

# Nibbāna

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*Nibbāna* (Sanskrit: *nirvāṇa*) is the highest good according to the Buddha. It is very difficult to explain it in words. As language fails to describe the deeper experiences of life, we do not have adequate words to describe *nibbāna* because this mental state is indescribable. In the Dhammapada, it is said that ‘*Nibbāna* is bliss supreme’ (*nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ*).

What is this supreme bliss and how is *nibbāna* a supreme bliss? One knows that fire burns. Metaphorically speaking, *rāga* (craving, greed), *dosa* (aversion, hatred) and *moha* (ignorance) are called fires which burn inside a person all the time. If one has attachment to something, he wants to have it and once he has it, he doesn’t want to be separated from it. The more he is attached to it, the more he desires it. This is very clear when he has pleasant sensations. He wants the sensations to continue. So long as he is ignorant, he does not know that everything is impermanent in this world. Nothing lasts forever. But as he does not know this reality, he hankers after some object of the world and craves for it. He is so passionately attached to it that he begins to burn when he is separated from it. As far as hatred is concerned, he burns with hatred for somebody who has caused him harm. He remembers it again and again and burns with the fire of hatred for this person. So *rāga* and *dosa* are fires that keep burning within a person. How can he be happy if he keeps on burning like this? How can he feel cool when he burns with the fires of craving and aversion?

The Buddha poetically describes the fires of *rāga* (lust, attachment) and *dosa* (aversion) in the Ādittapariyāya Sutta. He says there— ‘Everything is burning. The eye is burning. The object of eye is burning. The sensation that is produced when the two come in contact is burning. The craving or aversion that arises after that is burning’. In this manner, all six sense organs and their objects are burning and the sensations produced by their contact are burning. Thus, the Buddha has shown how lust is a fire. It is lust, craving or greed that causes infinite desires and it is desires, which cause our suffering, not only physical and mental suffering but also cosmic suffering. Even if a little unfulfilled desire is left in him, he continues endlessly in the cycle of birth and death and suffers. But if he is free from these fires of craving, he feels cool and quenched. This is *nibbāna*.

But one cannot be free from *rāga* (greed) and *dosa* (hatred) if he is not free from *moha* (ignorance). He has to develop wisdom (*paññā*) in order to understand the real nature of things and thus remove ignorance. Only when he eradicates the three unwholesome roots of action such as *lobha*, *dosa*, and *moha*, can he attain *nibbāna*, because all his actions that create *samsāra* for him stem from these roots of action.

If he attains wisdom by removing *moha* (ignorance), he is in a position to understand how *rāga* and *dosa* are fires and how they keep burning him. When these consuming fires of passion and hatred are put out, only then can he attain *nibbāna*. But these fires are not ordinary fires. Ordinary fire can be put out with water or it can go out itself when no fuel is added to it. But these fires of *rāga* and *dosa* cannot be extinguished by water thrown on it from outside or by not adding fuel from outside. The water to put it out should be well within oneself.

What is the nature of this fire and how is it caused? Everyone has a built-in dynamo within. This dynamo is fueled by desires and it produces desires. In order for this dynamo to stop working, one has to annihilate desires. One cannot extirpate them without understanding their nature and one cannot understand their nature so long as one is in ignorance (*moha*). Unless one develops wisdom (*paññā*), he cannot tear the veil of ignorance and cannot understand the real nature of things. But once he develops *paññā* and understands that nothing is permanent here, all things are constantly changing, he will develop non-attachment and will be free from desires. Thus, he will reach a state where the dynamo working within him will stop working for lack of fuel of desires. If there is no fuel of desires, desires will not be multiplied by the dynamo working within because it has stopped working.

But how to stop this dynamo? This is the question of all questions. The Buddha has shown us the path, walking on which, one can stop the dynamo from producing desires. If one walks on this path there will be a qualitative change in him. As a result, he will develop wisdom, understand the nature of reality, develop non-attachment to worldly things and finally extirpate all his desires.

How is this possible? One has to walk on the Noble Eightfold Path. Walking on the path shown by the Buddha means observing *sīla* (moral precepts), practicing *samādhi* (concentration of mind) and developing *paññā* (wisdom) with this concentrated mind to be able to see things clearly. When he sees things clearly, he realizes their impermanent nature. He develops *nirveda* (non-

attachment) and he no longer develops cravings for them. This is how it is possible to annihilate desires. The water to put out the fires of *rāga* and *dosa* has begun to well up within. This has been possible by bringing about a qualitative change in himself.

*Nibbāna*, as a matter of fact, is a state of free from desire. It is a state in which one is not affected by clinging and aversion. When one ceases to have desire for things one likes and when one does not feel hatred towards somebody he does not like, one reaches that state. But it is easier said than done. One has to travel a long way and work hard to attain that mental state. One can attain this state by bringing out a qualitative change in oneself, which is possible only when he observes *sīla*, practices *samādhi* and attains *paññā*.

