

## Nibbāna for our Challenged World

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So again, our greetings. I'm just coming to the end of teaching a week-long retreat, which was quite nice for me. So I have a little bit of retreat energy, I think, or feeling in me, and also very aware of. And here in the United States, in just a couple of days, we have this big event of the election that has many people anxious and agitated. And so with all this in mind, thinking about what I might talk about this morning, I'll talk about something which is a response to, or is maybe a response to, what's happening in the wider world. That is one of the core responses Buddhism has, and that is to talk about the ultimate goal of Buddhism, which is usually called *nibbāna* in English. It's *nirvāṇa*.

It's a very different topic, for they usually talk about before a national election, and usually for the last seven national election presidential elections. I've talked about the ten qualities of a *Dhamma rāja*: a ruler who rules by the *Dhamma*, the *Dharma*, who rules with justice. So today, I don't think I want to do this. It seems like that very topical. There is in Buddhism often considered to be a divide, or maybe it's healthier to say a distinction between the world of governing in politics and the world of spiritual freedom. And that divide is sometimes way too big, the gap between them, and involves a kind of pulling away too far from being involved in the world. But still, that distinction is there.

And that distinction arises not because Buddhists are pulling away from the world, but rather because the world is pulling away from freedom, from peace. And what Buddhism has at its centre is a capacity or a potential to discover a kind of ultimate peace, a phenomenal peace deep down inside, deep within. And it's a potential we all have, but it's seldom discovered, because the mind is often too active. Often that activity of the mind is to run after thoughts, ideas, desires, to be pushed around by aversions and things we don't like. And in Buddhism, this is called a cyclic existence, and sometimes it's considered cyclic in terms of multiple lives.

I don't think so much about multiple lives, but I do think about, in just a day, how the mind can cycle through and kind of spin and be caught up in kind of a loop of wanting and not wanting that feeds itself off.

If we're worried about something and thinking about something, it makes us feel not so good. Often a kind of self-alienation happens if we spend too much time being concerned and worried about things around us, and that self-alienation makes for discomfort, and then that discomfort gives birth to greater or more continuous caution and fear and anxiety. Or same thing with desire. If too much desire, pursuing what we want, and getting some, getting control of things, and holding everything at bay, and getting things just right, and also leads to a kind of self-alienation that makes us feel off. And one response to feeling off is to reach out for something that's going to comfort us, to do something good for us. And the more we go outside for our happiness, outside and focus around us, the less we're in touch with what's here for us.

The less we're in touch, the more some people, out of habit of being uncomfortable, will go out, blame other things. I want other things. I have a cautionary eye up all the time about what's going around to protect us. And so this in Buddhism is understood sometimes to be a cyclic phenomenon, that self-reinforces itself. And sometimes if we think, If I just have that thing, then I'll be ok, and then we get the thing, and we find out we're not quite satisfied, and some people get to a middle age or old age, and realize, you know, all these things I've been pursuing, they were good in some way, maybe important in some ways, but they didn't really satisfy some deeper yearning, some deeper feeling of connection to something much more important. And something's left out.

And so this *nibbāna* is coming to touch into what's being left out. To touch into that place where there can be not the caught up in loops and the cycles of existence and of the mind wanting and not wanting, but the place where the mind can feel deeply safe, deeply contented, deeply at peace and just at rest in itself. And not to pull away from the world, but then to be in the world in a whole different way, a radically different way. And it's hard to understand that sometimes we have to step back from the world for a while, to do this deep inner work, so we can return in a whole different way, in a way that Buddhism sometimes says is kind of a rebirth. So it's kind of like, you know, as simple as, you know, we sometimes we'll take a shower to make ourselves much more pleasant for other people to be around, and so we withdraw and go into the bathroom, into the shower, get ourselves clean, and then we come back out. And most people don't complain that we've gone off to take a shower, to be showered in *nibbāna*, to be showered in *nirvāṇa*.

To be showered in this peace is a cleansing process, and it cleanses us so that we can come back to the world cleaner, and so being more beneficial for the people around us. So *nibbāna nirvāṇa* is defined in the teachings of the Buddha as the ending of something, and a kind of definitive ending. And most specifically, it's the ending of all things that are motivated by compulsive desire, usually called greed, sometimes called passion or lust. But it's compulsive desire. All things that are motivated by hostility, sometimes called hate, kind of pushing things away and rejecting things, and all things that are somehow rooted in delusion, being confused about things, having ideas which are not really true, and projecting them on others, on the world, and on ourselves. And so the ending of projections, the ending of hostility, the ending of compulsive desire is a possibility.

