

Enlightenments, Not Enlightenment

By Jack Kornfield

Once a month, *Tricycle* features an article from the *Inquiring Mind* archive. *Inquiring Mind*, a Buddhist journal that was in print from 1984–2015, has a growing number of articles from its back issues available at www.inquiringmind.com. This month's selection is "[Enlightenments](#)," by Jack Kornfield, from the [Fall 2010](#) "[Enlightenment](#)" issue.



On a meditation retreat several years ago, late one evening after the dharma talk, a woman raised her hand and asked one last question: "[Is enlightenment just a myth?](#)" When we teachers went back to our evening meeting, we asked each other this question. We exchanged stories about great spiritual teachers—the creative freedom of Ajahn Chah (1918–92), the enormous field of metta [lovingkindness] around Dipa Ma (1911–89), the joyous laughter of Poonja (1910–97)—and of our own awakenings. Of course there is enlightenment. But the word *enlightenment* is used in different ways, and that can be confusing. Is Zen, Tibetan, Hindu, or Theravada enlightenment the same? What is the difference between an enlightenment experience and full enlightenment? What do enlightened people look like?

APPROACHES TO ENLIGHTENMENT

Early on in my practice in Asia, I was forced to deal with these questions quite directly. My teachers, Ajahn Chah in Thailand and Mahasi Sayadaw in Burma, were considered among the most enlightened masters of Theravada Buddhism. While they both described the goal of practice as freedom from greed, hatred and delusion, they didn't agree about how to attain enlightenment, or how it is experienced. I started my monastic training practicing in community with Ajahn Chah. Then I went to study in a

monastery of Mahasi Sayadaw, where the path of liberation focuses entirely on long silent meditation retreats.

In the Mahasi system, you sit and walk for weeks in the retreat context and continuously note the arising of breath, thought, feelings, and sensations over and over until the mindfulness is so refined there is nothing but instantaneous arising and passing. You pass through stages of luminosity, joy, fear, and the dissolution of all you took to be solid. The mind becomes unmoving, resting in a place of stillness and equanimity, transparent to all experience—thoughts and fears, longings and love. Out of this there comes a dropping away of identity with anything in this world, an opening to the unconditioned beyond mind and body; you enter into the stream of liberation. As taught by Mahasi Sayadaw, this first taste of stream-entry to enlightenment requires purification and strong concentration leading to an experience of cessation that begins to uproot greed, hatred, and delusion.

When I returned to practice in Ajahn Chah's community following more than a year of silent Mahasi retreat, I recounted all of these experiences—dissolving my body into light, profound insights into emptiness, hours of vast stillness, and freedom. Ajahn Chah understood and appreciated them from his own deep wisdom. Then he smiled and said, "Well, something else to let go of." His approach to enlightenment was not based on having any particular meditation experience, no matter how profound. As Ajahn Chah described them, meditative states are not important in themselves. Meditation is a way to quiet the mind so you can practice all day long wherever you are; see when there is grasping or aversion, clinging or suffering; and then let it go. What's left is enlightenment, always found here and now, a release of identification with the changing conditions of the world, a resting in awareness. This involves a simple yet profound shift of identity from the myriad, ever-changing conditioned states to the unconditioned consciousness—the awareness which knows them all. In Ajahn Chah's approach, release from entanglement in greed, hatred, and delusion does not happen through retreat, concentration, and cessation but from this profound shift in identity.

How can we understand these seemingly different approaches to enlightenment? The Buddhist texts contain some of the same contrasting descriptions. In many texts,

nirvana is described in the language of negation, and as in the approach taught by Mahasi Sayadaw, enlightenment is presented as the end of suffering through the putting out of the fires of craving, the uprooting of all forms of clinging. The elimination of suffering is practiced by purification and concentration, by confronting the forces of greed and hate and overcoming them. When the Buddha was asked, “Do you teach annihilation? Is nirvana the end of things as we know them?” he responded, “I teach only one form of annihilation: the extinction of greed, the extinction of hatred, the extinction of delusion. This I call nirvana.”

