

How do we know we have awakened?¹

The 4 noble truths

How do we know we have awakened as an arhat? We can only answer meaningfully (if at all) through our understanding of the suttas of early Buddhism. It is not helpful to turn to any Mahāyāna teachings which reject the fact that arhathood is the highest liberation. For early Buddhism, arhathood is Buddhahood itself in terms of spiritual liberation, as stated in **the Sambuddha Sutta** (S 22.58).²

Arhathood arises from the full understanding and experience of **the 4 noble truths**. Once we become streamwinners, or even as aspirants to streamwinning, we are able to see the true, as well as subtle, nature of suffering. The world may be appearances (that's what we project onto it), but it is what lies below these appearances that bait and bully us into acting in a way that perpetuates our suffering.

As long as we neither understand nor accept that craving is at the root of suffering, we will look for all the wrong explanations and rationalizations for suffering. Science and medicine may be able to describe the nature of suffering, even cure certain aspects and delay others, but the suffering of the mind—rooted in greed, hate and delusion—will always haunt us as long as we are unawakened.

With our worldly knowledge, we may study the nature of suffering, or even analyze what we see as the causes of suffering. We may gaze deep into the nature of suffering, but we only see suffering staring back at us. We cannot exorcise all the demons of suffering, or even tame any of them, as long as we are rooted in spiritual ignorance.

Meaning of life

The first two noble truths—suffering and its arising (through craving) – clearly describe the true **meaning** of life. We can take “meaning” here as referring to the value of life. When we understand that life is nothing but “suffering” (*dukkha*) because it is impermanent, unsatisfactory and beyond our control (it has no abiding essence), we see the *value* of such an understanding.

The full meaning of life is formulated in the teaching on **dependent arising** (*paṭicca, -samuppāda*), which is rooted in ignorance, and through ignorance we create our own virtual reality that invariably ends in suffering.³ Dependent arising comprises these two noble truths, describing by means of conditionality (causes and effects) the meaning of life.

Then, when we reflect deeper, we will see that because life is impermanent, it is precious to us: we *value* life. This is, in fact, the basis for moral virtue: it is founded on the value and respect for life because it is so fragile. Yet, it is precious because it is our only means of getting out of suffering, of awakening to true reality.

The purpose of life

¹ This is a simplified version of SD 50.5 (2.2).

² S 22.58 ([SD 49.10](#)).

³ For a simplified description of how dependent arising works, see SD 50.4 (1.1.1). For a detailed explanation, see **Dependent arising**, [SD 5.16](#).

The third noble truth here (following the practice model)⁴ is the path leading to the end of suffering, that is, the noble eightfold path, constituting the 3 trainings of moral virtue, mental concentration and wisdom.⁵ Having clearly understood the nature and arising of suffering, we are ready to work towards its ending, or rather, to take the path to the ending of suffering.

We must now apply our understanding into action, to tame and refine our body and speech so that they do not distract our mental cultivation. Then, we calm and clear our mind to direct it towards seeing true reality, which brings us the insight wisdom to free us from the grasp of ignorance and craving.

The total freedom from ignorance and craving – more fully, the destruction of the 3 karmic roots of greed, hate and delusion – is called nirvana, the fourth and last of the noble truths (according to the practice model) [see previous paragraph].

Nirvana is neither a place nor a state. It is just a word we use to refer to when all suffering ends with the destruction of greed, hate and delusion. It is like the extinguishing of fire, or the quenching of thirst. That fire or the thirst does not go anywhere; neither of them arise any more (as long as we are quenched). Nirvana, however, is the final quenching; it needs to be done only once.⁶

The last two noble truths deal with the path to the ending of suffering, and the total ending of suffering itself, that is, nirvana. While the first two truths deal with the meaning of life, these last two deal with the purpose of life. Based on our understanding of the meaning of life through dependent arising, we can now reverse the cycle, or break any of the vital links in the chain, and bring on the **dependent ending** (**paṭicca,nirodha*) of suffering with the uprooting of ignorance and craving.⁷

Attaining arhathood

This is the arhat's review knowledge (*paccavekkhaṇa,ñāṇa*) (AA 2:348), that is, a retrospective knowledge.⁸ In the Abhidhamma tradition, this is the "recollected mental image obtained in concentration, or to any inner experience just passed, as for instance, an absorption (*jhāna*) or a supramundane path, or fruition of the path, etc (*ariya,puggala*)."⁹

The suttas are less technical on this: we remind ourselves to keep to our practice, instead of anticipating or measuring its progress. If we need to ask whether we have progressed or not, the likely answer is that we have not! True practitioners only diligently and joyfully practise.¹⁰ As we live our lives diligently in the Dharma, over an extended period, we are able to joyfully notice that we have invariably not faltered in the smallest challenge to our moral virtue, or mental concentration, or wisdom.

⁴ The traditional sequence of the 4 noble truths is 1-2-3-4, that is (1) suffering, (2) arising of suffering, (3) ending of suffering, and (4) the path—this is the teaching model. The practice model—as listed here—is given as 1-2-4-3: see, eg, **Mahā Saḷāyatānika Sutta** (M 149,11 etc) + [SD 41.9](#) (2.4).

⁵ See **Sīla samādhi paññā**, [SD 21.6](#).

⁶ For a discussion on nirvana (*nibbāna*), see SD 50.1 intro esp (2).

⁷ On dependent ending, see SD **Upanisā Sutta** (S 12.23), [SD 6.12](#); **Dependent arising**, [SD 5.16](#) (18+19.-3.2).

⁸ SD [10.16](#) (1.2.1.6).

⁹ *Buddhist Dictionary*, quoting Vism 22, esp sections 19-20/676.

¹⁰ See esp (**Ekā, dasaka**) **Cetanā'karaṇīya Sutta** (A 11.2), [SD 33.3b](#).

We live confident in the fact that we have always, without exception, lived the Dharma in the spirit and the letter. This is sufficient for us to rejoice in that we have attained the supreme goal of the historical Buddha's teaching.

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