*Nibbāna* is defined as the definitive end of those. And it doesn't necessarily mean that it's finished forever. There can be a provisional *nibbāna*, where for a short period of time a person has this very definitive, clear experience that these things have stopped. It's possible to have a mind that's really stopped, and that's different than just being paused or being distracted from them, or going someplace and sitting under an oak tree in a park, and just everything kind of becomes peaceful and calm. That's all very nice. And you can say, Oh, there's no greed, hatred, illusion. But a *nibbāna* is something happens where it's like almost takes your breath away, Oh, this has really come to an end. It's stopped.

And so the highest goal in Buddhism is the ending of something. Sometimes the language is that of freedom, becoming free of something. Freedom from bondage, or freedom from attachments and clinging and graspings, freedom from over-identification with anything, and freedom from anxiety. And all these things—desire, greed, anxiety, delusion—have this quality of being self-perpetuating. There's a kind of authority in them, sometimes a desperation, sometimes a drive that here's where the answer is: This is what has to be done. Of course I have to get what I want. Of course I'm not one. Be safe until I get. I won't be successful until I get. Of course I should push things away.

Of course things should be blamed and be critical because only then will the world behave and something. Of course I should be anxious because it is a frightening world to live in. Of course my projections are true when all my opinions are true, and everyone should know it. I don't know if any of this characterizes you, but there's a kind of a sense of a coin, compulsion, a sense of authority, a sense of and has to be. Now, it has to be. This is important, and it overrides anything else. And what it overrides is something which is very, so sometimes the tradition calls it very subtle, and sometimes it calls it very hard to see. And that is the ending of those things, the cessation of greed, hatred and delusion, the cessation of anxiety. And

why it's hard to see, and why it's subtle, is because it's not a thing in the usual sense of things. It's not something you can clearly touch.

It's not something you can clearly see and focus your eyes on, not something you can hear. It's an absence. It's in the release. In other words, is used for this *nibbāna*, the release of attachments and clinging and compulsions. In that release, there is the absence of greed, hate and delusion. But you can't quite see that, but you can feel a difference. In the language of the Buddha, greed, hate, and delusion—a metaphor for them are fires, and they burn, and fires hurt, and now they burn us. And so these fires are burning, and the release, the calming, the quieting, the going out of the fires is the very things that hurt us. And this is one of the also difficult things to understand, and takes some mindfulness, that strong compulsive desire, compulsive hatred, projections, delusion, are kind of stressful to have. It's kind of a self-inflicted suffering and harm, even.

And so we start seeing that when we start meditating, and get calm enough, and we get calm and settled, and we feel how the rising of aversion, hostility, criticalness, the arising of wanting something different, it feels like there's a loss. There's a loss of intimacy, a loss of being deeply connected to ourselves. There's a loss to something, a loss of peace. So it's The Quieting of the Fires is sometimes called peace, but it's hard sometimes to appreciate that peace is important. Sometimes it can feel like it's selfish, and sometimes it can feel like, you know, then I would abandon the world and not take care of it, just about my peace. Hopefully it's the opposite. They'll talk about that. But the with the So the metaphor for the greed, hatred, delusion is fire. The metaphor for an awakened mind is light and illumination. And the thing about light is that a light doesn't hurt, usually unless it's too intense.

I guess looking at the sun, but it's a particular light that's most often used as a metaphor for awakening is moonlight. The light of the full moon, sometimes referred to as a cool light, a glow. It's often very pleasant and enjoyable and peaceful to look at the full moon hanging there peacefully in the sky. And so illumination. Remember what? The fires of greed, delusion are replaced by the light of wisdom, the light of freedom, the light of peace, the light of awareness that's free. And so that can be felt. But sometimes it's really that subtle, because without any drive to hold on to anything, to hold on to ideas, you can't quite touch this freedom, can't quite touch this peace. It's really a radical feeling of absence, and an absence that's hard to appreciate. However, I think that it doesn't take a lot of reflection to realize that our lives are filled with beneficial absence.

