

Nirvana Immersion
Reading Three—Destroying the Enemy

The refreshing opposite

Ok, now for some more practical suggestions to get us to nirvana. We've picked out our own favorite negative emotion; we've checked when we had it in the last few days; and we've reviewed how it felt when we had it—how it affected our happiness, how it turned it sad.

For your next meditation, try something different. Think about how *good* it feels to have the opposite kind of thought.

In the case of jealousy—in the case of my own favorite negativity—I would sit down and try to recall the last few times that I really took pleasure in someone else's achievements or success. And then I would see how that pleasure makes me feel, how happy it makes me feel.

The four fruits of the practice of virtue

How the attainment of nirvana relates to the realms of suffering existence is a subject covered in the teaching on the “four fruits of the practice of virtue.”

These are four levels in our progress to nirvana, and are called:

- 1) Stream-enterer
- 2) Once-returner
- 3) Non-returner
- 4) Enemy destroyer.

A person is called a “stream-enterer” once they have seen ultimate reality, or emptiness, directly. They are given this name because—once we do have this perception—then we are thrown directly onto a conveyor belt which will with absolute certainty take us on to nirvana and enlightenment.

It is said that there are thousands upon thousands of negative emotions in the human heart. At the level of stream-enterer, our perception of ultimate truth allows us to remove three of these emotions forever. The first is an intellectual belief that things are as they appear—that the last person who criticized us, for example, was acting on their own and wasn’t being created by seeds I planted in my own mind last week, when I yelled at someone else.

The second is doubt about the truth of the spiritual path. Seeing ultimate reality removes this kind of doubt forever because during the process of this perception we not only see ultimate truth but also have a direct experience of the core of an enlightened being. That is, we directly confirm to ourselves—for the first time ever—that such beings really do exist.

The third is a belief that mistaken codes of behavior and extreme forms of asceticism could ever truly be effective in helping us reach our spiritual goals. That is, once we reach a direct perception of ultimate truth, we also gain an insight into how behaving kindly towards others is the real way to gain both worldly and spiritual success—and

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so we learn to reject mistaken codes of conduct which would, for example, require that we harm those whose religious beliefs are different from our own. At the same time we learn to reject, forever, the notion that doing harm to ourselves could ever be part of a true spiritual path either.

Returning to the realm of desire

Now the way that a “once-returner” and a “non-returner” are explained is going to give us great insight into the idea that reaching nirvana takes us out of the outside world of suffering.

“Once-returner” is described in scripture as a level which occurs after “stream-enterer.” Within a few hours after seeing ultimate reality directly for the first time, we begin to utilize the knowledge which we have gained to eliminate the grossest forms of negative emotions within ourselves. These are said to be negative emotions which relate to what is known as the “desire realm.”

The desire realm is the world as we are familiar with it now. It includes all of the six types of beings we saw in the Wheel of Life: hellbeings, craving spirits, animals, humans, and some of the levels of full and partial pleasure beings. It is a world of suffering and violence, defined by the mindless drive for food and sex.

A person who habitually engages in the lowest forms of negative emotion “goes to” a rebirth in the desire realm after they die. But someone who has seen ultimate truth directly, and who uses this knowledge to help remove the grossest forms of their negative emotions, can reach a level of spiritual progress where they must be reborn in the desire realm only one more time. And then they are called a “once-returner.”

To understand what nirvana (and enlightenment, for that matter) really is requires that we understand more deeply what it is to take birth as any form of life, be it animal, human, or one of the forms of life which we cannot normally perceive.

It’s not difficult to believe that—when someone yells at us—it might be coming from a seed that we put in our mind earlier, by yelling at someone else. It’s not so difficult to grasp that the flavors of our daily experience are determined by how we treat others.

