

**MOOC Course on Buddhist Philosophy
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Component 1 (A): Personal Details

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Component 1 (B): Description of Module

Course Name	Buddhist Philosophy
Module Name/ Title	The Concept of Nirvāṇa and the Path Leading to Nirvāṇa
Module Id	Module No: 5
Prerequisites	Fundamentals of Buddhist ideas
Objectives	The objective is twofold: —to understand the nature of Nibbāna as described in Pali literature; and —to discuss the paths, which lead to Nibbāna according to Theravāda Buddhist Philosophy
Key words	nibbana, supreme bliss, supramundane state

Component 2

Contents: Nature, Definition and Meaning of Nibbāṇa, Types of Nibbāṇa, The path leading to Nibbāṇa, Middle path, Eight-fold path, Four stages of the supramundane state.

THE CONCEPT OF NIRVĀṆA AND THE PATH LEADING TO NIRVĀṆA (ACCORDING TO PALI BUDDHISM)

INTRODUCTION

The Historical Buddha taught only suffering (*dukkha*) and its cessation. He started his teaching by defining the state of suffering and making us aware how our minds are flaming with immoral roots and lives are burning with old age, sickness, and death. However, he discovered a gradual path through which one can introspect oneself and with the comprehension of suffering as it is, seeks liberation from transmigration (*saṃsāra*). He announced that *the taste of this (his) teaching is release*. This release, emancipation, liberation and freedom from suffering is known as Nirvāṇa (Pāli: Nibbāna) or the “highest bliss” (*paramaṃ sukhaṃ*). It is well preached in the third of the classic formula of fourfold noble truth.

This module is divided into two parts. In the first part we will discuss the nature of Nibbāna according to Pāli Buddhism. In the second part we will deal with the nature of the path leading to Nibbāna.

I. THE NATURE OF NIBBĀNA

The attainment of Nibbāna is the ultimate goal of Buddha’s fourfold saṅgha. It is both a concept and an experience. The Buddhist teaching of Nibbāna is one of the most discussed and widely interpreted concepts among monastics and academicians. However, we do not have a concrete definition as such. It is the supramundane (*lokuttara*) experience that is very difficult to express through language and words. It is *lokuttara* in the sense that it crosses over (*uttarati*) the world (*loka*). Nevertheless, we will see how the concept has been understood in the Pāli canon and commentaries.

The Buddha never encouraged his followers to get into the metaphysical discussions. He said it is better to practice instead of irrelevant discussions that obstruct the path leading to liberation. It is worth mentioning, here, that the Pāli canon presents ten undetermined (*abyākata*) metaphysical questions to which the Buddha remained silent as they were nothing but the thickets of theoretical views

(*diṭṭhigahanam*). They are: (1-2:) Is the world (*loka*) eternal or non-eternal? (3-4:) Is the world finite or infinite? (5-6:) Is the self (*jīva*) same as body or different from body? (7-10:) Does the Tathāgata exist after death, or does not exist, or both or neither? In this regard, the parable of the poisoned arrow (MN 63) deserves attention.

"It's just as if a man were wounded with an arrow thickly smeared with poison. His friends & companions, kinsmen & relatives would provide him with a surgeon, and the man would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know the social status of the man who wounded me, until I know the given name & clan and the bodily features of the man and the region from where he comes; until I know the particulars of the bow, bowstring, the shaft and the feathers of the shaft with which I was wounded. The man would die and those things would still remain unknown to him.'"

DEFINITION AND MEANING OF NIBBĀNA

The literal meaning of the term Nibbāna is “blowing out” or “to be extinguished” as it is derived from the verb *nibbāti*. Here, it signifies the extinction from threefold unwholesome roots—attachment (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). Again, the term Nibbāna is understood by its two components parts: *ni* and *vāna*. The term *vāna* can be derived with two verbal roots: √vu (to weave) and √vā (to blow). It is called Nibbāna as it is a departure (*ni*) from the cord-like (*vāna*) craving. [AbhiS; ch.VI, *Rūpaparicchedo*, *Nibbānabhedo*]

