

# *Nibbāna*(1 of 5) Introduction – Synonyms for *Nibbāna*

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**Gil Fronsdal**

My warm greetings to all of you again. I'm happy to be back here this Monday for the 7 a.m. sitting with you all to share the Dharma and the practice with you. The topic for this week is going to be *nibbāna*. *Nibbāna* is the Pali word for “*nirvana*,” the Sanskrit word. This topic is pretty central to the teachings of the Buddha. One of the stated goals of the practice is to attain *nibbāna*. But we have to look carefully at what this means and what the experience is like.

First of all the word “*nibbāna*” is a metaphor. After the time of the Buddha, perhaps it became more of a technical word, but the Buddha used the word as a metaphor with a variety of different meanings. So we'll look at the meanings of this word together for five days, like a path that unfolds day by day as hopefully we build on the teachings each day to go further on this topic.

*Nibbāna* is a topic that I think I avoided teaching for many years. I had a somewhat ambivalent relationship with using the word “*nibbāna*” or “nirvana.” This was partly because it can be a confusing topic. It lends itself to some kind of idea of a transcendent goal that's kind of apart from daily life. Often there can be a lot of conceit about who has or doesn't have the experience of *nibbāna*. A lot of confusion, a lot of comparative thinking, and a lot of striving can come with it, so it just seemed better not to talk about it.

But in recent years I seem to have changed my mind a little and now I think we shouldn't shy away from it. It's an important part of tradition, it's an important part of our potential and maybe we can talk about *nibbāna* in a way that prevents some of the downsides of talking about it.

One of the tensions in the history I had with the word “*nibbāna*” was that there were two general ways of

emphasizing the practice. Some of my teachers would emphasize that in some way or other the practice was just about being fully present for our experience without any concern for a goal. If we start talking about enlightenment or *nibbāna*, then we are beginning to talk about something that is not here but rather, somewhere else in the future. It is a potential. If we're leaning into the future we miss the experience here. The point was to just be present for this experience in a full, very deeply, unconditionally accepting way – just *this* experience.

Other teachers emphasized that there is something very different than just being here, which is *nibbāna*, liberation – the deep release and freedom that's possible. Sometimes this was presented as an experience you can have.

So how do these two different kinds of approaches work together? One way is a little saying that the fastest way or maybe the most effective way of getting from A to B is to be fully in A. So yes, there is a goal, but the way to attain the goal of *nibbāna* is not to lean into the future or strive, but to settle in with unconditional acceptance of this moment just as it is. Comfortable or uncomfortable, pleasant or unpleasant, wonderful gardens or bears and wilderness – it doesn't really matter. What matters is the practice that allows you to settle into how it is now – *this* is what it is. Let's be mindful and present here.

Sometimes, however, just being mindful of the present with no goal leaves some people with not enough incentive, imagination, or direction for how fully it's possible to be unconditionally here. *Nibbāna* is the fullest potential of what it's like to be fully here and present.

I'd like to give you another metaphor from my own experience. About eight years ago when my son was 13 or 14, we were on vacation and I did something that I'd never done before in my life because my son was interested in this. We went golfing. We rented the golf clubs and golf balls and walked out on the green. We did some practice putting before we got onto the proper golf course. I was going to go first at the first tee (I think it's called – the first place where you begin at the first hole).

I put the tee into the ground, put the little white golf ball on top of it, and chose the club that you use for hitting the first good whack that's supposed to send the ball far. I got myself all set and ready to swing. This was a time to be really present and mindful. I was right there and present, and it felt nice. It felt good to be engaged, to be in that posture the best I could under the blue sky on the green grass with forests nearby. It was quite lovely to just be there for that experience and to be

involved in the task of focusing on the activity of swinging and hitting the ball.

I was present, concentrated, and right there for the experience. It was great. I swung that club and – whoosh! – I missed the ball completely. It was still sitting peacefully on the tee. So, okay. I got myself all set to do it again, and again I just missed it completely. I don't know how many times I missed it, but eventually I hit it. The first time I hit it I could hear the sound of a good whack. The ball rolled about three feet on the ground. That was the glorious beginning of a golf career.