The larger truth though is that *everything* we ever perceive is coming from the same seeds in our minds—not just how we see the people around us, but the people themselves, and the world through which they and we move. When we drive through a certain area and see trees or mountains pass by, they’re not really passing by. Our mind is throwing them out one by one, for us to pass by—they get smaller in the

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rearview mirror of the car because the seed which produced them has given its fruit and then exhausted itself, all in the minute it takes to drive by.

Even the words which you see on this page are being laid down, one by one, on the whiteness by seeds in your own mind. As your eye scans across the page, it is actually like a person walking down a path of stepping stones, laying each one down in front of them so that they can step on to the next.

This process applies as well to the place where we will take birth next. If we have engaged in gross negative emotions and actions, then the seeds in our mind will ripen *as a perception of the desire realm*, of all of the sufferings of a human life—from the struggle to leave the blood of the womb, on to the last exhale on our deathbed.

That is, *there is no desire realm, there is no taking birth there*. Just as there is no next line on this very page until the seeds in your mind put it there, there is no desire realm—or any other place—which is sitting there waiting for us to be born into it. We create it as we go, with the old seeds in our mind.

And it's extremely important to realize that this applies as well to our own body, our own form of life. Right now we look down at the end of our arm and see a hand, but only because we have put some very good seeds there in our mind to ripen as a perception of this hand. If we had had lesser seeds—planted by lesser actions towards others—then we would be seeing a paw in the very same place.

It's not that we're born *into* a realm, or *as* a particular form of life. It's that we create it as we go.

On to destroying the enemy

A once-returned one is a person who has only got enough old negative seeds left in them to see themselves as a being who comes back once to the suffering realm of desire.

A non-returned one is someone who has no seeds left that will ripen as this same perception. They no longer possess any negative emotions or seeds from these emotions which are strong enough to ripen this way, although they do possess seeds that will ripen as a perception of what are known as the “form” or “formless” realms. These are slightly paradisaical realms, inhabited exclusively by full pleasure beings, where things go perfectly for many, many years—and then end in a giant crash of pain.

Which brings us to the destroyer of the enemy.

This is a person who has reached nirvana, in the sense of eliminating their negative emotions forever. If you think about it, this means that they can no longer make any more seeds which would flower as a perception of any kind of suffering, since it is the seeds planted by negative emotions which create all our perceptions of pain.

Now where does a person like this “go”? Meaning, what kind of world does a mind free of negative emotions create? Get used to asking the question this way, and you’re a lot further along in understanding what nirvana is.

It’s not that we have escaped any bad place called *samsara*, or the Wheel of Life. What’s really happening is that we no longer possess the negative thoughts which would create such a place. What kind of place we do create then is something we have to talk about.

The Sanskrit word *arhat*, which means a person who has reached nirvana, is traditionally explained in several different ways.

One way takes the word as meaning “a person who has destroyed (*hat*) the enemy (*ari*).” The *hat* part comes from a root *Vhan*, which means *to strike* or *hit*. From this comes the *hin* of *ahinsa* (*non-striking*, or *non-violence*), as well as the English word *gun*.

The “enemy” here is classically identified as our negative emotions, and the spiritual obstacles which prevent us from removing them.

Another interpretation sees the word *arhat* as coming from the root *Varh*, meaning *to deserve*. A typical scriptural passage might say, “These practitioners are called ‘enemy destroyers’ because they have achieved all their goals, and thus become an unparalleled object with whom we can collect good karma—someone who is truly deserving of our offerings.”

That is, Tibetans who came much later perpetuated the interpretation of “worthy” even after the reasoning behind it was no longer evident, as they were already using the phrase “enemy destroyer” to translate *arhat*.

Nirvana as an ending

We've flirted with the idea for a bit here, but perhaps now it's better to come out and say it: Nirvana is not really a state where you *are*, blissful or not; rather, *it's the ending of something*.

This idea of an ending is big in the ancient teachings. Probably the most famous place we see it is in the Four Higher Truths (sometimes mistranslated as the "Four Noble Truths"), the very foundation of the teachings of Lord Buddha:

- 1) Our life is suffering.
- 2) This suffering has a cause.
- 3) We can put a stop to this suffering.
- 4) There is a path we need travel, if we want to stop it.

