

Enlightenment in Buddhism

The English term **enlightenment** is the western translation of the term *bodhi*, "awakening", which was popularised in the Western world through the 19th century translations of Max Müller. It has the western connotation of a sudden insight into a transcendental truth.

The term is also being used to translate several other Buddhist terms and concepts used to denote insight (*prajna*, *kensho* and *satori*);^[1] knowledge (*vidhya*); the "blowing out" (*Nirvana*) of disturbing emotions and desires and the subsequent freedom or release (*vimutti*); and the attainment of Buddhahood, as exemplified by Gautama Buddha.

What exactly constituted the Buddha's awakening is unknown. It may probably have involved the knowledge that liberation was attained by the combination of mindfulness and *dhyāna*, applied to the understanding of the arising and ceasing of craving. The relation between *dhyana* and insight is a core problem in the study of Buddhism, and is one of the fundamentals of Buddhist practice.

In the western world the concept of (spiritual) enlightenment has taken on a romantic meaning. It has become synonymous with self-realization and the true self and false self, being regarded as a substantial essence being covered over by social conditioning.^[2] ^[3] ^[4] ^[5]

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Translation

Robert S. Cohen notes that the majority of English books on Buddhism use the term "enlightenment" to translate the term *bodhi*.^[6] The root *budh*, from which both *bodhi* and *Buddha* are derived, means "to wake up" or "to recover consciousness".^[6] Cohen notes that *bodhi* is not the result of an *illumination*, but of a path of realization, or coming to understanding.^[6] The term "enlightenment" is event-oriented, whereas the term "awakening" is process-oriented.^[6] The western use of the term "enlighten" has Christian roots, as in Calvin's "It is God alone who enlightens our minds to perceive his truths".^[7]

Early 19th century *bodhi* was translated as "intelligence".^[7] The term "enlighten" was first being used in 1835, in an English translation of a French article,^[8] while the first recorded use of the term 'enlightenment' is credited (by the Oxford English Dictionary) to the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (February, 1836). In 1857 *The Times* used the term "the Enlightened" for the Buddha in a short article, which was reprinted the following year by Max Müller.^[9] Thereafter, the use of the term subsided, but reappeared with the publication of Max Müller's *Chips from a german Workshop*, which included a reprint from the *Times*-article. The book was translated in 1969 into German, using the term "der Erleuchtete".^[10] Max Müller was an essentialist, who believed in a natural religion, and saw religion as an inherent capacity of human beings.^[11] "Enlightenment" was a means to capture natural religious truths, as distinguished from mere mythology.^[12]^[note 1]

By the mid-1870s it had become commonplace to call the Buddha "enlightened", and by the end of the 1880s the terms "enlightened" and "enlightenment" dominated the English literature.^[9]

Terms

Insight

Bodhi

Bodhi (Sanskrit, Pāli), from the verbal root *budd*, "to awaken", "to understand",^[13] means literally "to have woken up and understood".^[14] According to Johannes Bronkhorst,^[15] Tillman Vetter,^[16] and K.R. Norman,^[17] *bodhi* was at first not specified. K.R. Norman:

It is not at all clear what gaining *bodhi* means. We are accustomed to the translation "enlightenment" for *bodhi*, but this is misleading ... It is not clear what the buddha was awakened to, or at what particular point the awakening came.^[18]

According to Norman, *bodhi* may basically have meant the knowledge that *nibbana* was attained,^{[19][20]} due to the practice of *dhyana*.^{[17][16]} Originally only "prajna" may have been mentioned,^[15] and Tillman Vetter even concludes that originally dhyana itself was deemed liberating, with the stilling of pleasure of pain in the fourth jhana.^[16] Gombrich also argues that the emphasis on insight is a later development.^[21]

In Theravada Buddhism, *bodhi* refers to the realisation of the four stages of enlightenment and becoming an Arahant.^[14] In Theravada Buddhism, *bodhi* is equal to supreme insight, and the realisation of the four noble truths, which leads to deliverance.^[14] According to Nyanatiloka,

(Through Bodhi) one awakens from the slumber or stupor (inflicted upon the mind) by the defilements (*kilesa*, q.v.) and comprehends the Four Noble Truths (*sacca*, q.v.).^[13]

This equation of *bodhi* with the four noble truths is a later development, in response to developments within Indian religious thought, where "liberating insight" was deemed essential for liberation.^{[15][16]} The four noble truths as the liberating insight of the Buddha eventually were superseded by Pratītyasamutpāda, the twelvefold chain of causation, and still later by anatta, the emptiness of the self.^[15]

