

# The Nibbāna Sermons 1 to 11 by Bhikkhu K Ñāṇananda

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## Sermon 01

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*  
*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*  
*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*

*Etaṃ santam, etaṃ paṇītam, yadidaṃ sabbasaṅkhārasamatho*  
*sabbūpadhipaṭinissaggo taṇhakkhayo virāgo nirodho nibbānam.*

"This is peaceful, this is excellent, namely the stilling of all preparations, the relinquishment of all assets, the destruction of craving, detachment, cessation, extinction".

With the permission of the Most Venerable Great Preceptor and the assembly of the venerable meditative monks.

Recently we have had an occasion to listen to a series of sermons on *Nibbāna* and there have been differences of opinion regarding the interpretation of some deep *suttas* on *Nibbāna* in those sermons. And so the venerable Great Preceptor suggested to me that it would be useful to this group if I would give a set of sermons on *Nibbāna*, touching on those controversial points.

At first, for many reasons, I hesitated to accept this invitation for a serious task, but then, as the venerable Great Preceptor repeatedly encouraged me on this, I gave some thought as to how best I could set about doing it. And it occurred to me that it would be best if I could address these sermons directly to the task before us in this Nissarana Vanaya, and that is meditative attention, rather than dealing with those deep controversial *suttas* in academic isolation. And that is why I have selected the above quotation as the theme for the entire set of sermons, hoping that it would help create the correct atmosphere of meditative attention.

*Etaṃ santam etaṃ paṇītam, yadidaṃ sabbasaṅkhārasamatho*  
*sabbūpadhipaṭinissaggo taṇhakkhayo virāgo nirodho nibbānam.*

"This is peaceful, this is excellent, namely the stilling of all preparations, the relinquishment of all assets, the destruction of craving, detachment, cessation, extinction".

This in fact is a meditation subject in itself, a *kammaṭṭhāna*. This is the reflection on the peace of *Nibbāna*, *upasamānussati*.

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Alternative translation: "This is peaceful, this is sublime, namely: the calming of all constructions, the letting go of all supports, the extinguishing of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbāna."

AN 10.60 at AN V 111, translated Bodhi (2012: 1413):

"What is the perception of non-delight in the world? Here a bhikkhu refrains from any engagement and clinging, mental standpoints, adherences, and underlying tendencies in regard to the world, abandoning them without clinging to them."

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So if we can successfully make use of this as both the heading and the theme of these sermons, we would be in a position to understand those six qualities of the *Dhamma*. We are told that the *Dhamma* is *svākkhāta*, that it is well-proclaimed, *sandiṭṭhika*, can be seen here and now, *akālika*, timeless, *ehi-passika*, inviting one to come and see, *opanayika*, leading one onwards, *paccattam veditabbo viññūhi*, that it can be understood by the wise each one by himself. This set of sermons would have fulfilled its purpose if it drives home the true significance of these six qualities of the *Dhamma*.

Now at the very outset I would like to say a few things by way of preparing the background and I do hope that this assembly would bear with me for saying certain things that I will be compelled to say in this concern. By way of background something has to be said as to why there are so many complications with regard to the meaning of some of the deep *suttas* on *Nibbāna*.

There is a popular belief that the commentaries are finally traceable to a miscellany of the Buddha word scattered here and there, as *pakiṇṇakadesanā*. But the true state of affairs seems to be rather different. Very often the commentaries are unable to say something conclusive regarding the meaning of deep *suttas*. So they simply give some possible interpretations and the reader finds himself at a loss to choose the correct one. Sometimes the commentaries go at a tangent and miss the correct interpretation. Why the commentaries are silent on some deep *suttas* is also a problem to modern day scholars. There are some historical reasons leading to this state of affairs in the commentaries.

In the *Āṇisutta* of the *Nidānavagga* in the *Samyutta Nikāya* we find the Buddha making certain prophetic utterances regarding the dangers that will befall the *Sāsana* in the future. It is said that in times to come, monks will lose

interest in those deep *suttas* which deal with matters transcendental, that they would not listen to those *suttas* that have to do with the idea of emptiness, *suññatā*. They would not think it even worthwhile learning or pondering over the meanings of those *suttas*:

*Ye te suttantā tathāgatabhāsītā gambhīrā gambhīratthā lokuttarā suññatappaṭisaṃyuttā, tesu bhaññamānesu na sussūssisanti na sotam odahissanti na aññā cittam upatṭhāpessanti na te dhamme uggahetabbaṃ pariyāpuṇitabbaṃ maññissanti.*

There is also another historical reason that can be adduced. An idea got deeply rooted at a certain stage in the *Sāsana* history that what is contained in the *Sutta Piṭaka* is simply the conventional teaching and so it came to imply that there is nothing so deep in these *suttas*. This notion also had its share in the present lack of interest in these *suttas*. According to *Manorathapūraṇī*, the *Aṅguttara* commentary, already at an early stage in the *Sāsana* history of Sri Lanka, there had been a debate between those who upheld the precept and those who stood for realization. And it is said that those who upheld the precept won the day. The final conclusion was that, for the continuity of the *Sāsana*, precept itself is enough, not so much the realization.