Then of course I put the ball back on the tee and tried again, and eventually, I hit the ball. It was a very nice-sounding whack and the ball lifted up in the air and sailed down the golf course. What happened to me was that everything stopped. I felt my mind floating, flying with the golf ball up into the air. There was a sense of release, freedom, ease, and openness with watching the golf ball fly up in the air. The ideas of purpose, being intentional with the swing and with the golf ball, hitting, and being really present in a conscious way vanished completely. There was no intentionality, there was no me, there was no trying to be mindful of anything. It was just natural awareness and the complete release of intentionality, or purpose, or me in that movement.

While I was trying to make the swings, there was a very nice mindfulness, a satisfying presence. But that was a whole order of magnitude different than the satisfaction, ease, freedom, and well-being that came when the intentional conscious mindfulness of being present dropped away and I was just there with this great feeling of timeless openness with the ball flying through the air. After that ball went through the air I said, “Oh, *this* is why people go golfing – maybe for *that* experience.”

These are two different ways of being in the present moment. One is a little more intentional, more focused, and more involved, while one involves complete release. *Nibbāna* is a way of being present. It is being fully at A.

Many people might experience mindfulness as being fully here. *Nibbāna* is being fully here with the release, the freedom, and the ease.

The tradition describes it in many different ways. There's one list of 33 synonyms for the experience of *nibbāna*. I'll read you some of the words that give a sense of the richness and the value that the Buddha put on this experience. He called it, “Peaceful, sublime, happy, calm, wonderful, amazing, health, non-troubled, purity, freedom, the island, the shelter, the refuge, truth, what's subtle,” and “destination.”

These are very positive words that suggest *nibbāna* is highly valued. It is not, as some people think, that the word “*nibbāna*” means a kind of quenching, a kind of extinguishing of everything into some kind of barrenness. There's something quite wonderful about the release, the freedom of the ball going through the air, or of the bird flying through the air.

There are very positive associations with the word “*nibbāna*.” One is “to become peaceful and tamed.” A well-tamed, peaceful horse is described as “a horse that has *nibbāna*.” *Nibbāna* also has the meaning of a fire going out, not because it's been blown out but because the fuel that keeps it burning has run out and there's nothing more to burn. Another colloquial meaning of *nibbāna* is “health.” The idea of health sometimes comes with the idea that the fever of an illness has broken and there's no more fever burning us.

The experience of *nibbāna* has a number of metaphors that go with it. One of them from this list is an island. It is sometimes also called “the other shore.” This shore is where there's a lot of danger and danger of suffering. The other shore or the island we go to is a place that's free of danger. It is free of the floods of life and free of the winds of distress that can happen. It is sometimes presented as a location, a place, but that's kind of a metaphor.

Another metaphor is that it's a wonderful palace, a wonderful capital city that we come to at the end of the path. But regardless of what it is – and we'll talk about it as we go through this week – it's certainly a significant way of being unconditionally present for our experience right here. *Nibbāna* brings a tremendous feeling of well-being and sets us on a new course of practice where we understand the possibilities of well-being and peace in a radically different way. Peace and well-being come from the inside out in a powerful way, rather than from the world towards us.

One of the synonyms for this experience is the word "happy" (*sukha*.) Sometimes the word "delight" is used. There was a nun in the time of the Buddha, Utama, who wrote a poem. She said, "The Seven Factors of Awakening, the path for attaining release – I've cultivated them all as instructed by the Buddha. I attained what I wished. I am the true daughter of the Buddha, always delighting in *nibbāna*." The Buddha said, "*Nibbāna* is the greatest happiness."

*Nibbāna* is also described as the release from all suffering. We have these meanings: a release from all suffering, happiness, something we delight in, and something that teaches us the full potential of mindfulness – the full potential of being present here for this experience.



That will be what we talk about for the next few days.  
Hopefully, I'll do so in a way that is relevant for you and  
you will be able to understand this important topic.  
Thank you very much, and I look forward to  
being here with you tomorrow.