We're something not there, and we realize, Oh, that's good. An example that I taught yesterday was that of you're late for a very important appointment, and there's a lot of traffic.

You're driving. There's a lot of it's hot, and a lot of small smoke and smog. You're stuck in gridlock traffic. You can watch the time ticking by, and you see clearly. You can be late for your meeting. You're not going to make it. You're honking your horn. You're trying to zigzag around you. A lot of stress, a lot. This is so important, this meeting. You can't not be there. And then, because you're stuck in traffic and can't move at all, you decide to look at your calendar on your smartwatch, smartphone, and look at the calendar, you low and behold, you have the week wrong. The meeting is next week, and the meeting that you're waiting for, the meeting that you were expecting to go to for this day, doesn't exist. It's absence. It's gone. It's nowhere. It's not a thing. But boy, the absence of that thing, the non-existence of that meeting, is like the best news you've heard all day. Everything relaxes. Everything softens. You let go of all the stress and tension that built up. And it's kind of become kind of an amazing thing to realize that all this tension arose around something which actually didn't exist. It was a fantasy of your mind. Through the confusion about the dates, the absence of the meeting was really significant for your well-being.

So the absence of greed, hate, and delusion or something like that as well. Sometimes what we have greed, hatred, and delusion about doesn't really exist, or the promise, the guarantee of what they're supposed to do for us doesn't really exist. And many people have gotten what they want, and then well, that was nice. But, you know, now I want more or something different. But rather, sometimes what we want is beneficial. And this is one of the difficult kind of issues is that healthy things to want healthy things. They want to change and get rid of the way in which we want it. The way in which we push it away is not healthy. The compulsion, the contraction, the tightening up, the stress involved in wanting and not wanting. Even something that's appropriate to want and not want is deleterious.

As we learn to let go of compulsive desire, compulsive hostility, compulsive anxiety and have this absence, then we can learn how to also then to pursue healthy desires in a healthy way, healthy things that should be stopped and pushed away in a healthy way. And there's no reason not to be energetically engaged in making the world a better place, if that's appropriate for you. But to do it from this place, absence of compulsion. And for some people that means acts, absence of living, and expectations even for being successful. Of course you do something, and if it does not work out, then you take care of the next situation or address that and figure out what to do next. But we do the best we can.

So we sit in Buddhism ultimately to begin discovering the benefits of an absence. And it's possible through meditation to begin becoming attuned to absences rather than to presences. If we're always looking at what's present and want what's present to always be just right,

then we're always adjusting and looking, and we're always dependent on things being a certain way, and things will change, and so they're not the way that we thought they should be. And so it's sometimes an ever never ending phenomenon of adjusting and changing the deck chairs on the Titanic just to get everything just right. But an absence is not a thing, and the absence, in a kind of way, is undisputable, or you can lose touch with it. But it's not something we create, and it's not something that can be destroyed or change or become something else unless we get pulled into some other thing.

But the absence itself is more like the space in a large maybe studio in which a dancer is free to move in that space that you dancer could not do in a closet. The absence in the mind, the absence in the heart of grasped delusion is freedom. This is where freedom resides. Allows for a lot of movement, a breath of fresh air. But it's a place of absence. And so to begin tuning in and noticing whenever there's an absence. Where do you feel like your breathing room? This is good. It turns out there might be more absence in your life, healthy *nibbāna*-like absence of freedom, much more than you realize. And they realize we don't realize it with recent reason. We don't realize it. It is because the mind has a strong tendency to go on to the next thing, next thought, idea, desire, aversion, always grabbing on to something.

But to begin appreciating how things are absent, how right now there's an absence of strong desire, absence of desire, absence of aversion. It may be absence of projection, Oh, this is nice. Let's not quickly get into the next thought and idea. Let's kind of feel this and take it in, especially as meditation gets more and more quiet and still. And that's like having an open door in the heart or in the mind to start feeling these absences. And it's like going into those open doors, into a greater and greater spaciousness of absence, of stillness, of silence, of freedom is really great.

