Demystifying Nirvana

With Christina Feldman, John Peacock, Jake Dartington

Welcome to Demystifying Nirvana

Christina, Jake, and John warmly welcome you to Demystifying Nirvana and explain how this journey will unfold.

Nirvana is to be realized

Nirvāna (or *nibbāna* in the language of the early Buddhist texts) is at the heart of the Buddha's teaching. It's about waking up. It's about profound understanding. It's about cultivating an unshakable deliverance of the heart. It is the third of the ennobling truths. Yet this possibility of awakening, of nirvāna, so central to the Buddha's teaching, is rarely spoken about. It's curious why this might be so. Do people feel that it's an impossible goal? Do we feel that it's inaccessible? That we're not worthy? That this is something reserved for an elite few?

In this program, we would like to unpack this word, this understanding. What did the Buddha mean, and is it merely on some distant horizon, or is it something possible for each of us?

> **This *was* the Buddha's message: that every human being, every human heart—if infused with sincerity, with dedication, with commitment—can come to the same liberating understandings that the Buddha came to.**

Perspectives on nibbana

Over the arc of this course, we'll explore many different aspects of this teaching on nirvāna.

- We'll look at the idea of cooling: the cooling of the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion; and what that coolness reveals.
- We'll also look at the conditions for realizing nibbāna, exploring teachings like the awakening factors and the importance of wholesome desire in our practice.
- We'll consider the age-old debate of gradual and sudden paths of awakening. Is awakening something that happens in an instant, or is it a training that we cultivate over time? And is there a way that we can at times bring these perspectives together?
- We'll explore the famous model of the four stages of awakening. What is progressively released or let go of as the path deepens? We'll look at the stages of stream entry, once returning, non-returning, and the *arahant*.
- We'll also consider how nibbāna involves an unbinding of processes that create extra suffering, struggle, and distress in our lives. We'll look at the teaching on dependent origination as a description of how that binding happens, and see within that description a teaching on how it can be released: how there can be an unbinding, an untangling. Seeing nirvāna in that context.
- Finally we'll reflect on how we can *practice* nibbāna. This moves us a long way from the idea that nirvāna is some top-of-the-mountain experience for somebody else, at some other time. We'll bring it right into the midst of our lives and see this as a teaching of freedom.

Putting nirvana at the center of our lives

Demystifying Nirvāna. This is obviously the title of the course, and I think the the title says everything. Normally nirvāna is seen as something distant, esoteric, something that people can't aspire to, and that's not relevant to their lives. Perhaps all they want to do is lead slightly easier lives.

> **What this course attempts to do is place nirvāna at the very center of life as something that we can *do*, something that not only is an aspiration but something that we might even experience, if we understand it correctly.**

What we are attempting to do in the various talks and discussions is make this very, very clear: that this is something that isn't in some distant land. This is right in the heart of your life at this moment, and is accessible. The talks, meditations, and discussions are all directed at giving us a sense of that nirvāna process happening now. We're taking it out of that sense of a noun that is far, far distant—that we can't really aspire to—and seeing something that is part of the process of life.

I think all of us are very passionate about the idea that this something that usually is not spoken about either in the tradition or even in contemporary Buddhist circles, and is of such vital importance that it needs to be highlighted. We practice for some aim and that aim is often very limited. And yet the Buddhist tradition lays this out as being the goal, the very pinnacle of what we're aiming at. It seems so distant, and yet it's near. And one of the themes that we'll be looking at is that interpenetration of *where we are* with nirvāna. This is the intention behind all of the material that we're offering to you, hopefully in a very clear and accessible way.

A practical, hands-on program

This program is not just about offering teachings and reflections on nibbāna. It's a true invitation for you—through the meditations, through the daily life practices, through the questions we raise—to take this teaching to heart and to explore it in your own experience.

Meet Your Teachers

Learn more about your teachers for this exploration of nirvāna, and why they are passionate about bringing this topic out into the light.

Christina Feldman

"When I began to practice myself in Asia in the early 1970s, there was a lot of discussion about nirvana. This was a normal conversation. I think it was made very clear from the outset to me that this was the goal of the path, and very few people were shy about talking about it. I have found it very odd, almost

mysterious, that in Western cultures it seems to be a discussion that's almost taboo. This has made me very curious about why that is."

Jake Dartington

"I am really inspired to explore this with colleagues and to find a way through these excessively romantic notions of nirvana on the one hand, and reductionist ideas on the other. We can understand Nirvana as a path of freedom in the midst of our lives."

John Peacock

"I'm very interested in helping people think their way into the material rather than taking it on a mere belief that this is the end of the goal, and we happen to call it nibbāna. Let's see what the content is. Let's see how it affects our lives and see how it affects our aspirations. Let's see what living a life which has nirvana at its center looks like rather than as an end goal. *What would my life look like then?*"

Unit 1: Preparing the Ground

It's time to get underway. In this first unit, we'll gain a clearer understanding of the early Buddhist conception of nibbāna, and how this relates to us in our practice and everyday lives.

Welcome to this first unit of this program on *Demystifying Nirvana*, where we will endeavor to unpack this word nirvāna (or nibbāna), to demystify it so it doesn't feel impossible for us to understand, or even to achieve or attain. This is the heart of the Buddha's teaching. This is the heart of the Buddha's path of awakening and liberation.

Gathering the mind

So before we begin, let's come together to have a moment of collecting and gathering ourselves.

Establishing the quality of mindfulness grounded in the body. Feeling yourself arriving in the body and arriving in this moment.

Unifying, integrating body, mind, present moment. And listening. Listening inwardly to the life of the body, the life of the mind just now, however they may be.

A receptive attentiveness, a grounded mindfulness. Thank you.

