

What Is Enlightenment and Why Should I Care

I. Introduction

What is Enlightenment?

Enlightenment, Awakening, Realization, Liberation. These are all words that are used to designate what is perceived by some, many in fact, to be the ultimate human achievement, the pinnacle of spiritual development, the supreme accomplishment. Any concept that comes with so much desire-generating potential and so much ego-related baggage is obviously bound to be problematic in very many ways. How ironic that it should only be achievable through abandoning desire and transcending the egoic Self!

The More General View of Enlightenment

Let's begin with a general cross-cultural description of enlightenment. The following are excerpts from the Introduction to "Mystics, Masters, Saints, and Sages: Stories of Enlightenment", by Robert Ullman and Judyth Reichenberg-Ullman:

What Is Enlightenment?

To "Enlighten" means, literally, to provide knowledge or spiritual insight, to illuminate what was previously dark or obscured. Those who describe enlightenment experiences recount a shift out of their ordinary frames of reference. Their worldviews become remarkably different from what they had been before the experience. Many individuals report never again being the same and their sense of individuality and separateness evaporated, often permanently. This alteration leaves these enlightened beings in a state of freedom. They are still themselves, yet they are not. They continue to live out their lives in their physical bodies, yet their identification is no longer confined to the body or the mind. For some, even the world itself as anything more than an illusion disappears. Those who attain enlightenment become liberated, released from the attachment to suffering and limitation of any kind. They are absolutely free, and extraordinarily awakened.

What is an enlightened person like?

There is something palpably different about someone who has undergone an experience... that leads to enlightenment... There is a profound realization of living fully in the present moment: a deep sense of relaxation that arises from an understanding that there is nowhere else to go and nothing else to do. A magnanimity and spaciousness is observed as compared to the finite, limited nature of the individual self, and a complete sense of apparent indifference or nonattachment to the world or social norms may also be present. Enlightened beings often exude a sweetness that draws others to them like bears to honey, or contrarily, some may display a crusty, obnoxious, or obscene isolationism that drives away all but the most persistent and worthy aspirants. Though many enlightened beings

seek seclusion and remain unknown, others attract thousands of seekers who come to them for blessings and teachings...

What we are calling enlightenment has its counterpart in the highest aspirations and attainments of the 'mystical' component of every religious tradition. Each offers its own unique path to enlightenment, and while the orthodoxy insists that it can only be attained by serious and diligent practice according to one particular method, there is no shortage of accounts suggesting that it can happen to anyone at anytime. This ultimate goal goes by different names and is described by quite different language and concepts within these different spiritual traditions, but in spite of these apparent contradictions, there are also remarkable similarities. Here are some of the qualities they share (also from Ullman and Reichenberg-Ullman):

INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND EGO TRANSCENDENCE. A fundamental shift in consciousness from the individual to the whole appears to typify the enlightenment experience. This shift may be described as the dissolution of self, a merging of the wave in the ocean, union with the infinite, abdication of the personal sense of doership, or the loss of separate identity. There remains no identification with the individual ego or isolated, differentiated self. The individual, ego, and personality all continue to exist, but the identification with them is eliminated.

TIMELESSNESS AND SPACIOUSNESS. No thing or concept remains fixed in time and space. Enlightenment sets into play a moment-to-moment existence. In the words of the Buddha, the only thing that is constant is change. There is a realization of the present moment as all there is and a sense of fluidity that pervades all life.

ACCEPTANCE. This is a relaxation or surrender, a revelation or insight that all is transpiring according to a plan or randomness that surpasses the individual will. Struggle ends and gives way to acceptance of a reality free of bondage from and attachment to personal desires, thoughts, and feelings.

BEYOND PLEASURE AND PAIN. Those who have experienced enlightenment describe rapture, ecstasy, love, or simply a contentment that transcends suffering. In the midst of transformation, however, fear, confusion, disorientation, pain, torment, and even madness are not uncommon, sometimes lasting over extended periods of time. This has been described by some, such as Saint John of the Cross, as the "dark night of the soul." Disease and pain inevitably arise and many enlightened ones, such as Ramana Maharshi and Ramakrishna, have died of cancer. Suffering exists but the personal identification with it does not.

CLARITY. The enlightened mind is spontaneous, immediate, and flexible. Thinking is clear and unencumbered by extraneous and limiting thoughts and emotions. Thoughts are purposeful, direct and in the moment, free of extraneous mind chatter.

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SHATTERING OF PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS. Rigidity, expectations, preconceived ideas and personae give way to a vaster reality and even to a profound realization of emptiness, vastness, or nothingness.

Mystical versus Mundane Knowledge: The Core Concept

What is the relationship between an enlightenment experience and the state of enlightenment?
Again from Ullman and Reichenberg-Ullman:

We recognize that it is possible for a person to undergo a transient experience of illumination without remaining in a permanent state of oneness...

The Specifically Buddhist View of Enlightenment

The Buddha defined Enlightenment as the end of suffering.