Ācārya Buddhaghosa in his magnum opus the *Visuddhimagga* [ch. XXI] states that a true meditator (*yogāvacara*) longs for Nibbāna by calming the eleven types of fires, which cause rebirth. [Vism, ch. XXI] They are— greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), delusion (*moha*), birth (*jāti*), aging (*jarā*), death (*maraṇa*), sorrow (*soka*), lamentation (*parideva*), pain (*dukkha*), grief (*domanassa*), and despair (*upāyāsa*). However, the text *Abhidhammāvatāra* clearly states that Nibbāna is not mere extinction of these fires but it is only the means to attain Nibbāna, and is not an end in itself. (cf. Narada 1987, 357)

We find several connotations of the Nibbāna-state and a few synonyms as stated in the Tipiṭaka. The *Brahmayācanakathā* of Vinaya-Piṭaka records that the perfectly enlightened one declares that what he has attained (Nibbāna) is profound, hard to comprehend, peaceful, excellent, far beyond mere intellectual reasoning, subtle, only to be realised by the wise. Again, in the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* (MN 26), the Buddha while defining the noble quest describes Nibbāna as unborn, unageing, unnailing, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled, the supreme and

attained by the best exertion (AN 4.255). Ācariya Anuruddha in the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaho* describes the state of Nibbāna with four adjectives. He states that the great sages who are liberated from craving declare that Nibbāna is a state which is deathless (*accutaṃ*), absolutely endless (*accantaṃ*), unconditioned (*asaṅkhataṃ*), and unsurpassed (*anuttaraṃ*). Moreover, it is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, and cessation (MN 26 168). With all these descriptions it is very clear that the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering is Nibbāna. Although, the term Nibbāna is not mentioned in the description of *dukkhanirodha* in the Nikāya, the *Nirodhasacca-niddesavaṇṇanā* of the commentary of *Vibhaṅga* states—Nibbāna, which has one meaning only: “that which is the remainderless fading away and cessation of craving, giving it up, relinquishing it, letting it go, not relying on it.”

The *Milindapañho* also discusses about the state, the realization, and the place of Nibbāna (Pesala 1991, 155-159). It states that Nibbāna is:

- Entirely blissful and there is no un-satisfactoriness mixed in it
- The attribute of Nibbāna is understood by the similes of lotus, water, medicine, great ocean, food, space, wish-fulfilling gems, red sandalwood, butter, and mountain peak. It is not polluted by the defilements like a lotus is not wetted with water; extinguishes the thirst of craving like the water chills the fever of defilements; nourishes like nectar as the medicine cures the beings from poison; it is empty of defilements like the ocean is empty of corpse; and so on;
- It is free from the three periods of time: past, present, and future; neither arisen, nor non-arisen, nor producible;
- The element of Nibbāna does exist and can be realised by the one who truly understands the formations as per the instruction of the Buddha with the faculty of wisdom; It is to be known by the freedom from distress, danger, and fear, by peace, by bliss, by happiness, by purity and by coolness. Nibbāna is like getting out of the fire; getting out of the pit; coming out of trouble; getting out of the mud; the world is like an iron-ball; and like a stray person takes the right path.

There is no spot, where the Nibbāna is situated. However, one can realise anywhere—whether in Greek, in China, in Benaras, in Gandhara, in the highest heaven, mountain’s top and so on— with careful attention (*yoniso manasikāro*) with a firm grounding in morality.

NIBBĀNA: ONEFOLD, TWOFOLD AND THREEFOLD

Nibbāna is *onefold by the way of intrinsic nature (sabhāvato)*. It is said to be peaceful (*santi*). As such it is unique (*kevala*); exclusively supramundane and undifferentiated ultimate reality. It is supposed to be realised by oneself (*paccattam veditabbo*).

