



# Nirvana Now

Nirvana, says **Ajahn Sumedho**, is not some far-off goal that can only be attained through years of effort. It is a state of being you can realize at any moment once you let go of grasping.

**A** difficulty with the word *nibbana* is that its meaning is beyond the power of words to describe. It is, essentially, undefinable.

Another difficulty is that many Buddhists see nibbana (Sanskrit: nirvana) as something unobtainable—as so high and so remote that we're not worthy enough to try for it. Or we see nibbana as a goal, as an unknown, undefined something that we should somehow try to attain.

Most of us are conditioned in this way. We want to achieve or attain something that we don't have. So nibbana is looked at as something that if you work hard, keep the *sila* (moral precepts), meditate diligently, become a monastic, devote your life to practice, then your reward might be that eventually you attain nibbana—even though you're not sure what it is.

Ajahn Chah would use the words “the reality of non-grasping” as the definition for nibbana: realizing the reality of nongrasping. That helps to put it in a context, because the emphasis is on awakening to how we grasp and hold on even to words like “nibbana” or “Buddhism” or “practice” or “sila” or whatever.

It's often said that the Buddhist way is not to grasp. But that can become just another statement that we grasp and hold on to. It's a Catch-22: no matter how hard you try to make sense out of it, you end up in total confusion because of the limitation of language and perception. You have to go beyond language and perception. And the only way to go beyond thinking and emotional habit is through awareness—awareness of thought and awareness of emotion. “The island that you cannot go beyond” is the metaphor for this state of *being* awake and aware, as opposed to the concept of *becoming* awake and aware.

In meditation classes, people often start with a basic delusion that they never challenge: the idea that “I'm someone who grasps and has a lot of desires, and I have to practice in order to get rid of these desires and stop grasping and clinging to things. I shouldn't cling to anything.” That's often the

position we start from. So we start our practice from this basis and, many times, the result is disillusionment and disappointment, because our practice is based on the grasping of an idea.

Eventually, we realize that no matter how much we try to get rid of desire and not grasp anything, no matter what we do—become a monk, an ascetic, sit for hours and hours, attend retreats over and over again, do all the things we believe will get rid of these grasping tendencies—we end up feeling disappointed because the basic delusion has never been recognized.

This is why the metaphor of the island that you cannot go beyond is so powerful, because it points to the principle of an awareness that you can't get beyond. It's very simple, very direct, and you can't conceive it. You have to trust it. You have to trust this simple ability that we all have to be fully present and fully awake, and begin to recognize the grasping, and the ideas we have taken on about ourselves, about the world around us, about our thoughts and perceptions and feelings.

The way of mindfulness is the way of recognizing conditions just as they are. We simply recognize and acknowledge their presence, without blaming them or judging them, without criticizing them or praising them. We allow them to be, both the positive and the negative. And, as we trust in this way of mindfulness more and more, we begin to realize the reality of the island that you cannot go beyond.

When I started practicing meditation I felt I was somebody who was very confused, and I wanted to get out of this confusion and get rid of my problems and become someone who was a clear thinker and might one day become enlightened. That's what got me going in the direction of Buddhist meditation and monastic life.

But then, reflecting on this position that “I am somebody who needs to do something,” I began to see it as a created condition—it was an assumption that I had created. And if I operated from that assumption, although I might develop all

Ajahn Chah defined nibanna as the “reality of nongrasping,” putting the emphasis on awakening to how we grasp and hold on even to words like “nibanna” or “Buddhism” or “practice.”

kinds of skills and live a life that was praiseworthy and good and beneficial to myself and to others, at the end of the day, I might feel quite disappointed that I did not attain the goal of nibbana.

Fortunately, in monastic life everything is directed at the present. You’re always learning to challenge and see through your assumptions about yourself. One of the major challenges is the assumption that “I am somebody who needs to do something in order to become enlightened in the future.” Just by recognizing this as an assumption I created, that which is aware knows it is something created out of ignorance, or not understanding. When we see and recognize this fully, then we stop creating the assumptions.

Awareness is not about making value judgments about our thoughts or emotions or actions or speech. Awareness is about knowing these things fully—that they are what they are, at this moment. So what I found very helpful was learning to be aware of conditions without judging them. In this way, the resultant karma of past actions and speech as it arises in the present is fully recognized without compounding it, without making it into a problem. It is what it is. What arises ceases. As we recognize that and allow things to cease according to their nature, the realization of cessation gives us an increasing amount of faith in the practice of nonattachment and letting go.

The attachments that we have, even to good things like Buddhism, can also be seen as attachments that blind us. That doesn’t mean we need to get rid of Buddhism. We merely recognize attachment as attachment and see that we create it ourselves out of ignorance. As we keep reflecting on this, the tendency toward attachment falls away, and the reality of nonattachment, of nongrasping, reveals itself in what we may call nibbana.