In the Suttas we find the Buddha repeatedly saying that what he teaches is suffering and the **end of suffering**, and so this is where we must start in our search for understanding what the Buddha meant by Awakening or Enlightenment. The Suttas also state unequivocally that the end of suffering, if it is to be anything other than temporary, must be accomplished through the complete and final cessation of craving, which is specifically defined as desire and aversion with regard to the six types of sense objects; desire for existence; and desire for non-existence. Craving, in turn, is founded on ignorance, and the ignorance referred to is ignorance of the impermanent and dependent nature of all phenomena, and the nature of *Atta*, the personal Self or soul. Therefore, on the basis of the Suttas, we can expect an enlightened person to be:

1. Free from suffering.
2. Free from the compulsions of desire and aversion that causes suffering.
3. Free from ignorance and attachment to phenomena as relatively enduring and independently existent, and to understand that attachment to phenomena inevitably leads to dissatisfaction and suffering.
4. Free from ignorance and attachment to the personal Self as an independent, self-existent entity, whether permanently abiding or subject to annihilation, and to understand that attachment to Self inevitably leads to dissatisfaction and suffering.

The Buddhist Suttas describe Four Stages of Enlightenment:

1. The Stream Entrant or Seven Times Returner
2. The Once returner
3. The Non-Returner
4. The Arahant

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Possible Discussion Points:

The notion of the Arahant versus the Sammasambuddha

The Bodhisattva and the Bhumis

Implicit assumptions of “village”, “lay”, or “religious” Buddhism versus the sophisticated interpretations of “virtuoso”, “scholastic”, or “contemplative” Buddhism. (eg. the dead arahat that no longer exists versus the individual bodhisattva who is reincarnated)

Some Popular Notions about Enlightenment -- And some personal observations.

People often expect enlightened beings to live up to their own ideals and expectations of enlightenment: To be beautiful, graceful, pleasing, healthy, intelligent, neat, radiant charismatic, loving, to have psychic powers, etc, etc. Some will expect the enlightened to have no personality, no ego, to never speak in the first person, and to experience no emotion other than love. Infallibility and omniscience, amongst other psychic powers like reading minds and knowing the future, are popular expectations. Most will assume the enlightened beings are free from neuroses, phobias, and obsessions.

All such expectations are doomed. As William Hamilton said, “I haven’t met an Arahant who wasn’t a unique caricature” of the personality he was before enlightenment. And as Sayadaw U Pandita once said, “Because of habit patterns, it is possible for an Arahant to be obnoxious. However the difference with Arahants is that, if it is pointed out to them that they are obnoxious, they are capable of reflecting on situations and changing their behavior.”

I have noticed that all my favorite childhood heroes were always of the highest moral character. Honest to a fault, they selflessly dedicated themselves to helping others, to fighting evil in all of its forms, and were often involved in saving the world. Sure, they had “problems”, but they never suffered personally the way I did. Of course, they all had special powers and knowledge, and that helped a lot. That, combined with their being so noble and virtuous meant they didn’t have too much in the way of self-esteem problems. Interestingly enough, they all had secret identities.

Although all of my childhood comic book heroes – Dr. Strange, Superman, Batman, Spiderman, etc, - had similar qualities, some were much more worldly than others, and I definitely preferred the other-worldly sorcerer-types like Dr Strange and Merlin the best. Merlin is an archetype for sorcerers and wizards, the possessors of arcane knowledge, secret powers, and transcendental wisdom. Dr Strange was always saving the world from evil forces through his magical powers. He could read minds, see and hear events in other places, dematerialize and rematerialize, just like with Star Trek transporters but using only the power of his mind. He would go into a meditation trance and appear in a cave in the

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Himalayas to receive instructions from his Tibetan lama. And when I got a little older, I discovered Lobsang Rampa.

I think I grew up wanting to learn arcane secrets, to be trained in special powers, and yes, to discover my own secret identity. I went into science to discover the secrets of the universe and to acquire special powers. I studied philosophy and religion in the hope of uncovering my true, secret identity, and to discover the meaning of it all so that, I, like my heroes, could strive for truth, justice, and the fulfillment of the ultimate purpose of life. I could fulfill my destiny in the way I was meant to. When I look back, I can see how much I was subconsciously motivated by trying to become like my childhood heroes.

Swami Vivekananda (although he was already long dead when I discovered him) was the first person in real life to actually offer what I had been looking for. I was fascinated by his books on Vedanta that promised that one could discover their True Self (my secret identity), obtain ultimate wisdom, and develop supernormal-powers. It didn't work for me doing it from a book, but then along came Maharishi Mahesh. Finally, best of all, there came Kema Ananda, who taught me about the Buddha.

Our ideas about what Enlightenment is or ought to be are often similar to the characteristics of comic book heroes and wizards and sorcerers of timeless myths. They reflect a sort of Jungian archetype in the collective subconscious that is seeking to find expression.

It is interesting that, while clearly embedded in the mythical, magical and egoic levels of spiritual development, this archetype reaches for the transpersonal and transcendental. It values a kind of knowledge and wisdom that transcends the ordinary. It aspires to a power that can overcome pain, suffering and even death, and that is able to overcome the evils that are the cause of suffering in the world.

