

# What is Nibbāna?



by  
Bhikkhu Pesala



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Bhikkhu Pesala

Association for Insight Meditation

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# Preface

Nibbāna is extremely subtle and hard to describe. It is not a place like heaven or paradise. The Arahants and Buddhas do not “enter” nibbāna when they die. Nibbāna is not annihilation of the self, since the so-called ‘self’ does not exist — though attaining nibbāna entails the annihilation of egoism. It is blissful, but there is no feeling associated with it. In fact, because there is no feeling in nibbāna it is truly peaceful. Only Noble Ones can know what nibbāna is really like, but we can understand fairly well by inference and constant practise of insight meditation.

The more we understand what suffering is, the better we can appreciate the value of nibbāna, which is the end of suffering. For example, if you burn your hand it is very painful for some time afterwards. However, when the burn heals you don’t feel the pain any more. The absence of pain is a subtle kind of happiness; because there is no pain there now, you feel at ease.

To get the taste of nibbāna we should practise constant mindfulness. One who practises constant mindfulness of the body knows the taste of nibbāna. When the mind is racing out of control, as it usually is, we don’t experience any real peace. The whole day we are busy with this and that: thinking, planning, scheming, worrying, fretting, reminiscing, fantasising, etc. When we are truly mindful, the mind is almost silent and purified to a great extent from mental defilements. If you can gain good concentration for one or two hours you will be able to understand how blissful nibbāna would be. Then you will surely long to attain it, and give up worldly ways of thinking, and all worldly ambitions.

First, we must understand how desirable nibbāna is, and how profoundly unsatisfactory sensual pleasures are. Some people ask, “Isn’t the desire for nibbāna just another kind of craving?” No, it is not. The desire for nibbāna means the desire to be free from greed, hatred, and delusion. It is the spiritual quest that is latent in all human beings. We must awaken the thirst for understanding. The desire for freedom

is a wholesome mental state called '*chanda iddhipāda*', which is opposed to desire.

Below are some extracts about nibbāna from "The Debate of King Milinda" in which I abridged the translation of the Milinda Pañha. The Milinda Pañha is an ancient Pāḷi book compiled in the form of a dialogue between a Buddhist Sage, Nāgasena, and a Bactrian Greek King, Milinda or Menander. There is good reason to suppose that the dialogues described in the Milinda Pañha did actually take place, at least in some form.

Bhikkhu Pesala

# What is Nibbāna?

“Is cessation nibbāna?”

“Yes, O king. All foolish worldlings take pleasure in the senses and their objects; they find delight in them and cling to them. Hence they are carried down by the flood [of passion] and are not released from birth and suffering. However, the wise disciple of the noble ones does not delight in those things. So craving ceases in him. Thence, attachment ceases, becoming ceases, birth ceases, old age, death, grief, lamentation, pain, sorrow and despair cease to exist. Thus it is that cessation is nibbāna.”

“Does everyone attain nibbāna?”

“Not all, O king; but whoever conducts himself rightly, understands what should be understood, perceives what should be perceived, abandons what should be abandoned, develops what should be developed and realises what should be realised; he attains nibbāna.”

“Can one who has not attained nibbāna know that it is blissful?”

“Yes indeed, O king. As those who have not had their hands and feet cut off can know how painful a condition it is by the cries of those who have; so can those who have not attained nibbāna know it is blissful by hearing the joyful words of those who have attained it.”

## The Uncaused

“Nāgasena, there are things in the world that have come into existence through kamma, others are the result of a cause, and others are produced by season. Tell me, is there anything that does not fall into either of these three categories?”

“There are two such things, O king; space and nibbāna.”

“Do not, Venerable Nāgasena, corrupt the words of the Conqueror, or answer a question without knowing what you are saying!”

“What have I said, O king, that you speak to me thus?”

“Venerable sir, it is right what you say about space, but with hundreds of reasons did the Blessed One proclaim to his

disciples the way to the realisation of nibbāna and yet you say that nibbāna is not the result of any cause.”

“It is true, O king, that in many ways did the Blessed One point out a way to the realisation of nibbāna, but he did not point out a cause for the arising of nibbāna.”

“Here, Nāgasena, we go from darkness to greater darkness; from uncertainty to utter confusion. If there is a father of a child we would expect to find a father of the father. Just so, if there is a cause for the realisation of nibbāna we would expect to find a cause for its arising.”