What does it mean to be awake?

Over the course of this program, the three of us—John Peacock, Jake Dartington, and myself—will endeavor to unpack this word, nirvāna, to understand its relevance to our own lives, to understand that this is the direction of the path we cultivate, not as some distant goal, but as a present-moment cultivation.

> **What does it mean to be awake? What does it feel like to be unbound by familiar patterns of reactivity and compulsion?**

The Buddha painted a landscape of human flourishing: a picture much vaster than just meditative experience; a landscape where we engage creatively, responsibly, ethically, with the world around us, where we *can* flourish.

This is the direction of the teachings

The entirety of the Buddhist teaching is dedicated to developing this liberation of the heart. What does that mean? It means that we don't feel so governed by the world of conditions. We don't feel so governed by compulsion, by so many of the patterns and cycles of reactivity. We don't feel bewildered by the distress and the struggle in our lives. This landscape of nirvāna that the Buddha paints is a landscape of very profound peace and happiness, where our arguments with how things are really have begun to fall away.

Not just a practice but a path

The Buddha speaks not just of practice, but of path. This is, I think, firstly, a really significant and important shift for us to make: that...

> **What we are doing here in our contemplative life is not aimed towards some transcendent experience.**

Certainly, I would say the Buddha spoke about transcendence, but not transcendence of the world: transcendence of distress and struggle. This he describes as awakening.

A program designed for you

Our wish is that over the course of this program, the discussions we engage in, the material we engage in, you come to see as deeply relevant to you.

> **This is something you can live. This is something you can cultivate. And this gives a very profound sense of direction to the path that you are walking.**

In this first unit, we have several aims. One is to contextualize this word nibbāna: how it is used in the Buddha's teaching, what is meant by nibbāna, and to unpack it so it can be understood and related to in our own experience.

We will also explore the landscape that the Buddha speaks about of an awakened mind, and how that translates into the ways that we live, into the ways that we engage with the world and with each other, and with our own inner experience.

> **Nibbāna, as the Buddha speaks about it, is awakening. Awakening rests upon understanding. Understanding rests upon investigation and integrity.**

This is the beginning of a journey as we explore the different perspectives during this program and the different implications of what nibbāna is.

How Do I Relate to Nibbana?

We can have so many views about nibbāna (or nirvāna, if you prefer). If we leave these views unexamined, they will shape our path and perhaps lead us away from the direction the Buddha intended for us.

In the stories we inherit and read of the Buddha's awakening, he took his seat beneath the Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gayā, entered into deep states of meditation and found himself besieged by Mara, the embodiment of all that binds us to distress. He looked Mara in the eye and said, "I know you", and wasn't deceived. The stories tell us he got up from the Bodhi Tree and declared his awakening in no uncertain terms, saying:

> **Destroyed is birth. This holy life has been lived. What had to be done has been done. I am a tathagatha: one who has gone beyond distress.**
>
> —The Buddha

For more than 2,500 years, teachers and practitioners from all traditions have endeavored to understand and explain what it is that happened under the Bodhi Tree, to understand what nirvāna (or nibbāna) is. And although there are many disagreements and different perspectives, the place of foundational agreement is, as said by the Buddha, the ending of greed, the ending of hate, the ending of delusion. This is called nibbāna: the ending of the ignorance that underlies greed, hatred, and delusion.

The Buddha often spoke of cooling the fires. As the Buddha put it, as long as our hearts and minds are enraptured with greed, hatred, and delusion there will be affliction in our lives. Too often we bring affliction to the lives of others, and we experience struggle and distress and despair.

> **When greed, hatred and delusion are extinguished, so too are distress and despair and struggle.**

Describing nibbana

I'd like to share with you some of the language the Buddha used to describe nibbāna:

- peace
- non-affliction
- freedom
- the island
- the refuge
- liberation
- the highest happiness
- the unshakable
- the harbor
- the cessation of suffering.

This all sounds very lofty, perhaps hard for us to imagine. Yet throughout the Buddha's teaching life he encouraged people to realize this, that this is the heart of the teaching and the reason for walking the path, for cultivating the path: the direction of the path. I'd like to share a quote by Yogi Berra, one of the great American baseball players. He says:

> **If you don't know where you're going, you will wind up somewhere else.**
>
> —Yogi Berra

The Buddha is pointing out this navigational path.

The Buddha's confidence in us

In reading and studying the Buddha's teaching, we hear not only the wisdom of the content but also the confidence that the Buddha seemed to hold in others' possibilities of awakening. The message was very clear: that if we approach this path with confidence, conscientiousness, courage, sincerity, and integrity, that we too can come to the same liberating insights that the Buddha had come to.

The Buddha taught that nibbāna is the heart, the essence, and the ultimate fruition of a contemplative life, saying:

> **This noble life we live does not have gain, honor, or renown for its benefit; or the attainment of virtue for its benefit; or the attainment of concentration for its benefit; or knowledge and vision for its benefit... but it is this unshakable deliverance of the heart, of the mind that is the goal of this noble life: its heartwood and its end.**

Our relationship to nibbana

Nibbāna, or nirvāna particularly, is a word that has entered our culture on some levels as a perfume and a rock group, both called Nirvana. Sometimes it's a descriptive term that's used to describe the the best vacation in the world, or some peak experience that we delight in. Yet, as practitioners and students, we can have an uneasy relationship with both the word and the possibility of awakening.

In England, if you walk into most villages or towns and ask, "Where is your nearest castle?" You would probably get directions of somewhere very nearby.