In Mahayana Buddhism, *bodhi* is equal to *prajna*, insight into the Buddha-nature, sunyata and tathatā.^[22] This is equal to the realisation of the non-duality of absolute and relative.^[22]

Prajna

In Theravada Buddhism *paññā* (Pali) means "understanding", "wisdom", "insight".^[23] "Insight" is equivalent to *vipassana*, insight into the three marks of existence, namely anicca, dukkha and anatta.^[23] Insight leads to the four stages of enlightenment and Nirvana.^[23]

In Mahayana Buddhism Prajna (Sanskrit) means "insight" or "wisdom", and entails insight into *sunyata*. The attainment of this insight is often seen as the attainment of "enlightenment".^[24]

Kensho and satori

Kensho and *Satori* are Japanese terms used in Zen traditions. *Kensho* means "seeing into one's true nature." *Ken* means "seeing", *sho* means "nature", "essence",^[25] c.q Buddha-nature. *Satori* (Japanese) is often used interchangeably with kensho, but refers to the *experience* of kensho.^[25] The Rinzai tradition sees *kensho* as essential to the attainment of Buddhahood, but considers further practice essential to attain Buddhahood.

East-Asian (Chinese) Buddhism emphasizes insight into Buddha-nature. This term is derived from Indian tathagata-garbha thought, "the womb of the thus-gone" (the Buddha), the inherent potential of every sentient being to become a Buddha. This idea was integrated with the Yogacara-idea of the *ālaya vijñāna*, and further developed in Chinese Buddhism, which integrated Indian Buddhism with native Chinese thought. Buddha-nature came to mean both the potential of awakening *and* the whole of reality, a dynamic interpenetration of absolute and relative. In this awakening it is realized that observer and observed are not distinct entities, but mutually co-dependent.^{[26][27]}

Knowledge

The term *vidhya* is being used in contrast to *avidhya*, ignorance or the lack of knowledge, which binds us to samsara. The *Mahasaccaka Sutta*^[note 2] describes the three knowledges which the Buddha attained:^{[28][29][30]}

1. Insight into his past lives
2. Insight into the workings of Karma and Reincarnation
3. Insight into the Four Noble Truths

According to Bronkhorst, the first two knowledges are later additions, while insight into the four truths represents a later development, in response to concurring religious traditions, in which "liberating insight" came to be stressed over the practice of *dhyana*.^[15]

Freedom

Vimutti, also called moksha, means "freedom",^[31] "release",^{[31][note 3]} "deliverance".^[32] Sometimes a distinction is being made between *ceto-vimutti*, "liberation of the mind", and *panna-vimutti*, "liberation by understanding".^[33] The Buddhist tradition recognises two kinds of *ceto-vimutti*, one temporarily and one permanent, the last being equivalent to *panna-vimutti*.^{[33][note 4]}

Yogacara uses the term *āśraya parāvṛtti*, "revolution of the basis",^[35]

... a sudden revulsion, turning, or re-turning of the ālaya vijñāna back into its original state of purity [...] the Mind returns to its original condition of non-attachment, non-discrimination and non-duality".^[36]

Nirvana

Nirvana is the "blowing out" of disturbing emotions, which is the same as liberation.^[web 1] The usage of the term "enlightenment" to translate "nirvana" was popularized in the 19th century, due, in part, to the efforts of Max Muller, who used the term consistently in his translations.^[37]

Buddhahood

Anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi

Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, is said to have achieved full awakening, known as *samyaksaṃbodhi* (Sanskrit; Pāli: *sammāsaṃbodhi*), "perfect Buddhahood", or *anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi*, "highest perfect awakening".^[38]

The term buddha has acquired somewhat different meanings in the various Buddhist traditions. An equivalent term for Buddha is Tathāgata, "the thus-gone". The way to Buddhahood is somewhat differently understood in the various buddhist traditions.

Buddha's awakening

Canonical accounts

In the suttapitaka, the Buddhist canon as preserved in the Theravada tradition, a couple of texts can be found in which the Buddha's attainment of liberation forms part of the narrative.^{[39][40][note 5]}

The *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*^[note 6] describes how the Buddha was dissatisfied with the teachings of Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, wandered further through Magadhan country, and then found "an agreeable piece of ground" which served for striving. The sutra then only says that he attained Nibbana.^[41]

The *Mahasaccaka Sutta*^[note 7] describes his ascetic practices, which he abandoned. There-after he remembered a spontaneous state of jhana, and set out for jhana-practice. After destroying the disturbances of the mind, and attaining concentration of the mind, he attained three knowledges (vidhya).^{[28][29][30]}

