



Unshakeable Well-Being: Is the Buddhist Concept of Enlightenment a Meaningful Possibility in the Current Age

Ajahn Amaro¹ 

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First of all, I should lodge the caveat that even though the title includes the word “enlightenment,” I make no claims to having realized enlightenment myself. Please do not consider that I am speaking from that kind of exalted spiritual position, but rather as a spiritual friend and companion in life with all of you.

I thought I’d start off with some of the definitions of what we are calling “enlightenment” here. Some have called it a “human flourishing” but the more classical Buddhist way of speaking about it is in *via negativa* terms—such as “the ending of greed, hatred and delusion,” and “the ending of suffering.” That is the kind of language you come across in the Pali Buddhist scriptures of ancient India. They use more of a language of negation, speaking in terms of what things are *not* rather than what they *are*.

In Buddhist tradition, and in a more mythological expression, enlightenment is also called “the ending of the cycle of birth and death”—this makes reference to rebirth as well as to the diminishing and ending of rebirth. I think it’s helpful here to say that one of the things that attracted me and many other people towards the Buddha’s teachings is its non-dogmatic nature. I am quite aware that many people do not like the concepts of past lives, future lives, and rebirth. That sort of terminology may send shudders through the system and that’s fair enough. I feel that even though the texts talk in terms like “ending the cycles of birth and death,” it is completely valid to think of that in terms of “psychological birth and death.”

What do I mean by that phrase? For example, you might be born into your current book project or your new experimental design. That is a birth. The mind takes hold of a particular venture, a possession, an identity, a personal relationship, or a social role. We might say that we are born into the role of being a Dhamma teacher or into the role of being a professor,

born into founding a particular project, and with that birth is also a delight. The delight comes from the sense that everything is going well, there is the aspiration that beautiful and useful things might come forth from it. But there is also the death element; perhaps things do not work so well, or you do not get funded the next time, or you present your thesis and you get slammed by your professors. There is a bitterness that comes when you have invested in something and then have to see your aspirations die. That is birth and death. Buddhist language does not just refer to physical birth and death, it also refers to psychological birth and death.

My own teacher Ajahn Chah would use these terms when he talked about birth and death. He would talk about being born into a hope, being born into a building project, being born into the role of being a monk or a nun. So I feel it’s completely valid to think in terms of the freedom from birth and death as meaning freedom from being reborn into the entanglement and toxic identification that can come with taking hold of a project or a role or a position and so forth. “Freedom from birth and death” therefore means a complete independence from addictive and compulsive attachments, as well as from self-centered attitudes.

When I was an undergraduate student of psychology and physiology many years ago, we studied Maslow’s (1953) hierarchy of needs. I remember the pyramid that Maslow drew, with “physiological needs” at the base and successively above it, “safety,” “love/belonging,” “esteem,” and at the top of his pyramid is “self-actualization.” I remember being in the lecture theater and thinking, “That top part looks interesting. I can’t wait to get up to that self-actualization bit.” But as you can probably guess, that turned out to be a very small part of the study. I found myself wondering why we were not spending much more time on the most interesting part of the picture. Around about the same time, I was introduced to Freud’s statement that, “... much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common human unhappiness” (Breuer and Freud 1955). On hearing this, the clear intuition arose in me, “We can do better than that! There must be something better than ‘common human unhappiness’ to look forward to!”

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✉ Ajahn Amaro
ajahn.amaro@gmail.com

¹ Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire HP1 3BZ, UK

In a way, I've spent the last forty years on that top little triangle of Maslow's hierarchy. When we talk about the concept of enlightenment and its various degrees, I would suggest that's all within that top triangle of self-actualization in Maslow's diagram. Again, I'm not an academic psychologist so maybe that's no longer considered a valid model, maybe it has been totally superseded over and over again, but that was what was in my mind 40 years ago when I was a student. My desire to understand what self-actualization might consist of was one of the things that took me to Asia, so entering the forest monastic life was my way of working on my PhD. One of the reasons why I studied psychology was that I wanted to understand my own mind more completely, directly, and effectively. I feel I'm still involved in this project, but from within the environment of the forest monastery instead of that of the Academy.

In the classical Buddhist teachings, there are four gradations or stages of enlightenment that are described over and over again. The first level is called "stream-entry." This represents an irreversible breakthrough into a quality of psychological integration or self-actualization, or "emotional intelligence" that will necessarily result, eventually, in the "unshakeable well-being" of full enlightenment. This means that the mind can only be deluded to a limited degree a certain number of times; the mind can only get *so* lost. This quality of stream-entry is something that the Buddha praised as a realizable goal, not just for monastics but for lay people as well. The Buddha referred to those who had reached this level of realization as "noble people," people who had seen the nature of ultimate reality, who had "glimpsed the Deathless" to use another classical expression. Many thousands of lay people in the Buddha's own time, as well as monastics, reached this level of stream-entry, and many have realized the same level since then. Stream-entry is a very realistic and realizable goal, as well as being an attractive one.