A relevant question is asked in the *Milindapañho*—who attains *nibbāna*? The answer given by Nāgasena is that not all attain *nibbāna*. It is attained by one who walks on the Noble Eightfold Path. One who thoroughly comprehends all those *dhammas*, which are to be thoroughly comprehended; one who accurately knows *dhammas*, which are to be accurately known; one who abandons *dhammas* that are to be abandoned; one who realizes *dhammas* that are to be realized and one who develops *dhammas* that are to be developed by rightly walking on the Noble Eightfold Path can attain *nibbāna* (*Yo sammā paṭipanno abhiññeññe dhamme abhijānāti, pariññeññe dhamme parijānāti, pahātabbe dhamme pajahati, bhāvetabbe dhamme bhāveti, sacchikātabbe dhamme sacchikaroti, so labhati nibbāna'nti*. *Milindapañho*, V.R.I. edition, p.72).

There are other questions concerning *nibbāna*, which are brilliantly answered by Nāgasena. To a question ‘does he who has not attained *nibbāna*, know that *nibbāna* is *sukha* (happiness)?’, the answer given by Nāgasena was ‘yes’. Just as a man who knows what suffering it is not to have hands and feet by hearing those weep and cry who do not have them, similarly people can realize that *nibbāna* is a happy state by hearing from those who have realized it.

To a question whether *nibbāna* can be produced, Nāgasena says that it can be realized but cannot be produced (*Nibbānassa sascchikiriyāya hetu atthi, tassa pana dhammassa uppādāya hetu natthi*. Ibid, p.72). The examples given by him are brilliantly ingenious. As one can climb the Himalayas, as one can cross the ocean but can't bring them, similarly he can realize *nibbāna*, but cannot produce it.

To a question by King Menander whether *nibbāna* exists, Nagasena replies that it exists like the wind and can be seen by an *ariyan* disciple, who walks on the Noble Eightfold Path with a pure mind, free from defilements and who is straight and upright (*Atthi, Mahārāja, nibbānaṃ, manoviññeññaṃ nibbānaṃ, visuddhena mānasena pañītena ujukena anāvaraṇena nirāmisena sammā paṭipanno ariyasāvako nibbānaṃ passatīti*. ibid, p. 251).

Just as it is difficult to say how much water there is in the ocean or how many living beings are there in it, in the same way it is impossible to describe *nibbāna*. But its characteristics can be described with the help of different similes. As a lotus remains unstained by water even though it is submerged in it, so *nibbāna* is unstained and unsmearred by all *kilesas* (defilements). As water is cool and quenches fire so *nibbāna* extinguishes all fires of *rāga*, *dosa* and *moha*. Just as water quenches the thirst of the thirsty, similarly *nibbāna* removes all thirsts for *kāma taṇhā* (sensual craving), *bhava taṇha* (craving for existence) and *vibhava taṇhā* (craving for non-existence) in a man. Nagasena explains that like medicine, *nibbāna* cures beings of different kinds of poisons of defilements. Just as medicine cures diseases, so *nibbāna* ends all sufferings. *Nibbāna* like medicine is ambrosia. Nagasena further compares *nibbāna* with food and says that it has all the qualities of food. Just as food is responsible for people's longevity, strength and color, so is *nibbāna*. Just as food allays hunger, removes weakness, so *nibbāna* also extinguishes all burning sensations and removes all weaknesses caused by suffering.

Nagasena with the help of the simile of the sky brings out the characteristics of *nibbāna*. *Nibbāna* like the sky is neither born nor gets old nor dies nor passes

from one existence to another, nor comes into existence. Like the sky, it is difficult to subdue, not to be stolen by thieves, not dependent on anything else, fit for the birds (*āryas*) to fly and move, uncovered and infinite (*Ākāso na jāyati, na jīyati, na mīyati, na cavati, nauppajjati, duppasaho, acorāharaṇo, anissito, vihagagamano, nirāvaraṇo, ananto*. Ibid).

There are other similes which underline the characteristics of *nibbāna*. As *lohitacandana* is very rare, has none to equal it in smell and is praised by the good people, similarly, *nibbāna* is very rare, has none to equal it in smell and is praised by the *Āryas*.