> **Not in all, but in some monasteries and practice centers in Asia, if you walked in and asked, "Has anybody here come to these deep realizations?", they would likely answer, "It is indeed possible."**

I think we're asked to find a middle path in our own relationship to the possibility of this transforming understanding, to consider why we don't talk nibbāna. What is our uneasiness? What kind of relationship do we have to this possibility—not just the word, but to this possibility—of deep, transformative understanding?

Awakening is not self-improvement

For some, the possibility of this transformative understanding can trigger ambitiousness, and the search for our own Bodhi Tree moment. We hear of the Buddha saying on the eve of his awakening that, "I will sit here until my blood runs cold", and we think, "Well, that sounds like a good idea. I could do the same. I want to become a Buddha. I want to become..." —*enlightened* is often the word that's quite misused—quite forgetting that awakening in the Buddhist teaching is the end of becoming, and unlikely to be the result of becoming more perfect or more ambitious.

It's hard to always acknowledge that *I* will not become enlightened, that *I* will not become a Buddha. In truth, holding on to any view of self, awakened or unawakened, is likely to be a recipe for distress and for struggle.

> **Awakening, in my understanding, is not something we add to our spiritual portfolio. It is not a state. It's not an experience bound in time, but a lived understanding born of the cessation of ignorance.**

Awakening is not out of reach

Others have a different relationship to nibbāna. We might think this has nothing to do with us, that this has nothing to do with our practice or life. We might imagine it to be impossible, something that only happened in the past. We might say that minds today are more deluded than they were 2,600 years ago. Self-

doubt can shadow us.

We might imagine awakening in the light of some kind of transcendence that would make us dissociated and disconnected from the world. We might ask ourselves, can a Buddha have a mortgage? Can a Buddha have a relationship? Can a Buddha have a family? We might feel that we have very few models for this kind of an awakened life.

We perhaps see confusion in our own minds and instead of feeling that nibbāna is a possibility, resign ourselves to much more chipping away at the rockface of our imperfections, hoping for just a little more happiness and just a little more peace.

A middle path in relationship to nibbana

My hope is that in this program, we will begin to reflect upon our own relationship to the word and to the possibility of nibbāna, of awakening. How pivotal is this in our own path? Do we see this as being the direction that we are going? What would our path and our practice look like if we dispensed with both the word and the possibility of nibbāna?

There is a middle path that I think is important to find.

> **There's a danger in over-inflating nirvana to the point where we feel it's completely impossible for us and inaccessible. But there's also a danger in deflating this profound understanding to the extent that it's just some passing glimpse of happiness or a passing glimpse of peace.**

The Buddha began to teach, and he taught a path. The Buddha did not describe himself so much as a savior, but as a healer. He described the nature of the disease, the origin of the disease, the end of the disease, and the path to its end. This we know as the four ennobling truths.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

1. There is *dukkha*—unsatisfactoriness, vulnerability, struggle, confusion—that we are invited to deeply understand.

2. There are the origins of *dukkha*, of struggle and despair.

3. There is the possibility of an end to *dukkha*.

4. There is a path to the end of *dukkha*, a path that we are asked to cultivate, to develop, and to embody.

The path is not just about meditation. The path is not just about the time we spend on a cushion. The path is not just about attaining deep meditative states. But the path is a life that is committed to bringing into being all that is healing; all that is wholesome; and liberating; and the path of insight and the application, the embodiment, of insight.

> **This is the path: we plant the seeds of understanding, and we tend to those seeds in every dimension of our life so that they will bear fruit in inner and outer transformation.**

This is our invitation and our challenge.

The Dilapidated Shed

Jake offers us a sense of nibbāna as something profound and yet available as something we can experience. We're thinking less of an epiphanic flash of lightning, and more of a deep, peaceful cooling of our agitations.

As we begin to explore this theme of nibbāna, I find it helpful to reflect on how my understanding has changed over the years of practice, and also to reflect on many conversations I've had with students over the years on this.

A middle way in relating to nibbana

I do sometimes sense that people have the feeling that nibbāna (or nirvāna) is so high, so lofty as to be really quite impossible and then essentially irrelevant to us. People might have the idea of, "Well, if I went to live in a cave for 40 years and didn't see anybody, and was meditating for 18-20 hours a day... maybe, just maybe after 30 or 40 years, I might have a glimpse of what that is. But I have a family. I have kids. I'm working, and I'm a 21st century person. What's that got to do with me?" So it stays as some kind of high or almost irrelevant, impossible ideal. On that end of the spectrum, too, it can become something that's very much romanticized, worshiped from afar, if thought about at all.

Then at times, having realized the lofty view can be somewhat frustrating, there is also a tendency I've seen—perhaps in myself, but certainly in students sometimes—then to think, "OK, well, let's make our practice much, much more ordinary than that. This nibbāna has nothing to do with us but, hey, we can do this practice and it helps me to cope a little bit more with work, and helps me to deal with the ups and downs of life. And it takes the edge off suffering (*dukkha*). It makes life a little easier to cope with." You can see perhaps in that description: there's a loss, a real loss of something here that's deeply profound, very significant, and perhaps the most important thing of all in our lives to discover and explore.

As so often, we explore a middle way between extremes in this practice. And maybe this is a useful framework to begin with: how do we avoid, on the one hand, this irrelevant, lofty, impossible ideal; and on the other hand, that excessively reductionist viewpoint that loses a sense of the depth of this teaching.

Cooling the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion

With that in mind, the central word that speaks to me of nibbāna is this word "cooling" or "coolness".

> **We're cooling the fires of greed, hatred, delusion. We're cooling the fires of suffering.**

This is the territory that we're in. And my own sense is that it's also helpful not to begin with an all-or-nothing mentality about this, which can also be somewhat of a danger. I think sometimes people get this idea from popular culture, popular understandings of meditation or spiritual teachings: they tend to see nibbāna or *bodhi* or awakening or enlightenment as a kind of flash of lightning, this sort of thunderbolt model. Here we are practicing away diligently in our ignorance

for months and years and decades and maybe, just maybe, wow, I'm going to be hit by a thunderbolt, a flash of lightning.

