

Nirvana in Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana Buddhism: A Comparative Philosophical Study

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Keywords— *Samsara, Nirvana, liberation, cessation of suffering, transcendental state, Majjhima Nikaya*

Received: 03 Jun 2026;

Received in revised form: 28 Jun 2026;

Accepted: 02 Jul 2026,

Published on: 05 Jul 2026

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Abstract— *This study examines the concept of Nirvana in Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana Buddhism through a qualitative comparative and interpretive approach. Using selected canonical and commentarial texts, including the Majjhima Nikaya, the Heart Sutra, and the Bardo Thodol, the paper analyzes how each tradition understands liberation, suffering, and ultimate reality. The findings indicate that Nirvana is consistently associated with the cessation of craving, ignorance, and suffering, but its interpretation differs across traditions. Theravada emphasizes the realization of non-self and the unconditioned state as the culmination of disciplined insight and ethical practice. Mahayana reinterprets Nirvana through the doctrine of emptiness and non-duality, highlighting the inseparability of Nirvana and samsara. Vajrayana builds on these ideas by presenting liberation as the recognition of awakened awareness through esoteric practice, symbolic methods, and transitional states. The study also considers contemporary reinterpretations of Nirvana in relation to mindfulness, psychological well-being, and interfaith discourse. Overall, the paper suggests that Nirvana is best understood as a dynamic and evolving concept shaped by doctrinal, experiential, and historical contexts. The comparative analysis contributes to a clearer understanding of Buddhist soteriology and its relevance in modern study.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Nirvana is one of the most important and enduring concepts in Buddhist philosophy. It refers to the cessation of suffering, craving, and ignorance, and it represents the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice (Conze). Although the term is common across Buddhist traditions, its interpretation varies significantly in Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana Buddhism. These differences reflect not only doctrinal diversity but also distinct philosophical and practical approaches to liberation (Bardo Thodol (Tibetan Book of the Dead), Vajrayana text on transitional states and liberation).

In Theravada Buddhism, Nirvana is often understood as the unconditioned state realized through ethical discipline, meditative concentration, and insight into the nature of

reality (G. Fronsdal, 2005). In Mahayana Buddhism, the concept is deepened through the doctrine of emptiness and the view that Nirvana and samsara are not ultimately separate (Nagarjuna). Vajrayana Buddhism extends these interpretations through esoteric methods, symbolic practice, and teachings on the transformative potential of awareness. Together, these traditions show that Nirvana is not a fixed or uniform doctrine, but a concept interpreted in multiple ways across Buddhist history (The large Prajnaparamita sutras., 1975).

This paper therefore examines Nirvana comparatively across Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions. It aims to identify both shared doctrinal foundations and major philosophical differences, while also considering how modern Buddhist thinkers have reinterpreted Nirvana

in contemporary contexts such as mindfulness, psychological well-being, and interfaith dialogue.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Nirvana occupies a central and contested position within Buddhist studies, functioning as soteriological endpoint, philosophical category, and lived ideal. Early Theravada sources frame nibbana primarily as the cessation of dukkha realized through disciplined practice (Shekhar, 2015). Canonical texts emphasize the abandonment of attachment to the five aggregates and the insight into anatta (nonself), portraying nirvana as the unconditioned (asankhata) that halts karmic becoming and the cycle of samsara. Scholarly treatments of these texts have oscillated between reading the unconditioned metaphysically and interpreting it as a purely negative soteriological category an absence of conditioned suffering rather than a positive ontological state prompting ongoing debate over the degree to which early Buddhism posits an ultimate reality (G. Fronsdal, 2005).

The Mahayana reconfiguration of liberation pivots on the doctrine of sunyata (emptiness). Key prajnaparamita sutras and concise formulations such as the heart sutra assert the lack of inherent existence across phenomena, and Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamakakarika* systematically elaborates this insight into a critique of substantialist metaphysics. Within this framework, the distinction between samsara and nirvana is undermined, liberation becomes an immediate, nondual realization that recognizes both suffering and its cessation as empty of intrinsic essence. This shift from a primarily negational soteriology to a nuanced nondual ontology has been read as expanding the ethical and engaged dimensions of Buddhist practice, since the ontological parity between world and liberation resituates awakening within everyday relationality rather than in withdrawal from it (Garfield, 1999).