1. Insight into his past lives
2. Insight into the workings of Karma and Reincarnation
3. Insight into the Four Noble Truths

According to the *Mahasaccaka Sutta* these insights, including the way to attain liberation, led the Buddha himself straight to liberation.^[42] called "awakening".^[43]

Critical assessment

Schmithausen^[note 8] notes that the mention of the four noble truths as constituting "liberating insight", which is attained after mastering the Rupa Jhanas, is a later addition to texts such as Majjhima Nikaya 36.^{[44][15][16]} Bronkhorst notices that

...the accounts which include the Four Noble Truths had a completely different conception of the process of liberation than the one which includes the Four Dhyanas and the destruction of the intoxicants.^[45]

It calls in question the reliability of these accounts, and the relation between *dhyana* and insight, which is a core problem in the study of early Buddhism.^{[16][15][21]} Originally the term *prajna* may have been used, which came to be replaced by the four truths in those texts where "liberating insight" was preceded by the four jhanas.^[46] Bronkhorst also notices that the conception of what exactly this "liberating insight" was developed throughout time. Whereas originally it may not have been specified, later on the four truths served as such, to be superseded by *pratityasamutpada*, and still later, in the Hinayana schools, by the doctrine of the non-existence of a substantial self or person.^[47] And Schmithausen notices that still other descriptions of this "liberating insight" exist in the Buddhist canon:

"that the five Skandhas are impermanent, disagreeable, and neither the Self nor belonging to oneself",^[note 9] "the contemplation of the arising and disappearance (*udayabbaya*) of the five Skandhas",^[note 10] "the realisation of the Skandhas as empty (*rittaka*), vain (*tucchaka*) and without any pith or substance (*asaraka*).^{[note 11][48]}

An example of this substitution, and its consequences, is Majjhima Nikaya 36:42-43, which gives an account of the awakening of the Buddha.^[49]

Development of Buddhahood in Buddhist traditions

In Theravada Buddhism, reaching full awakening is equivalent in meaning to reaching Nirvāṇa.^[web 2] Attaining Nirvāṇa is the ultimate goal of Theravada and other śrāvaka traditions.^[web 3] It involves the abandonment of the ten fetters and the cessation of dukkha or suffering. Full awakening is reached in four stages.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism the Bodhisattva is the ideal. The ultimate goal is not only of one's own liberation in Buddhahood, but the liberation of all living beings.

In time, the Buddha's awakening came to be understood as an immediate full awakening and liberation, instead of the insight into and certainty about the way to follow to reach enlightenment. However, in some Zen traditions this perfection came to be relativized again; according to one contemporary Zen master, "Shakyamuni buddha and Bodhidharma are still practicing."^[50]

But Mahayana Buddhism also developed a cosmology with a wide range of buddhas and bodhisattvas, who assist humans on their way to liberation.

Nichiren Buddhism regards Buddhahood as a state of perfect freedom, in which one is awakened to the eternal and ultimate truth that is the reality of all things. This supreme state of life is characterized by boundless wisdom and infinite compassion. The Lotus Sutra reveals that Buddhahood is a potential in the lives of all beings. ^[51]

Western understanding of enlightenment

In the western world the concept of *enlightenment* has taken on a romantic meaning.^{[2][3][4][5]} It has become synonymous with self-realization and the true self, being regarded as a substantial essence being covered over by social conditioning.^{[2][3][4][5]}

Enlightenment as "Aufklärung"

The use of the western word *enlightenment* is based on the supposed resemblance of *bodhi* with Aufklärung, the independent use of reason to gain insight into the true nature of our world. In fact there are more resemblances with Romanticism than with the Enlightenment: the emphasis on feeling, on intuitive insight, on a true essence beyond the world of appearances.^[52]

Awakening

The equivalent term "awakening" has also been used in a Christian context, namely the Great Awakenings, several periods of religious revival in American religious history. Historians and theologians identify three or four waves of increased religious enthusiasm occurring between the early 18th century and the late 19th century. Each of these "Great Awakenings" was characterized by widespread revivals led by evangelical Protestant ministers, a sharp increase of interest in religion, a profound sense of conviction and redemption on the part of those affected, an increase in evangelical church membership, and the formation of new religious movements and denominations.