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*pariyattiyā hi antarāhitāya paṭipatti antaradhāyati, pariyattiyā tṭhitāya paṭipatti patitṭhāti.*

DN 16 at DN II 154: the Buddha's permission that 'minor rules' can be abolished after his passing away

But DN 16 at DN II 77 (= AN 7.21 at AN IV 21): Buddha states as a principle against decline that the monastics do not abolish what has been promulgated (and not promulgate something he has not promulgated)

At first *saṅgīti*, Vin II 288, Mahākassapa uses same phrase about not abolishing what has been promulgated in support of not abolishing the minor rules.

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Of course the efforts of the reciter monks of old for the preservation of the precept in the midst of droughts and famines and other calamitous situations are certainly praiseworthy. But the unfortunate thing about it was this: the basket of the Buddha word came to be passed on from hand to hand in the dark, so much so that there was the risk of some valuable things slipping out in the process.

Also there have been certain semantic developments in the commentarial period, and this will be obvious to anyone searching for the genuine *Dhamma*. It seems that there had been a tendency in the commentarial period to elaborate even on some lucid words in the *suttas*, simply as a commentarial requirement, and this led to the inclusion of many complicated ideas. By too much overdrawing in the commentaries, the deeper meanings of the *Dhamma* got

obscured. As a matter of fact, the depth of the *Dhamma* has to be seen through lucidity, just as much as one sees the bottom of a tank only when the water is lucid.

*Dve nāma kiṃ?*

*Nāmañca rūpañca.*

"What is the 'two'?"

"Name and form."

This is the second out of the ten questions Buddha had put to the Venerable *sāmanera Sopāka* who had attained *Arahant*-ship at the age of seven. It is like asking a child: "Can you count up to ten?" All the ten questions were deep, the tenth being on *Arahant*-ship. But of course Venerable *Sopāka* gave the right answer each time. Now it is the second question and its answer that we are concerned with here: *nāmañca rūpañca*. In fact, this is a basic teaching in insight training.

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- 1) all beings subsist on nutriment
  - 3) three feelings
  - 4) four noble truths
  - 5) five aggregates of clinging
  - 6) six inner sense-spheres
  - 7) seven awakening factors
  - 8) noble eightfold path
  - 9) nine abodes of beings
  - 10) ten factors of arahants

*nāmarūpapariccheda*

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It is obvious that *nāma* means 'name', and in the *suttas* also, *nāma*, when used by itself, means 'name'. However when we come to the commentaries we find some kind of hesitation to recognize this obvious meaning. Even in the present context, the commentary, *Paramatthajotikā*, explains the word 'name' so as to mean 'bending'. It says that all immaterial states are called *nāma*, in the sense that they bend towards their respective objects and also because the mind has the nature of inclination: *Ārammaṇābhimukhaṃ namanato, cittassa ca natihetuto sabbampi arūpaṃ 'nāman'ti vuccati.*

And this is the standard definition of *nāma* in *Abhidhamma* compendiums and commentaries. The idea of bending towards an object is brought in to explain the word *nāma*. It may be that they thought it too simple an interpretation to explain *nāma* with reference to 'name', particularly because it is a term that has to do with deep insight. However as far as the teachings in the *suttas* are

concerned, *nāma* still has a great depth even when it is understood in the sense of 'name'.

*Nāmaṃ sabbaṃ anvabhavi,  
nāmā bhiyyo na vijjati,  
nāmassa ekadhammassa,  
sabbeva vasamanvagū.*

"Name has conquered everything,  
There is nothing greater than name,  
All have gone under the sway  
Of this one thing called name."

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Translation Bodhi (2000: 130):

"Name has weighed down everything,  
Nothing is more extensive than name.  
Name is the one thing that has  
All under its control."

SĀ 1020: 「名者映世間，名者世無上，唯有一名法，能制御世間。」  
(CBETA, T02, no. 99, p. 266, a24-25); 映, *yìng*: DDB: "surpass"

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Also there is another verse of the same type, but unfortunately its original meaning is often ignored by the present day commentators:

*Akkheyyasaññino sattā,  
akkheyyasmim̐ patit̐hitā,  
akkheyyaṃ apariññāya,  
yogam āyanti maccuno.*

"Beings are conscious of what can be named,  
They are established on the nameable,  
By not comprehending the nameable things,  
They come under the yoke of death."

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Translation Bodhi (2000: 99):

"Beings who perceive what can be expressed  
Become established on what can be expressed.  
Not fully understanding what can be expressed,  
They come under the yoke of Death."

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All this shows that the word *nāma* has a deep significance even when it is taken in the sense of 'name'.

But now let us see whether there is something wrong in rendering *nāma* by 'name' in the case of the term *nāma-rūpa*. To begin with, let us turn to the definition of *nāma-rūpa* as given by the Venerable *Sāriputta* in the *Sammāditṭhisutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*.

