

Nirvana

what it is

how we get there



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“Nirvana” means “happiness.”

—Lord Buddha,

speaking in

The Sutra of the Great Nirvana

Blowing out the candle

Simply looking into what the word “nirvana” means gives us great insight into what it is and how we get there. The original Sanskrit has lots of secrets hidden in it, and the Tibetan and Chinese help us discover these secrets.

The *nir* in *nirvana* comes from the prefix *nis*, which means “out” or “forth.” This is related to the more basic prefix *ni*, which means “down,” or “in.” Both came to have meanings of “not,” and we see them for example in the English words *nil* (meaning “nothing”) and *neither*.

The next part of the word is *va*. This is a root or building block of Sanskrit which has three different meanings. One of these (with a long *a* vowel) is *to blow*—it came into English with words like *fan* and *ventilation*.

So far then we have *nir+va*, meaning *to blow out*. Finally we add the suffix *ana*, which makes the word into an agent which performs the action: *the thing which blows out a candle*, for example.

As we will see in the following selections from the timeless classics of Buddhism, this is a perfect description of what happens when we reach nirvana. In the highest schools of ancient Buddhist thought, *nirvana* refers to doing what we have to do to “blow out” or extinguish all the negative thoughts within our mind, permanently.

Imagine what it would feel like never to feel anger, or jealousy, or craving again. Imagine being happy and contented and creative, all day long, every day. It makes sense then that Lord Buddha himself defined nirvana simply as Happiness.

The first step in blowing out the candle

If nirvana means blowing out the candle of our negative emotions, then the first step is choosing which negative emotion that we'd like to work on first.

Now my own personal specialty is jealousy, but you're going to have to spend some quiet time alone, here at the beginning, to see what your own specialty is.

You can trust that there's one negative emotion in your mind which is causing a large percentage of all the unhappiness that you ever feel.

Invest a bit of meditation time here, at the start, deciding which one it is. Then as we work through the ancient teachings about nirvana, we'll work on it, and get rid of it.

You'll see that it's a big step towards reaching the Buddha's happiness, all day long.

Unravelling the illusion

Someone once said that the Sanskrit language, which is the mother of all western languages, is like a cloud: each word can be seen in many different ways at the same time.

The word *nirvana* is a great example.

We've seen how it can mean to "blow out the candle" of our negative emotions. But within the word itself is hidden the way that we use to blow it out. This relates to the second meaning that the root *va* (again with a long *a*) can have: *to weave*.

In Sanskrit, a root like *va* can be doubled, when it refers to an action which is repeated over and over again—like weaving the warp (vertical threads) and woof (horizontal threads) of a piece of fabric. This is called "reduplication," and brings us to the form *vava*. Over time this evolved into the English word *weave*, which is exactly what it means.

Add our suffix *ana*, and now we have a different meaning of *nirvana*: the "unweaving" of something—in this case, the unraveling of the web of illusion which keeps us from being happy. And this is exactly how the Buddha himself explained it in one ancient text.

Don't speak of grief, my child of noble family. Go beyond it, which is nirvana. You are weaving the web; now unweave it, which is the very meaning of "nirvana."

—Lord Buddha,
speaking in the
*The Sutra of the Great
Nirvana*

Unweaving the web

We all know the major spiritual tools: compassion, meditation, the service of others, an ethical way of life, a daily personal practice, yoga, breath, right eating. And we will be using all of them here in our pursuit of nirvana.

But realize one thing from the start: it is *misunderstanding* which causes our unhappiness, and it is *understanding* which brings us to happiness, to nirvana. We have woven an illusion, and to un-weave it will bring us to nirvana, more than anything else.

Thus speaks the Buddha, in the *Exalted Sutra of the Greater Way Requested by Purna*:

The Conqueror said, "What is realization? It is a state of mind where we think neither 'This is something' nor 'This is nothing'.

"And why?

"Purna, what I am telling you is that you should stop imagining things like this altogether; for if you were to say that something were something, then what you'd be saying was that if it were not something then it would be nothing, and then nothing would be nothing as well.