Vajrayana and Tibetan traditions add methodological and phenomenological specificity through tantric soteriology. Tantric systems claim that enlightenment can be expedited by transforming ordinary experience via deity yoga, subtle body practices, and ritualized skillful means that reconfigure affective and cognitive structures (Hanh, 1991). Texts such as the *Bardo Thodol* foreground transitional states as critical sites of spiritual transformation, with the recognition of the clear light during the dying process presented as a unique opportunity for liberation. Scholarship here has two interrelated concerns: first, explicating how tantric praxis is theorized to operate on the level of cognition and affect; second, evaluating how esoteric claims (e.g., instantaneous realization, mind's luminous quality) relate to or diverge from earlier exegetical frameworks. Critical work often interrogates the textual and

contextual contingency of these doctrines, including debates about transmission, secrecy, and the normative authority of commentarial lineages (The large *Prajnaparamita sutras.*, 1975).

Internal philosophical debates within Mahayana most notably between Madhyamaka and Yogacara schools further complicate accounts of Nirvana. Madhyamaka, following Nagarjuna, emphasizes the ineffability of ultimate reality and treats Nirvana primarily as the negation of dualistic conceptuality; its method is deconstructive, exposing conceptual reification. Yogacara, by contrast, focuses on the mechanisms of consciousness, especially the *alayavijnana* (storehouse consciousness), proposing that enlightenment entails the purification and transformation of underlying cognitive strata such that their luminous, nondual nature becomes manifest (Nagarjuna). Comparative scholarship explores whether these are complementary hermeneutical tools, compatible descriptions of the same soteriological horizon or fundamentally divergent metaphysical positions. Recent interpreters have argued for methodological synthesis, suggesting that Madhyamaka's critique of reification and Yogacara's emphasis on transformation can be integrated into a more comprehensive account of cognitive and conceptual deconditioning (The *Samyutta Nikaya.*, 2000).

Contemporary reinterpretations constitute a distinct and rapidly expanding domain. Prominent modern teachers and public intellectuals along with the global mindfulness movement, have reframed aspects of Nirvana in accessible, often secularized idioms. This reconceptualization frequently emphasizes practical outcomes: psychological resilience, stress reduction, and ethical responsiveness, and treat contemplative practices as empirically tractable interventions (A translation of the *Majjhima Nikaya*). Interdisciplinary research linking contemplative studies with cognitive science, clinical psychology, and neuroscience has produced an empirical literature addressing attentional regulation, emotional processing, and wellbeing associated with meditation, yet scholars caution against conflating clinical benefits with classical soteriological claims (The *fundamental wisdom of the middle way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika.*, 1995). This secularization raises methodological and hermeneutical questions about fidelity to traditional doctrines, the risks of conceptual flattening, and the ethical implications of decontextualizing religious practices.

Across these traditions and scholarly approaches, persistent tensions remain. One core debate concerns the metaphysical status of Nirvana: is it best construed as a metaphysical absolute, a negative cessation, a nondual realization, or a transformational process. Another concerns the relationship

between doctrine and practice: how do philological accounts of scripture map onto lived contemplative techniques and phenomenological reports of awakening (Tarthang Tulku (Thondup), 1994). Finally, the translation of esoteric or metaphysical claims into empirical research programs presents methodological challenges about operationalization, validity, and cross-cultural hermeneutics.

To advance scholarly understanding, an integrative research agenda is warranted. This agenda should pair careful philological analysis with phenomenological study, comparative doctrinal work, and empirical investigation of meditative praxis, especially studies that respect traditional conceptual frameworks while employing rigorous, interdisciplinary methods. Such an approach can clarify Nirvana's doctrinal contours, illuminate the mechanisms by which contemplative practice effects psychological and cognitive transformation, and critically assess contemporary appropriations of Buddhist soteriology in secular domains (Nagarjuna).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative, and interpretative research paradigm to investigate the concept of Nirvana within the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions. To ensure academic transparency and rigor, the research is structured around the following criteria and analytical frameworks: The study draws from a purposive selection of primary canonical texts and authoritative philosophical commentaries.