*Vedanā, saññā, cetanā, phasso, manasikāro - idaṃ vuccatāvuso, nāmaṃ; cattāri ca mahābhūtāni, catunnañca mahābhūtānaṃ upādāyarūpaṃ - idaṃ vuccatāvuso, rūpaṃ. Iti idañca nāmaṃ idañca rūpaṃ - idaṃ vuccatāvuso nāma-rūpaṃ.* "Feeling, perception, intention, contact, attention - this, friend, is called 'name'. The four great primaries and form dependent on the four great primaries - this, friend, is called 'form'. So this is 'name' and this is 'form' - this, friend, is called 'name-and-form'."

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Parallel MĀ 29 has the four immaterial aggregates instead.

「謂四非色陰為名」 (CBETA, T01, no. 26, p. 463, c25-26)

However, a definition of 'name' similar to that found in MN 9 is found in the *Ekottarika-āgama* (Anālayo 2011: 70 note 220, comparative study of MN 9)

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Well, this seems lucid enough as a definition but let us see, whether there is any justification for regarding feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention as 'name'. Suppose there is a little child, a toddler, who is still unable to speak or understand language. Someone gives him a rubber ball and the child has seen it for the first time. If the child is told that it is a rubber ball, he might not understand it. How does he get to know that object? He smells it, feels it, and tries to eat it, and finally rolls it on the floor. At last he understands that it is a plaything. Now the child has recognised the rubber ball not by the name that the world has given it, but by those factors included under 'name' in *nāma-rūpa*, namely feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention.

This shows that the definition of *nāma* in *nāma-rūpa* takes us back to the most fundamental notion of 'name', to something like its prototype. The world gives a name to an object for purposes of easy communication. When it gets the sanction of others, it becomes a convention.

While commenting on the verse just quoted, the commentator also brings in a bright idea. As an illustration of the sweeping power of name, he points out that if any tree happens to have no name attached to it by the world, it would at least be known as the 'nameless tree'. Now as for the child, even such a usage is not possible. So it gets to know an object by the aforesaid method. And the factors involved there, are the most elementary constituents of name.

Now it is this elementary name-and-form world that a meditator also has to understand, however much he may be conversant with the conventional world. But if a meditator wants to understand this name-and-form world, he has to

come back to the state of a child, at least from one point of view. Of course in this case the equanimity should be accompanied by knowledge and not by ignorance. And that is why a meditator makes use of mindfulness and full awareness, *satisampajañña*, in his attempt to understand name-and-form.

Even though he is able to recognize objects by their conventional names, for the purpose of comprehending name-and-form, a meditator makes use of those factors that are included under 'name': feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention. All these have a specific value to each individual and that is why the *Dhamma* has to be understood each one by himself - *paccattam veditabbo*. This *Dhamma* has to be realized by oneself. One has to understand one's own world of name-and-form by oneself. No one else can do it for him. Nor can it be defined or denoted by technical terms.

Now it is in this world of name-and-form that suffering is found. According to the Buddha, suffering is not out there in the conventional world of worldly philosophers. It is to be found in this very name-and-form world. So the ultimate aim of a meditator is to cut off the craving in this name-and-form. As it is said: *achecchi taṇhaṃ idha nāmarūpe*.

Now if we are to bring in a simile to clarify this point, the Buddha is called the incomparable surgeon, *sallakatto anuttaro*. Also he is sometimes called *taṇhāsallassa hantāraṃ*, one who removes the dart of craving. So the Buddha is the incomparable surgeon who pulls out the poison-tipped arrow of craving.

We may say therefore that, according to the *Dhamma*, *nāma-rūpa*, or name-and-form, is like the wound in which the arrow is embedded. When one is wounded by a poison-tipped arrow, the bandage has to be put, not on the archer or on his bow-string, but on the wound itself. First of all the wound has to be well located and cleaned up. Similarly, the comprehension of name-and-form is the preliminary step in the treatment of the wound caused by the poison-tipped arrow of craving.

And it is for that purpose that a meditator has to pay special attention to those basic components of 'name' - feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention - however much he may be proficient in words found in worldly usage. It may even appear as a process of unlearning down to childlike simplicity. But of course, the equanimity implied there is not based on ignorance but on knowledge.

We find ourselves in a similar situation with regard to the significance of *rūpa* in *nāma-rūpa*. Here too we have something deep, but many take *nāma-rūpa* to mean 'mind and matter'. Like materialists, they think there is a contrast between mind and matter. But according to the *Dhamma* there is no such rigid distinction. It is a pair that is interrelated and taken together it forms an important link in the chain of *paṭicca samuppāda*.

*Rūpa* exists in relation to 'name' and that is to say that form is known with the help of 'name'. As we saw above, that child got a first-hand knowledge of the rubber ball with the help of contact, feeling, perception, intention and attention. Now in the definition of 'form' as *cattāri ca mahābhūtāni, catunnañca mahābhūtānaṃ upādāya rūpaṃ* the four great primaries are mentioned because they constitute the most primary notion of 'form'. Just as much as feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention represent the most primary notion of 'name', conventionally so called, even so the four great primaries form the basis for the primary notion of 'form', as the world understands it.

It is not an easy matter to recognize these primaries. They are evasive like ghosts. But out of their interplay we get the perception of form, *rūpasaññā*. In fact what is called *rūpa* in this context is *rūpasaññā*. It is with reference to the behaviour of the four great elements that the world builds up its concept of form. Its perception, recognition and designation of form is in terms of that behaviour. And that behaviour can be known with the help of those members representing name.