So *nibbāna*, the ultimate kind of destination for Buddhist practice, Lilian's point of view of the Buddha, is often called the ending of greed, hate, and delusion. And that kind of sometimes it's the word *nibbāna* is translated as quenching or extinguishing. And that also doesn't sound very inspiring. It often refers to the quenching or the extinguishing of the fire that's burning us. But I want to end this talk with a list. And then I want to say something about a list of thirty-three synonyms for *nibbāna*. And then I want to say something about this distinction between *nibbāna*, the pursuit of *nibbāna*, and the pursuit of politics and governing. Put all this in kind context this week.

So it's often this list is often described as thirty-three synonyms for *nibbāna*. It's actually not synonyms of *nibbāna*, but its synonyms of the ending of greed, hate, and delusion. There is a teaching that all the passages in all the text is exactly the same, and then it's each of them

a substitute. One of these words. And so once I give you one example of a sentence, it says, What is the Uncreated? It is the ending of greed, hatred, and delusion. What is *nibbāna*? It's the ending of greed, hatred, and delusion. So all these words are substitutes that are explaining, that are explained by that is the ending of greed, hatred, and delusion.

So it's interesting. You listen to the most feel emotional associations maybe, or the inner feelings that come with each of these words, if you allow them to come and receive them and hear them kind of deeply, and maybe even putting aside everything I've said so far, just to hear each word:

- the Uncreated
- the Unbowed
- the taint free truth
- the other shore
- subtle
- very difficult to see
- unaging
- stable
- not disintegrating
- without attributes
- undifferentiated
- peaceful
- not dying
- sublime
- happy
- tranquil
- the ending of craving
- wonderful
- amazing health
- healthy *nibbāna*
- without hostility
- dispassion
- purity
- freedom
- non clinging
- the island

- safety
- shelter
- refuge
- the destination

Though some of those are very positive concepts, ideas, feelings, *nibbāna* is understood to be one of the greatest happiness and greatest experience of peace a human being can experience and know. But this, you know, to have this, to fulfil this potential, we have to end suffering. That is what this *nibbāna* knows all about. It's ending the causes of suffering. It's ending the things that bring us suffering, and the ways in which we harm ourselves from the inside out, the ways in which we burn ourselves. It's a phenomenal thing to discover this, to discover this potential for a radical, deep sense of peace and happiness, and now to be free of suffering.

I believe that it's important that some people do this work to find the end of hostility, the end of the drive for power, the greed for power, the end of endless desires for consumption, the end of all the delusions of projections and bias and racism and prejudice that exists in our world. To really discover how fully these things can be put to rest, and to know that this is a kind of a birthright we all have. It's all a potential we all have. Otherwise, we'll think that we just have to constantly be bumping into each other, my desire against your desire, my aversion against your aversion. And you know, kind of there's always then something that we are always trying to, some conflict that we're trying to deal with. Is it possible? It is possible to come to a place where we can live in the world without conflict, without being the source of conflict, and to know that it's possible to be deeply free of suffering. And I think in some ways that's what most people want. People are looking for happiness, looking not to suffer, looking to be safe, looking for refuge, looking for peace. And to really have some people really discover that, yes, this can be found inside is important for everyone to understand, and it creates a very different context for our political life, their public life.

And I hope that as this nation of United States goes through whatever it goes through over the next weeks, months, years, that we can respond wisely and caringly and supportingly for the people around us, for the country as a whole, where we never take recourse to hostility. We never take recourse to the lust for power. We never take recourse to delusions about other people in projections of self forces other than that are so endemic and painful in our society. Now, may we really drop deep down inside to have enough experience of freedom from greed, freedom from hostility, and freedom from delusion that we can engage in our civic work and our civic responsibilities without those three things motivating how we behave. And in doing so,



to be able to also work in this world for a better world without anxiety. What a gift we will be to others if we can work for a better world and at the same time show people that it's possible to be happy. It's possible to live without anxiety, without hostility, and without greed. This is probably the greatest benefit we can give another person, more than any material gain for many people, or more than many other things that could happen, maybe should happen. But to discover this infinite freedom, infinite peace inside this is the great thing. So *nibbāna* for this world, freedom from greed, hatred and delusion.

So thank you very much, and I hope you give some thought to this talk and to the message I'm making about the possibility of being involved with civic work at making this a better world without anxiety and without hostility. And may that be contagious. May that be what spreads across the lands. Thank you.