

Nirvana/Enlightenment/Awakening

The four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path are all about ending *dukkha* – is this enlightenment? Is this Awakening or Nirvana? I think it's odd how little we talk about Awakening as that's what it's supposed to be about. Do we *really believe* we might become enlightened? If not, then how do we settle this belief with the practice we do in the group? Are we setting ourselves up (subtly) to feel like failures?

Even if we don't think enlightenment will ever apply to us, do we have any idea of what it is like?

In wikipedia Nirvana (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nirvana>) is described like this:

"Nibbāna" is a [Pāli](#) word that means "blowing out" — that is, blowing out the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion.^[1]

The [Buddha](#) described nirvana as the perfect peace of the state of mind that is free from craving, anger and other afflictive states (*kilesas*). The subject is at peace with the world, has compassion for all and gives up obsessions and fixations. This peace is achieved when the existing [volitional formations](#) are pacified, and the conditions for the production of new ones are eradicated. In Nibbana the root causes of craving and aversion have been extinguished such that one is no longer subject to human [suffering](#) (*dukkha*) or further states of [rebirths](#) in [samsara](#).

The [Pali Canon](#) also contains other perspectives on nirvana; for one, it is linked to seeing the [empty](#) nature of phenomena. It is also presented as a radical reordering of consciousness and unleashing of awareness.^[2] Scholar Herbert Guenther states that with nirvana "the ideal personality, the true human being" becomes reality.^[3]

The Buddha in the [Dhammapada](#) says of nirvana that it is "the highest happiness". This happiness is an enduring, transcendental happiness integral to the calmness attained through [enlightenment](#) or *bodhi*, rather than the happiness derived from [impermanent](#) things. The knowledge accompanying nirvana is expressed through the word *bodhi*.

The [Buddha](#) explains nirvana as "the unconditioned" (*asankhata*) mind, a mind that has come to a point of perfect lucidity and clarity due to the cessation of the production of [volitional formations](#). This is described by the Buddha as "deathlessness" ([Pali](#): *amata* or *amaravati*) and as the highest spiritual attainment, the natural result that accrues to one who lives a life of virtuous conduct and practice in accordance with the [Noble Eightfold Path](#). Such a life engenders increasing control over the generation of [karma](#) ([Skt](#); [Pali](#), *kamma*). It produces wholesome karma with positive results and finally allows the cessation of the origination of karma altogether with the attainment of nibbana. Otherwise, beings forever wander through the impermanent and suffering-generating realms of desire, form, and formlessness, collectively termed [samsara](#).

Contrast with these extracts from Stephen Batchelor's book "Buddhism without beliefs":

DES PITE THE BUDDHA'S own succinct account of his awakening, it has come to be represented (even by Buddhists) as something quite different. Awakening has become a mystical experience, a moment of transcendent revelation of the Truth. Religious interpretations invariably reduce complexity to uniformity while elevating matter-of-factness to holiness. Over time, increasing emphasis has been placed on a single Absolute Truth, such as "the Deathless," "the Unconditioned," "the Void," "Nirvana," "Buddha Nature," etc., rather than on an interwoven complex of truths.

The early discourses suggest that awakening was a common occurrence among those who listened to the Buddha and acted upon what he said. A difference in degree was acknowledged between those who had experienced the initial moment of awakening and

entered the path, and those who had further cultivated the path and even reached the point where the habit of craving was extinguished. But access to the process of awakening itself was relatively straightforward and did not entail any great fuss. Yet as Buddhism became institutionalized as a religion, awakening became progressively more inaccessible. Those who controlled the institutions maintained that awakening was so exalted that generally it could be attained only with the detachment and purity of heart achieved through monastic discipline. Even then, they admitted, it was rare. To explain this state of affairs they appealed to the Indian idea of the "degeneration of time," a notion that regards the course of history as a process of inexorable decline. According to this notion, those who lived at the time of the Buddha were simply less degenerate, more "spiritual," than the corrupted mass of humanity today. Periodically, however, such views were challenged.

It would be good to discuss what we think about enlightenment and how (or whether) it applies to us.

Notes

1. [^ Richard Gombrich](#), *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988, page 63: "Nibbana means 'blowing out.' What must be blown out is the triple fire of greed, hatred, and delusion."
2. [^ Peter Harvey](#), *Consciousness mysticism in the discourses of the Buddha*. in Karel Werner, *The Yogi and the Mystic; Studies in Indian and Comparative Mysticism*. Routledge, 1995, page 82; books.google.com
3. [^ Guenther](#), *The Problem of the Soul in Early Buddhism*, Curt Weller Verlag, Constanz, 1949, pp. 156-157.