The earth element is recognized through the qualities of hardness and softness, the water element through the qualities of cohesiveness and dissolution, the fire element through hotness and coolness, and the wind element through motion and inflation. In this way one gets acquainted with the nature of the four great primaries. And the perception of form, *rūpasaññā*, that one has at the back of one's mind, is the net result of that acquaintance. So this is *nāma-rūpa*. This is one's world. The relationship between *rūpa* and *rūpasaññā* will be clear from the following verse:

*Yattha nāmañca rūpañca,  
asesaṃ uparujjhati,  
paṭighaṃ rūpasaññā ca,  
etthesā chijjate jaṭā.*

This is a verse found in the *Jaṭāsutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*. In that *sutta* we find a deity putting a riddle before the Buddha for solution:

*Anto jaṭā bahi jaṭā,  
jaṭāya jaṭitā pajā,  
taṃ taṃ Gotama pucchāmi,  
ko imaṃ vijaṭaye jaṭaṃ.*

"There is a tangle within, and a tangle without,  
The world is entangled with a tangle.  
About that, oh *Gotama*, I ask you,  
Who can disentangle this tangle?"

The Buddha answers the riddle in three verses, the first of which is fairly well known, because it happens to be the opening verse of the *Visuddhimagga*:

*Sīle paṭiṭṭhāya naro sapañño,*

*cittaṃ paññañca bhāvayaṃ,  
ātāpī nipako bhikkhu,  
so imaṃ vijaṭaye jaṭaṃ.*

This means that a wise monk, established in virtue, developing concentration and wisdom, being ardent and prudent, is able to disentangle this tangle. Now this is the second verse:

*Yesaṃ rāgo ca doso ca,  
avijjā ca virājitā,  
khīṇāsavā arahanto,  
tesaṃ vijaṭitā jaṭā.*

"In whom lust, hate  
And ignorance have faded away,  
Those influx-free *Arahants*,  
It is in them that the tangle is disentangled."

It is the third verse that is relevant to our topic.

*Yattha nāmañca rūpañca,  
asesaṃ uparujjhati,  
paṭighaṃ rūpasaññā ca,  
etthesā chijjate jaṭā.*

"Where name and form  
As well as resistance and the perception of form  
Are completely cut off,  
It is there that the tangle gets snapped."

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Bodhi (2000: 101):

"Where name-and-form ceases,  
Stops without remainder  
And also impingement and perception of form,  
It is here this tangle is cut."  
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The reference here is to *Nibbāna*. It is there that the tangle is disentangled.

The coupling of name-and-form with *paṭigha* and *rūpasaññā* in this context, is significant. Here *paṭigha* does not mean 'repugnance', but 'resistance'. It is the resistance which comes as a reaction to inert matter. For instance, when one knocks against something in passing, one turns back to recognize it. Sense reaction is something like that.

The Buddha has said that the worldling is blind until at least the *Dhamma*-eye arises in him. So the blind worldling recognizes an object by the very resistance he experiences in knocking against that object.

*Paṭigha* and *rūpasaññā* form a pair. *Paṭigha* is that experience of resistance which comes by the knocking against an object, and *rūpasaññā*, as perception of form, is the resulting recognition of that object. The perception is in terms of what is hard, soft, hot or cold. Out of such perceptions common to the blind worldlings, arises the conventional reality, the basis of which is the world.

Knowledge and understanding are very often associated with words and concepts, so much so that if one knows the name of a thing, one is supposed to know it. Because of this misconception the world is in a tangle. Names and concepts, particularly the nouns, perpetuate the ignorance in the world. Therefore insight is the only path of release. And that is why a meditator practically comes down to the level of a child in order to understand name and form. He may even have to pretend to be a patient in slowing down his movements for the sake of developing mindfulness and full awareness.

So we see that there is something really deep in *nāma-rūpa*, even if we render it as 'name-and-form'. There is an implicit connection with 'name' as conventionally so called, but unfortunately this connection is ignored in the commentaries, when they bring in the idea of 'bending' to explain the word 'name'. So we need not hesitate to render *nāma-rūpa* by 'name-and-form'. Simple as it may appear, it goes deeper than the worldly concepts of name and form.

Now if we are to summarise all what we have said in this connection, we may say: 'name' in 'name-and-form' is a **formal** name. It is an apparent name. 'Form' in 'name-and-form' is a **nominal** form. It is a form only in name.

We have to make a similar comment on the meaning of the word *Nibbāna*. Here too one can see some unusual semantic developments in the commentarial period. It is very common these days to explain the etymology of the word *Nibbāna* with the help of a phrase like: *Vānasāṅkhātāya taṅhāya nikkhantattā*. And that is to say that *Nibbāna* is so called because it is an exit from craving which is a form of weaving.

To take the element *vāna* in the word to mean a form of weaving is as good as taking *nāma* in *nāma-rūpa* as some kind of bending. It is said that craving is a kind of weaving in the sense that it connects up one form of existence with another and the prefix *ni* is said to signify the exit from that weaving.

