



## **ENLIGHTENMENT AFTER BUDHHA: MODERN PERSPECTIVE OF NIRVANA**

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Welcome to the world of models, states, stages, and visions of goals to attain. The curse and blessing of knowing all of this terminology and theory is that there is a natural tendency to begin to try to apply it to our own and wonder what was what. Beyond that, provided enough information for some one to become Master Posers on the spiritual path, I have just given some of you enough information to start obsessing way too much about “where you are” on the path. However, this is a trivial danger, and why senior dharma teachers do not ever seem to put the important details about sorting out what is what into their books is completely beyond us. It has many other meanings, but this is the specific one I care about at this moment. There are all sorts of pitfalls that can occur, but perhaps the most significant of them all is calling experiences “emptiness,” “Fruition”, “Stream Entry” or “Nirvana” that simply weren’t. It is a mistake that we are all likely to make more than once if we practice fairly well, know these models and care about them in the least, and even very enlightened beings with years of practice will sometimes wonder, “Was that emptiness?”, meaning “Was that my hit?”, or “Was that the next stage of awakening?”. Some of us will be particularly prone to blowing this on a regular basis even if we are actually somewhat enlightened. Take heart, failure can be a great teacher. The first and perhaps most important point is that from a certain point of view it is not an important question. If you have actually gotten enlightened to some degree or attained a Fruition, the permanent benefits of that have occurred regardless of whether or not you are certain about it. On the other hand, if you haven’t gotten enlightened but think that you have, it is worth being able to come back to reality. The range of clarity with which the Three Doors to Fruition present themselves can be quite wide. Sometimes, even if it was actually the “Was That Emptiness?” attainment of Fruition, there may not have been enough clarity at the time for one’s memory of



the way that particular door presented and of the depth of the discontinuity to be clear enough to satisfactorily answer the question. There are also a large number of possible momentary unknowing experiences that can present in ways that seem convincingly like the attainment of Fruition, even for meditators with years of experience with these issues. I will mention some of the most common events that can be mistaken for Fruition here, though this is far from being a complete list. Momentary experiences of the formless realms that arise in the insight stage Equanimity, particularly nothingness and neither perception nor yet non-perception, are common culprits. However, if one is this close, the real thing is very likely to occur sooner or later. Formless experiences arising from pure concentration practices have fooled people for millennia into thinking they were Fruitions. As mentioned earlier, insight stage The Arising and Passing Away, particularly the Arising and Passing Away Event itself, is a pernicious trickster and has fooled countless practitioners throughout the ages into thinking it was Fruition or the attainment of a path. This may even fool somewhat enlightened beings who are working on the next path. Note, the A&P Event typically shows up only once per path unless a long period of time goes by without practice after it, whereas Fruition is likely to be repeated naturally. Unusually heavy experiences of insight stage 5. Dissolution can be formless and murky enough to fool some meditators on occasion, as can any really dramatic shift between any of the vipassana or samatha jhanas (as these involve three or four “impulsions” or “mind moments” followed by a momentary unknowing experience; see The Abhidhamma in the Pali Canon). Even the first shift into insight stage Mind and Body can fool some novices if it happens dramatically enough and they get fascinated with how unitive, pleasant and clear the stage can be after the first shift into it. Often it is not possible to make a clear call about what was what, even if it was actually Fruition. While what follows is routinely considered to be dangerous information, I am happy to go to the far extreme of telling largely taboo secrets if it helps to balance the pervasive “mushroom” culture. These are some basic guidelines that may be used when trying to answer the question, “Was that emptiness?”:

- If there was any sense of an experience, even of nothingness or something that seemed incomprehensible, particularly anything involving the vaguest hint of the



passage of time during it, write it off as something other than emptiness. This is an absolute rule.

- Similarly, if there was any sense of a this observing a that, or a self of any sort that was actually present for whatever happened, write it off as something other than emptiness. If you were there, that wasn't it.
- If there was not a complete sense of discontinuity and if it makes any sense to think of time, space, perspective or memory continuing across the gap, write it off immediately as something other than emptiness. On the other hand, if the only way to remember what happened involves remembering just forward to the end of the particular door that presented and then remembering back to when reality reappeared, well, keep reading.
- If on continued repetition of the unknowing event over days or weeks it fails the above tests, write it off as something other than emptiness.
  - If continued repetition of that particular kind of unknowing event over days or weeks fails to give any clear experiences of the Three Doors and to reveal something very paradoxical and profound about the nature of subject and object, be skeptical.
  - If there was a double-dip into unknowing events with a few profound moments of clarity and altered experience between them, as is characteristic of the A&P Event, with one shift happening halfway down the out-breath and a second shift at the end of that out breath, write it off immediately as more likely having been that or maybe the early stages of Equanimity.
  - If the event cannot be repeated, write it off. Those who have attained a path will attain more Fruitions naturally, maybe one to many per day, as they basically can't help but cycle.
  - If there is not a rather predictable pattern of stages and perspective shifts that begins to become clear specifically following the course "Was That Emptiness?" of the progress of insight listed above in some way, particularly as regards shifts in perceptual thresholds), write it off as something other than emptiness. This brings me to the Cardinal Rule when trying to sort out what all experiences or attainments actually were: try to repeat it again and again and be honest with yourself. It literally took me many of thousands of times through these cycles and experiences at many