If we look at it in this way, nibbana is here and now. It’s not an attainment in the future. The reality is here and now. It is so very simple, but beyond description. It can’t be bestowed or even conveyed, it can only be known by each person for themselves.

As one begins to realize or to recognize nongrasping as the Way, then emotionally one can feel quite frightened by it. It can seem like a kind of annihilation is taking place: all that I think I am in the world, all that I regard as stable and real, starts falling apart and that can be frightening. But if we have the faith to continue bearing these emotional reactions and allow things that arise to cease, to appear and disappear according to their nature, then we find our stability, not in achievement or attaining, but in being—being awake, being aware.

Many years ago, in William James’ book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, I found a poem by A. Charles Swinburne. In spite of having what some have described as a degenerate mind, Swinburne produced some very powerful reflections:

*Here begins the sea that ends not till the world’s end.  
Where we stand,  
Could we know the next high sea-mark set beyond these  
waves that gleam,  
We should know what never man hath known,  
nor eye of man hath scanned...  
Ah, but here man’s heart leaps, yearning towards the  
gloom with venturous glee,  
From the shore that hath no shore beyond it,  
set in all the sea.*

~ From “On the Verge,” in *A Midsummer Vacation*



The poem is an echo of the Buddha’s response to Kappa’s question in the *Sutta Nipata*:

Next was the brahmin student Kappa.

“Sir,” he said, “there are people stuck midstream in the terror and the fear of the rush of the river of being, and death and decay overwhelm them. For their sakes, Sir, tell me where to find an island, tell me where there is solid ground beyond the reach of all this pain.”

“Kappa,” said the Master, “for the sake of those people stuck in the middle of the river of being, overwhelmed by death and decay, I will tell you where to find solid ground.

“There is an island, an island which you cannot go beyond. It is a place of nothingness, a place of non-possession and of non-attachment. It is the total end of death and decay, and this is why I call it Nibbana [the extinguished, the cool].

“There are people who, in mindfulness, have realized this and are completely cooled here and now. They do not become slaves working for Mara, for Death; they cannot fall into his power.”

~ SN 1092–5 (translated by Ven. Saddhatissa)

In English, “nothingness” can sound like annihilation, like nihilism. But you can also emphasize the “thingness” so that it becomes “no-thingness.” So nibbana is not a thing that you can find. It is the place of “no-thingness,” a place of nonpossession, a place of nonattachment. It is a place, as Ajahn Chah said, where you experience “the reality of nongrasping.”

Nibbana is a reality that each one of us can know for ourselves—once we recognize nonattachment and realize the reality of nongrasping. **BD**

---

AJAHN SUMEDHO is abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery near Hemel Hempstead in England, which is part of the network of Buddhist monasteries in the lineage of Ajahn Chah. He was ordained as a Buddhist monk more than forty years ago and studied with Ajahn Chah for many years in Thailand.



GONÇALO OLIVEIRA

This article is from Ajahn Sumedho’s introduction to *The Island: An Anthology of the Buddha’s Teachings on Nibbana*, by Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro, published by the Abhayagiri Monastic Foundation. To download a free PDF version of the book, go to [www.abhayagiri.org](http://www.abhayagiri.org).



## Like Oil and Water

There is a quality of pure awareness that is not fazed by fleeting thoughts, emotions, or sense impressions, explain **Ajahn Amaro** and **Ajahn Pasanno**. Even when they are together, pure awareness and the conditioned realm are always separate.

The relationship of this quality of awareness to the conditioned realm is embodied in Ajahn Chah’s analogy of oil and water, an image he used very often.

This is the way it is. You detach. You let go. Whenever there is any feeling of clinging, we detach from it, because we know that that very feeling is just as it is. It didn’t come along especially to annoy us. We might think that it did, but in truth it just is that way. If we start to think and consider it further, that, too, is just as it is. If we let go, then form is merely form, sound is merely sound, odour is merely odour, taste is merely taste, touch is merely touch and the heart is merely the heart. It’s similar to oil and water. If you put the two together in a bottle, they won’t mix because of the difference of their nature...

Oil and water are different in the same way that a wise person and an ignorant person are different. The Buddha lived with form, sound, odor, taste, touch and thought. He was an arahant (Enlightened One), so he turned away from rather than toward these things. He turned away and detached little by little since he understood that the heart is just the heart and thought is just thought. He didn’t confuse and mix them together.

The heart is just the heart; thoughts and feelings are just thoughts and feelings. Let things be just as they are! Let form be just form, let sound be just sound, let thought be just thought. Why should we bother to attach to them? If we think and feel in this way, then there is detachment and separateness. Our thoughts and feelings will be on one side and our heart will be on the other. Just like oil and water—they are in the same bottle but they are separate.

