

Nibbāna (2 of 5) Going Out of the Fire

October 20, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS *nibbuti, nibbute, nibbutam, suttas, blow out, extinguish, fuel, fire, burning, rituals, Brahmans, sacrifice, Atman, greed, hatred, delusion, The Fire Sermon, T.S. Elliott, The Wasteland, ending, harm, suffering, luminosity, clarity, attention, awareness, present, connected, cooling, awakening, enlightenment, light, happiness, liberation, release, excitement, agitation*

Gil Fronsdal

Good day, warm greetings. The topic of the talks this week is *nibbāna*, or in English, nirvana, from the Sanskrit word. *Nibbāna* is often seen as the ultimate goal in Buddhism.

One of the primary etymological explanations of what *nibbāna* means comes from the expression “to blow out” as in, “to blow out a fire.” But in the teachings of the Buddha, *nibbāna* isn't the activity of blowing the fire out. Rather, it refers to the fire going out when the fuel is removed – the extinguishing of a fire when its fuel is burned up, the going out of the flame.

This rather negative idea of an ultimate goal has to be put in context. The context is that in ancient India, at the time of the Buddha, the Brahmanical religion, one of the dominant religions of his time, had Brahmin priests for whom one of the important functions was sacred fire rituals. They fueled the fire by adding ghee oil or wood to the fire to keep it going. They also put sacrificial objects into the fire for the gods.

There were supposed to have been three sacramental fires that were part of the religion. These were both fires of sacrifice and also metaphorically fires of the soul, or the *Atman*, the fire of the Brahman – the ultimate being of the universe – and the fire of the sun. Whether the fires were for a sacrifice or metaphoric fires in us, they were kept going and fueled by the Brahmins.

The Buddha changed the meanings of the three fires of the Brahmins. He talked instead about the three fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. These are the fires that nirvana blows out and extinguishes. The fires of greed, hatred, and delusion are what go out with practice.

There's a very famous teaching of the Buddha that's called *The Fire Sermon* in English. In T.S. Eliot's famous poem, *The Wasteland*, the title of one of the poems is *The Fire Sermon*, based on this teaching of

the Buddha. I remember seeing a book on the hundred greatest speeches ever given in history, and the Buddha's *Fire Sermon* is one of them. It goes something like this: The world is on fire. The eyes are on fire, the ears are on fire, the nose is on fire, the tongue is on fire, the body is on fire, the mind is on fire. What is it on fire with? The fires of greed, hatred, and delusion.

(Bhikkhus, all is burning. And what is the all that is burning? The eye is burning, forms are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye-contact is burning, also whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant that arises with eye-contact for its indispensable condition, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion. I say it is burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, with lamentations, with pains, with griefs, with despairs. SN 35.28 Tr. Nanamoli Thera.)

In the teachings of the Buddha, the primary definition of nirvana is the ending of those three fires. It is not an extinguishing of life, nor an extinguishing of everything. *Nibbāna* is an extinguishing of the particular forms of excitement that humans can be caught up in that have the aspect of burning us.

Burning is a kind of harm. The idea of a fire that burns and harms us is closely related to the idea of suffering in Buddhism. One of the fundamental teachings in Buddhism is about the end of suffering. Nirvana is sometimes described as the end of suffering. It's the end of the fires of greed, hate, and delusion – the end of the burning that goes on. The idea that nirvana is the end of something is very important to understand.

The metaphor of fire, where the fire is kept going by the fuel that feeds it, reflects the idea of practice as a practice of no longer adding fuel to the fires of the excitement, the attachments, the greed, and the hatred that we have. *Nibbāna* is not so much a forceful extinguishing of something, but rather, no longer adding the fuel.

One of the functions of mindfulness and concentration practice is to let the mind become very satisfied in itself – enjoying itself, present, and connected here so that the attention, is not reaching out to anything, not wanting something, not pushing something away, not confused by things, or deluded by things. The awareness is able to stay present in a clear, luminous way. The luminosity and clarity that allow things to be as they are is an attention in the present that doesn't add fuel to anything. What we're learning to do in Buddhist meditation practice is partly to be luminously and clearly

present with attention, but without adding to the fire, so we can let it go out.

The language often used in relation to *nibbāna* is “cooling.” Things that are hot or excited get cool. They say that this metaphor for practice of cooling of the mind works better in India, which is a very hot climate where cooling is a refreshing, peaceful thing to experience. With the English language, because people grow up in a rainy, foggy, cold English climate, the idea of coolness has very different connotations culturally and emotionally than it does in India. But the meaning is a refreshing of the mind.

So the fires go out. Then we come to the English word for awakening – “enlightenment.” It's sometimes kind of a synonym for *nibbāna*. It is a little strange to use that word to translate *nibbāna*. But the Buddha talks about how when there is awakening, when there is this ending of the fires, the fires are replaced by a luminosity, a radiance. As a metaphor, a radiant light doesn't hurt, it doesn't burn. Light just shines on things so we can clearly see what's there. In that clarity, all kinds of things are possible that are not possible if we're on fire.

The fires of greed, hate, and delusion go out and the mind becomes cooler. The richness of the word “*nibbāna*” and the related word “*nibbuti*” is that in its original context, people didn't hear it only as the ending

of something. They also understood it as referring to health and happiness. Sometimes *nibbāna* is called “a great happiness.” The related word, kind of a past participle of it, “*nibbutī*” or “*nibbuta*,” is also used to mean happiness. There is sometimes a wordplay in Pali texts where the same kind of word is used for the happiness of liberation, the happiness of freedom, the happiness of nirvana, and the happiness of release – “*nibbute, nibbutam*.” The texts use both those terms.

The going out of the flames of greed, hate, and delusion leaves us with luminosity, happiness, and well-being. This is a very positive message that sometimes gets lost in English when *nibbāna* is described as the extinguishing, the quenching of thirst, the quenching of greed, hate, and delusion. For many people, quenching is not a very appealing idea. But *nibbāna* is not really the blowing out or the quenching. It means *going* out. It is allowing something to just go out or dissipate because it's not being fed.

For a while, you might think about how you feed and fuel your excitement. Maybe you don't want to use the phrase “fires of the mind,” but maybe think of it as the excitement of the mind. Ask, how does the excitement get fueled? When you have strong desires, craving, and greed, how do you add to them? In what ways does the mind keep them going and fuel them?

When you have aversion, jealousy, or hostility, to what degree does the mind keep fueling them, adding fuel to the fire? When you are bewildered, perplexed, confused, and uncommitted, not knowing what to do, what is happening in the mind? What are you doing to keep fueling that fire, that excitement, that agitation? Maybe we could use “agitation” instead of the word “fire” – how we get agitated. How do you do that? What are you doing? What's happening in your mind?

When you see that clearly, what is it like to pull away and step away so that you're no longer adding that fuel? You're not letting go of anything, you're just not feeding the agitation. What happens then? For the Buddha, the most common definition of nirvana is “the destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion.” That teaching gets repeated a lot in the *suttas*.

Hopefully, this little talk gives you a bigger context for understanding why the Buddha would make the goal of practice the destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion, the destruction of the fires that burn us. Thank you and we'll continue with this theme tomorrow.