

Freedom is a word that has as many diverse meanings as the word peace. In our meditation tradition, however, they are a part of the same experience; freedom means freedom from suffering, and peace is the result of that very freedom. In this final chapter, we will look at how the meditation practice leads to complete freedom and peace, and discuss the result of attaining true spiritual enlightenment.

As a meditator progresses through the stages of knowledge, seeing the nature of impermanence, inability to satisfy, and insubstantiality inherent in all mundane reality, they will find themselves increasingly free from suffering, experiencing an increasing amount of peace as a result. This mundane peace is not the true goal of meditation, however, as it is not safe from potential regression by the meditator. That is not to say that there is a goal beyond freedom from suffering and peace, but that the nature of the freedom and peace that are the true goal of meditation practice transcends mundane experience, and one who realizes them is no longer susceptible to regressing back into conflict and suffering.

Transcendental freedom from suffering is called *nirvana*, and is often misunderstood as being a kind of heaven or blissful state of experience. The truth of *nirvana* is that it is the simple consequence of letting go. Our ordinary experience of the mundane depends on our continuous craving and clinging to experience, due in turn to our ignorance of the unsatisfying nature of said experience. As we begin to look more closely at our experiences through the practice of meditation, we begin to change our perspective, seeing clearly that the things we thought were worth desiring and clinging to are not. This clarity of vision in turn leads to the weakening of our grasp on the objects of experience until there comes a moment of perfect clarity and the mind releases its hold on experience completely.

In practical terms, the meditator will begin to experience an increasing refinement of perception until every object that arises is seen with perfect objectivity, with no reacting to or craving for any object whatsoever. At this time the meditator will feel perfectly equanimous and mindful without any desire or aversion. Everything that they experience will appear to cease as soon as it has arisen, with mindful noting proceeding unimpeded for increasingly long periods of time. During one of these periods there will eventually arise a perfect observation of one of the three characteristics of either impermanence, suffering, or non-self. Examples of such an experience are:

- In the case of impermanence, one might experience an erratic or unexpected movement of the abdomen, fast when it was just slow, shallow when it was just deep, etc.
- In the case of suffering, one might experience a stiffness or unpleasantness to the movement of the abdomen.
- In the case of non-self, one might experience a smooth movement of the abdomen, totally independent of one's will or intention.

Any such experience comes to the meditator at the pinnacle of their practice, without any special investigation or intention. One should not ever try to evoke or seek out such experiences, as that will do little besides increase one's ego and attachment.

After experiencing one of the three characteristics with perfect clarity as described, the mind will enter into perfect alignment with the simple truth that nothing could ever possibly be worth clinging to; the truth that clinging is by its very nature a useless and futile activity. This alignment is not an intellectual knowledge, it is like knowing something exists because you see it right in front of you.

The next moment that proceeds directly from this perfection of vision is the experience of *nirvana*, which is without any arising or ceasing of physical or mental phenomena. Indeed, there will not even be any memory of the experience afterwards, as there was nothing to be remembered for its arising or ceasing. It is quite literally supermundane, as it is the one state outside of arisen phenomena. It is like the extinguishing of a flame, or the turning off of a light switch.

The experience of *nirvana* can last anywhere from a few brief moments to hours or even days in rare (and usually advanced) cases. In each instance, there will be the same cessation of experience, followed by no recollection of anything during the time one was in that state. It is important to understand that descriptions of *nirvana* will always be of limited value and potentially misleading if one has never experienced it for oneself. It is likewise easy to mistake states like sleep or trance for *nirvana* as there are many types of state that leave one with little or no memory of the experience. *Nirvana* is unique in that it proceeds from a perfect understanding of reality and thus involves complete detachment from experience.

Because there is no memory involved with the experience of *nirvana*, one will only be able to recognize the experience after the fact. This recognition has five parts, as follows:

1. One will remember what led to the experience, as described above relating to the three characteristics;
2. One will understand that *something* happened, that there was a cessation of all experience, though one will not know for how long without checking the clock;
3. One will have a profound sense of peace related to the experience, and the mind will feel completely refreshed and awake in a way one has never felt before;
4. One will be cognisant of a change in one's mental faculties, realizing that certain unwholesome habits or inclinations are completely absent;
5. One will be cognisant of the existence of further unwholesome habits and inclinations, more subtle than the previous and only now susceptible to one's conscious awareness.

For a meditator who has reached the end of the path and become an *arahant*, only the first four recognitions will arise as there are then no further unwholesome qualities of mind to remove.

A person who has gone through the above process can be rightly considered as one who has experienced enlightenment. Even a momentary glimpse of the cessation of *nirvana* is enough to effect profound and irrevocable change. Subsequent experiences of cessation lead to further refinement of character until the meditator can be described as being free from mental impurity entirely. This gradual purification is broken up into four stages, as follows:

1. The first experience of complete cessation frees a meditator from impurities relating to views and beliefs. One who has experienced cessation even once will have no remaining wrong views or doubts about what constitutes freedom, enlightenment, or the path.
2. Subsequent experiences of cessation will weaken one's biases and partialities of aversion and attraction. Each experience of cessation will further purify the mind, allowing one to become increasingly free from the domination of these harmful mind states.
3. Eventually one will reach a point where they are free from any addiction or aversion to sense objects. At this point all that is left is residual immaterial ambitions and aversions, as well as states like distraction and conceit.
4. Finally, through persistent application of mindfulness to the finest degree and attainment of cessation to the point of complete clarity of mind, one will free oneself from all ignorance and delusion, allowing no further cause for suffering, stress or harm to oneself or others to arise. At this point, one can be said to have attained the true goal of the meditation practice.

This process and its attainments are described here primarily in order to clarify that the true goal of meditation practice is not simply temporary mundane stress relief. This description is not meant to be a focus of the meditator during their mental development, but rather a reminder of the depth and potency of the meditation practice in effecting true and lasting change. It should serve as encouragement for the meditator that what they are doing is something profound and worthy of all the time and effort they might apply to it.

This ends the second part of How To Meditate, written for the benefit of advanced meditators in order to attempt to put into simple terms these profound and ultimately experiential teachings. As always, the real truth is within you and true realization must come for yourself through your own practice. These words are only a guide to lead you to that realization for yourself; never be content with intellectual knowledge or understanding. May all who read this benefit from it by using it to further their practice and attain true freedom from suffering.