~ Ajahn Chah, “The Training of the Heart”  
in *Food for the Heart*

When we use such terms as “the one who knows,” it is important to understand that this is a colloquial usage. In no way is some kind of true self or super-entity implied—it’s merely a convenient figure of speech. If we start looking for “who” it is that is aware we rapidly end up in a tangle of self-view.

When we speak or think about the quality of awareness, there is also a subtle danger of trying to cast it into the form of some kind of immaterial thing or process. The word “awareness” is an abstract noun, and we get so used to relating to ordinary objects through conceptualizing them that we allow the habit to overflow and we can end up conceiving awareness in the same way. The heart can be aware, but trying to make awareness an object, in the same way that we would a tree or a thought, is a frustrating process. Ajahn Chah warned against this, often saying:

You’re riding on a horse and asking,  
“Where’s the horse?”

~ Ajahn Chah, in *Venerable Father*, by Paul Breiter

Enlightenment, liberation, depends on the recognition of the radical separateness of awareness—“the one who knows” as Ajahn Chah would phrase it—and the world of the five *khandhas* (Sanskrit: *skandhas*). Having said that, it’s also crucial to note that the phrase “the one who knows” (Pali: *buddho*) is a colloquialism that has different meanings in different contexts. It can be used at one end of the spectrum to mean “that which cognizes an object,” and at the other end to mean supramundane wisdom. Most often it is used in simple concentration instructions, where the meditator separates awareness from the object and then focuses on the awareness. The separate awareness of full awakening is of a different order altogether.

A comparable model that Ajahn Chah often used to illustrate this area is that of the relationship of mindfulness (*sati*), clear comprehension (*sampajañña*), and wisdom (*pañña*) to each other. He would liken these three to the hand, the arm, and the body respectively: *sati*, like the hand, is simply that which picks things up, or cognizes them; *sampajañña*, like the arm that enables the hand to reach for the desired objects and move them around, refers to seeing an object in its context and how it relates to its surroundings; *pañña*, like the life source which is the body, is seeing things in terms of *anicca-dukka-anatta*—uncertainty, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. The hand and the arm have their functions, but without the body they are powerless.

The key is training the heart to rest in these various dimensions of knowing, and not becoming entangled in the *khandhas*.

*The heart knowing the Dhamma  
of ultimate ease  
sees for sure that the khandhas  
are always stressful.*

*The Dhamma stays as the Dhamma,  
the khandhas stay as the khandhas, that’s all.*

~ Ajahn Mun, *The Ballad of Liberation  
from the Five Khandhas*

(translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu)

## The process of awakening not only breaks down subject–object relationships, it also breaks down the very formulation of “things.”

Ajahn Sumedho also had a favorite analogy for this:

Just like the question “Can you see your own eyes?” Nobody can see their own eyes. I can see your eyes but I can’t see my eyes. I’m sitting right here, I’ve got two eyes and I can’t see them. But you can see my eyes. But there’s no need for me to see my eyes because I can see! It’s ridiculous, isn’t it? If I started saying “Why can’t I see my own eyes?” you’d think “Ajahn Sumedho’s really weird, isn’t he!” Looking in a mirror you can see a reflection, but that’s not your eyes, it’s a reflection of your eyes. There’s no way that I’ve been able to look and see my own eyes, but then it’s not necessary to see your own eyes. It’s not necessary to know who it is that knows—because there’s knowing.

~ Ajahn Sumedho, “What is the Citta?”  
*Forest Sangha Newsletter*, October 1988

This very error is the reason why it’s perhaps wiser to use a term such as “knowing” instead of “transcendent wisdom” or “awareness.” As a gerund it is a verb-noun, thus lending it a more accurate quality of immanence, activity, and non-thingness. The process of awakening not only breaks down subject-object relationships, it also breaks down the very formulation of “things.”

Some years ago Buckminster Fuller published a book entitled *I Seem to Be a Verb*, and more recently, and more expansively, Rabbi David Cooper published *God is a Verb*. Both of these were attempts to counteract the floodtide of formulations of reality as “things” that the untrained, conditioned mind is prone to generating.

---

AJAHN AMARO and AJAHN PASANNO are co-abbots of Abhayagiri Monastery in Redwood Valley, California, which is in the Thai Forest tradition of Ajahn Chah.



### EMPTINESS

We come now to the quality of emptiness. First, it is of some significance to note that although the adjectival noun *suññata* (Sanskrit: *sunyata*), or “emptiness,” is used in the Theravada scriptures, it is far outweighed by its humble cousin, the adjective *suñña*, “empty.” In later, Northern Buddhist traditions, *sunyata* took on not only a central position in the teachings on liberation (for example in the *Prajña Paramita Sutras*, the *Heart Sutra*, and the *Vajra Sutra*) and the Middle Way (as in Nagarjuna’s *Madhyamaka* philosophy, uniting emptiness and causality), but it also took on the attributes of some kind of quasi-mystical substance or realm—not intentionally or doctrinally even, but more through a subtle and unconscious reification. It became something that is a nothing, that then was worshiped and deified as a universal panacea.