There is in the texts, as well, a more positive way of understanding enlightenment. Here nirvana is described as the highest happiness; as peace, freedom, purity, stillness; and as the unconditioned, the timeless, the undying. In this understanding, as in Ajahn Chah’s approach, liberation comes through a shift of identity—a release from attachment to the changing conditions of the world, a resting in consciousness itself, the deathless.

In this understanding, liberation is a shift of identity from taking anything as “self.” Asked, “How is it that one is not to be seen by the king of death?” the Buddha responded, “For one who takes nothing whatsoever as I or me or mine, such a one is freed from the snares of the king of death.” In just this way, Ajahn Chah instructed us to rest in awareness and not identify with any experience as I or mine.

I found a similar practice in Bombay with Sri Nisargadatta, a master of Advaita [a nondualistic practice of self-inquiry derived from Hinduism]. His teachings about enlightenment demanded a shift from identifying with any experience to resting in consciousness wherever you are. His focus was not about annihilation of greed and hate. In fact, when asked if he ever got impatient, Nisargadatta joyfully explained, “I see, hear and taste as you do, feel hunger and thirst; if lunch is not served on time, even impatience will arise. All this I perceive quite clearly, but somehow I am not in it. There is awareness of it all and a sense of immense distance. Impatience arises; hunger arises. Even when illness and death of this body arise, they have nothing to do with who I am.” This is enlightenment as a shift in identity.

So here we have different visions of enlightenment. On the one hand, we have the

liberation from greed, hatred, and delusion attained through powerful concentration and purification, emphasized by many masters from Mahasi and Sunlun Sayadaw to Rinzai Zen. On the other hand, we have the shift of identity reflected in the teachings of Ajahn Chah, Buddhadasa, Soto Zen, and Dzogchen. And there are many other approaches; if you practice Pure Land Buddhism, which is the most widespread tradition in China, the approach to enlightenment involves devotion and surrender, being carried by the Buddha's "grace."

To understand these differences, it is wisest to speak of enlightenment with the plural *s*—as *enlightenments*. It's the same way with God. There are so many forms: Jehovah, Allah, Brahma, Jesus, Kali, and so forth. As soon as followers say they know the one true God, conflict arises. Similarly, if you speak of enlightenment as one thing, conflict arises and you miss the truth.

We know that the Buddha taught many different approaches to enlightenment, all as skillful means to release grasping of the limited sense of self and return to the inherent purity of consciousness. Similarly, we will discover that the teachings on enlightened consciousness include many dimensions. When you actually experience consciousness free of identification with changing conditions, liberated from greed and hate, you find it multifaceted, like a mandala or a jewel with many sides. Through one facet, the enlightened heart shines as luminous clarity, through another as perfect peace, through another as boundless compassion. Consciousness is timeless, ever-present, completely empty and full of all things. But when a teacher or tradition emphasizes only one of these qualities over the others, it is easy to be confused, as if true enlightenment can be tasted in only one way. Like the particle-and-wave nature of light, enlightenment consciousness is experienced in a myriad of beautiful ways.

GATEWAYS TO ENLIGHTENMENT

So what practices lead to these enlightenments? Most centrally, Buddhism uses the liberating practices of mindfulness and lovingkindness. These are supported by the practice of virtue, which frees us from being caught in reactive energies that would cause harm to ourselves or others. Added to this are practices of composure, or

concentration, where we learn to quiet the mind; and practices of wisdom, which can see clearly how all things arise and pass, how they cannot be possessed. Through these practices come purification and healing and the arising of profound compassion. Gradually, there is a shift of identity from being the person who is caught in suffering to liberation. Releasing the sense of self and all the changing conditions of the world brings stream-entry, the first stage of enlightenment.

The most common gates to stream-entry in the Theravada tradition are the gateway of impermanence, the gateway of suffering, and the gateway of selflessness. When we open through the gateway of impermanence, we see more and more deeply how every experience is born and dies, how every moment is new. In one monastery where I practiced, we were trained to experience how all of life is vibration. Through long hours of refined concentration, we came to sense all the sounds and sights, the breath, the procession of thoughts—everything we took to be ourself—as a field of changing energy. Experience shimmered, dissolving moment by moment. Then we shifted our attention from the vibrations to rest in the spacious heart of awareness. I and other, inside and outside—everything dropped away and we came to know the vast stillness beyond all change. This is enlightenment through the gate of impermanence.

