

NIBBANA FOR EVERYONE

by

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu

(adapted and translated by Santikaro Bhikkhu)

When you hear the words "*Nibbana* for everyone," many of you will shake your heads. You'll think that I'm trying to ["dye cats for sale"\(1\)](#) and probably don't have any interest in the subject. This only happens because you understand the meaning of such words too narrowly and out of line with the truth.

In the schools children are taught that ["Nibbana\(2\)"](#) is the death of an Arahant. The ordinary man in the street has been taught that it's a special city empty of pain and chock full of the happiness of fulfilled wishes, supposedly reached after death by those who store up perfections (*parami*) over tens of thousands of lifetimes. Modern social developers see it as an obstruction to progress that we shouldn't get involved with or even discuss. Students in general consider it a matter for devout old folks at the temple with nothing of relevance for them. Young men and women think it's bland and unexciting, awful and frightening. All the candidates for the monkhood merely mouth without understanding the vow, "May I go forth in order to awaken to *Nibbana*." The old monks say *Nibbana* can't happen anymore in this day and age, and that an Arahant cannot exist anymore either. So finally, *Nibbana* has become a secret that no one cares about. They've turned it into something barren and silent, buried away in the scriptures, to be paid occasional service in sermons while no one really knows what it is.

In fact, without this business of *Nibbana*, Buddhism would be as good as dead. When nobody is interested in *Nibbana*, then nobody is genuinely interested in Buddhism. When nothing about *Nibbana* interests us, then we can't get any benefits at all from Buddhism. I feel that it's about time for us to get interested and bring about the highest benefit, as fits the words, "*Nibbana* is the Supreme Thing" — namely, the highest goal of living things, which is always inseparable from our daily lives.

Nibbana has nothing in the least to do with death. The word "Nibbana" means "coolness." Back when it was just an ordinary word that people used in their homes it also meant "coolness." When it is used as Dhamma language, in a religious context, it still means "coolness," but refers to the cooling or going out of the fires of defilement (*kilesa*, reactive emotions), while in the common people's usage it means the cooling of physical fires.

Throughout the Pali scriptures, the word "*Nibbana*" is never used in the sense of death. When death is discussed, the word "*marana*" is used. Otherwise, the word "*Parinibbana*" is used, such as when the Buddha said, "[The *Parinibbana* will occur three months from now.\(3\)](#)"

***Nibbana* Is One Of The Dhatus** (natural conditions). It is the coolness remaining when the defilements — greed, anger, fear, delusion — have ended. Two types of this element can be distinguished. In the first, the defilements are exhausted and cooled, but the sensory system, the organs that receive sensory stimuli aren't yet cool. In the second, this sensory system is also cooled. A white-hot charcoal illustrates the difference. When it first goes out, it is still too hot to be handled. We must wait a while longer until it is cool enough to be touched. Through the explanations of later generations the meaning of "*Nibbana*" has changed to "death." Such changes and lapses are commonplace in this world, so nowadays we Thais use the later distorted meaning. I myself was taught this way when I was a child. When I first became a bhikkhu, I still understood it erroneously and passed that understanding on to my friends and students. Only when I could study the original Pali texts for myself did I discover that *Nibbana* was a whole other affair than death. Instead, it's a kind of life that knows no death. *Nibbana* is the thing that sustains life, thus preventing death. It itself can never die, although the body must die eventually.

As things are, other Indian religions contemporary with Buddhism also used the word "Nibbana." In the Pali texts there's a passage about a Brahmin teacher named Bavari from the area of the Godhavari River in Southern India. He sent his sixteen students, also well-known teachers, to ask the Lord Buddha about his version of Nibbana. Some of them may have understood Nibbana to mean "death." In Theravada countries, this story is well known as ["the Sixteen Questions" \(of the students\).](#)(4) The point here is that the theme of Nibbana was the highest concern of the Indian religions contemporary with Buddhism. Further, there must have been at least one group that interpreted it as "death" and spread its teaching in the vicinity of "The Golden Land" (*Suvarnabhumi*, the ancient name of Siam) before Buddhism arrived here. Thus, it was left behind as the general understanding among the common folk, similar to what happened with *atta* (self) and *atman* (soul). Now we had better return to our examination of Nibbana as taught in Buddhism.