The Buddha once reached down and scraped the ground in front of him and asked, "Do you see the dirt under my fingernail? What do you think is greater, the amount of dirt under my fingernail or the size of the great earth, the planet itself?" One of those present answered, "Venerable Sir, the quantity of earth under your fingernail is small but the great earth is very large indeed." The Buddha responded, "Similarly, the amount of future suffering you can expect to experience if you reach stream-entry is comparable to the dirt under my fingernail; while the amount of suffering ahead for those who have not reached stream-entry is comparable to the great earth" (S 13.1 [S = *Samyutta Nikāya*]). I think that one simile is enough to give you the idea of the appeal of realizing this level of psychological maturity.

The element of "irreversibility" associated with stream-entry is hugely significant. It means that once that level of insight has been reached then—irrespective of health, IQ, wealth or social position, or whether you have got tenure or not—you are fine. A quality of profound ease, of deep psychological well-being manifests and it is independent of circumstances.

In addition, the Buddha declared that once stream-entry has been reached, full enlightenment is guaranteed within a minimum of seven lifetimes. For those of you who do not like the idea of past and future lives, you can validly read that, I feel, as saying you can really blow it, i.e., get totally distracted and lost, no more than seven times. You can get utterly wrapped up, confused and angry, compulsive and depressed, but you cannot get totally lost more than seven times. Furthermore, each time, it is going to get harder to be so carried away. Although that may sound somewhat heretical with respect to some conservative approaches to Buddhist teachings, I feel that it is a perfectly valid way of understanding the Buddha's guarantee here.

At the level of stream-entry, three psychological, largely attitudinal, qualities are let go of. These are categorized in terms of what are called the "ten fetters" or *samyojana* in Pali—a fetter being like handcuffs or chains or shackles that tie your mind down. The three assumptions or attitudes that are let go of at stream-entry are: (1) Attachment to the body and to the personality. This attachment is called "self-view" or "personality view" (*sakkāya-ditṭhi*); it comprises the view, "I am the body, I am the personality, this is all and everything of what I am." (2) Doubt about the path to liberation, about the way to arrive at genuine, unshakeable well-being, and about the possibility of full psychological integration. (3) Attachment to one's social conditioning, namely the conventions and forms, rites and rituals that one is familiar with. This technically refers to religious forms like feeling that you have to bathe in the River Ganges to wash away your bad karma or being baptized in a Christian church in order to be one of the saved. However, my teacher, Ajahn Chah, would say that it also refers to conventions in general, including social ones, such as the value of money, fashions, nationality or supporting a particular sports team—saying that "this one is good, that one is bad," "this is right, that is wrong," with the implication that that value is an intrinsic quality, rather than having been ascribed by social agreement. All of this is "attachment to conventions."

The level above stream-entry is that of the "once-returned" (*sakadāgāmin*). Such a person experiences a reduction of sense-desire (*kāma-rāga*) and a reduction of ill-will (*vyapāda*). A "once-returned" is reborn in the human realm only one more time before their complete enlightenment. The mind is far less drawn into sense-desire and ill-will. At this level of realization, well-being or psychological maturity, you can still feel anger or aversion, you can still feel craving or greed and lust, but these emotions can no longer dominate the heart. They can no longer overwhelm the mind.

The third level is that of the "non-returned" (*anāgāmin*). In terms of Buddhist cosmology, this means that such a person is never again reborn in the human realm. They would be reborn only in one of the higher heavenly realms, in what are called the "The Pure Abodes" (*Sudhāvāsā*). The basis of Pure Land Buddhism is the aim to be reborn in one of those higher

realms. The realization of the level of *anāgāmin* brings with it the complete ending of craving for sense-pleasures and all ill-will.