Since the state of Nibbāna is attainable in this very life and after the passing away of an Arahant, the Buddha spoke the twofold Nibbāna called the Nibbāna element with the residue remaining (*sopādhisesa*) and the Nibbāna element without the residue remaining (*anupādhisesa*). These two states are known as *kilesa-parinibbāna* and *khandha-parinibbāna* in the Pāli commentaries (VibhA 433). Here, one may understand thus: the former element indicates the Nibbāna state of the Buddha what he attained at Bodhgaya and the later element represents his attainment at Kusīnārā in between the two Sāla trees. For the Sopādhisesa Nibbāna i.e. the experience of Nibbāna in this very life is defined by various modern scholars such as Walpola Rahula (2007), Damien Kewon (2000), Rupert Gethin (1998), and Ajhan Sucitto (2010) in many ways. For instance, it is peaceful, free from negative mental states, no sensation itself is happiness, and non-reactive. The attainment of Anupādhisesa Nibbāna dhātu means the final and full departure from any conditioned state. Being free from the cycle of existence, an Arahant knows and sees only the cessation of the process but not the death of anything that pertains to the concept of me, mine and myself. The state of Anupādhisesa Nibbāna, however, is difficult to express; it falls under the category of undetermined (*abyākata*) questions (7-10).

It is threefold by the way of different aspects (*ākārabhedena*). They are void (*suññatam*), signless (*animittam*), and longing-free (*appaṇihitam*). It is void as it is devoid of all conditioned states such as greed, hatred, and delusion. Ācārya Buddhaghosa in the Vism explains how ultimately all the truths are said to be void. He states they are void in a sense of the absence of anyone who experiences, any doer, anyone who is extinguished, and any goer. I quote:

For there is suffering, but none who suffers;

Doing exists although there is no doer.

Extinction is but no extinguished person;

Although there is a path, there is no goer.

[Ñāṇamoli 2011, 529]

Nibbāna is not void here; it is realized as one of the mental objects (*vatthudhamma*), decidedly proving that it is not a state of nothingness. In the

same way being free from the signs and hankering of all conditioned states it is called signless and longing-free, respectively.

II. THE PATH LEADING TO NIBBĀNA

Theravāda school strictly follows the gradual process of liberation. It says a practitioner, through a gradual path, discovers such a state which is already existing. There is a gradual path that leads to Nibbāna but the Nibbāna is not produced by the path. Bhikkhu Bodhi rightly says: you may get to the mountain along a path, but the mountain is not the result, not an effect of the path. You may see a light, but the light is not the result of your eyesight. Nibbāna is truth, the suchness, one can only realise it. One cannot bring Nibbāna into existence. Therefore, it is not the result of anything; has no cause and effect. It is *asaṅkhata* as it is free from the threefold characteristics—arising (*uppāda*), cessation (*vaya*), and change of state (*thitassa aññathattam*)—of any conditioned belongs to the mundane and supramundane state. (AN 3.47)

The Buddha, in the first sermon, declared the eightfold path called the middle way, which leads to disenchantment (*nibbidāya*), dispassion (*virāgāya*), cessation (*nirodhāya*), calming (*upasamāya*), direct knowledge (*abhiññāya*), self-awakening (*sambodhāya*), and Unbinding (*nibbānāya*). (SN 56.11)

This path is called middle path (*majjhimā paṭipadā*) as it avoids the two extremes. In Pāli literature, they represent indulgence to the sensual passion (*kāmesukāmasukkhallikānuyogo*) and self-mortification (*attakilamathānuyogo*). These two extremes or the theoretical views also represent the theory of eternalism (*sassatavāda*) and annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*). Psychologically, Karunadasa (2013) rightly observes that for the belief in an eternal self is due to craving for being (*bhavataṇhā*) and the belief in a temporary self is due to craving for non-being (*vibhavataṇhā*).

Here, middle path means the practice of eightfold path or the dependent origination through which one avoids the both extremes: spiritual eternalism and materialist annihilationism. The eightfold path consists of: right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*), right intention (*sammā saṅkappo*), right speech (*sammā vācā*), right action (*sammā kammanto*), right livelihood (*sammā ājīvo*), right effort (*sammā vāyāmo*), right mindfulness (*sammā sati*), and right concentration (*sammā samādhi*). Here the first two limbs of the path belong to the practice of wisdom (*paññā*), the last two represent concentration (*samādhi*) and the remaining four limbs being the ground supporting factors for concentration and wisdom constitute the practice of

virtue (*sīla*). These three factors are technically called threefold training (*tisikkhā*): virtue, concentration, and wisdom.

