

Names for Nibbāna

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As a young man, the Buddha had a vision of the world: All beings were like fish in a dwindling stream, fighting one another for a last gulp of water before they all died. Everywhere he looked for happiness, everything was already claimed. The implications of this vision struck terror in his heart: Life survived by feeding on other life, physically and mentally; to be interdependent is to “inter-eat”; the suffering that results serves no larger purpose, and so is totally pointless. This was the realization that drove him from home into the wilderness, to see if there might be a happiness that wasn’t dependent on conditions, that didn’t die, didn’t need to feed.

His awakening was the discovery that such a happiness did exist: a dimension, touched by the heart and mind, that was totally free from conditions. It wasn’t the result of anything, and didn’t cause anything else. The path leading to that discovery was what he taught for the rest of his life.

No single name did full justice to that dimension, so he named it largely with similes and analogies. The primary name was nirvana, unbinding. This was an analogy based on the way fire was viewed at the time: Fire burns—agitated, trapped, and hot—because the fire element clings to its fuel. When it lets go of the fuel, it goes out, cool and unbound.

But the Buddha gave his discovery more than 30 other names as well, to indicate ways in which it’s really worth desiring, really worth all the effort that goes into attaining it. The names fall into five main groups, conveying five different facets of that dimension:

The first is that it’s not a blank of nothingness. Instead, it’s a type of consciousness. But unlike ordinary consciousness, it’s not known through the six senses, and it doesn’t engage in fabricating any experience at all—unlike, for example, the non-dual consciousness found in formless levels of concentration. The Buddha described this consciousness as “without surface” and “unestablished.” His image for it is a beam of light that lands nowhere. Although bright in and of itself, it doesn’t engage in anything, and so can’t be detected by anyone else.

The second facet of this dimension is truth: Because it’s outside of time, it doesn’t change, doesn’t deceive you, doesn’t turn into something different.

The third is freedom: free from hunger, free from suffering, free from location, free from restrictions of any kind.

The fourth is bliss: unadulterated, harmless, and safe.

The fifth facet is excellence, higher than anything known in even the highest heavens. In the Buddha’s own words, it’s amazing, astounding, ultimate, beyond.

Even though this dimension is uncaused, a path of practice leads to it—in the same way that a road to a mountain doesn’t cause the mountain, but following

the road can get you there. The road is one thing; the mountain, something else. Following the road involves fostering, among other things, generosity, virtue, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Through these qualities, we develop the wisdom and compassion to see that nirvana really is the wisest and most compassionate goal we can set for ourselves: *wise* in that, unlike other goals, it's more than worth the effort and will never disappoint; *compassionate* in that we not only remove our mouth from the feeding frenzy of interdependence, but we also show others who are disheartened by the pointlessness of suffering that there is a way out.

It's for the sake of this goal that we meditate.