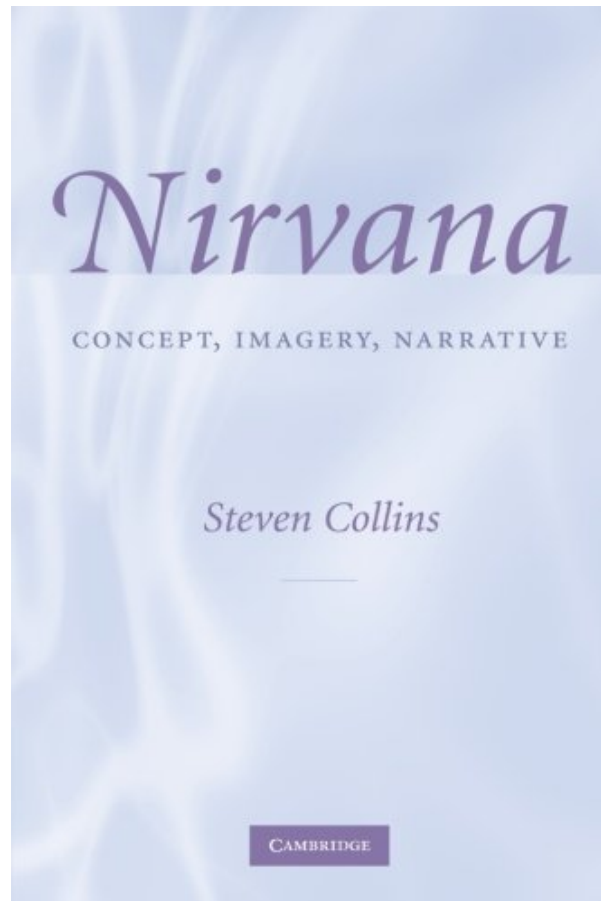


# **NIRVANA: CONCEPT, IMAGERY, NARRATIVE BY STEVEN COLLINS**



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# *Nirvana*

CONCEPT, IMAGERY, NARRATIVE

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'... an academically thorough and, I would dare to say, passionate exploration into a concept that invites description and evocation but is beyond both.' Buddhist Studies Review

'... for those whose main interest is in appreciating or teaching Collins's creative ways of engaging with the enigmatic yet fundamental Buddhist motif of nirvana, this new presentation of his work is really just perfect.' The Journal of Religion

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## About the Author

Steven Collins is Chester D. Tripp Professor in the Humanities at the University of Chicago. He is the author of *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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# **NIRVANA: CONCEPT, IMAGERY, NARRATIVE BY STEVEN COLLINS PDF**

The idea of nirvana (Pali nibbāna) is alluring but elusive for non-specialists and specialists alike. Offering his own interpretation of key texts, Steven Collins explains the idea in a new, accessible way - as a concept, as an image (metaphor), and as an element in the process of narrating both linear and cyclical time. Exploring nirvana from literary and philosophical perspectives, he argues that it has a specific role: to provide 'the sense of an ending' in both the systematic and the narrative thought of the Pali imaginaire. Translations from a number of texts, including some dealing with past and future Buddhas, enable the reader to access source material directly. This book will be essential reading for students of Buddhism, but will also have much to teach anyone concerned with Asia and its religions, or indeed anyone with an interest in the ideas of eternal life or timelessness.

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16 of 16 people found the following review helpful.

NOTE: Not a new book

By A reader

Readers should be aware that this is a new version of Part 1 of *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* in what the author hopes is a more accessible form for the general reader. This is stated clearly in the Introduction but is not noted in the amazon product description, unfortunately. Given that I already own the other title, I wish it had been made more clear.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Nirvana as concept, image and narrative

By Ed

In this book, *Nirvana: Concept, Imagery, Narrative*, Steven Collins pursues a number of approaches that a general reader could pursue in order to make sense of the Buddhist principle of nirvana. He does so by framing nirvana in categories familiar to the western mind.

Chapter one, "Systematic and Narrative Thought" is rather straight forward. Here Collins addresses the role nirvana plays in the capacity of systems and narratives. Both of these are abstract phenomenon construed by human intellection. In such a Buddhist system, Nirvana represents the goal towards which the practitioner works or perhaps the possibility of liberation from the system itself. This is, of course, problematic as such a term serves double duty as being both inside and outside the system. In the Buddhist narrative, Nirvana simply represents the end of the story. Collins here digresses on the concept of eternity, arguing that immortality is ultimately unsatisfactory and that Nirvana is essentially a superior form of death.

Chapter two, "Nirvana as Concept" addresses several points of Buddhist doctrine concerning nirvana, starting with karma and dependant origination. In his discussion on the difference between nirvana and parinirvana, Collins returns to his point from the preceding chapter on Nirvana as a superior form of death. He also makes the point that nirvana is both an acquisition (of wisdom and discernment) as well as cessation (of generating new karma and suffering). He also points out that in the *Abhidharma*, nirvana is explicitly defined as a dharma; a real, existent thing.