> **"There's been this perpetual ignorance, and then suddenly all the light comes on and we've arrived, and then there's nibbāna." This is an all-or-nothing model that I'm suggesting is really unhelpful.**

I'm very influenced here by a wonderful Thai teacher called Ajahn Buddhadasa, who spoke of "nibbāna for everybody." And as part of that understanding, you get a sense of degrees. You get the sense that as well as being the most profound, significant element of the Buddhist teachings, nibbāna can also refer at times to something more temporary, maybe even something more ordinary.

> **It can be those times in life where there's a coolness that strikes us. Sometimes quite unexpectedly we find there's a stilling, a space. The agitation of greed, hatred and delusion ceases—the agitation of searching for this or trying to get rid of that, or feeling restless, feeling not at home in the world... ceases.**

This cessation is actually something very peaceful, very creative, that opens up the possibility of engaging with life in a different way. It's a different way of being. And of course, at times this may well be temporary but it gives us a taste of something deeply significant, deeply important.

What opens up when agitations cease

I think here, too, there's something fascinating about the way nibbāna is often spoken of in the negative, in the way it's about cessation, it's about ending. We talk about the ending of greed, hatred, and delusion, or the ending of suffering. And sometimes people can get the idea of "Oh, this is something rather negative." But right from the start, we might consider how sometimes the cessation or ending of something opens up something else that may be very full and beautiful.

I'll give you a very simple example to think about this. If you had a broken down old shed at the end of your garden that was all rusty with rotten wood and it was quite ugly... once that ceased—if it were taken away, cleared—there's a space. Suddenly you can see the view that was obscured by this broken down shed. We might talk about it as the cessation of this old shed, in this example, but that cessation is not leaving something blank: actually something else is revealed. And I think this is a helpful way of exploring nibbāna.

What ceases?

With this everyday example of the broken old shed that is taken away to reveal a beautiful view, you can actually see that, in many ways, the Buddha's teachings

are speaking about something like this. For instance, we have the teaching on the hindrances:

THE HINDRANCES
Sense desire
Ill will
Restlessness and worry
Sloth and torpor
Doubt

These are things that can obscure the mind. We might see this list as a description of all the things that can feel like they're getting in the way.

We also have the teaching on the poisons:

THE THREE POISONS
Greed
Hatred
Delusion

Again, these are patterns that obscure a clear view... and they can fade. When we reflect on nibbāna, we're also seeing this as a teaching on cessation: on the ending of patterns that agitate and distress and obscure. There can be an ending of these patterns that manifest as unhelpful and unethical speech, action, and ways of living in the world.

What is revealed?

It's also significant to ask what may be revealed through this cessation. One model I love is the model of the *Brahmavihāras*—friendliness, compassion, joy, and equanimity—as one of the teachings (and of course, there are many) that gives us a clue that there's a richness: a more beautiful, more wholesome, more supportive way of living in the world for ourselves and for others that is revealed when obstructions cease.

So, yes, we can see nibbāna as about absences, as about cessation… and at the same time we can have a sense that there's a richness, a fullness and a beauty that is also revealed.

Ceasing to Fuel the Fires

We get a clearer understanding of what the Buddha was pointing to when we look at the etymology of the word *nirvāna*. As Jake was suggesting, what we'll find very much supports the idea that awakening is a cooling of the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion.

The first thing I want to introduce in this approach to looking at nirvāna (or nibbāna) is a question:

Why are we practicing?

Most of you will probably have some idea of why you're practicing, but let's take nibbāna as being very clearly the summum bonum of the tradition. The reason why you practice in the early tradition—let's put aside the *Mahāyāna* traditions at this point—is to awaken, to attain something that we call nibbāna (nirvāna). So we're practicing. We might have specific ideas as to why we're practicing but this early tradition aims at full awakening: waking up to the world that we live in, the way things are, the things we can't avoid, the things we come into contact with, and all phenomena. Everything in your experience is what we're waking up to.

Understanding the word

In Pāli and Sanskrit, we have these two words: nibbāna (pāli) and nirvāna (sanskrit). Now the word *nirvāna* is a very well-known word, and I will stick with it for a moment although we're going to use continuously throughout this course the Pāli version because we're primarily talking about early Buddhism. We're talking about material derived from Pāli texts. I don't want to go into this in too much detail because it's not about philology, but the two languages are obviously intimately related. When you look across from one set of terms in Sanskrit to another set of terms in Pāli, there's often a very distinguishable likeness just in the form of the words let alone their meanings. The same is the

case with nirvāna and nibbāna. Nirvāna is clear and easier to etymologize. It breaks up into three forms:

THE ETYMOLOGY OF NIRVĀNA	
Nir	First is the *nir*, which is the negation.
vā	The *vā* part in Sanskrit comes from two senses: *to blow*, and the sense of the wind. You can see how the two are intimately related.
na	The *na* part is what you're blowing out, and it literally means "out."

> **So if you want a literal translation of nirvāna, it literally means *blowing out*. But because of the grammatical form, it means *gone out*.**

Now, the grammatical form is what's called an intransitive, it doesn't pass to a direct object. This might seem very esoteric to some people but it's not meant to be. It's a very simple idea. In not passing to a direct object it means we're not going to a place.