II. The Characteristics of an Enlightened Being in Buddhism

The Description of a Buddha:

- A complete freedom from suffering, and a happiness that is entirely unaffected by circumstances.
- A complete absence of craving, every form of desire and aversion having been completely uprooted.
- An unlimited compassion for others that imbues their earthly existence with an unassailable meaning and purpose.
- Wisdom born of a profound Insight into the true nature of reality, wisdom that has completely dispelled all ignorance.

Enlightenment Defined as Overcoming the 10 Fetters.

(Stream Entrant)

1. "Personality view" (*sakkaya-ditthi*): The belief in a personal self, or soul.
2. "Skeptical doubt" (*vicikiccha*): Doubt about the validity of the teachings, the possibility of Enlightenment, or the reality of the enlightened state.
3. "Wrongful adherence to rites, rituals and ceremonies" (*silabbataparamasa*): Attachment to and mistaken beliefs regarding the power and efficacy of rules, rites, and rituals.

(Once Returner and Non-Returner)

4. "Sensual desire" (*kama-raga*): All forms of desire related to the sense realm.
5. Often translated as "ill-will or hatred", literally "to hit against" (*patigha*): All forms of aversion related to the sense realm.

(Arahant, cf. The Life of the Buddha, pp.234 & 235)

6. "Desire for existence in the realm of form" (*rupa-raga*): Attachment to the inherent sense of being a separately existent experiencer of the realm of non-sensory mental formations.
7. "Desire for existence in the immaterial realms" (*arupa-raga*): Attachment to the inherent sense of being a separately existent experiencer of formless realms."
8. Often translated as "conceit, self-assertion, or pride", literally "measuring" (*mana*): The more precise meaning is attachment to any form of separate existence as a distinct entity

to which such conceptualizations as better, worse, the same, or different might possibly be applied. Most succinctly: The conceit, "I am".

9. "Restlessness" (*uddhacca*): Refers to the subtle agitation and disturbance of a mind imbued with the inherent sense of being a separate self.

10. "Ignorance" (*avijja*): The delusion pertaining to the reality of one's own self-existence, of self-existent others, and of dualities of any sort.

Earlier we saw that, according to the Suttas, we can expect an Enlightened person to be:

1. Free from suffering.
2. Free from the compulsions of desire and aversion that causes suffering.
3. Free from ignorance and attachment to phenomena as relatively enduring and independently existent, and to understand that attachment to phenomena inevitably leads to dissatisfaction and suffering.
4. Free from ignorance and attachment to the personal Self as an independent, self-existent entity, whether permanently abiding or subject to annihilation, and to understand that attachment to Self inevitably leads to dissatisfaction and suffering.

We see this reflected in the four Paths, or Stages of Enlightenment:

- The Arhat completely fulfills all of these criteria.
- The Non-Returner fulfills criteria 4 and 3, and 2 with the exception of a residual desire for existence. We can equate this residual desire for existence with the continued experience of, and therefore a tendency to cling to, the *innate sense of self* as a separately existing entity. This is a subtle form of ignorance, as compared to the gross ignorance and attachment to the personality as Self referred to in 4. Criterion 1 is fulfilled except for whatever subtle suffering may still arise from the residual desire for separate existence.
- The Once Returner fulfills criteria 4 and 3, the desire and aversion of 2 are greatly attenuated, and so likewise is the suffering referred to in 1.
- The Stream Entrant is specifically identified in the Suttas as having fulfilled criterion 4, at least with regard to belief in and attachment to personality. That the Stream Entrant is at least relatively free of the ignorance referred to in 3 is implied by their having overcoming the fetter of belief in and attachment to the efficacy of rules and rituals. This follows from the realization that everything that rules and rituals have reference to, including any unseen beings, powers, or forces of nature, are dependently arisen and impermanent. Although the Stream Entrant is *not* free from desire and aversion as causes of suffering, they *are* free from attachment to personality and phenomena, so they are much less vulnerable to many kinds of suffering.

I don't know who to properly attribute this to, but one of my all-time favorite quotations is: "There is no such thing as an Enlightened person – only Enlightened behavior". This speaks very directly to the fact that Awakening is known by the results it produces, by its effects on behavior. The Awakened aspect of an enlightened being as a psychophysical entity who we may happen to encounter in the world is precisely that which has transcended personhood, hence there is no such thing as an Enlightened person, at least in that deeply rooted sense that we usually mean by the word 'person'. Not only is personhood transcended, but all attachment to the world and worldly things is abandoned. That an Awakening has occurred is manifested through a difference in the actions and reactions, bodily and verbal, and the attitudes, intentions and motivations that are observable to others, all of which reflect this transcendence and abandoning. One Enlightened being observing another sees not a person, but only a series of actions. The difference between the actions of an Awakened being and an un-awakened being is that the actions of the latter arise out of ignorance and craving while the actions of the former arise out of wisdom that is free of craving. Objectively observed, an Awakened being can be expected, depending upon their relative stage of Awakening, to demonstrate the 4 criteria identified above.

Key Points to Note in the Stages of Enlightenment:

- Belief in separate, personal self: overcome by the Stream Entrant, even though she continues to experience herself as a separate self.
- Desire and aversion with regard to the sense realm, i.e. the "world": diminished by the Once Returner, and overcome by the Non-Returner, both of which continue to experience themselves as separate selves.
- Inherent sense of Self, experience of separate existence: overcome by the Arahant, who no longer experiences the inherent sense of being a separate self.