levels and over many years to get to the point where I could even begin to think about writing a book like this one. If we don't have the necessary level of clarity and mastery to repeat the experience of interest again and again, either do enough clear and diligent practice to attain the required mastery or don't ask the question. Studying theory can only be so useful for this. In the end and always, it is practice and continued direct experience that reveals and clarifies. While it is somewhat true that with clarity comes mystery, this maxim can easily be used as a cop out. A related question is, "Am I enlightened?" formless realm experiences, visions of beings, unusual raptures, etc. For these sorts of people, as well as those working on higher paths who are stuck in the in-between stages, I offer the following: The first thing one must know about enlightened beings is that Fruitions occur for them, and they do so naturally and fairly often. True, there may sometimes be an initial period after first attaining a path when they might not happen so often. the range being from once every day to once every week or so at the very longest. However, Fruitions are largely unavoidable. It would take lots of consistent work to keep them from happening, and if one let one's guard down they would show up again quickly enough. In fact, the longer one goes without a Fruition, the more the pull towards that which is not any of this intensifies. Even those who are working on the next path will typically have recurring Fruitions from the current path sneak in even if they don't want them to. This is one way to distinguish as crossing above the level of the quickly diminishes in intensity, fades quickly as the focus of one's practice, and fails to provide the consistent sense of release, ease and sense of well-being that attaining a Fruition does. Before enlightenment, one always had to developing access concentration, attaining Mind and Body and working from there every time they. After attaining a path one begins at the level of the Arising and Passing Away and proceeds with much more skill and confidence. Simply reflecting on reality even slightly will result in a nearly instantaneous shift to a Mind and Body-like state. At a whim, one can begin meditating at the level, beginning with the double dip state shift at the middle and then end of the out breath that is the hallmark of that stage. Thus, enlightened beings can perceive vibrating phenomena at a whim. In that same vein, the cycles of insight always influence the conscious life of those who are enlightened. They are



inescapable. They cycle endlessly in one's waking hours and even when dreaming. They subtly or overtly color one's mood, energy level and perception of the world. As soon as a Fruition is attained, the cycle starts again and proceeds, though the timing and obviousness of this fact may be somewhat variable depending on how much one is practicing, what is going on in one's life and how good one is at noticing the qualities of these stages. Even when doing concentration practices, these cycles are in the background somewhere. It is possible to ignore them to a large degree for a while when in deep samatha jhanas, though it takes work to do so. I remember lying down to take a nap after lunch when on retreat in India a few days after my first Fruition. Before I knew it, meditation was occurring. The cycles were showing themselves in order without any effort or even invitation. They had their individual qualities much as I have explained above, though they move fairly quickly from one to the other, and about 45 minutes later Fruition occurred. Soon thereafter, it was obvious that the cycle had started again. Do you cycle naturally through the cycles of insight from stage four to eleven and then attain Fruition? If you just sat down on a cushion and did nothing special, would you move through these stages as easily as falling down a hill? Do Fruitions arise after such cycles in a way that fairly consistently leaves you with the staggering impression that, "that was it!"? If not, I would avoid harboring any notions that you are enlightened, "have been enlightened some time in the past," etc., as you are almost certainly in error. Such notions are not helpful most of the time anyway, and tend to be bound up in a sense of solidity and imagined continuity of self that is simply unrealistic. I have a friend who erroneously thinks he is enlightened and once said, "Oh, yes, I went through those stages once many years ago, but now I am beyond them." Toast! Those who are enlightened go through these stages hundreds if not thousands of times each year. There is absolutely no getting around them barring deep sleep, severe brain damage, strong sedation or death. However, it is fair to mention that some enlightened people simply don't think about things in this way, have never noticed that they cycled, never picked up on the patterns, were never exposed to the maps, don't have particularly strong concentration, don't realize how they got there, are not particularly intellectual or, if they are, never applied their intellect to these aspects of where theory meets practice, never really paid attention to



the way things unfold, and couldn't care less. Thus, if someone is enlightened, I brazenly assert they cycle like this, but that doesn't mean they realize they do, and if their practice unfolded gently or slowly or without very intense concentration and a map-oriented focus, they may have no idea about most of the things I am discussing here and yet they apply to them anyway. I poured massive amounts of energy into my practice, developed very strong concentration, and care about the maps obsessively, but that doesn't mean that other beings who are enlightened did or do. As Review sets in, it can seem that one can control these cycles and stages. It may seem after we have mastered a path somewhat that we can call insight stages up in order and stay in them as long as we wish or even call them up out of order. From one point of view, enlightened beings can master and manipulate the stages of insight, though such practices can take on much more of a samatha feel than an insight feel. From another point of view, perhaps a more thoroughly insight-oriented point of view, even such a notion is erroneous. Stages, cycles, and the empty intentions to manipulate them occur in a causal fashion, and if there is a sense that there is an independent self that is controlling them, then there is obviously more work to do. Now, there's a high standard, and worthy standard, indeed! These cycles, as with everything else, simply belong to the nature of things.