*Nibbāna* is also compared with the peak of a mountain. As it is high, immoveable, difficult to climb, so is *nibbāna* and as the highest point of the mountain is not fertile for any seed to grow, so is *nibbāna*, where no seeds of *kamma* can grow and bear fruits. (See Milindapañho, p.295)

While enumerating the characteristics of *nibbāna* T.W. Rhys Davids becomes lyrical. “One might fill columns with the praise, many of them among the most beautiful passages in Pali poetry and prose lavished on this condition of mind, the state of the man made perfect according to the Buddhist faith. Many are the pet names, the poetic epithets bestowed upon it, each of them, for they are not synonyms emphasising one or other phase of this many-sided conception — the harbour of refuge, the cool cave, the islands amidst the floods, the place of bliss, emancipation, liberation, safety, the supreme, the transcendental, the uncreated, the tranquil, the home of ease, the calm, the end of suffering, the medicine for all evil, the unshaken, the ambrosia, the immaterial, the imperishable, the abiding, the further shore, the unending, the bliss of effort, the supreme joy, the ineffable, the detachment, the holy city and many others. Perhaps the most frequent in the Buddhist texts is Arahantship - the state of him who is worthy and the one exclusively used in Europe is *nirvāṇa*, the ‘dying out’ that is the dying out in the heart of the hell fire of the three cardinal sins — sensuality, ill-will and stupidity.” (See Pali English Dictionary by T.W. Rhys Davids under *nibbāna*)

Rhys Davids quotes the view of another scholar, F. Heiler. Heiler says, “Nirvāṇa is, although it might sound a paradox, in spite of all conceptual negativity nothing but ‘eternal salvation’ after which the heart of the religious yearns on the whole earth.” He gives another definition. “Nirvāṇa is the untranslatable expression of the Unspeakable, of that for which in the Buddha’s own saying there is no word, which cannot be grasped in terms of reasoning and cool logic, the Nameless, the Undefinable.”

At one place Heiler quotes the view of R. Otto to make the conception of *nirvāṇa* clearer. “Only by its concept Nirvāṇa is something negative, by its sentiment, however, a positive item in most pronounced form.”

Rhys Davids concludes that “Nibbāna is purely and solely an ethical state to be reached in this birth by ethical practices, contemplation and insight.” In other words, *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* form the road map to *nibbāna*.

One attains *nibbāna* when the three fires of *rāga*, *dosa* and *moha* are extinguished. But how are they extinguished? They are really said to be extinguished when they do not have oil and wick left in them. It is possible that a lamp is extinguished by a strong wind, but it has fuel left in it. It cannot be said to be the state of *nibbāna* yet. The state of *nibbāna* is characterized by a complete lack of *rāga*, *dosa* and *moha*. The process of burning and producing fuel go together so long as we do not attain *nibbāna*. But once we attain it, the fires neither burn nor produce fuel. *Aggi anāhāro nibbuto* -- a fire gone out through lack of fuel. *Aggikkhandho purimassa ca upādānassa pariyādānā aññassa ca anupahārā anāhāro nibbāyeyya* (S. Nidānavagga, 1.76)—as a fire would go out, bereft of food, because of the former supply being finished, no additional supply is forthcoming.

We know that rebirth is caused by unwholesome desire (*kāma*, *kilesa*, *āsava*, *raga*, etc). The dying out of this desire results into freedom and salvation from rebirth or its cause or substratum.

Once the fuel is finished, what is achieved is coolness i.e., peace. And as said above, the means to achieve coolness is to walk on the Noble Eightfold Path. It is only by walking on this path of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* that the fires of *rāga*, *dosa* and *moha* can be put out. Those who work under the influence of these fires create *upadhis* (i.e., *kamma* or *saṅkhāra*) for them, which are responsible for rebirth. If these *upadhis* are gotten rid of, there will be no rebirth and hence no suffering. This state is described as *sītibhūto* (cool), *nibbuto* (quenched), *nirupadhi* (with no more fuel) and *anupadānā dīpacciviya nibbutā* (gone out like the flame of a lamp without a supply of fuel).

Questions:

1. What is *nibbāna*? Explain ‘*nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ*’.
2. What does the Buddha mean when he says in the Ādittapariyāya Sutta that ‘Everything is burning...’?
3. Why are *rāga*, *dosa* and *moha* called fires? How it is possible to quench such fires?
4. ‘Everyone has a built-in dynamo within which nothing but desires are produced.’ Explain.
5. How can this dynamo be stopped? Write in detail.
6. Who attains *nibbāna*? What are his qualities?
7. Who can attain *nibbāna*? What should he do to attain it?
8. What are the characteristics of *nibbāna* according to Nāgasena?
9. ‘*Nibbāna* is purely and solely an ethical state to be reached in this birth by ethical practices, contemplation and insight.’ Elucidate.
10. ‘*Nibbāna* can be realized but it cannot be produced.’ Elaborate.
11. What do you mean by *upadhis*? Write your answer by giving examples.
12. What is the role of *sīla* in attaining *nibbāna*? Write in detail.
13. What is *samādhi*? How does it help in attaining *nibbāna*?
14. Explain the role of *paññā* in being liberated and attaining *nibbāna*.
15. What do you mean by *paññā* and how can it be attained?
16. What does T.W. Rhys Davids say about *nibbāna*?