But nowhere in the *suttas* do we get this sort of etymology and interpretation. On the other hand it is obvious that the *suttas* use the word *Nibbāna* in the sense of 'extinguishing' or 'extinction'. In fact this is the sense that brings out the true essence of the *Dhamma*.

For instance the *Ratanasutta*, which is so often chanted as a *paritta*, says that the *Arahants* go out like a lamp: *Nibbanti dhīrā yathāyaṃ padīpo*. "Those wise ones get extinguished even like this lamp."

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Bodhi (forthcoming):

“The old is destroyed, there is no new origination,  
their minds are dispassionate toward future existence.  
With seeds destroyed, with no desire for growth,  
those wise ones are extinguished like this lamp.”

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The simile of a lamp getting extinguished is also found in the *Dhātuvibhaṅgasutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*. Sometimes it is the figure of a torch going out: *Pajjotass'eva nibbānaṃ, vimokho cetaso ahu*, "the mind's release was like the extinguishing of a torch."

The simile of the extinction of a fire is very often brought in as an illustration of *Nibbāna* and in the *Aggivacchagottasutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* we find the Buddha presenting it as a sustained simile, giving it a deeper philosophical dimension. Now when a fire burns, it does so with the help of firewood. When a fire is burning, if someone were to ask us: "What is burning?" - what shall we say as a reply? Is it the wood that is burning or the fire that is burning? The truth of the matter is that the wood burns because of the fire and the fire burns because of the wood. So it seems we already have here a case of relatedness of this to that, *idappaccayatā*. This itself shows that there is a very deep significance in the fire simile.

*Nibbāna* as a term for the ultimate aim of this *Dhamma* is equally significant because of its allusion to the going out of a fire. In the *Asaṅkhatasamyutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya* as many as thirty-three terms are listed to denote this ultimate aim. But out of all these epithets, *Nibbāna* became the most widely used, probably because of its significant allusion to the fire. The fire simile holds the answer to many questions relating to the ultimate goal.

The wandering ascetic *Vacchagotta*, as well as many others, accused the Buddha of teaching a doctrine of annihilation: *Sato sattassa ucchedaṃ vināsaṃ vibhavaṃ paññāpeti*. Their accusation was that the Buddha proclaims the annihilation, destruction and non-existence of a being that is existent. And the Buddha answered them fairly and squarely with the fire simile.

"Now if a fire is burning in front of you dependent on grass and twigs as fuel, you would know that it is burning dependently and not independently, that there is no fire in the abstract. And when the fire goes out, with the exhaustion of that fuel, you would know that it has gone out because the conditions for its existence are no more."

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*Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 1.13 (translation Radhakrishnan):

“As the form of fire when latent in its source is not seen and yet its seed is not destroyed, but may be seized again and again in its source by means of the drill ...”

*Maitrī Upaniṣad* 6.34 (translation Radhakrishnan):

“Even as fire without fuel becomes extinct in its own place, even so thought, by the cessation of activity, becomes extinct in its own source.”

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As a sidelight to the depth of this argument it may be mentioned that the *Pāli* word *upādāna* used in such contexts has the sense of both 'fuel' as well as 'grasping', and in fact, fuel is something that the fire grasps for its burning. *Upādānapaccayā bhavo*, "dependent on grasping is existence". These are two very important links in the doctrine of dependent arising, *paṭicca samuppāda*.

The eternalists, overcome by the craving for existence, thought that there is some permanent essence in existence as a reality. But what had the Buddha to say about existence? He said that what is true for the fire is true for existence as well. That is to say that existence is dependent on grasping. So long as there is a grasping, there is an existence. As we saw above, the firewood is called *upādāna* because it catches fire. The fire catches hold of the wood, and the wood catches hold of the fire. And so we call it firewood. This is a case of a relation of this to that, *idappaccayatā*. Now it is the same with what is called 'existence', which is not an absolute reality.

Even in the *Vedic* period there was the dilemma between 'being' and 'non-being'. They wondered whether being came out of non-being, or non-being came out of being. *Katham asataḥ sat jāyeta*, "How could being come out of non-being?" In the face of this dilemma regarding the first beginnings, they were sometimes forced to conclude that there was neither non-being nor being at the start, *nāsadāsīt no sadāsīt tadānīm*. Or else in the confusion they would sometimes leave the matter unsolved, saying that perhaps only the creator knew about it.

All this shows what a lot of confusion these two words *sat* and *asat*, being and non-being, had created for the philosophers. It was only the Buddha who presented a perfect solution, after a complete reappraisal of the whole problem of existence. He pointed out that existence is a fire kept up by the fuel of grasping, so much so that, when grasping ceases, existence ceases as well.

In fact the fire simile holds the answer to the tetralemma included among the ten unexplained points very often found mentioned in the *suttas*. It concerns the state of the *Tathāgata* after death, whether he exists, does not exist, both or neither. The presumption of the questioner is that one or the other of these four must be and could be answered in the affirmative.