What is implicit even when not explicitly stated is that selflessness, both at the level of belief and at the level of experience, conduces to loving kindness and compassion for others. All of the mental energy that no longer goes into personal suffering is transformed into compassion for the suffering of others. In the absence of desire and aversion there is no reason to place one's own well-being ahead of that of others.

Contrast with Dominant Values in the World at Large:

The relative subservience of the individual to the collective good, as is found in some Asian cultures like China and Japan for example (in contrast to the defiant individualism found in the US) notwithstanding: Some degree of selfishness, of looking after me, myself, and mine above all else, is universally lauded and endorsed. While there is also a concept of excessive selfishness as unacceptable, the boundaries between "healthy" selfishness and "bad" selfishness vary enormously, and are nowhere clearly defined except as imposed by law. In effect, society deems any act, no matter how selfish, to be acceptable if not expressly prohibited by law.

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Desire is accepted as the norm and is indeed encouraged in countless ways, such as advertising. Wealth and excess are widely admired and envied.

Aversion including hatred and intolerance, is accepted as the norm. Expressions of aversion and resentment, taking satisfaction in the misfortune of others, criticism and blame, and the planning of vengeful actions, both subtle and overt, form the basis for much of ordinary social intercourse. Hatred and intolerance are actively promoted by many political and cultural institutions.

Happiness is attributed to success in satisfying one's desires and aversions. Suffering is routinely accepted as being due the failure to do so and is attributed to external factors rather than to the experience of being a separate self.

Possible Discussion Point:

The Possibility of World Promoting Enlightenment-Oriented Values.

III. The Stream Entrant and the Arahant

Description of the stream entrant

The “Experience”:

Then Ven. Assaji gave this Dhamma exposition to Sariputta the wanderer: “Whatever phenomena arise from a cause, their cause and their cessation too, such is the teaching of the Tathagata, the Great Contemplative.” Then to Sariputta the wanderer, as he heard this exposition of Dhamma, there arose the dustless, stainless Dhamma eye: “*Whatever is subject to origination is also subject to cessation.*” *Mv 1.23.5*

Over time there has developed a great emphasis on a particular experience or event that marks the attainment of Enlightenment from the first stage of Stream Entry on. This experience, known as *magga-phala* or *darsana marga*, which typically occurs during meditation, is never referred to in the Suttas. What we do find are descriptions of Awakenings that happen during the delivery of a discourse, in a specific posture, during a particular incident, while engaged in a specific activity, at a specific location, etc, all of which are strongly indicative of an event that occurs within a clearly circumscribed period of time. But at the same time we notice two features about these descriptions that differ from our modern conception of the enlightenment experience: The first is that they happen under all kinds of different circumstances and are most certainly not confined to meditation or retreat-like conditions of withdrawal from worldly activity. The second is that while a few of them are suggestive of suddenness and brevity, most are sufficiently non-specific that they could as easily be referring to periods of many minutes, hours, or in some cases even several days.

Stream Entry is clearly defined in the Suttas, and that definition is based upon the abandoning of the 3 fetters of self-identification, doubt, and grasping to rites, rules and rituals. It is also defined in a number of different Suttas according to the arising of the characteristics of the Stream Enterer. Stream Entry is nowhere defined on the basis of an experience. It would be far more accurate to say that an enlightenmet experience is defined as such on the basis of its results, rather than the other way around. If Stream Entry results, then by definition the precipitating event was *magga-phala*, because the Path has been attained and the Fruits realized. If, on the other hand, evidence of Stream Entry is not subsequently apparent, then the Path and Fruit have not been realized and no matter how wonderful or exalting the event was, it was not *magga-phala*.

There are three possible cases regarding so-called Enlightenment experiences:

1. An identifiable experience, following which the yogi becomes a Stream Entrant as demonstrated by the abandoning of fetters and the manifestation of the characteristics. Stream entry validates the experience as genuine.
2. An apparently supramundane enlightenment event that is not followed by the lasting transformation corresponding to Stream Entry. The apparent *magga-phala* event is invalidated.

3. No identifiable *magga-phala* event, but Stream Entry as evidenced by the abandoning of fetters and the manifestation of the characteristics.

The essence of the *magga-phala* or any other enlightenment experience is that it is a direct and unmediated experience that involves a completely different way of knowing than what we are used to. Normally, the only “direct experience” we ordinarily have as worldlings is that of consciousness itself, and that direct experience gives rise to a “knowing as being” that is so fundamental as to not be subject to further analysis, nor is it reducible to anything else. We do not know our own consciousness as an object, but we know it by being it, because that is what we are, in the moment. We know that we are conscious by direct experience. (Compare with: I am That. I am that I am. I am conscious. Consciousness is.)

The enlightenment experience is very similar. It occurs when mental fabrications cease and the processes by which the mind normally mediates experience are temporarily interrupted. What is known and experienced is exactly the same “reality” as always, but it is now experienced in the absence of the mind’s filters, and without the impositions upon it of subject-object duality, without differentiation and conceptualization. Some refer to it as the direct experience of emptiness. What this means is that we become empty of all mental projections, and then we experience emptiness directly, simply by being empty. When the processes of craving and grasping cease, we are the absence of craving and grasping, which is to say we experience nirvana directly, we are nirvana, and we know it by being it.

