distinguishing feature of Pāli Buddhism is its avoidance of speculative metaphysics and its attempt to demystify the spiritual life. This is clearly seen in the Buddha's refusal to commit himself to the metaphysically speculative positions taken up by his contemporaries.[7] For example, he refused to speculate about such matters as the creation of the world, the finitude of the world, and about the state of a Buddha after death. The

[5] Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, *The World of Buddhism* (London: Thames Hudson, 1991).

[6] Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (New Delhi: Munshram Manoharlal, Ltd., 2000).

[7] See for example, the "Discourse to Vacchagotta on Fire" *Majjima Nikāya* 1. 483-488.

enlightenment experience of the Buddha was never formulated in the Pāli Nikāyas as consisting of an insight into an underlying, transcendent, reality. That would be the Brahmanism of the Upanishads, not Buddhism. The insight that was the catalyst for the Buddha's enlightenment consisted in his realization that this world of change *is reality* (or at least it is our human reality, which amounts to the same thing in early Buddhism). Thus, at least as far as the Pāli Nikāyas are concerned, nibbāna does not refer to a kind of reality, nor to a higher mode of knowledge (even such as the supersensory modes of knowledge, called *abhiññā)* nor to a meditative trance (such as the *jhānas*).

## IV. Reconstructing nibbāna from the Pāli sources

The first thing to keep in mind, if I read the early suttas right, is that *nibbāna* is the solution to the fundamental human problem: the unsatisfactoriness of life (*dukkha*) on psychological and religious levels. The samsaric cycle of life, death, and rebirth as it is described in the twelvefold formula of dependent arising (*paticcasamuppāda*) is the proper context in which to consider nibbāna. The Buddha's diagnosis of the human condition affirmed that an unenlightened person is afflicted by the fires of passion, of selfishness, and that these could be traced to the defilements of greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*).

In response to such corruptions of the human personality, the Buddha offers a spiritual therapy that takes a psychological form. He recommends a radical transformation of mental attitudes and dispositions that is aimed at eliminating lust, hatred, and delusion. In the texts we read: "The removal of desire and passion for pleasant things, seen, heard or cognized, is the sure path for the realization of nibbāna."[8] The Buddha outlined a specific regimen for accomplishing this, namely, the threefold training (*tisikkhā*): moral conduct (*sīlā*), mental concentration (*samādhi*), and the development of wisdom (*paññā*). Nibbāna, in this context, stands for the freedom that is attainable by a person here and now from unsatisfactory conditions by

[8] *Sutta Nipāta* 1086.

eliminating the causes. The moral and psychological transformation of the individual is tantamount to a total elimination of unwholesome mental traits and the cultivation of wholesome mental traits

The Pāli Canon has numerous passages supportive of this conception of nibbāna, for example:

> Herein, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu is a worthy one who has destroyed the defiling impulses, lived the [higher] life, done what has to be done, laid aside the burden, achieved the noble goal, destroyed the fetters of existence, and is freed through wisdom. He retains his five senses, through which, as they are not yet destroyed, he experiences pleasant and unpleasant sensations and feels pleasure and pain. His cessation of craving, hatred, and confusion is nibbāna in this life.[9]

In the *Sutta Nipāta* we also find a description of the state of mind of the person who has achieved nibbāna; such a person is "unshaken when hit by the vicissitudes of life, griefless, attachmentless and secure."[10] Such passages demonstrate that nibbāna is a radical change in lived experience, not the extinction of life or the achievement of a plane of existence different from this very world of change. It is a radical transformation of the total person—one begins to live and experience nibbānically. I suggest that it might clear matters up quite a bit, if we turn nibbāna from a noun into an adverb. So nibbāna may aptly be described as the ideal *quality* of life lived by a freed person (an *arahant*). Thus the difference between the person who has achieved nibbāna and the normal person is not a difference in reality, but a difference in the way reality is perceived and its effects on the person's actions and character.

I fully recognize that there are passages in the Pāli Canon that seem to offer a different interpretation of nibbāna. Bhikkhu Bodhi, for example, puts great emphasis on these few passages. In the introduction to his translation of the *Majjhima-Nikāya*, he writes that "the more sophisticated

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[9] *Itivuttaka* 38.