The Buddha solves or dissolves this presumptuous tetralemma by bringing in the fire simile. He points out that when a fire goes out with the exhaustion of the fuel, it is absurd to ask in which direction the fire has gone. All that one can say about it, is that the fire has gone out: *Nibbuto tveva saṅkham gacchati*, "it comes to be reckoned as 'gone out'."

It is just a reckoning, an idiom, a worldly usage, which is not to be taken too literally. So this illustration through the fire simile drives home to the worldling the absurdity of his presumptuous tetralemma of the *Tathāgata*.

In the *Upasīvasutta* of the *Pārāyaṇavagga* of the *Sutta Nipāta* we find the lines:

*Accī yathā vātavegena khitto,  
attham paleti na upeti saṅkham,*

"Like the flame thrown out by the force of the wind  
Reaches its end, it cannot be reckoned."

Here the reckoning is to be understood in terms of the four propositions of the tetralemma. Such reckonings are based on a total misconception of the phenomenon of fire.

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Bodhi (forthcoming):

As a flame, thrown by a gust of wind,  
(Upasīva," said the Blessed One),  
"goes out and cannot be designated,  
so the muni, liberated from the mental body,  
goes out and cannot be designated."

"But does one who has gone out not exist,  
or else is he healthy through eternity?  
Explain this matter clearly to me, O muni,  
for this Dhamma has been understood by you."

"There is no measure of one who has gone out,  
(Upasīva," said the Blessed One).

"There is no means by which they might speak of him.  
When all phenomena have been uprooted,  
all pathways of speech have also been uprooted."

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It seems that the deeper connotations of the word *Nibbāna* in the context of *paṭicca samuppāda* were not fully appreciated by the commentators. And that is why they went in search of a new etymology. They were too shy of the implications of the word 'extinction'. Probably to avoid the charge of nihilism they felt compelled to reinterpret certain key passages on *Nibbāna*. They

conceived *Nibbāna* as something existing out there in its own right. They would not say where, but sometimes they would even say that it is everywhere. With an undue grammatical emphasis they would say that it is on coming to that *Nibbāna* that lust and other defilements are abandoned: *Nibbānaṃ āgamma rāgādayo khīṇāti ekameva nibbānaṃ rāgakkhayo dosakkhayo mohakkhayo ti vuccati*.

But what do we find in the joyous utterances of the *theras* and *therīs* who had realized *Nibbāna*? As recorded in such texts as *Thera-* and *Therī-gāthā* they would say: *Sītibhūto'smi nibbuto*, "I am grown cool, extinguished as I am." The words *sītibhūta* and *nibbuta* had a cooling effect even to the listener, though later scholars found them inadequate.

Extinction is something that occurs within an individual and it brings with it a unique bliss of appeasement. As the *Ratanasutta* says: *Laddhā mudhā nibbutiṃ bhuñjamānā*, "they experience the bliss of appeasement won free of charge." Normally, appeasement is won at a cost, but here we have an appeasement that comes gratis.

From the worldly point of view 'extinction' means annihilation. It has connotations of a precipice that is much dreaded. That is why the commentators conceived of it as something out there, on reaching which the defilements are abandoned, *nibbānaṃ āgamma rāgādayo khīṇāti*. Sometimes they would say that it is on seeing *Nibbāna* that craving is destroyed.

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Sn 231: *sahāv'assa dassanasampadāya ...*  
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There seems to be some contradiction in the commentarial definitions of *Nibbāna*. On the one hand we have the definition of *Nibbāna* as the exit from craving, which is called a 'weaving'. And on the other it is said that it is on seeing *Nibbāna* that craving is destroyed. To project *Nibbāna* into a distance and to hope that craving will be destroyed only on seeing it, is something like trying to build a staircase to a palace one cannot yet see. In fact this is a simile which the Buddha had used in his criticism of the *Brahmin's* point of view.

In the *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta* we have a very clear statement of the third noble truth. Having first said that the second noble truth is craving, the Buddha goes on to define the third noble truth in these words: *Tassāyeva taṇhāya asesavirāganirodho cāgo paṭinissaggo mutti anālayo*.

This is to say that the third noble truth is the complete fading away, cessation, giving up, relinquishment of that very craving. That it is the release from and non-attachment to that very craving. In other words it is the destruction of this very mass of suffering which is just before us.

In the *suttas* the term *tanhakkhayo*, the destruction of craving, is very often used as a term for *Nibbāna*. But the commentator says that destruction alone is not *Nibbāna*: *Khayamattaṃ na nibbānaṃ*. But the destruction of craving itself is called the highest bliss in the following verse of the *Udāna*:

*Yañca kāmasukhaṃ loke,  
yaṃ c'idaṃ diviyaṃ sukhaṃ,  
tanhakkhaya sukhaṃ'sete,  
kalaṃ n'agghanti soḷasiṃ.*

"Whatever bliss from sense-desires there is in the world,  
Whatever divine bliss there is,  
All these are not worth one-sixteenth  
Of the bliss of the destruction of craving."

