

Nibbāna (3 of 5) *Nibbāna* Is Release

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Today I'm giving the third of five talks on *nibbāna*, or nirvana. This can be a complex topic. Especially in some circles of Buddhism, among Buddhist teachers there can be a lot of discussion and controversies about what *nibbāna* really is.

One of the controversies that goes back thousands of years in the *Theravādan* tradition is about whether *nibbāna* is a state, a thing, or a place that's transcendent, or whether it really is an absence. Many in the tradition consider it distasteful or unacceptable to define the highest goal and highest possibility of Buddhism to be an absence because then it might have no profundity, no power, and no ability to free us. So they believe

nibbāna has to be some *thing* – a transcendent state, for example, that is beyond time and place, is unconditioned and uncreated, and exists in some transcendent way.

My own orientation to this is that *nibbāna* is an absence. That's the background for how I'm talking about it this week. I think it's a radical absence, an absence that's quite profound, transformative, radical, and quite powerful in its own way. How can that be?

One of the things to understand about the word *nibbāna* is that it is in fact a noun, but it's a verbal noun, like the word “walking” in “the person is walking.” Because the person is walking, we can talk about the walking the person is doing. “The walking” is a verbal noun of the verb “walking.”

In the same way, we can release our clinging, and then we can talk about the release – “The release felt so good.” Releasing is the verb, and “the releasing” is the verbal noun. So it turns out that *nibbāna* is a verbal noun.

It is directly connected to a verb that's very similar: *nibbāyati*. *Nibbāyati* is the act of release, or of cooling, or of the fire of clinging and attachment going out,

Translators of Pali will find that it's awkward to translate *nibbāyati* into English (*nibbāna-ing*). Sometimes they

translate it as “to attain *nibbāna*.” Then we read it as a noun – “to attain” this noun, this thing. But really, *nibbāna* is the act of releasing. We find over and over again that the Buddhist teachings use verbs to describe the action of freeing: freeing, the destruction of the attachments we have, the ending of something, the releasing of something. There is a movement that happens, which is the important movement of freedom, of freeing ourselves from our attachments.

When we free ourselves, then there's the absence of what we were caught by. So if I'm holding something and I put it down, then there's the absence of the thing in my hand. If I've been clinging to something for a very, very long time, it's a big deal to have put it down and have the hand open. The hand is now absent of something, but it's not a minor thing that it's no longer there if I've been holding it for 20 years and finally, my hand is free to do something else.

The analogy I like to use for how significant this absence is is that of someone who's been in prison for 10, 20, 30, 40 years, and finally, they're freed from prison. Now they can walk down the street. They look like everyone else walking down the street and living their lives. But the longer they've been in prison, the more the absence of prison is something that they always appreciate. The absence is quite significant for

them in a way that other people walking on the street who've never been to prison wouldn't appreciate.

It is the same way with a lifetime of clinging, holding, being attached, and being closed. Many of us don't even realize we are closed because we haven't developed the deep sensitivity of mindfulness to understand how the underlying holding, attachment, and clinging support all the ways in which we suffer – all the distress and stress that we feel.

Releasing that suffering and clinging and seeing the absence of it shows us the powerful potential of freedom.

That absence then becomes an arena in which we can function and move with freedom. So one way I often like to translate *nibbāna* is “release.” It is the releasing of whatever it is that limits us, binds us, and oppresses us, which has its genesis in us.

One of the great paths of human life is to move in that direction – to free ourselves of greed, hatred, and delusion to taste a degree of this absence of clinging, and to really appreciate this possibility. The Buddha describes this absence as: “the Dharma which is visible here and now.” Whatever the Buddha meant as the Dharma is not something you find in a book or teachings. The essence of it is visible to us directly, here and now.

How is it visible? The Buddha was very clear. He said that the Dharma is visible when there has been greed and the greed has been abandoned, released, and brought to an end. That is how the Dharma is visible. This is kind of simple. It doesn't take a lot of books and deep philosophy to understand this kind of Dharma. But it's very practical. At least in the imagination, it is something we can understand. If we have been holding tight for a long time and then we release that holding, in the release we see the Dharma. The releasing is really the heart of the Dharma.

Sometimes we have to understand the holding before we can release it. So sometimes mindfulness has a lot to do with just being present with all the ways we might be attached and cling. When we understand the underlying conditions for clinging deeply and well, then something can release. As we stop feeding and fueling clinging and the fires of greed, hate, and delusion, the fires begin to go out.

The idea of going out, releasing, where the fire gets released, is an ancient kind of idea that doesn't quite work, maybe, in modern English. But the *nibbāna* of the fire is the cooling of the fire, the calming of the fire, the going out of the fire, and the release of the fire.

Then we can experience that for ourselves in all areas of our lives. It is so ordinary, so common to have some small or large movement of hostility, jealousy, or resentment, and then to have a palpable, visceral experience of it not being there – not because we've been distracted from it, but because something has really let go, something has released.”Ah, look at that.” That is where the Dharma is.

In the teachings of the Buddha, that absence is also seen as a possibility of tremendous inspiration – “Oh, *this* is possible.” It's possible to live without clinging. It might be hard to do it thoroughly or do it all the time, but having some experience of this release and the absence of clinging is possible. It is fantastic to appreciate that absence and the breath of fresh air and fresh heart and fresh mind that it gives us.

So I think of *nibbāna* as the release. The wonderful absence that follows that release is how we begin to understand the Dharma and what it's really about in the big picture. You don't need a lot of philosophy for this.

So to make *nibbāna* a transcendent thing – maybe it is, there are different points of view. But once we have a sense of the release of clinging, we don't want to cling to the transcendent idea of *nibbāna* as a thing or a state.

That would be a little bit as if we held our hand in a fist for a very long time, then finally opened the fist and felt so good with the fist, the fingers, and the hand free and open and relaxed. Then we liked the feeling so much that we wanted more, and because we wanted it, we closed the fist to grab hold of it.

Of course, you can't have both. You can't grab the fist. You can't grab on. You can't grab the open hand. As soon as you grab the open hand, you've lost it. The freedom of *nibbāna*, this release feels so good, but if we want that goodness, we paradoxically are going in the opposite direction from release. We're grabbing onto it again. So it's a wonderful kind of balancing act, a wonderful space to walk in: to really appreciate freedom and letting go and calm and then to not pick up clinging again, not to over-evaluate it or hold onto it or get stuck on it.

So *nibbāna* as a release. As we develop our mindfulness, we will begin to experience small and sometimes large experiences of release and freedom. That is the Dharma. Appreciate that. Don't be blinded by thinking that the Dharma is something much more difficult and sophisticated that only people with PhDs will understand. The Dharma is to be understood right there in the release. May you be released, may you delight in your release, and may you understand how it leads to the release of all suffering.

Thank you.