> **The last thing that we are heading towards is some destination or place. The grasping in the early texts after a destination or place is considered to be an obstacle, actually, to *nibbāna*.**

So the grammatical category here is a verb form. It's something we're engaged in, something that we're doing. Out of this etymology we get a lot of Indian metaphysics, if we contextualize it. And I think some of that is interesting and relevant to what we're doing in this process.

Allowing the fires to burn out

Now, in the previous two presentations that you've heard, you would have heard the idea of cooling—in the case of what Jake was saying—the *going out*, and the extinguishment of the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion. There are very similar ideas here. Within Indian culture of the period we have a great emphasis on fire. And you find fire metaphors running through the Buddhist tradition as well.

> **In this particular instance, the three fires obviously represent greed, aversion, and delusion.**

They are related to the three sacrificial fires of the religious traditions that you found in India in that period. Even to this day, if you go to a Hindu temple you will find a fire burning. All the rites of passage are usually done around that fire. Literally people will walk around the fire and offer, nowadays, sacrifices of things

like sesame seeds and oil, coconut—all sorts of things are thrown onto the fire as sacrifices.

The Buddha was changing that language. He was utilizing the language of that period and bringing it back into a very practical situation. Because the Buddha was saying that—instead of engaging in these esoteric, religious, ritualistic practices—

> **We're creating a situation where the fuel that sustains the fire is allowed to burn out.**

The metaphor of fire is a very important one, because when we look and observe a fire, particularly one of these ancient sacrificial fires, you would find logs on that fire. If we want to continue to fuel the fire, in the Buddha's terms, that's *upādāna:* grasping, clinging, but the word literally means *to fuel*, to fuel a material process.

So we have two choices: we can continue to fuel that material process in our daily lives by doing the same things we ordinarily do, stemming from three basic psychological factors: greed, aversion, and delusion. If you really want to keep your fires going, just continue to operate from those and all the psychology that derives from those three factors, greed, aversion, and delusion.

> **However, if you want to wake up—and we still will have to unpack this notion of what nibbāna is—if you want to attain what we might refer to as a nibbānic or an awakened experience, then somehow you have to cease to fuel.**

Imagine you've got a fire in front of you. Whatever kind of fire you have, if you want to keep it going just keep placing your coal or your wood on that fire. What happens when you look at the flames that are attaching to the fuel? They sort of cling to the wood, or they cling to the coal that you see in front of you. What the Buddha is suggesting is that when the fuel—the wood, or the coal—has burned up, the flame will go out. It's a strange sense in which to think about it, but this is actually the way the Indians of that period thought about it: in that moment when the flame went out, when the fuel was exhausted, the flame was liberated. The question this suggests is:

> **What must be taken away for a liberative dimension to come into being?**

For us to feel some sense of liberation there has to be the negation of factors that keep the unawakened state in place. At this stage nibbāna is not suggesting, other than by implication, something else. And a lot of the Indian languages suggest the opposite by implication, not by directly stating it. Now you'll find both things happening in the early Pāli texts: sometimes the Buddha directly states something; in other cases there is this typical Indian use of language: suggestion.

So you eradicate one thing and it's not simply an absence: it's the presence of something that's revealed when you take away something else. It's like Jake's example of the shed. When you remove the shed, you get a beautiful view and possibly a view you didn't even know existed when that hideous building stood in front of you. By removing that, a new vista, a new vision, is opened up to you. This is exactly what is happening with the Buddha's suggestion about nibbāna.

Coming back to my original question, "Why are we practicing?" Clearly we are practicing for something that we are calling *nibbāna*: to have a clearer view, to have a clearer view of life and going forward in our lives.

Ceasing to go around in circles

One other aspect to this is the question of what is revealed. What is revealed when we take away the hideous shed? The hideous shed actually is what we call *samsāra* (the cycle of endless, repetitive wandering). This implies that we are attached to certain conditions that we continue to replicate in our lives and thus fuel the problem.

> **The problem, as most of us will know, is the problem of *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness, vulnerability, suffering) and how it manifests in our life.**

This word samsāra that I'm using: the etymology is in some ways really quite simple. It means to go around in circles. We get a sense of repetitiveness from this word. Now, traditionally the word samsāra is used to refer to birth, death, rebirth: a process that we can see going on in life. And what we're doing is liberating ourselves, either in the traditional sense of liberating ourselves from that cyclical existence, but also the cyclical existence of repetitiveness in our ordinary lives. This is what we're liberating ourselves from. It's the repetitiveness, and the clinging to certain habit patterns which continue to fuel this process, that we're calling samsāra. The extinguishment of samsāra is nibbāna. Literally, samsāra has gone out. We have ceased to create the conditions for the existence of something to continue. This is what is implied.

This happens at two levels

Now, just a final comment. We can see this extinguishment in two senses.

CESSATION AT DIFFERENT SCALES	
In daily life	We can see this cessation happening in daily life, in little aspects of liberation. Something that has kept us bound to forms of behavior has *gone out*. It is now no longer driving us compulsively, as it once did.
The big extinguishment	Then there is the big extinguishment where we have cooled, or have extinguished, or allowed to become extinguished, the conditions that uphold a particular way of living our lives.

Ultimately, the movement that we're making is into wholesome ways of living. That is a path to an ethical form of what I would call nibbāna.

Meditation 1: Allowing the Mind to Settle

If nibbāna is the cessation of unhelpful patterns of mind—greed, aversion, and delusion—then it helps to practice the skill of ceasing to fuel these patterns of mind. An apt style of meditation for this is allowing our thoughts and preoccupations to fade naturally.

We've been speaking about nibbāna as a cooling down of fire, of what happens when a flame goes out. There's a sense of allowing a process to cease when it's no longer fuelled. This provides an image that can be really skillful in our meditation practice. Perhaps when we start meditation, there's sometimes a sense of trying to fix or manipulate or over-control our experience: "I don't want to be having that thought", or "I need to be tense to somehow try to create a state of peace"!