Many of the verses found in the *Udāna* are extremely deep and this is understandable, since *udāna* means a 'joyous utterance'. Generally a joyous utterance comes from the very depths of one's heart, like a sigh of relief. As a matter of fact one often finds that the concluding verse goes far deeper in its implications than the narrative concerned. For instance, in the *Udapānasutta*, we get the following joyous utterance, coming from the Buddha himself:

*Kiṃ kayirā udapānena,  
āpā ce sabbadā siyuṃ,  
tanhāya mūlato chetvā,  
kissa pariyesanaṃ care.*

"What is the use of a well,  
If water is there all the time,  
Having cut craving at the root,  
In search of what should one wander?"

This shows that the destruction of craving is not a mere destruction.

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*Udāna* prose story reports that brahmins had blocked a well with chaff in order to prevent the Buddha and his monks from drinking.

Pande (1957: 75) comments that "the author of the prose ... seems to have grossly misunderstood the ... verse, which intends 'water' in no more than a merely figurative sense." (*Studies in the Origins of Buddhism*)

Chinese parallel to stanza has no prose story (T 212 at T IV 707c20)

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Craving is a form of thirst and that is why *Nibbāna* is sometimes called *pipāsavinayo*, the dispelling of the thirst. To think that the destruction of craving is not sufficient is like trying to give water to one who has already quenched his thirst. But the destruction of craving has been called the highest bliss. One who

has quenched his thirst for good, is aware of that blissful experience. When he sees the world running here and there in search of water, he looks within and sees the well-spring of his bliss.

However to most of our scholars the term *taṇhakkhaya* appeared totally negative and that is why they hesitated to recognize its value. In such conventional usages as *Nibbānaṃ āgamma* they found a grammatical excuse to separate that term from *Nibbāna*.

According to the Buddha the cessation of existence is *Nibbāna* and that means *Nibbāna* is the realization of the cessation of existence. Existence is said to be an eleven-fold fire. So the entire existence is a raging fire. Lust, hate, delusion - all these are fires. Therefore *Nibbāna* may be best rendered by the word 'extinction'. When once the fires are extinguished, what more is needed?

But unfortunately Venerable *Buddhaghosa* was not prepared to appreciate this point of view. In his *Visuddhimagga* as well as in the commentaries *Sāratthappakāsinī* and *Sammohavinodanī*, he gives a long discussion on *Nibbāna* in the form of an argument with an imaginary heretic. Some of his arguments are not in keeping with either the letter or the spirit of the *Dhamma*.

First of all he gets the heretic to put forward the idea that the destruction of lust, hate and delusion is *Nibbāna*. Actually the heretic is simply quoting the Buddha word, for in the *Nibbānasutta* of the *Asaṅkhatasamyutta* the destruction of lust, hate and delusion is called *Nibbāna: Rāgakkhaya, dosakkhaya, mohakkhaya - idaṃ vuccati nibbānaṃ*.

The words *rāgakkhaya, dosakkhaya* and *mohakkhaya* together form a synonym of *Nibbāna*, but the commentator interprets it as three synonyms. Then he argues out with the imaginary heretic that if *Nibbāna* is the extinguishing of lust it is something common even to the animals, for they also extinguish their fires of lust through enjoyment of the corresponding objects of sense. This argument ignores the deeper sense of the word extinction, as it is found in the *Dhamma*.

In the *Māgaṇḍīyasutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* the Buddha gives the simile of a man with a skin disease sitting beside a pit of hot embers to explain the position of lustful beings in the world. That man is simply trying to assuage his pains by the heat of the fire. It is an attempt to warm up, not to cool down. Similarly what the lustful beings in the world are doing in the face of the fires of lust is a warming up. It can in no way be compared to the extinction and the cooling down of the *Arahants*.

As the phrase *nibbutiṃ bhūñjamānā* implies, that extinction is a blissful experience for the *Arahants*. It leaves a permanent effect on the *Arahant*, so much so that upon reflection he sees that his influxes are extinct, just as a man with his hands and feet cut off, knows upon reflection that his limbs are gone. It

seems that the deeper implications of the word *Nibbāna* have been obscured by a set of arguments which are rather misleading.

In fact I came forward to give these sermons for three reasons: Firstly because the venerable Great Preceptor invited me to do so. Secondly in the hope that it will be of some benefit to my co-dwellers in the *Dhamma*. And thirdly because I myself felt rather concerned about the inadequacy of the existing interpretations.

What we have said so far is just about the word *Nibbāna* as such. Quite a number of *suttas* on *Nibbāna* will be taken up for discussion. This is just a preamble to show that the word *Nibbāna* in the sense of 'extinction' has a deeper dimension, which has some relevance to the law of dependent arising, *paṭicca samuppāda*.

By bringing in an etymology based on the element *vāna*, much of the original significance of the word *Nibbāna* came to be undermined. On quite a number of occasions the Buddha has declared that the cessation of suffering is *Nibbāna*, or else that the destruction of craving is *Nibbāna*. Terms like *dukkhanirodho* and *taṇhakkhayo* have been used as synonyms. If they are synonyms, there is no need to make any discrimination with regard to some of them, by insisting on a periphrastic usage like *āgamma*.

Yet another important aspect of the problem is the relation of *Nibbāna* to the holy life or *brahmacariya*. It is said that when the holy life is lived out to the full, it culminates in *Nibbāna*.

