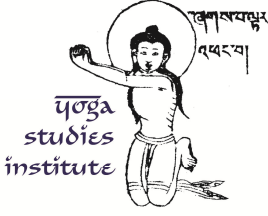


Nirvana Immersion
Homework Master, Class One



THE ASIAN
CLASSICS INSTITUTE



Nirvana Immersion

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Class One: The Names of Nirvana

1) The Sanskrit word “nirvana” can be explained in three very different ways. One of these has to do with candles; please explain, including also English cognates, or related words, for all three pieces of the Sanskrit.

[The prefix *nir* in the word *nirvana* is originally from a simple *ni*, which means *down*, and has come to mean *not*. We see it in the English words *nil* (*nothing*) and *neither*.

The next part of the word comes from the Sanskrit root \sqrt{va} (spelled $\sqrt{va\#}$), which means *to blow*. We see this root in English words like *fan*, and *ventilation*.

The last part of the word is the suffix *ana*, which indicates a “doer” of the action; here, the thing which does the blowing out. We see this suffix in English words like *comedian* (the one who makes comedy) or *mathematician* (someone who does mathematics).

One way of taking the whole word together then is as “the thing which does the blowing out,” and this is indeed the classical meaning of the word *nirvana*. The idea is that there is a kind of practice and meditation which can blow out, forever, the fire of our own negative thoughts: things like jealousy, anger, addictions, busyness, judging other people, and procrastination.

Try to imagine, then, what it would be like never to get upset again. Imagine what it would be like if nobody in the world could ever again make you upset. And that gives us our first feeling for what nirvana will be like.]

Nirvana Immersion
Homework Master, Class 1

2) A second meaning of the word *nirvana* has to do with weaving; explain how this relates to the way in which we reach nirvana, and include a new English cognate.

[The second Sanskrit root which relates to the word *nirvana* is \sqrt{va} (also spelled $\sqrt{va\#}$), which means *to weave*. In fact, the English word has itself come directly from this root, which is repeated when the action it describes is repeated; and so *va* is doubled to *vava* and eventually becomes *weave* in English.

Combined with the prefix *nis* (*nir*), we get the idea of *un-weaving*, or unraveling a web—the web of illusion. It is this unraveling which allows us to do the blowing out: if we can cut through the illusion that surrounds us, then we will be able to stop our negative emotions, forever.

We'll be talking a lot more about this “web of illusion,” but the basic idea is that the things and people around us are not what they seem—they can be compared to a mirage on a desert highway, where we think we see a pool of water.

How we relate to that water is a crucial idea here: with illusions, we are bound to react in a way which is totally mistaken, and which could even hurt us. We might hurry to grab a canteen from the back seat, and then speed in our car down the road—actions which could cause an accident...for nothing. More on this later.]

3) On to the third way of reading the Sanskrit word “nirvana”: How did the Tibetan translators of ancient times choose to translate this term, and how does this relate to the first two ways of explaining it? What are some English cognates for this way of reading the Sanskrit of the term?

[The ancient Tibetan translators chose to translate the word “nirvana” as *nya-ngen le depa*: “going beyond all grief.” That is, first we become aware that we are misunderstanding the things and people around us: we try to unravel the web of illusion in which we live.

We are able then to “blow out” the negative emotions that rise up inside of us as we try to interact with people and objects in the world that aren't at all what we always thought they were. In time, we stop interacting with the world in ways which hurt us.

That is, we go beyond the grief and frustration of trying to get things to work in ways which will never work. This too we will learn more about shortly.

Nirvana Immersion
Homework Master, Class 1

This reading of the term “nirvana” is connected to another Sanskrit root, also \sqrt{va} with a long *a*, with the basic meaning of “to win.” That is, we *beat* (*va*) the *grief* (*nir*)—the pain and negativity—of our life, forever.

The root \sqrt{va} with this particular meaning is also seen as \sqrt{van} . We see this form in the English cognates *vanquish* and *invincible*.]

4) Lord Buddha, and the sages who have explained his teachings in the centuries since he lived, describe in many different ways the “grief” that we go beyond when we reach nirvana. Choose the three descriptions here that mean the most to you and explain them briefly, being sure to comment also upon whether they are technically overcome when we reach nirvana, or at some earlier or later stage.

[Students might mention any three of the following, or others from the reading:

(1) Lama Quicksilver, speaking about 200 years ago, describes this grief as the feeling we would have in our heart if our own child should die. This kind of grief, and death, are only gone beyond when we have assured that no one will ever again die, or see their loved ones die.

(2) An early Indian text called *A Commentary to the Praise of Confession* describes this grief as “watching how the beings of our world are tortured by the pain of life.” This grief as well is only overcome at Buddhahood, for all.

(3) Master Vasubandhu says that grief is “part of the painful process of getting old, and then dying.” The causes for this grief are overcome at nirvana.

(4) He also says that we feel it when we are torn from those we love, or encounter people or situations which we dislike. These causes also overcome at nirvana.

(5) Master Prajnavarman says that “grief” here is simply all of our suffering—again, the causes overcome at Buddhahood.

(6) Master Kalyanamitra describes it as “all the impurities within us”; only overcome in complete Buddhahood.

Nirvana Immersion
Homework Master, Class 1

(7) Lord Buddha himself describes grief as the pain of desiring the six objects of the senses in an ignorant way; overcoming this begins well before nirvana—with the intellectual realizations of emptiness which occur at the path of preparation—and is completed at nirvana.

(8) He also says that grief is being surrounded by things and people that we lose, as they pass away; overcome finally only in Buddhahood.

(9) Grief is a place of ignorant liking, and ignorant disliking, and the ignorance behind them. Overcome at nirvana.

(10) Grief is pride, and all of our other negative emotions; the classical problems overcome at nirvana.

(11) It is a world in which there is conflict between people; ended at Buddhahood.

(12) And it is a place where we make things into things—the ignorance which ends at nirvana.]

5) How did Lord Buddha, very briefly, describe nirvana—and how does this relate to our own life and goals?

[Lord Buddha, speaking in *The Sutra of the Great Nirvana*, says simply that “‘Nirvana’ means ‘happiness’.” We know we are making progress towards the highest goals of the spiritual path—including even the direct perception of emptiness, or seeing all other people and events as divine—when we are, simply, becoming a person who is more and more happy, day by day. This is the true measure of spiritual progress.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn’t know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, spend some time meditating on the question: “What is my own most habitual negative emotion?” Try to get some feeling for when it started in your life, and also some feeling of what it would feel like if you were able to overcome it forever.

Nirvana Immersion
Homework Master, Class 1

Please write here the two times that you started these meditations (homeworks without these times will not be accepted):