"And when you do stop imagining things, then that we call 'nirvana.'

Now think carefully about this nirvana. Do you think it is far away? Or could it be, in fact, close at hand?

Purna answered, "Nirvana is nothing far away. And neither is it close."

Going beyond all grief

Just over a thousand years ago the Tibetans—who were until then a race of nomads without a written language—were faced with the daunting task of translating thousands of ancient Buddhist texts into their language. They sent a special team to India to come back with writing, which they did, and started a translation project which took some 700 years to complete.

In the early years especially, there was a question of whether to translate the *meaning* of words (called a *don-gyur* in Tibetan) or the *wording* of words (called *dra-gyur*). The Sanskrit word *shila*, for example, means “morality,” but the root from which the wording comes gives it the literal meaning of “coming to coolness”—a deeper sense of the function of morality. One of the great *lotsawas*, or Master Translators of ancient Tibet, was faced with decision of whether the Tibetan translation of *shila* would be the more descriptive “morality” (*tsultrim*) or the more poetic “coming to coolness” (*siltop*). It happens that, in this case, they chose the former.

Which brings us to the third Sanskrit root that we can see in the word *nirvana*. This is *va* (once more with a long *a* vowel) with the meaning of “to win.” It has another form, which is *van*. We see this root in the English words *vanquish*, and *invincible*.

When the Tibetan translators got to the word “nirvana,” they decided to go for a wording-translation which reflected this root, rather than the roots meaning “to blow out” or “to un-ravel.”

And so they settled on the word *nya-ngen le depa*. The *nya-ngen* part of the word means “grief,” which is reflected in the *nir* of the Sanskrit: down, low. And the *le depa* means “to go beyond, or transcend”—that is, to defeat (*van*) our grief. As we’ll see later, they also chose the word “enemy defeater” to describe a person who had attained this nirvana.

This word for nirvana in Tibetan—*nya-ngen le depa*—is used so frequently that it has been smushed into the single sound *nyangde*: sort of like saying *don’t* instead of *do not*.

Let’s look a little deeper into these two parts of the Tibetan word for nirvana, and see how it applies to our own battle.

The different forms of grief

If nirvana is to go beyond all grief, exactly what is “grief”?

How does this grief feel?

Lama Quicksilver (1771-1851):

Think of a mother who has the most lovely of children, a child who has stolen her heart away—and then think of how she feels if the child should die. This is what the word “grief” means.

How does this grief feel to those with compassion?

The *Commentary to the Praise of Confession*, from ancient India:

Grief is the torment of watching how the beings of the world are tortured by the pain of life.

How does grief come to us?

Master Vasubandhu, from the fourth century:

Grief is a part of the painful process of getting old, and then dying. And we feel it when we are torn from those we love, or even when we must encounter those whom we dislike.

What is the grief that we pass beyond, in nirvana?

Master Prajnavarman, from ancient India:

“Passing beyond grief” simply means to put an end to all of our suffering.

Kalyanamitra, another ancient Indian master:

“Passing beyond grief” is to destroy all the impurities within us.

Master Vinitideva, from the same period:

“Passing beyond grief” is reaching happiness, and gaining the ability to stay there, without ever losing it.

Choney Lama (1675-1748), of Tibet’s Sera Mey Monastery, in his famed commentary to the *Diamond Cutter Sutra*:

The grief that we transcend when we speak of “going beyond all grief” in nirvana is first of all the grief of our past karma and our negative emotions—and it is the grief of all of our pain.

Lord Buddha on passing from grief

Here are three pieces by Lord Buddha himself on the meaning of grief, and passing beyond this grief:



From a secret teaching by Lord Buddha entitled *The Great Completion, the Wish for Enlightenment, the King which Accomplishes All Things*:

We crave the six objects of the senses,
And so throw ourselves into the pain
Of the six different kinds of craving.

The terror that this brings us
Is the grief which we call “grief.”

The grief of the grief we pass beyond
Is these same six different objects;
But we no longer misperceive them—
We are no longer born in the six realms of pain.