In the *Rādhasaṃyutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* we find the Venerable *Rādha* putting a series of questions to the Buddha to get an explanation. First of all he asks:

*Sammādaṣṣanaṃ pana, bhante, kimatthiyaṃ?* "For what purpose is right vision?" And the Buddha gives the answer: *Sammādaṣṣanaṃ kho, Rādha, nibbidatthaṃ, "Rādha, right vision is for purposes of disgust or dejection".* And that is to say, disgust for *saṃsāra*.

The next question is: for what purpose is disgust? And the Buddha answers: disgust is for dispassion. What is the purpose of dispassion? The purpose of dispassion is release. What is the purpose of release? The purpose of release is *Nibbāna*. Last of all Venerable *Rādha* puts the question:

*Nibbānaṃ pana, bhante, kimatthiyaṃ?* "For what purpose is *Nibbāna*?" And the Buddha gives this answer: *Accasarā, Rādha, pañhaṃ, nāsakkhi pañhassa pariyaṇtaṃ gahetuṃ. Nibbānogadhañhi, Rādha, brahmacariyaṃ vussati, nibbānaparāyanaṃ nibbānapariyosānaṃ. "Rādha, you have gone beyond the scope of your questions, you are unable to grasp the limit of your questions. For, Rādha, the holy life is merged in Nibbāna, its consummation is Nibbāna, its culmination is Nibbāna."*

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Bodhi (2000: 984f):

“You have gone beyond the range of questioning Rādha. You weren’t able to grasp the limit to questioning. For, Rādha, the holy life is lived with Nibbāna as its ground, Nibbāna as its destination, Nibbāna as its final goal.”

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This shows that the holy life gets merged in *Nibbāna*, just as rivers get merged in the sea. In other words, where the holy life is lived out to the full, *Nibbāna* is right there. That is why Venerable Nanda, who earnestly took up the holy life encouraged by the Buddha's promise of heavenly nymphs, attained *Arahant*-hood almost in spite of himself. At last he approached the Buddha and begged to relieve him of the onus of his promise. This shows that when one completes the training in the Holy Life, one is already in *Nibbāna*. Only when the training is incomplete, can one go to heaven.

Here, then, is a result which comes of its own accord. So there is no justification for a periphrastic usage like, "on reaching *Nibbāna*". No glimpse of a distant object is necessary. At whatever moment the Noble Eightfold Path is perfected, one attains *Nibbāna* then and there. Now, in the case of an examination, after answering the question paper, one has to wait for the results - to get a pass.

Here it is different. As soon as you have answered the paper correctly, you have passed immediately and the certificate is already there. This is the significance of the term *aññā* used in such contexts. *Aññā* stands for full certitude of the experience of *Nibbāna*.

The experience of the fruit of *Arahant*-ship gives him the final certificate of his attainment, *aññāphalo*. That is why *Nibbāna* is called something to be realized. One gets the certitude that birth is extinct and that the holy life is lived out to the full, *khīṇā jāti, vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ*.

Of course there are some who still go on asking: what is the purpose of *Nibbāna*? And it is to answer this type of question that many scholars go on hair splitting. Normally in the world, whatever one does has some purpose or other. All occupations, all trades and businesses, are for gain and profit. Thieves and burglars also have some purpose in mind. But what is the purpose of trying to attain *Nibbāna*? What is the purpose of *Nibbāna*? Why should one attain *Nibbāna*?

It is to give an answer to this question that scholars brought in such phrases as *Nibbānaṃ pana āgamma*, 'on reaching *Nibbāna*'. They would say that 'on reaching *Nibbāna*', craving would be destroyed. On closer analysis it would appear that there is some fallacy in this question. For if there is any aim or purpose in attaining *Nibbāna*, *Nibbāna* would not be the ultimate aim. In other words, if *Nibbāna* is the ultimate aim, there should be no aim in attaining

*Nibbāna*. Though it may well sound a tautology, one has to say that *Nibbāna* is the ultimate aim for the simple reason that there is no aim beyond it.

However, this might need more explanation. Now as far as craving is concerned, it has the nature of projection or inclination. It is something bent forward, with a forward view, and that is why it is called *bhavanetti*, the leader in becoming. It leads one on and on in existence, like the carrot before the donkey. So that is why all objects presented by craving have some object or purpose as a projection. Craving is an inclination.

But what is the position if one makes the destruction of craving itself one's object? Now craving because of its inclining nature is always bent forward, so much so that we get an infinite progression. This is for that, and that is for the other. As the phrase *taṇhā ponobhavikā* implies, craving brings up existence again and again.

But this is not the case when one makes the destruction of craving one's aim. When that aim is attained, there is nothing more to be done. So this brings us to the conclusion that the term *taṇhakkhayo*, destruction of craving, is a full-fledged synonym of *Nibbāna*.

Well, this much is enough for today. Time permitting and life permitting, I hope to continue with these sermons. I suppose the most Venerable Great Preceptor made this invitation with the idea of seeing one of his children at play. For good or for bad, I have taken up the invitation. Let the future of the *Sāsana* be the final judge of its merits.

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Salient points:

- Definition of 'name'
- Fire imagery