Sometimes we enter enlightenment through the gate of suffering. We sit in the fire of human experience, and instead of running from it, we awaken through it. In the *Fire Sermon*, the Buddha declares, “All is burning. The eye, the nose, the tongue, the body, the mind, the world is burning. With what is it burning? It is burning with the fires of greed, of hatred, and of delusion.” Through the gate of suffering we face the fires of desire, hate, war, racism, and fear. We open to dissatisfaction, grief, and loss. We accept the inherent suffering in life and we are released. We discover that suffering is not “our” pain, it is “the” pain—the pain of the world. A profound dispassion arises, compassion fills the heart, and we find liberation.

My friend Salam, a Palestinian journalist and activist, passed through the gate of suffering when brutally beaten in Israeli prisons. This kind of suffering happens on every side in war. When I first met Salam in San Francisco, he was being honored for his hospice service. I asked him what brought him to this work. “One time I died,” Salam

told me. Kicked by a guard, he lay on the floor of the jail with blood coming out of his mouth, and his consciousness floated out of his body. Suddenly, he felt so peaceful—a kind of bliss—as he saw he wasn't that body. "I was so much more: I was the boot and the guard, the goat calling outside the walls of the police station. I was all of it," Salam told me. "When I got out of jail, I couldn't take sides anymore. I married a Jewish woman and had Jewish-Palestinian children. That is my answer." Salam explains, "Now I sit with people who are dying because they are afraid, and I can hold their hands and reassure them that it's perfectly safe." He awakened through the gate of suffering.

Sometimes we awaken through the gate of selflessness. The experience of selflessness can happen in the simplest ways. In walking meditation, we notice with every step the unbidden arising of thoughts, feelings, sensations, only to observe them disappear. To whom do they belong? Where do they go? Back into the void, which is where yesterday went, as well as our childhood, Socrates, Genghis Khan, and the builders of the pyramids.

As we let go of clinging, we feel the tentative selflessness of things. Sometimes boundaries dissolve, and we can't separate ourselves from the plum tree, the birdsong, or the morning traffic. The whole sense of self becomes empty experience arising in consciousness. More and more deeply, we realize the joy of "no self, no problem." We taste enlightenment through the gate of selflessness and emptiness.

There are many other gates: the gates of compassion, of purity, of surrender, of love. There is also what is called the "gateless gate." One teacher describes it this way: "I would go for months of retreat training, and nothing spectacular would happen, no great experiences. Yet somehow everything changed. What most transformed me were the endless hours of mindfulness and compassion, giving a caring attention to what I was doing. I discovered how I automatically tighten and grasp, and with that realization I started to let go, to open to an appreciation of whatever was present. I found an ease. I gave up striving. I became less serious, less concerned with myself. My kindness deepened. I experienced a profound freedom, simply the fruit of being present over and over." This was her gateless gate.

EXPRESSIONS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Whatever our gate to enlightenment, the first real taste, stream-entry, is followed by many more tastes as we learn to stabilize, deepen, and embody this wisdom in our own unique life. What does it look like? The facets of enlightenment express themselves marvelously in our teachers. Each manifests enlightenment with his or her own flavors.

Dipa Ma, a wonderful grandmother in Calcutta, was one of the great masters of our tradition. A tiny person with a powerfully trained mind, Dipa Ma expressed enlightenment as love. She devotedly instructed her students in mindfulness and lovingkindness and then she hugged them—putting her hands on their head, face, and shoulders, whispering metta phrases. They got drunk on love. Like Dipa Ma, Ammachi, a Hindu teacher from South India, manifests enlightenment as the “hugging guru.” She goes into a trance, and all night long she holds people; she might take as many as 2,000 people onto her lap and hug them. This is enlightenment as love.