The ultimate nature of reality is that it is what it is, “suchness” or *tathata*, intrinsically empty of any nature of being the way it appears to us to be, of corresponding to our mental projections about it. Epistemological analysis reveals that it can never be known “objectively”, as it is in itself. But are our projections not, perhaps, a reasonably good representation of ultimate reality? Nagarjuna’s logical analysis, modern physics, modern psychology, and modern neuroscience are all in unanimous agreement that they are not. All perceived objects are projections of the mind itself, and as such are lacking in any inherent or intrinsic nature of being self-existent in themselves, independent of the mind. Nor are they even reasonable facsimiles of anything that is intrinsically self-existent. They are, in fact, pure illusion constructed by the mind, and their appearance reflects the nature of the perceiving mind far, far more than it does the nature of underlying reality. Even the mind itself and its projections as projections share in this same ultimate nature of being empty of inherent self-existence. Suffering itself is a mental projection, a mind state generated by the mind. The craving and grasping that lead to suffering are themselves mental projections and as such are just as empty as every other mental projection.

The ultimate nature of reality is that it is empty of being the way it appears to us, and the cessation of the mental formations that create that appearance is the direct experience of that very emptiness. Emptiness is known through being empty. With the cessation of all mental formations, there is no duality of subject and object, knower and known, self and other. The cessation of all mental formations is the direct experience of nonduality. Nonduality is known through being nondual consciousness. With the cessation all mental formations, craving and grasping cease as well. The cessation of craving and grasping is nirvana. Nirvana is known through being without craving and grasping.

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Space and time, multiplicity, and causality are all mental formations. The ultimate nature of reality as known in the absence of mental formations, directly and experientially, is: infinite, timeless, changeless, indivisible, undifferentiated, non-dual, a-causal, and conscious. The ultimate nature of reality as known directly and experientially is also “being as consciousness”, but not “consciousness of” anything, because it is entirely without subject and object. Ultimate reality also obviously includes dualistic conscious perceptions of a multitude of mental formations, even though the content of these perceptions are devoid or empty of any intrinsic or inherent self-existence. Thus dualistic perceptions remain an inseparable part of ultimate reality, and ultimate reality, therefore, is beyond definition in terms of existence and non-existence.

The most important thing about the relative reality of ordinary experience is that it is ultimately empty. It is not ultimately real. The most important thing about enlightenment is that an enlightened being knows this. Consciousness is ultimately real, but the objects of consciousness are not, they are empty.

The Characteristics of the Stream Entrant are variously described, but include:

- Conviction (as a consequence of overcoming doubt and uncertainty);
- Virtue (although not perfect virtue: “although he may commit some kind of offense...”, MN 48);
- Generosity (reflecting a combination of non-attachment and compassion for others),
- Freedom from enthrallment by the five hindrances, and other characteristics of a “person of consummate view” (MN 48),
- Absence of fear at death (SN LV.27), and
- Greatly diminished suffering (SN XII.1).

What changes and why?

Having had a sudden direct experience of an Ultimate Truth beyond all appearances, or else due to the cumulative effect of many smaller Insights or Realizations of the same Ultimate Truth, the Stream Entrant is no longer deceived by perceptions of Self and appearances of a self-existent external reality that is independent of the mind. More importantly, the way the mind functions has been permanently altered based on this “new Information”. Knowing the illusory nature of self and the world, there is less attachment, less suffering, less craving, less motivation to engage in non-virtuous behaviors. Having tasted a reality beyond all appearances of duality and of a separate selfhood, there is more inner peace, joy, love, generosity, and a sense of purpose arising out of the commitment to continue the journey to complete enlightenment.

The Path to Stream Entry:

There are Four Factors Conducive to Stream Entry:

1. Association with people of integrity

This was said by the Blessed One, said by the Arahant, so I have heard: "With regard to external factors, I don't envision any other single factor like admirable friendship as doing so much for a monk in training, who has not attained the heart's goal but remains intent on the unsurpassed safety from bondage. A monk who is a friend with admirable people abandons what is unskillful and develops what is skillful."

A monk with admirable people as friends — who's reverential, respectful, doing what his friends advise — mindful, alert, attains step by step the ending of all fetters. Iti 1.17

As he was sitting to one side, Ven. Ananda said to the Blessed One, "This is half of the holy life, lord: having admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues."

"Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that. Having admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues, he can be expected to develop & pursue the noble eightfold path... Upaddha Sutta Samyutta Nikaya XLV.2

"And what is meant by admirable friendship? There is the case where a lay person, in whatever town or village he may dwell, spends time with householders or householders' sons, young or old, who are advanced in virtue. He talks with them, engages them in discussions. He emulates consummate conviction in those who are consummate in conviction, consummate virtue in those who are consummate in virtue, consummate generosity in those who are consummate in generosity, and consummate discernment in those who are consummate in discernment. This is called admirable friendship. Dighajanu (Vyagghapajja) Sutta AN 8.54

2. Listening to the true dharma

"There are these five rewards in listening to the Dhamma. Which five? One hears what one has not heard before. One clarifies what one has heard before. One gets rid of doubt. One's views are made straight. One's mind grows serene. These are the five rewards in listening to the Dhamma." Dhammassavana Sutta AN 5.202

"So, as I said, Kalamas: 'Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, "This contemplative is our teacher." When

you know for yourselves that, "These qualities are unskillful; these qualities are blameworthy; these qualities are criticized by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to harm & to suffering" — then you should abandon them.'