The Pāli canon suggests several other approaches or the ways of attaining liberation that include:

- Samatha and Vipassanā meditation [AN 4.170];
- freeing oneself one's ceased mind of restlessness concerning the dhamma [AN 4.170];
- through *jhāna*-s
- the fourfold establishment of mindfulness (*Cattāro satipaṭṭhānā*) [MN 10];
- seven stages of Purification (*satta-visuddhi*) as depicted in MN 24 and the Vism.

If we minutely see the structure of these references, we find that Nibbāna is attainable through threefold training only i.e., virtue (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). These three pillars of Buddhism can be understood with several verses including the following three:

Avoidance all evil, gathering of merit and purifying one's own mind —this is teaching of the Buddhas. [Dhp 183; Sarao 2009, 140]

(*sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ kusalassa upasampadā sacittapariyodapanaṃ
etaṃ buddhāna sāsanaṃ*).

When a wise man, established well in virtue, develops consciousness and understanding, then as a bhikkhu ardent and sagacious, succeeds in disentangling this tangle. (SN 1.23; Ñāṇamoli 2011, 4)

(*sīle patiṭṭhāya naro sapañño,
cittaṃ paññañca bhāvayaṃ.
ātāpī nipako bhikkhu,
so imaṃ vijaṭṭhaya jaṭanti*.)

Morality, concentration, wisdom, and release have been comprehended by the illustrious Gotama himself. Having known them directly, he taught the Dhamma to the bhikkhus. The awakened one who is the end-maker of suffering, the One with vision, has attained Nibbāna . (AN 4.1)

(*sīlaṃ samādhi paññā ca,
vimutti ca anuttarā.
anubuddhā ime dhammā,
gotamena yasassinā.
iti buddho abhiññāya,*

*dhammamakkhāsi bhikkhunam.
dukkhassantakaro satthā,
cakkhumā parinibbuto.)*

Since the state of Nibbāna is beyond worldly comprehension, it is supramundane, the four preceding stages to Arahatsip or Nibbāna are worth mentioning. A practitioner who is qualified in mundane concentration (*lokiya samādhi*) has suppressed the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) of *samādhi* through the five *jhāna*-factor- initial application (*vitakka*), sustained application (*vicāra*), pleasure (*pīti*), happiness (*sukha*) and one-pointedness concentration (*ekaggatā*) and successfully comprehends the four immaterial states of infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, and neither-perception-nor-non-perception enters to the supramundane state. Having been qualified in the immaterial state, here, the practitioner recognises ten negative mental states called fetters (*saṃyojana*). He understands that with the presence of these fetters, it is impossible to cross the shore. Therefore, the practitioner, by the four stages of supramundane state, eliminates those 10 fetters and attains arahathood. These 10 fetters are as follows: personality view (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*), perplexity (*vicikicchā*), indulgence in wrongful rites and rituals (*sīlabbataparāmāsa*), Sensual desire (*kāmarāga*), hatred (*paṭigha*), attachment to the material sphere (*rūparāga*), attachment to the immaterial sphere (*arūparāga*), conceit (*māna*), restlessness (*uddhacca*), and ignorance (*avijjā*). Among them, the first five are collectively called as lower (*orammabhāgiya*) fetters and the last five are known as higher (*uddhammabhāgiya*) fetters.

THE FOUR STAGES OF SUPRAMUNDANE STATE

The four stages are:

1. Stream entry (*sotāpatti*)
2. Once-returning (*sakadāgāmi*)
3. Non-returning (*anāgāmi*)
4. *Arahat*

In this way, there are four types of individuals called stream enterer, once-returner, non-returner, and arahat. Each of the four stages can be divided into two substages: the path (*magga*) and fruit (*phala*).

Accordingly the consciousness of each individual is called path consciousness (*maggacitta*) or fruition consciousness (*phalacitta*) with respect to the sub-stage. A practitioner eliminates all the respective fetters in the path stage and in the fruiting stage he realises the cessation of fetters.