Romanticism and transcendentalism

The romantic idea of enlightenment as insight into a timeless, transcendent reality has been popularized especially by D.T. Suzuki.^{[web 4][web 5]} Further popularization was due to the writings of Heinrich Dumoulin.^{[53][54][web 6]} Dumoulin viewed metaphysics as the expression of a transcendent truth, which according to him was expressed by Mahayana Buddhism, but not by the pragmatic analysis of the oldest Buddhism, which emphasizes anatta.^[55] This romantic vision is also recognizable in the works of Ken Wilber.^[56]

In the oldest Buddhism this essentialism is not recognizable.^{[57][web 7]} According to critics it doesn't really contribute to a real insight into Buddhism.^[web 8]

...most of them labour under the old cliché that the goal of Buddhist psychological analysis is to reveal the hidden mysteries in the human mind and thereby facilitate the development of a transcendental state of consciousness beyond the reach of linguistic expression.^[58]

Enlightenment and experience

A common reference in western culture is the notion of "enlightenment *experience*". This notion can be traced back to William James, who used the term "religious experience" in his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.^[59] Wayne Proudfoot traces the roots of the notion of "religious experience" further back to the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who argued that religion is based on a feeling of the infinite. Schleiermacher used the notion of "religious experience" to defend religion against the growing scientific and secular critique.

It was popularised by the Transcendentalists, and exported to Asia via missionaries.^[60] Transcendentalism developed as a reaction against 18th Century rationalism, John Locke's philosophy of Sensualism, and the predestinationism of New England Calvinism. It is fundamentally a variety of diverse sources such as Hindu texts like the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita,^[61] various religions, and German idealism.^[62]

It was adopted by many scholars of religion, of which William James was the most influential.^[63]^[note 12]

The notion of "experience" has been criticised.^[3]^[67]^[68] Robert Sharf points out that "experience" is a typical western term, which has found its way into Asian religiosity via western influences.^[3]^[note 13]

The notion of "experience" introduces a false notion of duality between "experiencer" and "experienced", whereas the essence of kensho is the realisation of the "non-duality" of observer and observed.^[70] ^[71] "Pure experience" does not exist; all experience is mediated by intellectual and cognitive activity.^[72]^[73] The specific teachings and practices of a specific tradition may even determine what "experience" someone has, which means that this "experience" is not the *proof* of the teaching, but a *result* of the teaching.^[74] A pure consciousness without concepts, reached by "cleaning the doors of perception" as per romantic poet William Blake^[note 14], would, according to Mohr, be an overwhelming chaos of sensory input without coherence.^[76]

Bodhi Day

Sakyamuni's Buddhahood is celebrated on Bodhi Day. In Sri Lanka and Japan different days are used for this celebration.

According to the Theravada tradition in Sri Lanka, Sakyamuni reached Buddhahood at the full moon in May. This is celebrated at Wesak Poya, the full moon in May, as Sambuddhatva jayanthi (also known as Sambuddha jayanthi).^[web 9]

According to the Zen tradition, the Buddha reached his decisive insight on 8 December. This is celebrated in Zen monasteries with a very intensive eight-day session of Rōhatsu.

See also

- Buddhist philosophy
- Buddhism and psychology
- Illuminationism
- Enlightenment (spiritual)
- Hongaku
- Subitism
- Wisdom

Notes

1. See also Lourens Peter van den Bosch, *Theosophy or Pantheism? Friedrich Max Müller's Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion* (http://www.her-e-now4u.de/eng/theosophy_or_pantheism_friedr.htm): "The three principal themes of his Gifford lectures on natural religion were the discovery of God, the discovery of the soul, and the discovery of the oneness of God and soul in the great religions of the world."
2. Majjhima Nikaya chapter 36
3. See Encyclopedia.com, *Vimutti* (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O101-Vimutti.html>)
4. According to Gombrich, this distinction is artificial, and due to later, too literal, interpretations of the suttas.^[34]
5. See Majjhima Nikaya chapter 4, 12, 26 & 36
6. Majjhima Nikaya chapter 26
7. Majjhima Nikaya chapter 36
8. In his often-cited article *On some Aspects of Descriptions or Theories of 'Liberating Insight' and 'Enlightenment' in Early Buddhism*
9. Majjhima Nikaya 26
10. Anguttara Nikaya II.45 (PTS)
11. Samyutta Nikaya III.140-142 (PTS)
12. James also gives descriptions of conversion experiences. The Christian model of dramatic conversions, based on the role-model of Paul's conversion, may also have served as a model for western interpretations and expectations regarding "enlightenment", similar to Protestant influences on Theravada Buddhism, as described by Carrithers:

It rests upon the notion of the primacy of religious experiences, preferably spectacular ones, as the origin and legitimation of religious action. But this presupposition has a natural home, not in Buddhism, but in Christian and especially Protestant Christian movements which prescribe a radical conversion.^[64]