When Prince Siddhartha first took up the homeless spiritual life, he wandered in search of the Nibbana that is the total quenching of all dukkha – he wasn't looking for death! From the famous teachers of India at that time, he learned nothing higher than the experience of neither perception nor non-perception (*nevasanyanasanyayatana*), a degree of mental tranquility so deep that we can describe it neither as "death" nor as "non-death." He couldn't accept this as the supreme Nibbana, so he went off to search on his own until he discovered the Nibbana that is the coolness remaining when the defilements have finally ended. He called it "**the end of dukkha**," meaning the exhaustion of all the heat produced by defilements. However much the defilements are exhausted, there's that much coolness, until there is perfect coolness due to the defilements being finished completely. In short, to the degree that the defilements are ended, there will be that much coolness or Nibbana. That is, **Nibbana is the coolness resulting from the quenching of defilements**, whether they quench on their own or someone quenches them through Dhamma practice. Whenever the defilements are quenched, then there is the thing called "Nibbana," always with the same meaning – coolness.

Next, notice that the defilements are concocted things (*sankharadhammas*) that arise and pass away. As it says in the Pali,

Yankinci samudayadhammam sabbantam nirodhadhammam.
(Whatever things originate, all those will cease.)

Any reactive emotion that arises ceases when its causes and conditions are finished. Although it may be a temporary quenching, merely a temporary coolness, it still means Nibbana, even if only temporarily. Thus, there's a temporary Nibbana for those who still can't avoid some defilements. This indeed is the temporary Nibbana that sustains the lives of beings who are still hanging onto defilement. Anyone can see that if the egoistic emotions exist night and day without any pause or rest, no life could endure it. If it didn't die, it would go crazy and then die in the end. You ought to consider carefully the fact that life can survive only because there are periods when the defilements don't roast it, which, in fact, outnumber the times when the defilements blaze.

These periodic Nibbanas sustain life for all of us, without excepting even animals, which have their levels of Nibbana, too. We are able to survive because this kind of Nibbana nurtures us, until it becomes the most ordinary habit of life and of the mind. Whenever there is freedom from defilement, then there is the value and meaning of Nibbana. This must occur fairly often for living things to survive. That we have some time to relax both bodily and mentally provides us with the freshness and vitality needed to live.

Why don't we understand and feel thankful for this kind of Nibbana at least a little bit? We're lucky that the instincts can manage by themselves. Conscious beings naturally search for periods that are free from craving, thirst, and egoism. We might call this natural urge "the Nibbana instinct." If there is unremitting thirst, life must die. Thus, infants know how to suck the breast and mosquitoes know how to buzz around sucking blood to sustain their lives until they are slapped to death. Our instincts have this virtue built in: they search for periods of time sufficiently free from defilement or free from thirst to maintain life. Whenever there is freedom and voidness there is always this little Nibbana, until we know how to make it into the lasting or perfect Nibbana of the Arahant. It isn't death, but rather is deathlessness, in particular, spiritual deathlessness. If anyone sees this fact, they'll personally experience that we can survive only through this kind of Nibbana. We don't survive just because of that rice and food that so infatuate people. We realize that everybody must have this thing called "Nibbana" and must depend on it as their lives' sustenance.

So who can object to us talking about "Nibbana for everyone"?

In order to better understand the meaning of the word "Nibbana," we ought to look at it from the perspective of linguistics. A material sense of the word is found in the phrase "*pajjotasseva nibbanam*" This "*nibbana*" refers to the ordinary quenching of a lamp, and more broadly to any source of heat or fire. When the rice porridge is still hot, the cook yells out from the kitchen, "wait a moment, let it *nibbana* first." When the goldsmith melts down gold and pours it into a mold, he sprinkles water on it to cool it down. The word used in Pali here is "*nibbapeyya*," to first make it *nibbana* or cool before working it into some shape or form.