...'When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness' — then you should enter & remain in them. Kalama Sutta AN 3.65

3. Appropriate attention

This was said by the Blessed One, said by the Arahant, so I have heard: "With regard to internal factors, I don't envision any other single factor like appropriate attention as doing so much for a monk in training, who has not attained the heart's goal but remains intent on the unsurpassed safety from bondage. A monk who attends appropriately abandons what is unskillful and develops what is skillful.

Appropriate attention as a quality of a monk in training: nothing else does so much for attaining the superlative goal. A monk, striving appropriately, attains the ending of stress. Iti 1.16

4. Practice in accordance with the dharma

"Stay mindful, monks, and alert. This is our instruction to you all. And how is a monk mindful? There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body as the aggregate that it is -- ardent, alert, & mindful -- putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings as they are... mental and emotional states as they are... perceived reality as it is created by the mind -- ardent, alert, & mindful -- putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world. This is how a monk is mindful.

"And how is a monk alert? There is the case where feelings are known to the monk as they arise, known as they persist, known as they subside. Thoughts are known to him as they arise, known as they persist, known as they subside. Perceptions are known to him as they arise, known as they persist, known as they subside. This is how a monk is alert. So stay mindful, monks, and alert. This is our instruction to you all." SN XLVII.35

The Process Leading to Stream Entry in Practical Terms:

1. A period of daily Study and Reflection involving a critical evaluation of our ordinary, conventional views of reality. This Study and Reflection continues until we have succeeded in removing all doubt with regard to both the logical inconsistency and the dissatisfactory consequences of those ordinary accepted views.
2. This is accompanied by a simultaneous program of rigorous Mental Training in morality, concentration, mindful awareness, tranquility, and equanimity. This Mental Training enables the mind to conduct a penetrating investigation into its own moment-to-moment experience of reality.
3. The properly trained and prepared mind is applied to a Systematic Investigation and Deconstruction of our Ordinary, Mind-Constructed Experience;
4. In the course of the systematic deconstruction of ordinary perception, a series of profound Insights into the True Nature of Reality arises, which finally culminates in a Direct Experience of Reality, undistorted by mental constructions and projections.
5. This direct experience of reality produces a Permanent Transformation in the way the mind perceives certain things and interprets and reacts to certain others.
6. This permanent transformation in the functioning of the mind reveals itself in the changes in attitude that have been described as Abandoning the Three Fetters, and it manifests in daily life as the Characteristics of the Stream Entrant.

Wisdom and Ignorance:

Understanding the truth of No-Self is wisdom, attachment to the belief in personal self is ignorance.

Understanding the Emptiness and mind-created nature of phenomenal experience is wisdom, belief in the self-existent reality of the world of our perceptions is ignorance.

Wisdom must arise and ignorance must be overcome at each of three different levels of mental functioning: The Intellectual, The Intuitive, and the Emotional.

Wisdom at the level of intellectual understanding does not by itself affect either of the other two levels of mental functioning. Intellectual understanding repeatedly applied to actual experience can modify the intuitive view enough to create the possibility for direct and undistorted experience. Wisdom attained through direct experience radically transforms the intuitive view of reality. The emotional response to experience reflects the

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intuitive understanding, so when there is Wisdom at the intuitive level, there is also emotional wisdom.

Ultimate Truth or Reality versus Constructed or Relative Reality

Ultimate Reality is usually described by negations, paradoxes, and a single positive assertion:

First The Negations: According to those who lay claim to a direct experience of the Ultimate, and least as far as the human, conceptual mind is concerned, the Ultimate is

Indivisible

Undifferentiated

Nondual

Inconceivable (i.e. beyond all conceptualization, comprehension and understanding)

Unconditioned

Infinite

Timeless

(By virtue of which it is unchanging, beginningless and unceasing)

The only positive attribute of the Ultimate attested to by experience is:

Awareness or Consciousness. The experience of the Ultimate is described consistently described as conscious, but as consciousness with neither a subject nor an object, which makes it a consciousness that is quite distinct from ordinary consciousness, which is invariably "consciousness of", and consists in a duality of knower and known. The illuminating Clear Light of the Mind is equated with Ultimate Reality. Consciousness, in this sense of the word, is the ultimate, irreducible ground of all 'being' even in ordinary experience, because in the absence of consciousness, anything 'is' only by virtue of inference and assumption.

The Paradoxes:

Despite being Indivisible and Undifferentiated, but by virtue of being Conscious: Ultimate Reality encompasses two infinite Manifolds, that of all possible dualistic conscious experiences, and that of all impossible dualistic consciousness events. This is the reality that is relative and constructed rather than Absolute or Ultimate.