See Sekida for an example of this influence of William James and Christian conversion stories, mentioning Luther^[65] and St. Paul.^[66] See also McMahan for the influence of Christian thought on Buddhism.^[5]

13. Robert Sharf:

[T]he role of experience in the history of Buddhism has been greatly exaggerated in contemporary scholarship. Both historical and ethnographic evidence suggests that the privileging of experience may well be traced to certain twentieth-century reform movements, notably those that urge a return to *zazen* or *vipassana* meditation, and these reforms were profoundly influenced

by religious developments in the west [...] While some adepts may indeed experience "altered states" in the course of their training, critical analysis shows that such states do not constitute the reference point for the elaborate Buddhist discourse pertaining to the "path".^[69]

14. **William Blake:** "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thru' narrow chinks of his cavern."^[75]

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3. Sharf 1995b.
4. Sharf 2000.
5. McMahan 2008.
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7. Cohen 2006, p. 2.
8. Cohen 2006, p. 2-3.
9. Cohen 2006, p. 3.
10. Cohen 2006, p. 9.
11. Cohen 2006, p. 4.
12. Cohen 2006, p. 6-7.
13. Nyanatiloka 1980, p. 40.
14. Schreiber-Fischer 2008, p. 50.
15. Bronkhorst 1993.
16. Vetter 1988.
17. Norman 1997, p. 29.
18. Norman, K. R. (2005). *Buddhist Forum Volume V: Philological Approach to Buddhism* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=qYyRAgAAQBAJ&pg=PA25>). Routledge. p. 25. ISBN 978-1-135-75154-8.
19. Norman 1997, p. 30.
20. Vetter 1988, p. xxix, xxxi.
21. Gombrich 1997.
22. Schreiber-Fischer 2008, p. 51.
23. Nyanatiloka 1980, p. 150.
24. Fischer-Schreiber 2008, p. 281.
25. Kapleau 1989.
26. Lusthaus 1998.
27. Lai 2003.
28. Bikkhu Nanamoli 1995, p. 340-342.
29. Warder 2000, p. 47-48.
30. Snelling 1987, p. 27.
31. Bowker 1997.
32. Nyanatiloka 1980, p. 239.
33. Gombrich 2005, p. 147.
34. Gombrich 2005, p. 147-148.
35. Park 1983, p. 126-132.

36. Park 1983, p. 127.
37. Scott 2009, p. 8.
38. Mäll 2005, p. 83.
39. Warder 2000, p. 45-50.
40. Faure 1991
41. Bikkhu Nanamoli 1995, p. 259.
42. Bikkhu Nanamoli 1995, p. 342.
43. Warder 2000, p. 47-48.
44. Schmithausen 1981.
45. Bronkhorst 1993, p. 110.
46. Bronkhorst 1993, p. 108.
47. Bronkhorst 1993, p. 100-101.
48. Bronkhorst 1993, p. 101.
49. Bronkhorst 1993, p. 102-103.
50. Harris 2004, p. 103.
51. "Buddhahood – Dictionary of Buddhism – Nichiren Buddhism Library" (<https://www.nichirenlibrary.org/en/dic/Content/G/66>).
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59. Hori 1999, p. 47.
50. King 2002.
51. Versluis 2001, p. 3.
52. Hart 1995.
53. Sharf 2000, p. 271.
54. Carrithers 1983, p. 18.
55. Sekida 1985, p. 196-197.
56. Sekida 1985, p. 251.
57. Mohr 2000, p. 282-286.
58. Low 2006, p. 12.
59. Sharf & 1995-C, p. 1.
70. Hori 1994, p. 30.
71. Samy 1998, p. 82.
72. Mohr 2000, p. 282.
73. Samy 1998, p. 80-82.
74. Samy 1998, p. 80.
75. Quote DB (<http://www.quotedb.com/quotes/2653>)
76. Mohr 2000, p. 284.

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6. Critical introduction by John McRae to the reprint of Dumoulin's *A history of Zen* (<http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/HistoricalZen/McRaeIntroduction.pdf>)
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- [Pali Text Society: Occurrences of the term 'enlightenment'](http://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/search3advanced?dbname=pali&query=enlightenment&matchtype=exact&display=utf8) (<http://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/search3advanced?dbname=pali&query=enlightenment&matchtype=exact&display=utf8>)
- [Joan Sutherland, *What is enlightenment?*, *Buddhadharma February 16, 2013*](http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/web-archive/2013/2/16/what-is-enlightenment.html) (<http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/web-archive/2013/2/16/what-is-enlightenment.html>)

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