Even the wild animals that are captured from the jungle and tamed like pussycats are said to have been "*nibbana*-ed." Sensual pleasures cool down foolish people in a way appropriate for them. Unwavering concentration on material forms (*rupajhanas*) brings coolness free from those fires of sensuality. Although temporary, these absorptions (*jhanas*) are certain levels of Nibbana, also. The "experience of nothingness" (*akincanyayatana*) and the other formless absorptions (*arupajhanas*) bring levels of coolness free from the fires that arises out of attractive material things. Nibbana due to the ending of all defilements brings the final coolness that is the ultimate in all respects.

Certain groups of teachers have come up with the word "*sivamokkha-mahanibbana*," which they explain as some kind of town or city. Although no one can make any sense of it, they keep it around for people to bow to when this strange word is declaimed from the pulpits of their run of the mill temples.

There is also the word "*nibbuti*," meaning an ethical level of Nibbana. It refers to a cool heart and cool life such as that which impressed a young woman on seeing Prince Siddhartha. She exclaimed, "Whoever's son this gentleman is, his mother and father are *nibbuta* (that is, cool); whoever's husband he is, that woman is *nibbuta* (once again, cool)." Such examples have the meaning of Nibbana, also. Nowadays the monks in Thailand chant the benefits of ethical behavior with "*silena nibbutim yanti*," which means *nibbuti* is achieved through healthy morality (*sila*). This comes after the lesser benefits of ethical living, such as acquisition of wealth and attaining happy births (*sugati*). The purpose here is for Nibbana to have a place in ordinary daily life.

This coolness of heart and peace of mind that everyone desires is the meaning of Nibbana. However, people misunderstand it and aim only for sex, which is hot stuff. Thus, they get a deceptive Nibbana. People have clung to such an interpretation since, or even before, the Buddha's time, such as can be found among the sixty-two wrong views listed in the [Brahmajala Sutta.\(5\)](#)

Please consider the history and basic meaning of the word "Nibbana." In all cases it points to coolness of heart and mind, according to the higher or lower awareness of each person. The essential meaning, however, is always in the nurturing and sustaining of life. It lessens the time when fires burn the mind just enough for us to survive and eventually develops to the highest level, which absolutely quenches all fires. The highest degree of realization in Buddhism, according to the Buddha, is the end of lust, the end of hatred, and the end of delusion, which is the final quenching of all fires and the coolest coolness that life can be.

Nibbana is not the mind, but is something that the mind can experience, or, as the Buddha put it, is a certain *ayatana* that wisdom can experience. Forms, sounds, odors, flavors, and tactile sensations are material or physical *ayatana*, things the body can experience. The formless absorptions from the experience of endless space (*akasanancayatana*) up to and including the experience of neither perception nor non-perception (*nevasanyanasanyayatana*) are [mental ayatana that the mind can experience.\(6\)](#) Then, Nibbana is a spiritual *ayatana* for mindfulness and wisdom to experience and realize. We should consider it something that Nature has provided for the highest level of humanity. We ought to know it so that Nibbana and our lives are not in vain. Every one of us has mindfulness and wisdom in order to touch Nibbana. Don't let it go to waste!

The Nibbana-element exists naturally so that Nibbana will be realized, like a precious medicine which ends all dukkha. There is the dukkha or disease which ordinary medicines cannot cure, namely, the disease of defilement that must be cured by the extinction of defilements, through which this *nibbana-dhatu* is realized. This highest spiritual illness lies deeply hidden in us and torments us secretly. Anyone who can quench it has reached the pinnacle of being human.

The words "there is no Nibbana" are more wrong than wrong can be because the nibbana-element exists naturally, everywhere, always, only nobody is interested enough to find it. The Lord Buddha discovered and revealed it to us through his enormous compassion, but we cut the story short thinking that in this era there is no Nibbana anymore, when we should instead say that nobody understands it or is interested in it. Merely by becoming proper followers of the Buddha, Nibbana will appear. It is already waiting for people to find it.

We cannot create Nibbana because it is beyond all causes and conditions. Nevertheless, we can create the conditions for realizing Nibbana, namely, all actions which lead to the abandonment of the defilements. We won't claim, as some do, that "doing good is a condition for Nibbana." Condition (*paccaya*) implies causal necessity, but there is nothing which has such power over Nibbana. The right words are "doing good is a condition for realizing Nibbana," which can be done in any age or period. Old folks like the words "Stairway to Nibbana" because they think it is a place or city, which is what they have been taught. Still, it is an acceptable enough phrase, meaning simply "supporting conditions for the realization of Nibbana."