These sources were selected based on their foundational role in defining the soteriological goals of each tradition: Theravada text Majjhima Nikaya (Pali Canon) is utilized for its foundational focus on meditative insight and the cessation of suffering. Mahayana text the Heart Sutra and Lotus Sutra are examined for their radical reinterpretation of reality through emptiness and non-duality. Vajrayana text the Bardo Thodol (Tibetan Book of the Dead) is used to analyze the esoteric mapping of transitional states and instantaneous liberation. The contemporary research incorporates the works of modern scholars to analyze the transition of Nirvana from a metaphysical goal to an experiential process.

Structured Comparison Framework To facilitate a systematic cross traditional analysis, the research evaluates these traditions through five central thematic pillars:

- The cessation of suffering (duḥkha-nirodha).
- The application of emptiness (sunyata).
- The realization of non-self (anatman).

The distinction between Nirvana with and without remainder.

The synergistic integration of compassion (karuṇa) and wisdom (prajna).

The research employs philosophical inquiry to examine the metaphysical and epistemological structures of Nirvana. This involves dialectical analysis specifically employing Nagarjuna's prasanga (reductio ad absurdum) method to scrutinize how different schools navigate the breakdown of dualistic mental constructs and conceptual proliferation (Prapanca).

Contemporary Contextualized Critique: Applying psychological and ethnographic lenses to explore the redefinition of Nirvana as a lived experience (Fields, 2002). This method allows for a synthesis between traditional transcendental states and their modern application as tools for personal growth, mental health, and interfaith dialogue. This multi-faceted approach provides a rigorous understanding of the doctrinal, experiential, and cultural relevance of Nirvana across varying historical and spiritual frameworks

The research findings, derived from the comparative analysis of canonical texts and modern scholarship, illustrate how Nirvana is interpreted across the five thematic pillars established in the methodology.

1. The Cessation of Suffering (duḥkha-nirodha) and non-self (anatta)

Theravada: The Majjhima Nikaya presents Nirvana (Pali: Nibbana) as a definitive phenomenological cessation of the fires of passion, aversion, and delusion. This is achieved through a methodological deconstruction of the five aggregates, leading to the realization of anatta (non-self). The practitioner, or Arhat, severs psychophysical continuity to reach an unconditioned (asankhata) state that stands entirely outside the causal webs of dependent origination (Shekhar, 2015).

Mahayana and Vajrayana: While both traditions agree that Nirvana is the extinction of craving and ignorance, they shift the focus away from a purely analytical deconstruction toward a non-dual realization of reality (Heart Sutra, Mahayana text emphasizing emptiness and non-duality).

Mahayana: Drawing on the Heart Sutra, the findings reveal a radical shift where Nirvana and Samsara are seen as ontologically indistinguishable. Through the lens of sunyata, all phenomena lack inherent existence; thus, Nirvana is not a distant refuge but an unmediated experience of reality free from conceptual proliferation (Prapanca).

Vajrayana: This tradition scales Mahayana dialectics by presenting Nirvana as the instantaneous recognition of the

mind's nature. It identifies liberation as the union of luminosity (prabhasvara) and emptiness (sunyata), where the Clear Light of Reality is revealed to be the primordial nature of consciousness (Nagarjuna).

Nirvana with and without Remainder

Findings confirm a bifurcated understanding of liberation: Nirvana with Remainder is a psychological shift and cessation of craving achieved during a lifetime, while Nirvana without Remainder is the total termination of psychophysical continuity at death (Nagarjuna).