By virtue of being comprised of both the possible and impossible Manifolds: Ultimate Reality is itself beyond both existence and non-existence. All dualistic conscious experience is relative. That which belongs to the Manifold of the possible can be said to 'exist' only relative to that which 'does not exist' because it belongs to the Manifold of the impossible.

By virtue of the encompassed Manifolds existing relatively and being empty of any "self-nature" or "nature of self-existence", the Ultimate is completely empty of the nature of any subject and object of dualistic consciousness. Thus the emptiness of the Ultimate can be described as "Other Emptiness", while the emptiness of the Manifolds can be described as "Self Emptiness".

By virtue of encompassing the Manifolds, the Emptiness of the Ultimate is synonymous with the Infinite Potential, or Fullness of the Ultimate.

Despite being incomprehensible, but by virtue of being conscious: Ultimate reality is knowable. The Ultimate is known directly and non-dualistically as the illuminating Clear Light of Mind with obscurations eliminated by the (temporary) cessation of process of mental fabrication.

The intermediate stages: Overcoming Desire and Aversion Pertaining to the Sense Realm:

Even with the second Path attainment, the stage of the Once-Returner, it is with great wonder, awe and amazement that one realizes the remarkable degree to which ordinary desires and aversions have mysteriously disappeared and simply don't arise in the same way they once did. There is this experience of surprise and wonder in spite of all of the practice that has been engaged in specifically to attain freedom from these afflictions, because it is not something that has been brought about through will or intention. It is the result of a profound inner shift occurring at an entirely non-conscious level that comes about through repeatedly creating and sustaining the right causes and conditions.

There is no mystery about the causes and conditions. Right Effort is the application of mindful awareness and the cultivation of intention towards the non-arising of the unarisen unwholesome, the abandoning of the arisen unwholesome, the arising of the unarisen wholesome, and maintenance of the arisen wholesome. And Right Effort is not some minor sidebar to the Eightfold Path – it is one-eighth of the whole Path. In the Mahasatipatthana Sutta, the Applications of Mindful Awareness, the third application of mindfulness is to mental states and the fourth is to the variety of mind-created mental events upon which our personal reality is dependent. When this is coupled with both the mindful awareness of No-Self and Emptiness in the course of events that make up daily life, and with the repeated immersion in the direct experience of the unconditioned, we arrive once again at a profound transition point where a further deep restructuring of mind and brain occurs.

Although as Once Returners we know that desire and aversion have not yet been completely extirpated, we find that they now hide in the shadows, only appearing when we are tired or unmindful, and even then only hesitantly and without great force. They are bravest and make their best showing when their greatest allies make an appearance, when the past objects of intense hatred or lust come onto the scene, but even then they are easily overcome and make a cowardly retreat when confronted with mindful awareness. Mostly these events just remind us of how important it is that we finally uproot them once and for all.

The Non-Returner is indeed completely and totally free from the compulsions of desire and aversion, and their manifestations as greed, hatred, anger, frustration, lust, jealousy, and sadness. The inability of many people to understand how a person could live without enslavement to desire and aversion has given rise to the myth that when a person becomes a Non-Returner or an Arahant, they must immediately enter into the protection of a monastery because they cannot possibly survive in the world in the absence of desire and aversion. This is total nonsense, and an intelligent being acting out of wisdom and wholesome motivations instead of being driven by emotional compulsions can survive quite well in the world with no problem at all.

The Arahant: The Disappearance of the Inherent Sense of Being a Separate Self

The Arahant has overcome the conceit, “I am”, the desire for separate existence in any form, the final vestiges of Ignorance, and the subtle restlessness associated with the experience of and attachment to separate existence.

But how can an Arahant function in the world? Isn't there a need for a sense of 'I' behind any volitional mind state?

The point is that there never has been either an actual 'I' or a constructed sense of 'I' behind any volition or intention. That is the illusion that is to be unmasked. Both the idea of a self and the inherent sense of an 'I' are generated independently of volition and intention, and the mind attributes intention and volition to the 'I' after the fact. Or as might also be said, following the arising of intention, the sense of 'I' is generated in its turn and appropriates the pre-existing intention to itself. This fact has even been demonstrated in the laboratory by neuroscientists. *Neither any worldling nor any Buddha has ever acted out of a volitional mind state that had an 'I' behind it, and that very perception is the illusion to be overcome.*

On the other hand, worldlings constantly act out of volitional mind states that have an emotional compulsion behind them, and the 'I' construct appropriates to itself the emotional compulsion along with the intention. Buddhas do not. The origin of action of Buddhas in the world is a mind that has been purified of its defilements, which is to say a brain/body complex that has been reprogrammed away from compulsions based in unwholesome mental states such as desire and aversion. The body/brain/mind of a living Buddha is instead oriented towards action tempered by wisdom and reason and directed by wholesome mental states such as loving kindness and compassion. This is how an Arahant, “free from any sense of identification, identity or possession” and most definitely and completely free from any compulsion, is able to act as “an expression of freedom, the gesture of the oneness of life”.