There are dozens of synonyms for Nibbana, for example, the Deathless, Permanence, Peace, Safety, Health, Diseaselessness, Freedom, Emancipation, Shelter, Refuge, Immunity, Island (for those fallen into water), Highest Benefit, Supreme Joy, Other Shore, That Which Should Be Reached, and the End of Concocting. All of these are thoroughly cool, because there aren't any fires to make them hot. Peaceful coolness is their meaning or value; unfortunately, it is a value too subtle to interest people who are still overly enveloped by selfishness. When brushing aside the defilements for the first time, you will certainly be delighted by Nibbana more than anything ever before. This is available to and possible for everyone. May we take the word "coolness" as the supreme value.

The expression that best conveys the meaning of Nibbana is "the end of dukkha." Although the Buddha used this term, it's of no interest for those people who feel that they don't have any dukkha or suffering. They don't feel they have dukkha: they just want the things they want and think there isn't any dukkha to quench. Consequently, they don't care about quenching dukkha or about the end of dukkha. Even a large number of the many foreigners who come to Suan Mokkh feel this way. However, once we tell them there is a new life, or quenching of thirst, or life which is beyond positive and negative, they really start to get interested. This is the difficulty of language, which we nonetheless must use to get people interested in Nibbana. For each person, there must be one translation of the word "Nibbana" especially for that person. This is no minor difficulty. Yet deep down, without being conscious of or having any intention toward it, everyone wants Nibbana if only through the power of instinct.

The study of Nibbana in daily life is possible in order to have a better understanding of and a greater interest in Nibbana's meaning. When seeing a fire go out or something hot cooling down, look for the meaning of Nibbana in it. When bathing or drinking ice water, when a breeze blows or rain falls, take notice of the meaning of Nibbana. When a fever subsides, a swelling goes down, or a headache goes away, recognize the meaning of Nibbana as found in those things. When perspiring, sleeping comfortably, or eating one's fill, see the meaning of Nibbana. When seeing an animal with all its fierceness and danger tamed away, see the meaning of Nibbana. All of these are lessons to help us understand the nature of Nibbana in every moment. The mind will regularly incline towards contentment in Nibbana and this helps the mind to flow more easily along the path of Nibbana.

Whenever you find coolness in your experience, mark that coolness firmly in your heart, and breathe out and in. Breathing in is cool, breathing out is cool. In cool, out cool — do this for a little while. This is an excellent lesson that will help you to become a **Lover of Nibbana** (*Nibbanakamo*) more quickly. The instincts will develop in an enlightened (*bodhi*) way more than if you don't practice like this. Natural Nibbana — the unconscious quenching of defilement — will occur more often and easily. This is the best way to help nature.

In conclusion, Nibbana is not death. Rather, it is the coolness and deathlessness that is full of life. In the Pali scriptures, the word "Nibbana" is never used regarding death. Nibbana is a natural element always ready to make contact with the mind in the sense of being one kind of *ayatana* (sensible thing). If there were no Nibbana, Buddhism would have no meaning. The genuine kind of Nibbana, different from the Nibbana of other sects, was discovered by the Buddha. Natural

Nibbana can happen simply because the defilements arise and end naturally because they are just another kind of concocted nature. Every time the defilements don't appear, Nibbana becomes apparent to the mind. This kind of Nibbana nourishes the lives of living things so they survive and don't go crazy. At least, it lets us sleep at night. Nibbana isn't any kind of special city anywhere. It is in the mind that is now void of besieging defilements. For the morality of ordinary people at home, its name is "*nibbuti*." Nibbana isn't the mind, but it appears to the mind as a certain *ayatana*. We can experience Nibbana here and now by breathing in cool and breathing out cool. It is the automatic quenching of heat, of thirst, of dukkha in ordinary life, even without our being conscious of it. It is the eternal nourishment and sustenance of life.

I hope that you all will begin to know that "Nibbana for everyone" isn't just "dyeing cats for sale," but is the genuine cat for catching rats — that is, dukkha and anxiety — according to the mindfulness and wisdom of each person!