> **But rather than controlling, we can approach meditation with an attitude of allowing: of allowing the thoughts and feelings and images and memories all just to come and go, and to cease.**

So in this practice, I'll guide us using this idea of cessation as something that can support our meditation very practically.

The posture

Beginning by finding a posture that is supportive, a posture that combines the qualities of being upright and alert, on the one hand, with a sense of ease, on the other. This can be quite a dynamic balance. You may notice right now that there's a little more uprightness needed in the posture. Or maybe it's drifted into unnecessary tension and there are slight adjustments that would support the sense of ease. Exploring.

Grounding attention in the body

Then from here, gently allowing the attention to begin to come into the body and move all the way down into the legs and into the feet. Spending some time to really feel the contact with the ground, the connection with the Earth.

Depending on how you're sitting, it might be the soles of the feet on the ground, it may be the legs—but how does that contact feel right now? Sensing. Noticing. Really feeling that contact with the ground, the connection with the Earth.

Whatever else is around in experience, in this moment—whatever thoughts and preoccupations and memories are present—in the midst of all of that, sensing the body. A very basic sense of body resting on the ground, and allowing that to support a steadying.

Taking your seat

And then from here, the contact with the ground can just be in the background of awareness. And in the foreground, really taking the seat. Seeing how this is: very literally feeling the body on the chair or cushion, its physical points of contact and connection; and if it also feels useful, perhaps opening to the symbolic sense of *taking your seat,* right now.

> **Taking the seat of awareness. Just as the Buddha sat down under the Bodhi Tree, you take this seat here and now.**

Becoming aware of the breath

Letting these physical contact points with the ground and seat be there in the background. And in the foreground beginning to feel and sense the breath in the body.

If there's a different anchor that you tend to use that's more supportive for you, feeling free to use that.

Really feeling this rhythm of the breathing. Maybe sensing the breath in the belly, or perhaps the chest area, or the nose. Or there may be a sense of the whole body breathing. Just gently exploring what feels supportive.

Allowing the attention just to rest with the in-breath and out-breath.

Noticing how we get drawn into thought

Then noticing how, quite naturally, the attention tends to get drawn into a train of thought, a preoccupation, maybe a memory arises and draws the attention.

> **You may sense that sometimes these trains of thought can really fuel a particular pattern in the heart and mind.**

So, in this very gentle sense of just noticing and acknowledging these, we patiently return to the breath in the body. There's a sense of allowing these to cease, to gently fade in their own time.

Opening up a space. Feeling the breath in the body. The in-breath; the out-breath.

Bringing curiosity to experience

And so, as much as feels possible, bringing a sense of curiosity to those moments where the attention is drawn away into a particular pattern. In these moments, really noticing this tendency of the mind to be drawn to this and that, to be absorbed in a preoccupation, a daydream—whatever's present.

Really seeing this pattern and paying some attention to the attitude that supports gently coming back to the breath.

> **This gentle return, again, supports a sense of letting things fade in their own time. Allowing the mind to, little by little, begin to settle and gather and collect.**

We're not forcing the mind to be still or harshly pulling back the attention... but rather a patient gathering, collecting. Allowing these many cessations of the patterns that can draw the heart and mind.

Opening up a space, and a stillness.

Allowing unhelpful patterns to fade

Noticing where the attention is now. Aware of those moments when it's drawn into trains of thought. And a reminder of these supportive attitudes: being gentle, patient, a sense of freshness as we begin again, come back, and find a steadiness in the midst of all that's here.

Aware of the breath in the body. Allowing other patterns to simply arise and pass. Allowing them to cease. Aware of the peace and stillness that this reveals.

Bringing the meditation to a close

And so, in a moment, you have the option to gently bring this practice to a close; or the option to continue in your own time, to explore, to notice, to come back.

Widening the awareness to a sense of the whole body from the feet to the very top of the head. Perhaps beginning to gently let in some light: maybe opening the eyes a little, closing them, opening them again a little.

Then whenever you feel ready, gently bringing this practice to a close.

Reflect

1. What is your conception of nibbāna? Perhaps there are some associations in the background that are worth questioning: the flash of lightning, the all-or-nothing model, a romanticized state of perfection.
2. Awakening is not a self-improvement project. Is there a sense in which you are practicing to be somebody, to get it right, to experience the extraordinary, to be fixed? What happens when these subtle agitations are relaxed?
3. This is a whole-life path. Are you cooling the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion in your life away from the cushion?
4. If we adopt the metaphor of cooling the fires: what are you fuelling in your life these days? What preoccupations are you sustaining with thoughts and actions? What would it serve you to cease fuelling? What has already ceased?
5. What does it feel like to withdraw fuel from the agitations of mind and heart during meditation?
6. If you would like to, please introduce yourself and say hello to your fellow practitioners.
7. Do you agree that nibbāna isn't talked about clearly enough?
8. What is your relationship to nibbāna like? Does it seem so distant to be irrelevant? Does it seem to hinge on great meditative prowess? Does it seem a little closer after these talks?
9. Is setting goals and expectations for our practice helpful?
10. How are you getting on with the first meditation? In this style of practice, we notice patterns of mind and allow them to fade by themselves, simply by not fuelling them.

You may wish to make notes in a journal.

Teacher Discussion: Preparing the Ground

Our first discussion ranges from the need to speak openly about nibbāna, to skillful ways of relating to goals and expectations, to reflecting on nibbāna as an important practice in its own right. Let's dive in.