The Integration of Compassion (karuṇa) and Wisdom (prajna)

The findings highlight a shift in the ideal figure of liberation. While the Theravada Arhat seeks individual liberation through discipline, the Mahayana Bodhisattva utilizes skillful means (Upaya) to remain active in the cycle of rebirth. This transformation shows that in later traditions, ultimate realization is co-extensive with universal compassionate engagement for all beings. The discussion synthesizes these findings through philosophical inquiry and a contemporary contextualized critique, addressing the tensions identified in the research (Williams, 2009).

Philosophical Inquiry: The Tension of Reality A central debate emerges regarding whether Nirvana is a final ontological cessation or an ever-present, non-dual reality. Using Nagarjuna's prasanga method, the research illustrates that Nirvana acts as an epistemic achievement, a cognitive shift in how reality is known rather than merely a metaphysical destination. Furthermore, the purification of the storehouse consciousness (alaya-vijnana) in the Yogacara school suggests that Nirvana emerges when dualistic splits are removed to reveal innate luminosity (Nagarjuna).

Contemporary Contextualized Critique: From Metaphysics to lived experience the research identifies a significant contemporary shift where Nirvana has transitioned from a remote metaphysical goal to a dynamic lived experience (Harvey, 1995).

Psychological Resilience: Modern figures scholars have reinterpreted traditional doctrines into tools for psychological resilience and inner peace. Mindfulness and meditation are now positioned as secular tools for mental health rather than just religious requirements (Sunandabod, 2024).

The Accessibility Gap: A critical tension exists between maintaining the philosophical integrity of ancient texts and increasing their accessibility for modern audiences. While the Theravada path may appear rigid and Mahayana and Vajrayana rituals may seem esoteric, the contemporary redefinition as an experiential awakening process allows

these doctrines to remain relevant in secular and interfaith dialogues.

Ultimately, the diversity of Buddhist metaphysics demonstrates that Nirvana is a mutable understanding of ultimate truth. Its lasting importance lies in its adaptability, serving simultaneously as a traditional spiritual target and a dynamic practice integrated into the daily lives of modern practitioners to address human suffering (Rahula, 1974).

IV. CONCLUSION

Nirvana serves as the ultimate soteriological ideal within Buddhist philosophy, representing the definitive cessation of craving, aversion, and ignorance, and the final transcendence of the cycle of samsara (Conze). While the foundational goal of ending suffering remains a unifying thread across all Buddhist vehicles, this research has demonstrated that the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions each construct a unique metaphysical and methodological architecture to define and achieve this state. The findings of this comparative study highlight a clear doctrinal evolution:

The Theravada tradition prioritizes individual moral discipline and a rigorous "methodological deconstruction" of the self to achieve the "unconditioned" state of the Arhat (Majjhima Nikaya, Theravada Pali Canon source on Nirvana and meditative insight). In contrast, Mahayana upends this analytical model by introducing the radical non-duality of sunyata (emptiness), where the goal shifts from individual escape to universal awakening driven by the compassionate work of the Bodhisattva (Nagarjuna).

Vajrayana further scales these concepts through an esoteric stream of ritual and symbolic action, transforming abstract metaphysics into a psychophysical methodology for the instantaneous recognition of the mind's primordial luminosity. The discussion reveals that Nirvana is not a static concept but a dynamic and mutable understanding of ultimate truth. A primary tension persists between viewing Nirvana as a final ontological cessation (classical Pali Canon) or an ever-present, non-dual reality (Madhyamaka school). However, the research illustrates that Nirvana is increasingly realized as an epistemic achievement, a fundamental shift in how one perceives reality rather than merely a distant metaphysical destination.

Furthermore, the analysis of contemporary relevance shows a significant shift toward viewing Nirvana as a dynamic awakening process. Through the work of modern thinkers, ancient doctrines have been successfully adapted for secular and interfaith audiences, positioning mindfulness and ethical living as vital tools for psychological resilience and "lived experience".

Ultimately, the diversity of Buddhist metaphysics proves that a singular, monolithic doctrine of Nirvana is impossible. Instead, its lasting importance lies in its adaptability and culturally contextualized integrity, continuing to provide a profound and relevant framework for understanding human consciousness and the cessation of suffering in both traditional and contemporary settings.

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