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Nirvāna is, doubtless, the most important concept in Buddhism. Of course, it is more than just a concept – it is a living reality that pervades everything. Although we often speak about it as something that we may attain in the future, even after death, it is important to remember that its presence is manifested to us every day in ways to which we are often oblivious.

The literal meaning of the word Nirvāna is ‘blown out’ or ‘extinguished’ as in the quenching of flames. In his famous Fire Sermon, the Buddha spoke of people ‘burning’ with the ‘fires’ of attachment, hatred and delusion. The attainment of Nirvāna, therefore, represents the dousing of the existential conflagrations that are the cause of our suffering in this world and unfavourable rebirth in the next.

Nirvāna is also the reality to which the Buddha attained in his Enlightenment. This was described by the Buddha as a realm of bliss, purity and peace – the complete fulfillment of all our deepest hopes and aspirations. In the Mahāyāna sūtras, it is taught that Nirvāna, also known as the Buddha-nature in its indwelling aspect, comprises our true self to which we awaken when our dark minds are vanquished.

In Shin Buddhism, Nirvāna is presented in more concrete terms as the ‘Pure Land’ of utmost bliss and happiness – a realm into which we are ‘born’ after we die. This is another way of referring to the attainment of Enlightenment. The Pure Land tradition also considers Amida Buddha as the dynamic and personal dimension of Nirvāna, reflecting its compassionate aspect in a form to which we can respond with entrusting hearts. The awakening of shinjin, which is, in fact, the arising of Amida Buddha as a spiritual force within our own minds, is also the activity of Nirvāna itself working towards making itself known to all sentient beings and carrying them to its liberating shores.

It is important, then, not to see Nirvāna as a static or abstract reality that is cold and remote. It is the very essence of life, love and beauty which reaches out to all of us in the irresistible forms of Amida Buddha and the Pure Land.