“Nibbāna, O king, is unconstructed, therefore no cause has been pointed out for its production. It cannot be said of nibbāna that it has arisen or can arise; that it is past, present, or future; or cognisable by the eye, ear, nose, tongue, or body.”

“Then, Nāgasena, nibbāna is a condition that does not exist!”

“Nibbāna does exist, O king, and can be cognised by the mind. A noble disciple whose mind is pure, lofty, sincere, unobstructed and free from craving can attain nibbāna.”

“Then explain by means of similes what nibbāna is.”

“Is there such a thing as the wind?”

“Yes there is.”

“Then explain by means of similes what the wind is.”

“It is not possible to explain what the wind is by means of similes, but it exists all the same.”

“Just so, O king, nibbāna exists, but it is impossible to describe.”

### **Modes of Production**

“What is it that is kamma-born, what cause-born, and what season-born? What is it that is none of these?”

“All beings, O king are kamma-born. Fire, and all things growing out of seeds are cause-born. The earth, water, and wind are season-born. Space and nibbāna exist independently of kamma, cause, and season. Of nibbāna, O king, it cannot be said that it is perceptible by the five senses, but it is perceptible by the mind. The disciple whose mind is pure, and free from obstructions can perceive nibbāna.”



### **The Bliss of Nibbāna**

“Is nibbāna entirely blissful or is it partly painful?”

“It is entirely blissful.”

“But that I cannot accept. Those who seek it have to practise austerity and exertion of body and mind, abstention from food at the wrong time, suppression of sleep, restraint of the senses, and they have to give up wealth, family, and friends. They are blissful who enjoy the pleasures of the senses, but you restrain and prevent such pleasures and so experience physical and mental discomfort and pain.”

“O king, nibbāna has no pain; what you call pain is not nibbāna. It is true that those who seek nibbāna experience pain and discomfort, but afterwards they experience the unalloyed bliss of nibbāna. I will tell you a reason for that. Is there, O king, such a thing as the bliss of the sovereignty of kings?”

“Yes there is.”

“Is it mixed with pain?”

“No.”

“But why is it then, O king, that when the frontier provinces have revolted, kings have to set out from their palaces and march over uneven ground, tormented by mosquitoes and hot winds, and engage in fierce battles at the risk of their lives?”

“That, venerable Nāgasena, is not the bliss of sovereignty. It is only the preliminary stage in the pursuit of that bliss. It is after they have won it that they enjoy the bliss of sovereignty. That bliss, Nāgasena, is not mixed with pain.”

“Just so, O king, nibbāna is unalloyed bliss and there is no pain mixed in it.”

### **Description of Nibbāna**

“Is it possible, Nāgasena, to point out the size, shape or duration of nibbāna by a simile?”

“No it is not possible; there is no other thing like it.”

“Is there then any attribute of nibbāna found in other things that can be demonstrated by a simile?”

“Yes that can be done.

“As a lotus is unwetted by water, nibbāna is unsullied by the defilements.

“Like water, it cools the fever of defilements and quenches the thirst of craving.

“Like medicine, it protects beings who are poisoned by the defilements, cures the disease of suffering, and nourishes like nectar.

“As the ocean is empty of corpses, nibbāna is empty of all defilements; as the ocean is not increased by all the rivers that flow into it, so nibbāna is not increased by all the beings who attain it; it is the abode of great beings [the arahants], and it is decorated with the waves of knowledge and freedom.

“Like food, which sustains life, nibbāna drives away old age and death; it increases the spiritual strength of beings; it gives the beauty of virtue, it removes the distress of the defilements, it relieves the exhaustion of all suffering.

“Like space, it is not born, does not decay or perish, it does not pass away here and arise elsewhere, it is invincible, thieves cannot steal it, it is not attached to anything, it is the sphere of Noble Ones who are like birds in space, it is unobstructed and it is infinite.

“Like a wish-fulfilling gem, it fulfils all desires, causes delight and is lustrous.

“Like red sandalwood, it is hard to get, its fragrance is incomparable and it is praised by good men.

“As ghee is recognisable by its special attributes, so nibbāna has special attributes; as ghee has a sweet fragrance, nibbāna has the sweet fragrance of virtue; as ghee has a delicious taste, nibbāna has the delicious taste of freedom.

“Like a mountain peak, it is very high, immovable, inaccessible to the defilements, it has no place where defilements can grow, and it is without favouritism or prejudice.”

### **The Realisation of Nibbāna**

“You say, Nāgasena, that nibbāna is neither past, nor present nor future, neither arisen, nor not arisen, nor producible. In

that case does the man who realises nibbāna realise something already produced, or does he himself produce it first and then realise it?"

