

Nibbāna (4 of 5) Functions of *Nibbāna*

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Today is the fourth talk on the topic of *nibbāna*. In some circles, there's a lot of intense conversation about what *nibbāna* is, with the idea that it's a noun, a thing, or a particular state – as if it has to be some thing.

It is hard to give a clear idea of this experience of deep release in terms of what it is because mostly it is an absence of something. Maybe we don't need to know what is left in this absence. Sometimes this need to know, to understand is a real hindrance that gets in the way of living the freedom that we have experienced. Rather than trying to define what *nibbāna* is – a movement of freedom, a release, a deep letting go and non-clinging – what is important about *nibbāna* is how it functions for us.

If a person is thirsty, the molecular structure of water is not important. What's important is the function of water to quench this thirst. Questions about the molecular structure of *nibbāna* (is it a form of consciousness, is it a form of some transcendent state, some ultimate reality, some thing that's unconditioned) may be beside the point. What's important about *nibbāna* is how it functions for us, and how we're changed by it.

This transformation is, in fact, one of the ways liberation is discussed in the Buddhist tradition. The advantage of seeing *nibbāna* as the way we have been transformed is that it is a protection against clinging. It helps us to avoid making a self out of that experience and thinking: "Now I have had that experience; now I'm that kind of person." Focussing on the change is also a protection against getting too preoccupied with opinions about what *nibbāna* really is.

Perhaps different people have different experiences of *nibbāna*, different ways in which they go through it, or ways in which they touch into something like freedom. We don't want to make the experience too concrete; instead, we want to understand how it's going to function for us.

One of the functions of *nibbāna* is to release a person from attachments. Attachments mean clinging: ways the mind has gotten contracted, tight, compulsive, or driven by certain desires, aversions, ideas, feelings, or motivations. This is a drivenness, compulsion, contracting, grabbing hold, and insistence that this is how it's going to be, where we are pushed by something. Even if we don't want it, we may not be able to help ourselves because this is a very compelling drive. The ancient language uses the word "thirst" (which we usually translate as "craving") as a metaphor for these driven desires that we are becoming free from. So, this function of *nibbāna* is to begin the process of freeing us from the desire of thirst, which has compulsion in it.

Another function is to begin to understand where the path of freedom leads and where the open doors are. It becomes increasingly clear that the path is not to be found in precepts, rituals, or certain rules of behavior. Rituals and precepts can be useful in human life, and they have an important place. But they in themselves are not the direct experience, the direct movement of opening the doors of the mind and the heart, or becoming free. So part of what the Buddha is pointing to with liberation is the possibility of having a vision of where freedom is found, a vision of where the doors may be opened to allow our awareness to be clear and free.

That idea of a vision is encapsulated in the first step of the Eightfold Path: right view (right vision), (MN 9). Having right view means we have had a clear enough experience of freedom to have inner sight. The Buddha described this as the "opening of the Dharma eye." Now we have a feeling for and a clear recognition of what freedom of the

mind is – where the mind is at ease, peaceful, and happy, and the doors are open. When we have this experience, we can see the direct path to freedom.

Precepts, rules, and rituals are not as direct as this direct path of the Buddha. Rituals can be such a big part of some people's lives that they may think the rituals themselves are going to be freeing, but the Buddha suggests otherwise. The Buddha was also quite adamant that believing in philosophies and metaphysical ideas – believing that certain ideas are ultimate – is just a trap. Freedom is not found there even if they are good ideas and true statements. Freedom is found in non-clinging, in release.

Something else that becomes clear, when *nibbāna* is clear enough, is that the sense of release – and the openness, freedom, radiance, light, clarity, happiness, ease, and well-being that come with it – is independent of any idea of an essential, permanent, reified, true self.

In the ancient language, *sakkāya* means “a true body, a true group of things.” “Sa” means “true” here, and “kāya” means “body.” In the ancient world, there were people who believed there was such a thing as a true body essence that we had to realize or find so that we could be free. The Buddha said *nibbāna*, freedom, releases us from any preoccupation, concern, or desire to find this kind of true, essential, authentic essence. The experience of freedom shows that it is not needed. It's also not there in the freedom, in the open door. Some people define *nibbāna* as a clear recognition of not self. The absence of self in that direct experience is very freeing and wonderful to have.

Another function of this experience of *nibbāna* (freedom from greed, hate, and delusion) is to have a crystal clear understanding of the difference between being caught in greed, hate, and delusion, and the absence of being caught. When the freedom from being caught is that clear, then a person has a first-hand experience of what the Dharma is, what the Buddha was teaching. It's not abstract philosophy; it's not something complicated. It's the really clear recognition of this potential we have to shed our preoccupation with clinging, attachments, aversion, and hostility. All this comes from having a qualitative, clear experience of that ease, peace, and freedom, and realizing that it is possible.

Then we understand that *this* is what the Buddha was about. Knowing that this is what he was teaching gives a person an unshakable confidence in the three refuges – in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, not because of any dogmatic belief, but because they know for themselves something that can never be taken away. This tremendous confidence arises because it's personal: you *know* this is possible. This is a confidence in the value of being free, the value of not clinging or being attached, and the value of keeping the doors open in the mind and the heart. We learn how to do that in a wise, effective, and safe way, and not succumb to the belief that we have to close the doors, to cling, or to have aversion.

The quintessential function of *nibbāna* is a tremendous confidence in the potential for freedom. This first experience of *nibbāna* is not necessarily going to be complete letting go of all the clinging and attachments we have. It's a letting go that may be complete for a short time before some of our clinging comes back. But now we know the practice is not to believe the clinging, give it authority, or invest ourselves in the world of clinging. The path is towards freedom. The path is to find those open doors in the maze of the mind so that life can flow through us, instead of having life experiences getting stopped and gummed up in our hearts and minds.

The next talk in this series will be about the relationship between *nibbāna* and the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path arises out of the experience of *nibbāna*.

Thank you so much.