[10] *Sutta Nipāta* 268.

view that Nibbāna is merely the destruction of the defilements... cannot hold up under scrutiny."[11] He cites the aforementioned Udāna passage as conclusive evidence of the fact that nibbāna is a transcendent or supramundane reality that is much more than a kind of moral perfection that can be achieved in natural human existence.

I had the good fortune to discuss just these matters with Bhikkhu Bodhi at his hermitage in Sri Lanka some years ago. Although I remain very careful about disagreements I have with a *bhikkhu* over the understanding of *Dhamma*, I think that one must understand nibbāna in the broader context of the Buddha's life and teachings instead of basing one's interpretation of such a critical concept so narrowly on a few isolated passages of the Canon. In broad terms, the Buddha attempted to demystify religious experience and he taught that the search for a mysterious reality behind the changing world (as in Brahmanism) is a mistake. The religious quest is not transcendental insight, but ethical and psychological transformation that makes living in this world free from suffering, and by so doing greatly amplifies the meanings in a person's life. Thus, I think it prudent to try to reconcile any philosophical interpretation of nibbāna with these central themes rather than to give so much weight to one or two passages that seem to go against the grain of the teachings.

## V. Nibbāna as a Social Ideal

With these preliminary points about nibbāna in mind, let us now turn to my central thesis: that nibbāna should be viewed as intrinsically connected to the social dimensions of human life. The case for this view rests on a consilience of three themes: the life of the Buddha, nibbāna as the perfected practice of moral conduct, and the social impact of nibbānic living.

### A. The Life of the Buddha: A Life of Social Involvement

My first point of reference is the life of the Buddha himself—a fairly

[11] Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, translators, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995) p. 31.

obvious starting point, one might assume, but one very often passed over by scholars. Despite doubts that we could ever construct a complete account of the life of the Buddha from the early sources, it is reasonable to say that the Buddha lived a fairly long life beyond his enlightenment experience and that he concerned himself with the welfare of others. In other words, rather than retiring completely from society, he lived a life of social involvement. It seems reasonable to me, therefore, that the Buddha's life ranks highly as a basis for reconstructing nibbāna as a social ideal. More boldly, I would argue that where interpretations of the textual and doctrinal materials conflict, a reference to the life of the Buddha is a reasonable way to try to determine the stronger position.

Because many interpreters take nibbāna to be a kind of spiritual insight, they view the Buddha's flash of insight under the Bo tree as his nibbāna. I disagree with this interpretation. I would rather suggest that the insight at the time of the Buddha's awakening, his profound understanding of dependent arising, was the **catalyst** for a nibbānic life. The forty-five years of the Buddha's ministry that followed his experience under the Bo tree was his nibbāna. Following this suggestion, we see just how socially-engaged nibbāna can be. The Buddha's life was one of service, of profound involvement with the social and political struggles of his time. The canonical texts are clear about this: the Buddha is depicted as stopping wars, attending to the sick, advising the distraught. In short, the Buddha's life stands for compassionate living and self-emptying service—his life is a textbook on socially-engaged action.

The goal of Buddhism is to live the best possible human life—even a perfected life. But all human life is an unfolding, a developing process of actions and undergoings in the broader context of experience—it is protracted over time and space. Living is not contained in a small slice of time, no matter how intense that slice might be—for example the moment of the Buddha's awakening under the Bo tree. The best possible human life is still the lived experience in this world of change. From a Buddhist perspective, humans are existentially bound to such world, and it seems almost too obvious to ask "where else is one going to go?" And, if nibbāna is the term for what the Buddha saw as the quality of the best possible human life, then it is the way that he lived his life that provides the best

model for our understanding of nibbāna—and that life was profoundly social.

The life of the Buddha offers an opportunity to reflect on one further aspect of nibbāna—the statement found in many places in the common that call nibbāna "deathless." Surely, the promise of nibbaña is not the promise of immortality, since the Buddha himself obviously did not escape death. But that is what the interpreters who regard nibbāna as transcendent seem to hint at. And it seems to be what frightened mortals who turn to religion want to hear. But if nibbāna isn't the promise of immortality—there would have to be an ātman or a soul or a psyche for that, and we know that such things are utterly rejected by the Buddha—then what can it mean to say the nibbāna is deathless? I suggest that nibbāna is "deathless" in the sense that the enlightened person is no longer terrorized by death; that the realization that one is mortal can be looked square in the eye, not ignored and avoided as we usually do, and fearlessly see our existence and our inevitable decease for exactly what they are. In short, nibbāna is deathless because, in nibbānic experience, death is no longer a source of suffering.