"Neither of these, O king, yet nibbāna does exist."

"Do not, Nāgasena, answer this question by making it obscure! Make it clear and elucidate it. It is a point on which people are bewildered and lost in doubt. Break this dart of uncertainty."

"The element of nibbāna does exist, O king, and he who practises rightly and who rightly comprehends the formations according to the teachings of the Conqueror, he, by his wisdom, realises nibbāna.

"How is nibbāna to be shown? By freedom from distress and danger, by purity and by coolness. As a man, afraid and terrified at having fallen among enemies, would be relieved and blissful when he had escaped to a safe place; or as one fallen into a pit of filth would be at ease and glad when he had got out of the pit and cleaned up; or as one trapped in a forest fire would be calm and cool when he had reached a safe spot. As fearful and terrifying should you regard the anxiety that arises again and again on account of birth, old age, disease, and death; as filth should you regard gain, honours, and fame; as hot and searing should you regard the three-fold fire of desire, hatred, and delusion.

"How does he who is practising rightly realise nibbāna? He rightly grasps the cyclic nature of formations and therein he sees only birth, old age, disease, and death; he sees nothing pleasant or agreeable in any part of it. Seeing nothing there to be taken hold of, as on a red-hot iron ball, his mind overflows with discontent and a fever takes hold of his body; hopeless and without a refuge he becomes disgusted with repeated lives. To him who sees the terror of the treadmill of life the thought arises, 'On fire and blazing is this wheel of life, full of suffering and despair. If only there could be an end to it, that would be peaceful, that would be excellent; the cessation

of all mental formations, the renunciation of grasping, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna!

“Therewith his mind leaps forward into the state where there is no becoming. Then has he found peace, then does he exult and rejoice at the thought, ‘A refuge has been found at last!’ He strives along the path for the cessation of formations, searches it out, develops it, and makes much of it. To that end he stirs up his mindfulness, energy and joy; and from attending again and again to that thought [of disgust with mental formations], having transcended the treadmill of life, he brings the cycle to a halt. One who stops the treadmill is said to have realised nibbāna.”

### **Where is Nibbāna?**

“Is there a place, Nāgasena, where nibbāna is stored up?”

“No there is not, yet it does exist. As there is no place where fire is stored up yet it may be produced by rubbing two dry sticks together.”

“But is there any place on which a man might stand and realise nibbāna?”

“Yes there is; virtue is the place; standing on that, and with reasoning, wherever he might be, whether in the land of the Scythians or the Bactrians, whether in China or Tibet, in Kashmir or Gandhāra, on a mountain top or in the highest heavens; the one who practises rightly realises nibbāna.”

“Very good, Nāgasena, you have taught about nibbāna, you have explained about the realisation of nibbāna, you have praised the qualities of virtue, shown the right way of practice, raised aloft the banner of the Dhamma, established the Dhamma as a leading principle, not barren nor without fruit are the efforts of those with right aims!”

## About the Milinda Pañha

The Milinda Pañha was written over two thousand years ago, not very long after the time of the Buddha. Venerable Nāgasena was reputed to be an Arahant, though I suppose that Milinda (Menander), being a Bactrian Greek king, was a non-Buddhist from birth. It is apparent from the range of his questions that he had a thorough knowledge of Buddhist teachings. Though the dialogues probably did take place — it may not have been in the form that we now have. The Milinda Pañha could have been compiled by a Buddhist scholar to please the Greek king, perhaps being based on conversations in the Greek king's court. Whatever its origin may be, it is included in the Pali Canon, and is regarded by Theravādins as a masterly exposition of the Buddha Dhamma.

### How Can One Realise Nibbāna?

All true Buddhists want to know the answer to this question. Many people in modern times have realised nibbāna. Those who practise meditation intensively with systematic mindfulness, as taught by Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw of Burma or other great teachers, will have a good chance to realise it, but they must be exceptionally diligent. Many lay people, both young and old, have been successful in their practice. Those who were successful practised mindfulness throughout the whole day and late into the night without a break, for long periods — for several months, not just a few weeks. If anyone claimed to have attained nibbāna after practising for only a week or two, I would be very sceptical, unless they had done a lot of meditation previously. Although there are plenty of accounts in the Tipiṭaka of rapid and sudden attainment when conditions were ripe, it is rare to find people with such great ability nowadays. Most people will have to struggle for several days just to gain mental purity. After that, insight will begin to arise, but mature insight requires deep concentration and strenuous effort, so only a few will succeed. Nevertheless, if

one gains mental purity and the early stages of insight, one will enjoy very significant benefits that will radically alter one's outlook on life.