With respect to the fourth level, even though the realization of the non-returner represents an extremely advanced state, non-returners still have work to do if they are to arrive at complete enlightenment. In order for full enlightenment, *arahantship*, to be realized five more fetters, shackles that tie the heart down must be broken. These last five fetters are:

1. Attachment to and identification with blissful mind-states based on form.

2. Attachment to and identification with blissful mind-states based on formlessness.

3. Identification with the subtle mind-states associated with feelings of “I,” “me,” and “mine.” This is *asmi-māna* and it is different from attachment to self-view (*sakkāya-ditṭhi*). In the *Khemaka Sutta* (S 22.89), a monk said, “There is no attachment to the body or the personality. It is really clear to me that body and personality are not who and what I am. But still, this ‘I’ feeling persists. Just as one cannot really tell where the scent of a flower comes from—is it the petals or the pollen or the stalk?—but the scent is there. So too, even though there is no attachment to the body or personality, no attachment to feeling, perception or consciousness, still the ‘I’ feeling endures.” That is a very good description of *asmi-māna*, also known as “the conceit of *I am*.” As a side note, the Venerable Khemaka actually became an *arahant* hearing his own explanation. He is the only person known to have become enlightened by hearing his own Dhamma talk. So that can happen. *Arahantship*, then, includes the letting go of *asmi-māna*, the conceit of identity.

4. The next fetter that is shed in the move from non-returner to *arahant* is the letting go of *uddhacca*, which literally means “restlessness.” This is not about fidgeting on your meditation cushion, but rather is about a subtle kind of restlessness, the attitude that: “*That* looks more interesting than *this*”; or “There is something over *there* in the future, in some other place that is more real, more rich, more satisfying, more interesting than *this*.” Letting go of *uddhacca* is letting go of the imputed “otherness” based on the perceptions of time, place and subject-object duality.

5. The last fetter of all is *avijjā*, or “ignorance” (also called “nescience” or “unawareness”). This describes the final remnants of unmindfulness and bias that prevent the mind from being attuned to the fundamental reality of experience. When this last fetter has fallen away, the mind or heart is said to be fully liberated (*vimutti*) or enlightened (*bodhi*), and birth and death are said to have come to an end. The Buddha’s own description of his enlightenment, to his first five pupils, states: “*Ayam-antimā jāti natthi dāni punabbhavo’ti*.”

[This is the last birth. There will be no more renewal of being (S 56.11)].

There is no need to dwell too much on these broader details of the four stages at this time; they are spelled out here so that they are available as a general map. To come back to stream-entry, which is the main subject being explored here, I would like to emphasize that this should be considered to be a very realizable goal. My teachers and mentors would say such things as: “If you have enough faith and interest to come and live in a monastery, or show up at meditation retreats to sit and deal with restlessness and physical pain, and to work hard at training your mind for a week or ten days, then you probably have all that you need in order to realize stream-entry.” If you have that amount of faith and commitment, and focus, if you really want to understand how your mind works, and are prepared to work and deal with difficulty in order to gain that understanding, then you have most of the requisite qualities to realize stream-entry. When making a point to describe the necessary qualities for stream-entry, the Buddha once said, “Even if these great *sal* trees, Mahānāma, could understand what is well spoken and what is badly spoken, then I would declare these great *sal* trees to be stream-enterers, no longer bound to the nether world, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as their destination” (S 55.24).

I do not make this point lightly. I feel that it’s important to recognize that stream-entry is a doable goal. That irreversible quality of well-being, that breakthrough to full psychological integration that cannot be completely fallen away from, is a reachable goal for most people *if* they have the faith to engage and practise meditation, and to really sit down and work on their mind, their life.

Stream-entry, that degree of profound well-being, is thus an achievable goal but merely knowing of it as a meaningful possibility does not make it an actuality in one’s life, does it? The shelves of the larder can be filled with the right ingredients but that does not make a meal. Knowing that the Dutch language exists and wanting to be able to speak it is not the same as being able to. So, what are the means whereby we can make that ideal of stream-entry a reality in our experience?

Meditation, as mentioned, is certainly a significant contributor to its actualization; however, it is not the only factor that supports it. In his teachings, the Buddha speaks of a number of other elements that facilitate that realization; they are called “the factors that support stream-entry” (S 55.5).

1. The first one is “association with good people” (*sappurisa-saṃseva*). *Sappurisa* means a good person or a well-rounded person; *sa-* means “good” or “right” or “true” or “harmonious,” *-purisa* means “a person”; *saṃseva* means “companionship” or “association.” So, spending time with good people, drawing close to good-hearted people, drawing close to wise people, is the first factor supporting stream-entry.

2. Next is to “attend to wise teachings” (*sadhammasavana*); this means to take the time to listen to teachings, to ideas and explanations that guide the mind towards that quality of psychological integration and well-

being, towards peacefulness and clarity, and away from ego-centered drives and destructive behaviors. In Buddhist terms this is “listening to the good Dhamma” or “the true Dhamma.”