The role of the 'I' in the functioning of the mind is to serve as the reference point for experience and action. It is the narrative center of gravity for the formations that will determine future reactions and volitional intentions based on current experiences and actions. Current experience is interpreted on the basis of past such narratives; desire and/or aversion arise for the nurture and protection of the narrative center of gravity (the Self); cognitive perceptions and associated emotional compulsions arise based on the content of past narratives, and these are what drive volitional intention and ultimately action, not an 'I'. There is no Self involved except in as much as the sensations, feelings, perceptions, volitional formations and conscious registration of the experience are a 'Self'. A new narrative is commenced to assimilate and integrate the new experience, the mind's reaction to the experience, the emotions, intentions, actions and results of the actions. And then of course, with the beginning of a new narrative, the constructed idea of Self and the illusory sense of Self come into being once again as the central reference of that new narrative: “This is what happened to me, this is what I thought and this is how I felt, and this is what I decided to do.” This new narrative is filed away where it will serve as part of the basis for future interpretation of experiences and the initiation of future intentions.

One may be tempted to say, “But what about when ‘I’ struggle to decide, to formulate an intention? Or when there is an inclination to do one thing, but ‘I’ decide to restrain myself or to do something else. Surely ‘I’ am the decider, the intender in those instances”. If one examines more closely, what happens is that the ‘I’ arrives on the scene, frets a bit, and then eventually an intention emerges, *but not from the ‘I’*. Sometimes the ‘I’ will continue to wrestle a bit even after it knows that a decision has already been made. But sooner or later, the ‘I’ appropriates a decision that has arisen seemingly from nowhere. What is most important about the situation we are discussing here is that the various opposing inclinations are in a very close balance, so a clear cut decision is not immediately and automatically arrived at. As the problem is held in conscious awareness awaiting a decision, it creates an opportunity for other factors to weigh-in as a part of the decision making process. When anger arises, the anger is a result of past causes, it is a karmic result. It is the identification with the anger and the appropriation of intentions arising out of the anger that is the cause of future experiences, the karmic action. If the ‘I’ hesitates in identifying with the anger because of the influence of “wholesome companions and wholesome circumstances”, i.e. studying Dharma and listening to Dharma talks, this is an example of balanced influences. If one remembers the instruction, “when anger arises just observe it mindfully, don’t identify with it as ‘I am angry’”, then a new kind of wholesome karma is being generated. If as a result of mindfully observing the anger an intention arises to decline to appropriate the intentions arising in association with that anger, yet another new wholesome karma is being generated. But not by an ‘I’. Rather, it is because of the past wholesome conditioning due to the Dharma training. The ‘I’ will appropriate the decisions and intentions, and they will become part of the narrative formation to be stored. They will have karmic effects in the future. But the ‘I’ as doer and decider is only illusion.

Emotions exist in organisms like ourselves because they serve a purpose. In particular, they compulsively push us into action whenever the data from our senses and its interpretation by our other mental faculties indicates that a particular emotion is appropriate. They are a highly successful evolutionary device, lying roughly in the middle of a continuum between pure instinct and pure reason. These innately determined emotional reactions serve the purpose of increasing the likelihood of survival and reproduction of beings of lesser mental capacity. They are a kind of ‘shotgun’ approach to dealing with circumstances that arise in life, and they only need to succeed in their purpose more often than they fail in order to be preserved in the genome. As human beings we find that they typically cause more problems than they solve, and they are far less necessary and useful for us than for intellectually simpler beings. For Awakened beings these emotional compulsions serve no useful purpose at all and are totally unnecessary.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of human beings is our plasticity of mind, and this plasticity is most valuable when applied to modifying our emotional responses. We have the plasticity of brain and mind that allows us to rein in these innate reactions, to transcend or overcome them in a variety of ways. We call these modifications of innate emotional responses civilization and culture, and they are also at the heart of the practice of the first four of the Paramittas: Generosity, Virtue, Patience, and Effort.

IV. Enlightenment in the Modern World

Possible Discussion Points:

The possibility of Enlightenment

Validation of the no-self and emptiness views by modern philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and physics

Epistemological and empirical validation of the mystical experience, and making it comprehensible

Intentional knowing versus Direct Knowing, or knowledge as object versus knowledge as being

Intelligence versus Instinct, and moderating desire and aversion

The Attainability of Enlightenment

- In the time of the Buddha
- Modern beliefs
- Evidence

The feasibility of Enlightenment for western lay persons

Potential impact of Enlightenment and Enlightenment-Oriented Values on the World

Adaptation of Direct Knowledge to different conceptual systems, and education

Enlightenment and Other Religions:

Here for your consideration are the Points of Agreement from the Snowmass Contemplative Group initiated by Father Keating in 1984:

- 1) The potential for enlightenment is in every person.
- 2) The human mind cannot comprehend ultimate reality, but ultimate reality can be experienced.
- 3) The ultimate reality is the source of all existence.
- 4) Faith is opening, accepting & responding to ultimate reality.
- 5) Confidence in oneself as rooted in the ultimate reality is the necessary corollary to faith in the ultimate reality.
- 6) As long as the human experience is experienced as separate from the ultimate reality it is subject to ignorance, illusion, weakness and suffering.
- 7) Disciplined practice is essential to the spiritual journey, yet spiritual attainment is not the result of one's effort but the experience of oneness with ultimate reality.