**B. Nibbāna as Practice of Moral Conduct**

While training in moral conduct (*sīlā*) is one of the prerequisites for higher achievements on the religious path, moral conduct should not be construed as merely a means to an end, but also as an intrinsic part of the nibbānic life. That nibbāna and the moral path are intrinsically connected is clearly indicated by the following passage from the *Dīgha Nikāya:*

> Again, the Exalted One has well-explained to his disciples the moral practice (*patipadā*) leading to nibbāna, and they coalesce, nibbāna and moral practice, just as the waters of the Ganges and the Yamuna coalesce and flow on together.[12]

Here we see that it is a misinterpretation of nibbāna to think of it as the *result* of the threefold training (moral conduct, mental culture, and wisdom/insight). If my interpretation of nibbāna being more of an adverb

[12] *Dīgha Nikāya* 2. 223.

than a noun seems reasonable, then it must be the case that nibbāna *just **is*** the skillful practice of the threefold training, not some result outside of them—and if that is right, then in the case of moral conduct (especially) the social dimension is essential—notably, the Buddha in the *Discourse to the Layman Sigāla* shows that the moral duties of the layperson are built out the reciprocal relationships between people in a social context (e.g., between husband and wife, child and parents, student and teacher, and between friends). Please note that I am not denying the obvious point that nibbāna is an individual achievement. It seems clear the Buddha taught that each of us must work out our own salvation as the Buddha famously said in his parting words to the *bhikkhus*.[13] But there's no reason to think that this implies a kind of hyper-individualism that denies the social dimension of human life—after all, the Buddha recognized that each individual personality is at least partly a social construct.[14]

The nibbānic life of an *arahant* or a Buddha manifests at its core the highest achievements of moral conduct. In Pāli Buddhism these are called the *brahmāviharas;* they are: compassion (*karunā*), loving kindness (*mettā*), sympathetic joy (*mudithā*), and equanimity (*upekhā*). We should note that the first three of these moral ideals requires involvement with other people. They simply cannot be divorced from a social context. For instance, loving kindness requires another person or being to be lovingly kind towards. The practice of the *brahmāviharas*, therefore, is a kind of self-emptying service to others. I say "self-emptying" because quite literally they are a means of undoing the selfishness and attachment that are the very source of human existential problems. The highest ideals of Buddhism thus involve a profound commitment to the welfare of other people—this is a key *social* dimension to all Buddhist ethics.

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[13] *Dīgha Nikāya* 2.156.

[14] In the "*Discourse to the Layman Sigāla*" one's social relations are critical to the advancement of moral conduct—or consider the Sangha, where community life is not a mere aggregation of entirely distinct individuals, but a social context in which the fullness of our individuality is achieved in seeking common purpose.

Very often scholars refer to the description of nibbāna as "*lokuttara*" to defend a transcendental interpretation of the term. "Lokuttara" is typically translated as "transcendental" or "beyond the world." But in the context of Pāli Buddhism, the freed person stands "***above*** the world" in an *ethical* sense, rather than "***beyond*** the world" in a transcendental sense. An arahant is one who cannot be touched by the barbs of lust, hatred and delusions, and thus he or she stands above the moral tangles of the world, while at the same time living *in* the world. In common parlance we might say that the arahant is "in" the world but not "of" it. Thus, *lokuttara* is surely a metaphor, and probably a metaphor that has an ethical, rather than a metaphysical, meaning. Buddhist scholars who are familiar with the canonical literature—and certainly anyone who is familiar with the Oxford scholar Richard Gombrich's account of the Pāli texts—know that metaphors abound in the suttas. Just like one might say to a friend that seeking revenge is "**beneath**" him/her, or one might say that one is not "**above**" swearing. Now, we know for sure that the arahants are not hovering above the earth in outer space. So the only issue seems to be whether the metaphor should be taken metaphysically or ethically. The whole tenor of early Buddhism is to shift away from the metaphysical to the ethical, therefore I see no reason not to understand the meaning of *lokuttara* as an ethical metaphor for rising above a morally tainted existence.