Stages and elimination of fetters

Stream entry	eliminates the first three fetters
Once-returning	suppresses or weakens the fourth and fifth fetters
Non-returning	eliminates both the fetters, which have been suppressed at the state of once-returning
<i>Arahat</i>	eliminates the last five fetters

The fruit of stream-enterer (sotāpatti-phala)

Having been uprooted the first three fetters, the stream-enterer has three possibilities of rebirth after his death. First, he takes maximum of seven births in the human and celestial world and liberates himself in any of the rebirths. Although one does not remember that he is *sotāpanna* in his subsequent births, it is said that by the previous kamma effect one gains implicit confidence in triple gems and observes five precepts. Secondly he takes rebirth in good families and attains arahathood within two or three rebirths. Lastly, a specially developed person (*ekabīji puggala*) takes only single birth. How fast a practitioner attains Arahathood depends on one's individual mental elevation.

The fruit of once-returner (sakadāgāmi-phala)

Since the individual in the second stage takes rebirth only once, he is called *sakadāgāmī*. Moreover, the commentary on *Puggalapaññatti* also mentions five types of once returner. [Bodhi 2000, 361]

The fruit of non-returner (anāgāmi-phala)

As the name suggests, the non-returner does not take rebirth to any sensuous planes. He has now completely abandoned sensual lust and hatred. He spontaneously takes rebirth in the pure abodes (*suddhāvāsa bhūmī*) and attains arahathood there. Abhi VT mentions five types of non-returner. [Bodhi 2000, 362]

The fruit of Arahat

Having destroyed all the defilements, one attains arahatship or Sopādhisesa Nibbāna and becomes the destroyer of all cankers (*khīṇāsava*). This is the state of intuitive or inferential knowledge (*paññavedhañāṇa* or *anubodhañāṇa*), which is

neither nothingness nor mere cessation. Now, the individual is free from the cycle of existence. These supramundane paths and fruits are attained by the method called Vipassanā bhāvanā by developing the faculty of wisdom (*paññindriya*). Having done so, one realises the threefold characteristics—impermanence, miserable, and substance-less— of all the phenomena.

Component-3: Bibliography with Abbreviations

Bibliography with Abbreviations

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ABBREVIATION

AbhiS	<i>Abhidhammatthasaṅgaho</i>
AbhiS NT	<i>Abhidhammatthasaṅgaho Navanītaṭīkā</i>
AbhiS VT	<i>Abhidhammatthasaṅgaho Vibhāvanīṭīkā</i>
AN	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
DPR	Digital Pāli Reader
MN	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
PTS	Pali Text Society
SN	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
Vibh	<i>Vibhaṅga</i>
VibhA	<i>Vibhaṅga Aṭṭhakathā</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>
Vism MT	<i>Visuddhimagga-Mahāṭīkā</i>

Component-4: Additional Readings: (Books/Articles/Internet Links)

- Chapter 33 of Narada (1988);
- Chapter 4 and 5 of Rahula (1974);
- Only the *Nibbānabheda-kathā* of AbhiS and AbhiS VT (Chapter 6) translated by Narada (1975) and Bodhi (2000);
- MN 10, 26, 29, 63;
- SN 1.23, 6.1, 56.11; and
- AN 4.170
- Pesala 1991, 155-159

OPTIONAL READINGS

- Chapter 10 of Karunadasa (2013); and
- Chapter 3 of Gethin (1998)

INTERNET LINK

https://www.digitalpalireader.online/_dprhtml/index.html

For Canonical Translations in English, go to

<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/index.html>

Component 5: Select Glossary of Technical Terms

Abyākata: Undetermined

Anāgāmī: Non-returner

Animitta: Signless

Anupādisesa: Without residuals remaining

Anuttara: Unsurpassed

Appaṇihitā: Longing-free

Arahat: A perfect or worthy being

Asaṅkat: Unconditioned

Bhavataṇhā: Craving for being

Nīvaraṇa: Hindrance

Paññā: Wisdom

Sakadāgāmi: Once Returner

Samādhi: Concentration

Samyojana: Fetter

Sassatavāda: Eternalism

Sīla: Virtue

Sopādisesa: With the residue remaining

Sotāpanna: Stream enterer

Suññata: Void

Ucchedavāda: Annihilationism

Vibhavataṇhā: Craving for non-being