This is not to say that all such teachings on emptiness are false or useless—not at all. It is just to say that, like any verbal formulation of Dhamma, if grasped incorrectly they can obstruct rather than aid progress on the path. If the concept of emptiness is understood and used as a skillful means, it is clear that it could not be any kind of thing-in-itself. Any tendency to incline the attitude in that direction would thus be seen as falling wide of the mark.

If a person were to say that *suññata* is a material element, his or her friends would die laughing. Some people would say that it is an immaterial or formless element, and here the Noble Ones (*ariya*) would die laughing. Voidness is neither a material nor an immaterial element, but is a third kind of element that lies beyond the ken of ordinary people. The Buddha called it “quenching element” or “cessation element” (*nirodha-dhatu*).

The words “material element” (*vatthu-dhatu*) or “form element” (*rupa-dhatu*) refer to materiality in visible forms, sounds, odors, tastes, or tactile objects. “Formless element” (*arupa-dhatu*) refers to the mind and heart, to mental processes, and to the thoughts and experiences that arise in the mind. There is only one kind of element not included in these two categories, an element that is the complete antithesis and annihilation of them all.

Consequently, the Buddha sometimes called it “coolness element” (*Nibbana-dhatu*), sometimes “quenching element” (*nirodha-dhatu*), and sometimes “deathless element” (*amatadhatu*).

~ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*

The qualities of knowing, emptiness, and the radiant mind weave through each other and are mutually reflective and supportive. They are like the fluidity, wetness, and coolness of a glass of water: three qualities that are distinct yet inseparable.

In the Pali scriptures *suñña* simply means “empty.” It describes the quality of absence—an absence contained within a particular defining form, rather than some kind of absolute value. Every space has its poetics: this personality is empty of self, this glass is empty of water, this room is empty of people—there is a definite voidness in some respects, but it is also shaped by its context. The pair of silences during the opening bars of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony are just silence, but the particular poetry of those silences is shaped by the notes before and after.

Without the glass there would not be any emptiness; without the other musical notes those moments would not be silent—that is to say, the emptiness only exists in relationship to its vessel, whatever that may be: a personality, a glass, a room, a musical phrase. It’s just a way of speaking about form and space using relative language.

Thus from the Theravada point of view, the concept of emptiness is quite prosaic. It lacks the intrinsic mystical quality imputed to it in some of the Northern Buddhist scriptures. However, it becomes more meaningful in terms of liberation as it is almost always used in the context of “empty of self and the property of a self.” If that absence is recognized then the heart is certainly inclining to awakening.

The environment of pure awareness is cultivated through a realization of emptiness; it then embodies that characteristic as a result of its perfection. Radiance is another of the principal qualities that manifests as that knowing is purified.

Bhikkhus, there are these four radiances—what are the four? The radiance of the moon, the radiance of the sun, the radiance of fire, the radiance of wisdom (*paññapabha*)... Bhikkhus, among these four, the radiance of wisdom is indeed the most excellent.

~ *Anguttara Nikaya* 4.142

These three attributes—knowing, emptiness, and the radiant mind—weave through each other and are mutually reflective and supportive. In a way, they are like the fluidity, wetness, and coolness of a glass of water: three qualities that are distinct yet inseparable.

To round things off, here are some words from Ajahn Chah that encompass the themes we have been looking at.

About this mind... in truth there is nothing really wrong with it. It is intrinsically pure. Within itself it’s already peaceful. That the mind is not peaceful these days is because it follows moods. The real mind doesn’t have anything to it, it is simply [an aspect of] Nature. It becomes peaceful or agitated because moods deceive it. The untrained mind is stupid. Sense impressions come and trick it into happiness, suffering, gladness, and sorrow, but the mind’s true nature is none of those things. That gladness or sadness is not the mind, but only a mood coming to deceive us. The untrained mind gets lost and follows these things, it forgets itself. Then we think that it is we who are upset or at ease or whatever.

But really this mind of ours is already unmoving and peaceful... really peaceful! Just like a leaf which is still as long as no wind blows. If a wind comes up the leaf flutters. The fluttering is due to the wind—the “fluttering” is due to those sense impressions; the mind follows them. If it doesn’t follow them, it doesn’t “flutter.” If we know fully the true nature of sense impressions we will be unmoved.

Our practice is simply to see the Original Mind. We must train the mind to know those sense impressions, and not get lost in them; to make it peaceful. Just this is the aim of all this difficult practice we put ourselves through.

~ Ajahn Chah, *Food for the Heart*

---

This article is adapted from *The Island: An Anthology of the Buddha’s Teachings on Nibbana*. 