Practitioners need to hear about nibbana

I think if practitioners are going to place nibbāna at the heart of their own path and the heart of their own practice, they will only do that if they hear about it from those that they are listening to, those that they're being taught by. If it's not discussed very openly, not really foregrounded as being, "This is what we're here for", then it becomes either very esoteric or surrounded in mystery and confusion. And yet the path is big. The path to nibbāna is big. It's integrity, it's samādhi, it's insight. Yet all of these are in the service of awakening, in my understanding.

I think there are other things involved. I think we live in times and cultures of profound self-doubt and impossibility, which means that we set our horizons, sometimes, too low.

On goals and expectations

I also feel that we live in cultures and times where there's a kind of allergy to words like "goals". Or there's an allergy to words like "expectations" or "attainments". The sense is that if you use that language, you're going to trigger all this really unhelpful striving and over ambitiousness, which personally I think

that's not necessary an equation. You can have goals without striving. You can have a sense of expectations. Personally, I feel it's very important to have expectations in this practice. It's not a negative word. It doesn't need to be a charged word.

If we have no expectations, what are we aspiring to? Where are we going? Expectations is about taking steps. It's about reaching for what's possible. Yet if people hear that message all the time: "Don't have expectations and you won't be disappointed." Don't have expectations and you may also not have any change, or a sense of where that change is taking you.

Inspiration on the path

Inspiration for me, and I think probably for all of us, is so deeply important, the inspiration that comes from the teaching. But for me, what was truly inspiring was to be in the company of people who seemed to truly embody this level of profound peace and compassion and generosity, who seemed not to exhibit these compulsions of craving and ill will, who seemed free of that whole landscape.

And when I began to practice, I knew that these people—who I was living next to, that I was being taught by—actually knew something that I didn't know. So both listening to the teachings and being inspired by the examples of others was, for me, very pivotal in this path.

Reflecting on nibbana is itself a practice

I think it's really helpful for us to encourage people to reflect on what we mean by nibbāna or what they're aiming for in their practice, and to keep this reflection ongoing. It's actually part of the practice. Part of the path of awakening is to keep reflecting on, "What do we mean by this?" It's not a one-off thing that a teacher tells you, "Oh, this is what it is" and then off you go. But it's a little bit like how philosophers discuss the nature of philosophy. I think as practitioners we

can actually list that as a practice: "What does this awakening mean? What is nirvāna?"

Is awakening open-ended?

One of the things I've sometimes felt unsure about in terms of goals. Often in life there's a discrete task that has a beginning, middle, and an end. So, "This is what I'm going to do. I've started it. Now I'm doing it. Now it's finished." Whereas I often feel our practice, and our life as a practice, has a sense of being open-ended. So, yes, there's this direction, but I've often been somewhat confused, to be honest with you, with the idea of a sort of arrival, that it's then done. So a little bit like the life of an artist: the life of the artist never ends, in the sense of, "Oh, I've been creative. Now I've done that." So there's something about a sense of our path and awakening as open-ended that makes me a little unsure about the language that we do hear in the tradition: "Done is what needed to be done."

The difference between craving and aspiration

I wonder if the key for practitioners is to understand the difference between aspiration and craving. And when craving gets hold of ideas like "enlightenment", or nibbāna and things like that, because sometimes people, all of their life, they've been looking for the thing that's going to make them complete. There's a sense of lack, "OK, yeah, if I buy this, or get that relationship, or get this job: these things are going to make me complete." But those things are impermanent and ultimately unreliable. And so we're in a spin. And then if that's the spin we've been in, and then you hear somebody say, "Oh, there's this thing called nibbāna", it's easy to relate to that as another object towards which we crave and project these cravings. So as well as asking what's our desire directed towards, there's also the contemplation on the quality and nature of that desire, so that it becomes something aspirational as opposed to simply the old habits of craving.

A linear or meandering path?

I have certainly some sympathy with the view that living an awakened life is an ongoing project, because that makes nibbāna sound so linear for a start off: "Here's a discrete beginning, here's a discrete middle, and here's a discrete ending. And OK, we might never get to the ending but you've got this linear pathway." Actually, the pathway is much more meandering.

In one of the abhidharma commentaries, nibbāna is spoken about as being eternal. But that doesn't mean eternal in the sense of it being out there somewhere in the universe. Eternal here means it's there in the present, it's there in the past, and it's there in the future. And it's always present in some way. But it's that sense you're not actually just aiming at a particular thing then say, "Oh, I've done the job. Actually it's a continuing thing."

Aspiration provides direction

Aspiration very much inspires us to engage with what we are doing. If you don't have an aspiration that's clearly identifiable, then you meander in a bad sense of the word. You drift here and there and you practice this and you practice that. There's clearly a sense of change wanted. I don't think anybody winds up even just in an ordinary meditation class without the sense of wanting something to be changed. And it's usually, I think, linked to possibly not feeling entirely at home in the world. So it might not be fully blown dukkha as we often speak about it, but it might be that sense of disconnect, not feeling at home. The things the world has given me aren't quite right. Now, to move from that then into an aspiration, you've got to identify what you do want.

Translating nibbana into inspiring terms

If I want to go on my package holiday, I need to read the brochure to be inspired to go on my package holiday. I need to see what the hotel is like. What's the food

going to be like? What's the island I'm heading for? Is it walking country? Is it a sitting-by-the-swimming-pool kind of trip? We don't get a sense of that from this word nibbāna. We are told what it's not. And I think it's partly the way the original languages operate. The word doesn't tell us, it says by implication and negation what it is. But we really need to have that unpacked, I think, in the West to translate it into a language which really does inspire us to move in those directions.

In Daily Life

Our task until the next unit is to notice mental patterns of preoccupation arising, to refrain from fuelling them, and to notice as they fade.

