



# From the Origin of Nirvana to the Meaning of Emptiness

## 從「涅槃」的來源 談《壇經》中的「空」

A Talk Given by Angela Morelli  
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DRBU recently started a new semester. This semester, the course I am taking is the Sixth Patriarch's *Platform Sutra*. The discussion of the week was *Prajna* – the second chapter of the Sutra, in which the Sixth Patriarch says,

Good and Wise Friends, *Maha-prajnaparamita* is a Sanskrit phrase which means “great wisdom that goes to the other shore.”

By “the other shore”, he is referring to nirvana, which means “this shore” that we are on right now is samsara.

The concept of nirvana to me is very abstract. Sometimes I'd hear an eastern cultured person describe someone who passed away by saying so and so entered nirvana, in that case, it is a euphemism for death; and sometimes I'll hear a western cultured person describe something as extremely blissful and carefree as nirvana. But in Buddhism, nirvana is the result of the highest state of cultivation.

Until one day I encountered the original meaning of the word nirvana and how the Buddha used it as an analogy to teach others. Suddenly the word nirvana became a much more vivid teaching. In the Pali Canon, there are records of Brahmins who went to the Buddha to inquire about the nature and the goal of his teaching. And the Buddha responded with the analogy of nirvana - fire extinguished.

Which means nirvana was an existing concept for these people at that time. A concept which belongs to a bigger concept that we should not take

最近法大開學，我選修了《六祖壇經》這門課，這個星期我們討論「般若」。《六祖壇經》第二章〈般若品〉六祖大師講到：

善知識，摩訶般若波羅蜜是梵語，此言大智慧到彼岸。

其中彼岸指的就是涅槃，我們所在的此岸指的就是六道輪迴。

「涅槃」這個概念，對我來說非常的抽象。有時，聽到東方文化背景的人講某人入涅槃了——這個情況下，涅槃是死亡婉轉的講法；有時也會聽到西方文化背景的人說，無憂無慮的經歷就像涅槃一樣。而在佛教中，涅槃指的是修行者最究竟的境界。

直到有一個機會，我讀到了涅槃的原始義理，以及佛陀如何用它來做譬喻教導當時的人。頓時，「涅槃」這個名詞被賦予了生動鮮明的意義。南傳經典中，收錄了婆羅門請問佛陀關於他教義的性質以及其

for granted but should rather look into it – the concept of fire. The word nirvana literally means to blow fire out, to extinguish. Then for the Brahmans who asked the questions, what does it mean to them for fire to be extinguished?

In modern times, the way we understand the extinguishment of fire is that it is gone, disappeared, annihilated. If we were to understand Nirvana according to the analogy then it would be a nihilistic state. I would guess if the Buddha were to speak to people like us, he would not have used the analogy of nirvana – fire being extinguished. However, for people in India at that time fire was a totally mythic phenomenon.

Fire in their culture is both a natural phenomenon (called Agni) and the god who is also called Agni. The *Shurangama Mantra*, for example, mentions this god Agni in multiple places. The god Agni, when not manifested, exists as a potency inherent in Nature. When he manifests, he attaches to fuels and appears as fire. When fire is extinguished, he does not die but merely goes back to a latent form of existence that pervades everywhere.

The Buddha used this cultural concept to explain this goal of cultivation. Just like fire extinguished, one is unattached, no longer consumes fuel nor suffers from the burning *dukkha*.

In fact, in the *Adittapariyaya Sutta* - The Fire Sermon, the Buddha described the uncultivated human existence as such:

Monks, the All is aflame. Which All is aflame?

The eye is aflame. Forms are aflame. Eye-consciousness is aflame. Eye-contact is aflame. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on eye-contact, experienced as pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain, that too is aflame. Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion. Aflame, I tell you, with birth, aging, and death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs.

*The Buddha used this cultural concept to explain this goal of cultivation. Just like fire extinguished, one is unattached, no longer consumes fuel nor suffers from the burning dukka.*

因佛陀就用當時文化中的這個概念來解釋修行的目的。就像火滅去一樣，不附著、不取用任何的燃料，也不再受燃燒的痛苦。

The ear is aflame. Sounds are aflame...The nose is aflame. Aromas are aflame...The tongue is aflame. Flavors are aflame...The body is aflame. Tactile sensations are aflame...The intellect is aflame. Ideas are aflame. Intellect-consciousness is aflame. Intellect-contact is aflame. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on intellect-contact, experienced

最終目的，佛陀用涅槃——火熄滅——做為比喻來答覆。

這表示當時的印度社會已經有「涅槃」的概念，且涵義較為廣泛——是一個跟「火」有關的概念。對於火的概念，與其認為當時社會與現代的認知一樣，不如仔細研究一下當時印度人是怎樣看待「火」的。涅槃的本意，就是把火吹熄滅。那麼對於提問的那些婆羅門來說，熄滅的火意味著什麼呢？

在現代人來看，火滅了就代表火消失了、沒有了。基於這種認知，涅槃對現在人而言就是一種斷滅的狀態。我猜想如果生在這個時代，佛陀應該不會用這個比喻介紹涅槃。但對於印度當時的人們來說，火是非常神聖的象徵。