For Zen Master Suzuki Roshi, enlightenment was expressed by being just where you are. A woman told Suzuki Roshi she found it difficult to mix Zen practice with the demands of being a householder: “I feel I am trying to climb a ladder, but for every step upward I slip backward two steps.” “Forget the ladder,” Suzuki Roshi told her. “When you awaken, everything is right here on the ground.” He explained how the desire to gain anything means you miss the reality of the present. “When you realize the truth that everything changes and find your composure in it, there you find yourself in nirvana.” Asked further about enlightenment, Suzuki Roshi said, “Strictly speaking there are no enlightened beings; there is only enlightened activity.” If you think you are enlightened, that is not it. The goal is to let go of being anyone special and meet each moment with beginner’s mind.

Mahasi Sayadaw, the Burmese master, expressed enlightenment as emptiness. Watching him on his visits to America, we saw that he rarely laughed or judged. Instead, he exuded a quiet equanimity. Events and conversations would happen around him while he remained still. He was like space—transparent, nobody there. This is enlightenment as emptiness.

For Ajahn Jumnien, a Thai forest master, awakening is not only empty; it's full. His robe is covered in hundreds of sacred medallions, and he employs dozens of skillful means to teach—guided meditations, sacred chants, mantras, chakra and energy practices, forest medicines, animal stories, and shamanic rituals. His dharma is all-hours, nonstop, full of life and joy. There's a sense of abundance in him, and happiness just pours out like a fountain. He expresses enlightenment as fullness.

Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh expresses enlightenment as mindfulness. When he comes to teach at Spirit Rock, 3,000 people sit meditatively on the hillside and eat their apples mindfully in preparation for his arrival. A bell is rung, and he walks slowly and deliberately up the road—*so* mindfully that everyone sighs, “Ahhh.” The consciousness of 3,000 people is transformed just seeing this man walk, each step the whole universe. As we watch, we drop into the reality of the eternal present. This is where we awaken. Enlightenment as mindfulness.

The Dalai Lama expresses enlightenment as compassionate blessing. For instance, once at the end of his stay at a San Francisco hotel, he asked the management to bring out all the employees. This meant the people who chop vegetables in the kitchen, who clean the carpets late at night, who make the beds. The big circular driveway filled with all those who made this hotel work but who were usually unrecognized. One by one, he looked at each one with full presence, took each person's hand, and said, “Thank you,” moving unhurriedly just to make sure that he connected with each one fully. The Dalai Lama personifies enlightenment as compassionate blessing.

Ajahn Chah's manifestation was the laughter of wisdom. Whether with generals or ministers, farmers or cooks, he would say, “When I see how much people are struggling, I look at them with great sympathy and ask, ‘Are you suffering? Ahhh, you must be very attached. Why not let go?’” His teachings were deep and straight to the point. He'd say, “If you let go a little, you'll be a little happy. If you let go a lot, you'll be a lot happy. If you let go completely, you'll be completely happy.” He saw suffering, its cause, and that freedom is possible in any moment. He expressed enlightenment as wisdom.

When people read these stories, they might ask, “How do they relate to me? I want these

enlightenments. How do I get them? What should I do?” The jewel of enlightenment invites us to awaken through many skillful means. Mahasi Sayadaw would say, “To find emptiness, note every single moment until what you think to be the world dissolves, and you will come to know freedom.” Ajahn Chah would say, “Just let go, and become the awareness, be the one who knows.” Dipa Ma would say, “Love no matter what.” Thich Nhat Hanh would say, “Rest in mindfulness, this moment, the eternal present.” Ajahn Jumnien would say, “Be happy for no cause.” Suzuki Roshi would say, “Just be exactly where you are. Instead of waiting for the bus, realize you are on the bus.”

So, is enlightenment a myth? No. It is not far away. It is freedom here and now, to be tasted whenever you open to it. In my role as a teacher, I have the privilege of seeing the blessing of enlightenments awaken in so many meditators who come to dharma practice and become transformed through its many expressions. As their initial tension and struggle with life, doubt, and distress subsides, I watch their bodies ease, their faces soften, their dharma vision open, their hearts blossom. Some touch what the Thai philosopher Buddhadasa called “everyday nirvana.” Others come to know a deep purity of mind and to experience a taste of liberation directly.

The Buddha declares, “If it were not possible to free the heart from entanglement, I would not teach you to do so. Just because it is possible to free the heart, there arise the teachings of the dharma of liberation, offered open-handedly for the welfare of all beings.”

Aim for nothing less.

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