3. Then there is “wise reflection” (*yoniso manasikāra*), which means, literally, “attending to the root or to the origin of things.” We attend, we consider, we reflect upon our experience. This includes reflecting upon our feelings of liking and disliking, our feelings of being approved of or the feeling of being criticized, the feeling of success, the feeling of failure. When you launch a project or carry out a study and you do not get the results you were expecting, *yoniso manasikāra* is that part of intelligence that wonders, “Hmmm ... what is the pattern here? How is this working?” It is the capacity to look into the way things work and to recognize the patterning of experience, and how the natural order functions. This is wise reflection or “attending wisely.” In Buddhist practice a lot of wise reflection revolves around watching our moods and listening to our thoughts. It is the quality of being able to step back and say, “This is the feeling of liking, this is the feeling of disliking. Here is the experience of me getting into the car and being annoyed by the traffic.”

4. The final way to strengthen the possibility of realizing stream-entry is “practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma” (*dhammānudhammapaṭipatti*), which means engaging in meditation and developing wholesome states in tune with reality. That is to say, working with the mind in a way that is free from self-view and self-centered attitudes. This is because we often practise meditation in tune with our egotistical drives (“Because I want to attain enlightenment and be the most impressive!”) or with a sense of obligation, because we have been told to “do it this way” by an expert or a teacher. We can engage in meditation driven by obligation, by obedience, by ambition, by aggression: “I’m going to wipe out my defilements. I’m going to make my thinking mind shut up!” But this is practising Dhamma not in accordance with Dhamma, but in accordance with aggression, with self-view, and with aversion, ambition and greed, and so forth. Instead, meditation and the other aspects of training need to be guided by mindfulness and wisdom (*sati-paññā*). This will then be what informs all action and decision-making rather than habitual fears, desires, and aversions. Here the Buddha is encouraging us to make effort and give direction to our lives based on the cultivation of means that are helpful and wholesome since those will lead to the most beneficial results. The means and the end are unified. The Buddha is therefore encouraging us to incline away from working in a way that is unhelpful and unwholesome, as that can only lead to more alienation and disharmony, to more suffering in the end.

In summary, those four factors supporting stream-entry are associating with good people, listening to true teachings, reflecting wisely and practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma. Another small but significant aspect to mention is that sometimes, we mistake awareness or knowing, as understood from the Buddhist perspective, to mean a sort of mental agility. The quality

of stream-entry is not dependent on being able to articulate or even to think clearly. This is an important principle. It is not dependent on clarity of thought. You do not have to remember your lines. True insight can be established without a dependence on memory, conceptual thought or language. True insight is rather a quality of vision, a quality of attitude, and attitude is not a concept. It is a way of seeing, a way of being. It is an awakened knowing, awareness itself, rather than knowing *about* things.

Ajahn Chah had a stroke when he was in his sixties. His brain function was quite heavily compromised. During the period of time when he could still speak, sometimes monks would come to visit and he might want to say, “Come here Sumedho” but what emerged was “Come here Ānando”; or he’d mean to say, “It’s good to see you” while what would come out would be something like, “Blue dog happy Thursday.” And he would realize that was nonsense. He knew that the words of his choosing had not been spoken and that a different set of words had appeared instead, but he found this amusing instead of distressing. He understood that his thinking functions were misfiring, but he did not have any suffering about it. He was at ease with it even though it was not under his control. He described it by saying, “The monkeys are playing about in the telephone exchange.”

This shows that unshakeable well-being, as discussed here, does not depend on a healthy body or even on a capacity for orderly thinking. Rather it is a matter of attitude. It is a steadiness of the inner vision, of apperception. It is the ability to appreciate the ever-changing field of experience, regardless of its contents, with openness, easefulness, and impartiality. Our happiness then does not depend on any single “thing” or object as it is grounded in a commodious awareness of *the process* of experiencing, rather than in *the contents* of those experiences.

What I have presented here is a short summary of the principles relating to enlightenment, as understood in the Southern School of Buddhism, in response to the question of the title: “Is the Buddhist concept of enlightenment a meaningful possibility in the current age?” It is a description of some of the relevant ingredients available in the psychological larder as well as something of a recipe of how to put them together in order to create a nourishing meal resulting, ultimately, in an unshakeable well-being. Whether we as individuals make use of those ingredients in a skillful way to support that kind of well-being, or whether we ignore them or create a non-nutritious concoction, is up to each one of us. Please also bear in mind that the points described here are not intended to be dogmatic assertions that are expected to be believed out of hand. Rather they should be regarded as reflections offered for consideration that, if they prove to be valid and meaningful through personal experience, can be used to aid individuals in the actualization of a quality of well-being that is liberating, enriching, and indeed unshakeable.

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