Now, we're going to engage in a daily task. This is something I would like you to contemplate until the next unit.

Refrain from fuelling preoccupations, and notice endings

One of the things that should perhaps become apparent by this stage is that no matter what our understanding of nibbāna is, we must know it's something to do with endings. It's something to do with cessations, something which is moving out of being. That is central. Jake, in his meditation, introduced that notion of endings. And so...

> **I want us to look at these endings. We know that things will only continue to be if they're fed.**

We could take something, for example, such as a thought that arises: a worry, an anxiety. As we all know with worries and anxieties, what actually happens is we feed them. We disappear down the rabbit hole of worries and anxieties. All too often we get lost in the labyrinth somewhere. That worry and anxiety will even move somewhere else, to another topic.

> **Here, what I'm suggesting is that we notice the arising of something like a thought—such as a worry, or anxiety, or even a body sensation—and see if we can note it and not fuel it.**

See if we can note the pattern and withdraw that tendency to want to feed it. We're not just noticing the arising of something—the arising, using my example

of an anxiety—but also noting the ending of it when I cease to fuel it. So we're doing this twofold task.

Drop this reflection in periodically

Now, I wouldn't do this obsessively in the day. Just sometimes drop in and notice your thought patterns.

You can often notice in the body the arising of the precursor of the mental thought: a little tightening in the gut, a little tension in the shoulders. Maybe something like that. And you think, "Oh yeah, I know something's coming up here."

> **You may just remain with the physical sensations. See if you can just observe that physical sensation and not fuel it any further.**

See if you can look at what arises, perhaps on the back of that sensation. It may be the precursor of an anxiety, a worry, or something else. And see if you can abstain from feeding it and disappearing down that rabbit hole, as I suggested.

So it's a very simple task, and in a way quite a difficult task, because we are just looking at something arising, noticing, and trying not to feed it, and noticing how it's possibly going to drop out of our experience much quicker than if we continue, obviously, to feed it.

Acknowledging what's here

Just a little word about acknowledging. Because obviously the aim of what we're engaging in with this task is not to suppress things, not to push them away. This would be aversion: trying to get rid of these patterns, quickly.

> **What we're doing is we're acknowledging without repressing. Acknowledgment is actually saying, "Yes, I know you're here. I appreciate that you're here." We're looking at what has arisen, even if it's difficult, with a friendlier eye.**

And so we're not pushing it away. We're saying "Yes, you're here. But I'm not going to follow through with you. I'm not going to feed you with other thought processes or even just my thinking about a physical process. I'm not going to make you something bigger than you already are." And that's all we're doing.

So I would suggest you take this as a little task for the week, and in the next unit we will set you another task.

Summary: Unit 1

Preparing the Ground

Congratulations on beginning this journey and completing the first unit. We might already sense that nibbāna is a real possibility. Perhaps the destination is not so far away, nor does the direction of travel require us to be more than we are, but rather to lighten our burden. Let's review.

- If we don't have a sense of where this path is leading, it's likely that we will practice in myriad ways, with myriad attitudes, that don't necessarily lead us closer to the goal.
- The Buddha was insistent that nibbāna is the prime benefit of the path, and that it was within reach of the sincere practitioner. It is not reserved only for the most dedicated monastics, veteran retreatants, or superhuman meditators.
- Awakening isn't something we can personally lay claim to. It is not another identity, a state, or an experience bound in time. It is a lived understanding born of the cessation of ignorance. When greed, hatred, and delusion are extinguished, so too are distress, despair, and struggle.
- And while we don't want to over-inflate nibbāna until it seems impossibly huge, neither is there much benefit in reducing it to the point of being a passing glimpse of happiness or peace.
- Jake introduced the metaphor of nibbāna as a cooling of the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. If we find the word "hatred" too strong, we might use aversion here.
- Jake gave us the analogy of clearing away a broken old shed. When the unlovely has been removed, a space opens up. When these fires (or poisons or defilements, as they're sometimes known) cease, what remains is a beautiful, loving, interested, engaged, peaceful state of mind.
- This is a different model of awakening to the one we receive from popular culture, in which an isolated hermit is hit by a momentary flash of lightning after years of striving on a remote mountaintop. This "thunderbolt model", Jake suggests, is perhaps not so helpful. Cooling the fires points us in a different direction. We're not so much trying to *get something* out of the practice but laying down our insistences altogether.
- John expanded on our metaphor of cooling the fires. He observed that whatever we refrain from fueling will cease naturally. So when there are unwholesome tendencies in the mind—whether of craving, aversion, or

confusion—we can withdraw the identifications, fixations, and thoughts that sustain these patterns.
- When we do this, we may experience a cooling of the fires, a contentment and peace that isn't dependent on the world giving us what we want, or on a superlative meditation session. This is perhaps a taste of nibbāna, a cessation that isn't far away and that could, when developed over time, lead to a final extinguishment of greed, aversion, and delusion.

In formal practice

Until the next unit, you are invited to meditate using the practice that Jake suggested.

1. Begin by grounding attention in the body and taking your seat.
2. Become aware of the breath, or another appropriate anchor.
3. Notice how the mind gets drawn into thoughts and preoccupations. Bring curiosity to these moments. See the pattern.
4. Gently, patiently, kindly return attention to the anchor.
5. Allow the preoccupations to fade naturally through ceasing to fuel them.

Audio from the guided meditation is available as a download to support you. Or you may wish to review the instructions in the workbook and undertake these practices at your own pace.

In Daily Life

John offered a practice for us to engage with until the next unit.

1. Refrain from fueling preoccupations. Simply observe them and allow them to fade naturally.
2. Notice the endings. That which is no longer fueled, ceases.

See the In Daily Life section for more details.