Lacking in this chapter, I found, was a discussion about the difference between a Buddha and Pratyekabuddha. That is, insufficient attention was given to the role of discriminative insight in Buddhist awakening. Next, perhaps merely a semantic complaint, Collins writes, "This chapter [Nirvana as a concept] has tried to articulate what Buddhist systematic thought says about the concept of nirvana. It is a real, external, and timeless Existent [dharma], not merely a concept..." (58). Why on earth would the conclusion of the chapter be contrary to the chapter title? Collins' purpose in this chapter is stated, "This issue is: how to find a way to understand nirvana from the external (etic) point of view that preserves the internal (emic) characterization of it, without simply restating what that is." (58-59) I can't help but wonder how the Buddha would have addressed this statement. Can nirvana qua concept and nirvana qua experience be reconciled? Any approach that attempts to reconcile such disparate views would be certainly problematic.

Chapter three, "Nirvana as Image" begins with a very interesting philological investigation into nirvana and parinirvana which is quite informative and interesting. The chapter moves on to the image or symbol of the cessation of ordinary consciousness and then to the image of various states of happiness. It concludes with some classic images or metaphors of nirvana; quenching fire, ocean, dry land (other shore), and the city of nirvana.

Chapter four, "Nirvana, Time, and Narrative" looks again at how nirvana concludes our understanding of time. Collins defined nirvana as a point in which the narrative imagination must stop. Furthermore, he writes

that "in narrated time, nirvana offers meaningful closure to life whereas death is often seen as a(n often tragic) breaking-off of life." The rest of the chapter is devoted to articulating many examples of ideas of nirvana and its role in terminating the various methods of telling the Buddhist story; 1.) end of stories or sermons, 2.) climax of series of epithets, synonyms and sections in a text, 3.) Climax of a list of meditative states, 4.) Aspiration for the audience at the end of a text, 5.) aspiration at the end of a sermon, 6.) aspiration for authors/redactors.

Chapter five, "Past and Future Buddhas" addresses the relationship between Buddhas prior to the historical Buddha and Buddhas yet to come. I personally found this to be the least engaging and least interesting chapter of the book.

Overall, Collin's project is to demonstrate how that in "Buddhism, the ineffable is brought into being as an aspect of the effable." (185), but I'm not entirely sure this was accomplished. I continuously return to the "explanatory gap" of the philosophy of mind between theory and experience. What more can one do but suggest that these two perspectives are correlated? Ultimately, their relationship is of ultimate concern for Buddhism. The very notion of discriminatory insight, to me, suggests the bridging of this gap where one can both experience reality as it is and make a meaningful utterance about it from the perspective of discriminative wisdom. This aspect of nirvana seems entirely lacking in this book. The conversation addressing non-dualism and the following experience is direly missing.

This work strikes me as an attempt to force Buddhism into western categories so that the average western reader can find a place for nirvana within their worldview in the capacity of either a concept, imagery or narrative. But what of experience? This perspective is simply insufficiently addressed. The historical Buddha said little or nothing about nirvana, presumably because nirvana qua experience is simply not a concept, image or narrative.

Finally, a word on Collins' resources. I found many of his references to muddle an already complicated subject. These references further demonstrate the agenda and approach of Collins. Although Collins cites the usual cast of characters in Buddhist studies, the following are a list of other sources, all of which I know little or nothing about. Caroline Walker Bynum, Jacques Le Goff, Hubert and Mauss, Jim Egge, Clifford Geertz, Thomas Mann, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, Jerome Bruner, E.M. Forster, Hayden White, Robert Thornton, Bernard Williams, Zygmunt Bauman, Jorge Luis Borges, MacDannell and Lang, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, F.H. Brabant, Eric Griffiths, Marcel Proust, Arthur Hallam, Mircea Eliade, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Barbara Adam, Edmund Leach, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Paul Ricoeur, Ernst Gellner, Frank Ramsey. Personally, I found these references to alienate me from the text. Although Collins says the book is for the "general reader," these references suggest otherwise and suggest his methodological biases.

Overall, not too shabby of a book. It helped me turn my attention away from philosophy and towards a social study of Buddhism. If one is studying Buddhism outside of the capacity of philosophy or meditation, this book will surely be of tremendous help. This book simply seems to me to be focused on Buddhism as a social religious phenomenon.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

A clear and engaging the on Self and Salvation in Buddhist thought

By Amazon Customer

I have read several books by Steven Collins and greatly enjoyed them all. His close reading of Buddhist texts is fascinating, especially in his earlier "Selfless Persons" Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism in which he deals with Theravada Buddhist categories of thought around the concept of personhood. I also highly recommend a related multi-disciplinary collection called "The Category of the

Person" The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History edited by Carrithers, Collins and Lukes and featuring essays on personhood by these three and also Marcel Mauss, Ernest Gellner, Charles Taylor and Derek Parfitt, among others.

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