We pass beyond these six sufferings,
And thus do we “pass beyond all grief”;
Thus do we reach nirvana.



From *The Exalted Sutra of the Greater Way Known as “Instructions on How to Don the Armor”*:

O Anantamati, those who seek to pass beyond the grief of things that pass have in equal measure decided not to seek those forms of happiness which pass—and so there is no need to mention that they would have no wish to live in any palace.

But this palace is the one where we have given up creating things which pass; it is a place where cool breezes blow, and quiet reigns—thus is it called Nirvana, or Passing Away from Grief.

It is a place where liking, and disliking, and dark ignorance have ended—where they no longer lie even below the surface. It is a place where the nets thrown by the view of desire have been ripped to shreds, where the sea of misunderstanding things has dried and disappeared. It is a place where torment, and screams of pain, have been forever stilled, from their very root. It is a place where all wrong deeds are finished—and for these reasons it is Nirvana, Passing Away from Grief.

This palace is a place where that illness known as “pride,” and where every form of life’s many troubles, has been sent away far, to a distance—and thus we call it Nirvana, Passing Away from Grief.

This palace is a place which cannot be conceived by the mind, nor by thoughts, nor by consciousness itself. Thus too do we call it Nirvana, Passing Away from Grief.

This is a place beyond the world of conflict, beyond crossing the border into new lives, beyond everything even on to thinking there is anything. All has been put to rest, all has been brought to peace, and thus is it Nirvana, the Passing Away from Grief.

The palace is a place where thinking things, or even wanting to think things, has all been shut off; it is a place where we no longer imagine that something is there, or that there is any longer any sign of something we could imagine about. Thus as well is it Nirvana, Passing from All Grief.

This then, Anantamati, is the very essence of total nirvana, that magnificent nirvana, that passing beyond all grief: it is a nirvana which is infinite, and something that could never be put into words.

If it could be travelled, then it would never be a path. For there is no word for this path, and it cannot be described. And if those great beings, the bodhisattvas, the spiritual warriors, are able to use this path to travel to the Palace of Nirvana, well then they will find themselves able to set countless billions of suffering beings upon this path as well.



From *The Sutra of the Great Nirvana*:

If you are able to see the true nature of the Buddha, and shut down your negative emotions, then that we call “the great nirvana, passing beyond all grief.”

And when you have seen the true nature of the Buddha in this way, then we call it “forever,” and we call it “yourself,” and we call it “happiness,” and “total purity.” Thus then is shutting down your negative emotions called “total nirvana, passing beyond all grief.”

Don’t speak of grief, my child of noble family. Go beyond it, which is nirvana. You are weaving the web; now unweave it, which is the very meaning of “nirvana,” of “going beyond all grief.”

What we are “going beyond” is also what is “covered.” And so when things are no longer covered we call it “nirvana,” passing beyond all grief.

What we are “going beyond” is also every going, and every coming. So when we no longer come or go, that too is “nirvana,” passing beyond all grief.

What we are going beyond is also every taking; so when we no longer take, that too is nirvana, passing beyond all grief.

What we are going beyond is also what is certain; so when things are no longer certain, and no longer uncertain, that as well is nirvana, to pass from grief.

What we are going beyond is also what is new, and what is old. So when things are no longer new nor old, this too is nirvana.

What we pass beyond is also our obstacles; and when there are no more obstacles, this is nirvana also.

O child of noble family, the disciples of the land they call Urukakavyi say that what is gone beyond is anything which would make a thing a thing; and so nirvana is as well that place where there is nothing that makes a thing a thing.

O child of noble family, what we go beyond is anything which exists; and so nirvana is also that place where there is nothing which exists.

What we pass beyond is anything coming together; and so in nirvana nothing comes together.

What we pass beyond is pain; and so in nirvana there is no pain.

But don't, o child of noble family, ever speak of cutting off your negative emotions as "nirvana," as "going beyond grief." Nirvana is, rather, the fact that your mental afflictions never started in the first place.

In fact, o child of noble family, the conquering Buddha *is precisely the fact that your negative emotions never started in the first place.* This we call "nirvana."