Now as we've seen, we can think of nirvana as the ending of our suffering—in the form of our negative emotions. But as we've also seen, the idea of how we reach and keep an ending of something is a little tricky. Here's how someone no less than Je Tsongkapa himself addressed this problem, by examining how each of the four great ancient schools of Buddhism thought about it. This examination occupies a substantial section of his famed *Great Commentary to the 'Root Text on Wisdom'*.

Je Tsongkapa states first of all that the Detailist School, the lowest of the four, says that nirvana must be a changing thing, a thing which does something. Its function, they say, is similar to that of a dam, which works to stop the flow of a stream of water—except that nirvana works to stop the continued flow of our karma and negative emotions, and the string of births that results from them.

Nirvana, they say, cannot be one of those changeless things of the world, for it performs a function; and (as every school of Buddhism would agree) anything which does something to something else necessarily changes in the process.

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Having said this, the Detailists know that they need to answer the question of why then the Buddha would have made a number of statements that nirvana was the ending of certain things (which would be unchanging), and not the thing that made them end (which would be changing).

Lord Buddha for example stated directly that nirvana was simply the ending of desire: “Nirvana is simply the stopping of that kind of desire which comes up together with being happy with something, and wanting it: it is the freedom from such desire, it is ending this desire.”

He also said of someone who reaches nirvana:

Their mind is freed,
Like the flame of a lamp
Which dies.

That is, the Detailists must answer the objection that nirvana has clearly been said to be the ending of something—the absence of something, which (as everyone knows) is an unchanging thing.

(It is very important by the way to distinguish “unchanging” from “permanent.” The mind, for example, is permanent—it has lasted for beginningless time and will continue on into endless time—but it is in a state of constant flux, and changing over the course of its endless journey. The absence of a thing, on the other hand, is unchanging for as long as it lasts—the absence of the words on the next page right now is something that I hope will end in the next few minutes, but until then it will never vary, being but the fact that words are not there; no less, no more.)

The Detailists though stick to their guns and say that neither quotation proves that nirvana is an unchanging absence of something. In the first case, they admit, Lord Buddha has indeed referred to nirvana as the ending of desire. But by calling it that, they say, what he was really referring to was nirvana as the thing which accomplished the stopping, and not the stopping itself.

And the point of the second quotation, they say, is simply that *due to the action* of nirvana, our negative emotions are stopped, in the way a flame goes out.

The higher schools call the Detailists on this position by saying that it cannot be the case that nirvana is some working thing which functions to put an end to the continued flow

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of negative emotions, and rebirths. And this is simply because anything which does something necessarily undergoes a process of aging, and thus change; it also eventually comes to a stop, as it ceases to perform its function.

This though cannot be true of nirvana, which is an unchanging state. At least we hope so! The higher schools finally state that nirvana could never be something which started when all of its causes gathered together. Why this is so is something we need to look into later on in these pages.

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Absolute justice

Ok, next meditation—one more practical step closer to nirvana.

We've spent some time thinking about our #1 worst negative thought, and then seeing how we feel when we have the opposite kind of thought: a cool, refreshing experience!

Now let's focus on the person that we've been having trouble with. In my case (jealousy), it's someone who shows up in my life and is competing with me for the attention I want.

If your particular specialty is anger though, the person is someone who irritates you. Perhaps someone who recently explained to you quite carefully just how stupid they think you are.

Now what I want you to do for your next meditation is to take some time and sit down quietly and think about this person. I want you to consider the possibility that they are coming from a seed in your own mind, and that this seed you planted yourself, when you spoke unkindly to someone else, or purposely tried to compete with someone else in a negative way—say for a promotion, or a partner.

Is it possible that there is an absolute justice to the world, and that we get exactly the kind of people showing up in our life that we ourselves have been in the lives of others?