In the texts we commonly see the metaphor "crossed over" or "gone to the other shore" used to describe nibbāna. But this must be taken as having an ethical rather than a metaphysical or transcendental meaning. In the *Sutta Nipāta* the Buddha made this explicit: "those who are mindful have attained the tranquility of complete nibbāna in this very life...they have crossed over *attachment* to this world."[15] Note also that the lotus, the Buddhist symbol of transcendence, still has its roots in the mud; it thrives in the murky pond, and at the same time remains pristine in its purity.

I certainly do not want to leave the reader with the impression that the interpretation of nibbāna as a mystical state of consciousness has no support at all in the Pāli Canon. After all, the texts do not present an

[15] *Sutta Nipāta* 1087.

entirely consistent view of any of the major Buddhist doctrines. But very often when such purportedly mystical descriptions of nibbāna do occur, they are at the end of a long passage that recounts the progressive achievement of the *four jhānas* (higher meditative states). I am really not sure what to make of these passages, because the canonical sources unambiguously say that nibbāna is not a *jhāna*, and that nibbāna can be achieved without the *jhānas*. What is clear from the Pāli Nikāyas is that the mental development represented by the *jhānas* should follow mastery of moral conduct (*sīlā*), for without moral conduct, one might misuse such powers of mental concentration.

I would like to make one last point regarding my claim that nibbānic living is intrinsically moral living and thereby social. If I am right to argue that nibbāna derives from the social contexts of human life, then we should consider the Sangha more than a temporary waystation for religious development. The Sangha was instituted by the Buddha to provide a practical social context for religious life—in other words, the Sangha *is* the religious life in practice, rather than a mere social platform for reaching beyond the social realm.

### C. The Social Impact of Nibbānic Living

As the Pāli scriptures suggest, the bulk of human suffering has roots in both social and psychological conditions. The Buddha emphasized the reciprocity between moral ills in the individual and social ills. Needless to say it remains true today that immoral actions often have social roots: violence, war, drug addiction, alcoholism, etc., are but a few glaring examples of social evils of the contemporary world. According to the Buddhist analysis, the egofulness that is the root of immorality derives from misguided social values—the need to be an important somebody to others, the social pressures to be a self.

In this context, nibbāna as moral practice is the elimination of these social pressures, hence it is the removal of some of those causes from which unwholesome acts derive. As the Sri Lankan scholar, P.D. Premasiri, put it, "if it is agreed that human depravity, consisting of unchecked greed and hatred fed by ignorance, is the universal cause of social conflict and moral

evil, then one cannot deny the social relevance of the Buddhist concept of the supreme goal of *nibbāna.*"[16]

From the perspective of the Pāli scriptures, a person who is overcome by lust, hatred, and delusion has the tendency to commit deeds which cause suffering to oneself and others as well as to encourage others also to behave in improper ways. The social theory presented in the Pāli canon—especially in the *Vinaya* and the discourses on society and kingship in the *Dīgha Nikāya*—stresses over and over again that social conflict can be eliminated in society only to the extent that people transform their minds both ethically and spiritually. So, nibbāna is not only the cure of socially induced ills for an individual, but once nibbāna has been achieved by an individual, that person has a positive moral effect on broader society; in other words, the *nibbānic* life also promotes the creation and maintenance of a righteous social order. According to the Buddha, the arahant who is free from sensuous intoxication and negligent behavior, established in patience and gentle demeanor, one who is restrained from evil, having cultivated peace and tranquility within him/herself plays a vital role in society, and gives it moral direction and guidance.

I conclude by reiterating my earlier statement, that to interpret nibbāna, the ultimate goal of Buddhism, as lacking social dimension is to grossly misrepresent it. I am not claiming, of course, that my bolder thesis—that nibbāna is essentially social in nature—is the only position that is supported by the Pāli texts. But I do think that this interpretation has the best fit within the wider understanding of essential Buddhist doctrines and has a further pragmatic justification in terms of serving as a foundation for engaged Buddhist practice. According to Buddhism, a morally good person, a person whose mind is free from lust, hatred and delusion will feel social concern and will do what is right as a matter of course. If this is true, then from a Buddhist perspective the proper basis for socially committed action is spiritual development, ideally, nibbāna.

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[16] P.D. Premasiri, "The Social Relevance of the Nibbāna Ideal" in *Buddhist Thought and Ritual*, edited by David Kalupahana (New York: Paragon House, 1991) p. 51.

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