One should take the practice of meditation seriously. One should not underestimate the task, but neither should one assume that nibbāna is beyond one's reach. If one assumes that realisation is impossible, one will not make strenuous efforts, then nibbāna will be unattainable.

Several requirements are indispensable to attain nibbāna. Impeccable morality is the first. Most people break one or more of the five precepts from time to time. However, if one makes a sincere commitment to observe the precepts perfectly when taking up meditation, moral purity is established. Then one must practise strictly according to the instructions given, without hiding any moral lapses from the teacher.

For serious meditation, five precepts are not enough. To attain nibbāna while still indulging in and attached to sensual pleasures is impossible. One must observe eight precepts, which includes chastity, abstention from entertainments, and moderation in eating. One must be willing to bear physical discomfort caused by hunger, loss of sleep, etc. The middle path does not mean a moderate amount of effort — it means a strenuous effort, but avoiding extremes like complete abstinence from food and sleep. Diligent meditators must sleep very little (less than six hours), but practising for the whole night is not recommended. Wakefulness is the second essential requirement.

Effort must be continuous and uninterrupted. Each time one puts down the burden of contemplation, it takes time to pick it up again. Momentum will be lost, and progress will slow down dramatically. If one changes one's sitting posture every time pain arises, one will not gain deep concentration. A meditator must practise with a "do or die" effort, regardless of concerns for comfort, health, or life itself. Continuity is the third essential requirement.

Although meditation should be practised at home whenever possible, it is not the right environment to develop insight. In your own home you will be at ease, which is conducive to concentration, but you are also very likely to be interrupted. It is barely possible to gain continuous mindfulness while practising at home. One should go to a quiet place or a meditation centre to practise continuously for as long as one can manage. Twenty-four hours is long enough to gain concentration. A ten-day course should be sufficient to gain significant insight, but to attain nibbāna one should practise continuously, or attend regular ten-day courses, until the goal is reached. A supportive environment is the fourth essential requirement.

One should also have the guidance of a skilled teacher. Right understanding is indispensable to success in meditation. There are so many spiritual paths, and even within Buddhism there are many different traditions and meditation methods, so a beginner is sure to be perplexed. The Buddha's most important discourse on mindfulness, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, begins by saying, "This, monks, is the only way for the purification of beings, for the transcendence of grief and lamentation, for the extinction of pain and sorrow, for attaining the right method, for the realisation of nibbāna." Yet the same discourse contains at least six different meditation techniques. Other discourses describe different ways to attain concentration, but they all revert to the Satipaṭṭhāna method to develop insight.

One should understand the difference between concentration and insight, and know the distinction between a meditation technique, and the comprehensive method of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*). We should note several key points about the way to nibbāna:

### Key Points About the Way to Nibbāna

1. Nibbāna is the cessation of craving, so the way to it opposes defilements. The purpose of insight meditation is not to get 'blissed out', though one will experience

plenty of joy and bliss if one practises energetically. At the higher stages of insight one must become thoroughly weary of the mental and physical processes. Only such world weariness can lead to nibbāna.

2. The Middle Way is not the easy way. Progress may be relatively pain free for an individual with very little attachment, and it may be swift for someone of keen intellect, but for the average person it will require prolonged and strenuous effort. One should expect to encounter difficulties on the way. Be wary of teachers who claim that it there is an easy route.
3. Insight meditation must focus on realities that can be known in the present moment. All mental and physical phenomena must be investigated as soon as they occur within one's mind to realise their true nature.
4. Thinking and theory are far away from direct insight knowledge. Thinking must be observed with bare awareness to realise its true nature. Reading and listening to discourses are only an aid to practice.
5. All conditioned things are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self. If meditation does not reveal these three characteristics, it is not insight meditation, and does not lead to nibbāna.
6. In the discourse on the Eight Thoughts of a Great Man to Venerable Anuruddha, the Buddha said, "This Dhamma [nibbāna] is for one who wants little, not for one who wants much; for the contented, not for the discontented; for the secluded, not for one fond of society; for the energetic, not for the lazy; for the mindful, not for the unmindful; for the composed, not for the flustered; for the wise, not for the unwise; for one who is precise and who delights in precision, not for the vague or for one who delights in diffuseness." (A. iv. 227)