當時的社會文化中，火既是自然現象，又是無所不在的神明。祂的名字叫「阿耆尼」，〈楞嚴咒〉中也有提到。這個神明在自然界中無處不在，一旦遇著可燃物，就會依附在燃料上而現出火來。火滅了以後，阿耆尼並沒有消失，而是再回到無所不在的潛伏狀態。

因此，佛陀就用當時文化中的這個概念來解釋修行的目的。就像火滅去一樣，不附著、不取用任何的燃料，也不再受燃燒的痛苦。實際上，就像佛陀在《火燃經》中描寫凡夫的生存狀態時講到：

比丘們，這一切在燃燒。哪一切在燃燒？眼在燃燒，形色在燃燒，眼識在燃燒，眼觸在燃燒，凡依賴於眼觸而升起者——樂、痛、不樂不痛之體驗——也在燃燒。燃起為何？燃起了欲望之火、瞋意之火，與癡迷之火。我告訴你們，燃起了生、老、死，燃起了憂、哀、痛、悲、慘。

耳在燃燒，聲音在燃燒……。鼻在燃燒，氣息在燃燒……。舌在燃燒，味感在燃燒……。身在燃燒，觸感在燃燒……。意在燃燒，觀念在燃燒，意識在燃燒，意觸在燃燒，凡依賴於意識接觸而升起者——樂、痛、不樂不痛之體驗——也在燃燒。燃起為何？燃起了欲望之火、瞋意之火，與癡迷之火。我告訴你們，燃起了生、老、死，燃起了憂、哀、痛、悲、慘。

但是佛陀這位大覺者並沒有追隨這個概念，反而是將這個概念翻轉過來，超越世俗一般的認知。佛陀沒有說涅槃就像火神阿耆尼一樣，而是將涅槃定義為出世的解脫，佛陀要修行人脫離對「有」的執

as pleasure, pain or neither pleasure nor pain, that too is aflame. Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion. Aflame, I tell you, with birth, aging, and death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs.

However, being brilliant as the Buddha, he did not just follow the analogy, but rather turned it around and transcended the cultural understanding. He did not say one would be like the god Agni, but rather, the Nirvana defined by the Buddha transcends the worldly concepts. In that way, the Buddha pulls cultivators away from attaching to “existence.” Because the state of Nirvana contains everything and is apart from all marks, it cannot be described as a certain thing that exists. One can only describe what Nirvana is not, but cannot fully describe what it is.

Similarly, the Sixth Patriarch described emptiness in the *Sixth Patriarch's Platform Sutra* in the following way:

...vast and far-reaching; like empty space, it has no boundaries. It is neither square nor round, large nor small. Nor is it blue, yellow, red, or white. It has no above or below, no long or short. Moreover, it has no anger or joy, right or wrong, good or evil, beginning or end.

Therefore, one should pay attention when one thinks that he/she is experiencing a specific emptiness in cultivation. It is probably a mistake since the specific mark of emptiness shows it is not empty. It is more useful to cultivate prajna, not by cultivating a specific prajna, but rather, by getting rid of specific marks.

I'd like to share a few questions given during the *Platform Sutra* class; they are usually questions for us – follow the DRBU learning methodology – to develop our inherent wisdom, to look into the text directly and see what we see with our specific lens, and then examine whether these lenses are in line with what the Buddha's trying to teach. Ultimately, let go of the lenses and cultivate according to the text.

First question, “How does the sutra describe what emptiness is and is not?”

Next question, “According to the description of emptiness, why is it a goal of cultivation? What is the value of cultivating emptiness?”

Third question, “What is the common understanding of emptiness in our culture? How does this definition help or hinder our cultivation?”

I hope the Sutra investigation prompted by these questions will help everyone's cultivation! Amitufofo! ❀

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著。涅槃的境界即一切法，離一切相，因此無法描述它存在於哪個特定方所。我們只能從反面否定涅槃是一物，卻無法正面描述涅槃是何物。

異曲同工地，六祖大師在《壇經》裡面，講到關於「空性」的時候說到：

心量廣大猶如虛空，無有邊畔。亦無方圓大小。亦非青黃赤白。亦無上下長短。亦無瞋無喜。無是無非。無善無惡。無有頭尾。

所以，當你覺得修行證入了「某些、一定」的空性，這時候就要注意了，因為這「某些、一定」就證明還不是空，因為空無形相，不會有「某些、一定」。若是要修般若行，與其說修行般若，不如修祛除這個著相，還來得更有幫助。

接下來和大家分享幾個問題，這些是老師在《六祖壇經》課堂留給大家去思考的。按照法大主觀智能推動的教學方式，這些問題是要我們用自己的智慧去思惟經文的義理，然後看看自己所詮釋的內容，是否與佛陀的教導有所偏差。最終目的，就是要放下自我主觀意識，依教修行。

第一個問題：《六祖壇經》裡，描述「空性」是什麼？不是什麼？

第二個問題：根據對於「空性」的描述，為什麼空性是修行的一個目標？空性有什麼值得修行的價值？

第三個問題：對於「空性」，我們的文化中存在的普世認知是什麼？這樣的普世定義，對我們的修行有什麼樣的助益或是障礙？

希望經過仔細用心的思考，這些問題會對大家的修行有所幫助。阿彌陀佛！❀