



# Enlightenment

The Sanskrit word for enlightenment is *bodhi* which means ‘awakening’, and someone who attains spiritual awakening is called a ‘buddha’. To become enlightened means to wake up from the sleep of ignorance, from all the misconceptions we have about ourselves and the world. An enlightened being understands things as they truly are. Enlightenment takes us beyond human limitations into a dimension that transcends such things as space and time. The unique feature of the Buddha’s message is that such a transcendental state is achievable for human beings during their lifetimes and not only after death.

*Discovering Buddhism*, Dominique Side (Chapter 2: Gautama the Buddha)

Literally, nirvana (*nibbana* in Pali) means ‘blowing out, extinguishing’, and here it refers to the extinguishing of the fires of desire, hatred and ignorance that rage inside us. These are, of course, the fundamental causes of suffering which implies that as soon as they have been extinguished then automatically one ceases to suffer. If the causes of suffering do not exist then suffering cannot be produced. It follows that nirvana is taken to mean the end of suffering, or the cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering, and so it is defined as the opposite of samsara. [...]

It is important to remember that nirvana is not ‘a thing’: it is not something that one can get by following the Buddhist path, and neither is nirvana a place, like a heaven, where one will go as a result, or as a reward, for practising Buddhism. Nirvana is a realization, a way of seeing things. When one understands deeply the nature of things according to the Four Noble Truths, and when one is able to sustain that understanding continuously, one is said to have attained nirvana.

*Discovering Buddhism*, Dominique Side (Chapter 13: Samsara and Nirvana)

Although in one sense nirvana is seen as the result of many years or many lifetimes of virtuous effort, in another sense nirvana is not the result of anything. If it were the result of something this would mean that it was produced, and then it would be conditioned and therefore impermanent. But nirvana is permanent in the sense that it is beyond time, and the truth of nirvana is always there whether we realize it or not. Buddhists have to tread carefully between saying that nirvana is unconditioned on the one hand, and saying that one attains enlightenment by following the Buddhist path, on the other hand.

Are these two statements contradictory? Possibly not because nirvana does not automatically occur as the result of any particular action. There is no guarantee that if you meditate for x hours or behave virtuously for x years, you will automatically attain nirvana. It is more elusive than this and cannot be brought about through an A plus B equals C sort of approach. Like all mystical states it is beyond our control. The



Questions of King Milinda illustrates this point with an image: it says that a path does not cause a mountain, it just leads there.

Discovering Buddhism, Dominique Side (Chapter 13: Samsara and Nirvana)



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