

The Stages of Awakening

By Upāsaka Sudatta

When I first started practicing, I had the impression that awakening—enlightenment—was an all-or-nothing affair. I was practicing in a Zen group, and I had this idea that you would practice and practice and practice, and after ten years, fireworks would go off and voila! You would be enlightened. And I think that is how many people think of awakening.

However, that is not what the Buddha taught. His earliest teachings—the ones he gave in the first years after his awakening—are called “the gradual path.” This is a training. It is like being an athlete. You start out with a certain skill level and conditioning. Then you start a program. You lift weights. You eat a healthy diet. You practice specific skills. I read once that to be a major league shortstop, you must master 16 skills. These are divided into eight defensive skills, five awareness and leadership skills, and three physical and mental traits.

Buddhist training is a lot like that. However, one difference between Buddhist training and becoming a shortstop, is that in baseball, you must master all these skills, at least at the major league level. However, in Buddhism, there are different paths to awakening. You do not have to master everything the Buddha taught. In fact, you won't. You will connect with something in the Dhamma, and that will be your path to awakening. I know two people who attained awakening through the practice of metta. The Buddha's chief lay disciple Anāthapiṇḍika became a stream-enterer through the practice of generosity. There are the Three Characteristics, or—as Ajahn Geoff puts it—the “Three Perceptions.” Or, it may be non-self, dependent co-arising, karma.

It doesn't stop there. In one place in the Canon the Buddha describes the “wings to awakening.” It is a list of lists. You can see them in the split screen. This master list includes The Four Foundations of Mindfulness, The Four Right Exertions, which is the sixth path factor, The Four Bases of Power, the Five Faculties, the Five Strengths, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, and the Noble Eightfold path.

Imagine that Nibbana is a circular room with many doors. You do not have to open all the doors. You just have to open one of them. We all have different temperaments, and we all connect to the Dhamma in different ways.

Having said that, to attain the different levels or stages of awakening, there are certain impediments that must be overcome. These impediments are called “fetters.” The Pāli word is “saṃyojana.” It literally means “to yoke” or “to bind.” Fetters are personality traits that bind us to saṃsara and the cycles of rebirth. To be sure, the word “fetter” is used in different ways in the Pāli Canon, so do not be confused if you see it used in another way.

The Buddha lists the “Ten Fetters” in the Aṅguttara Nikāya in the Book of Tens in a sutta called—not surprisingly, “Fetters”:

“Bhikkhus, there are these ten fetters. What ten? The five lower fetters and the five higher fetters. And what are the five lower fetters? Personal-existence view, doubt, wrong grasp of behavior and observances, sensual desire, and ill will. These are the five lower fetters. And what are the five higher fetters? Lust for form, lust for the formless, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance. These are the five higher fetters. These, bhikkhus, are the ten fetters.”—
[AN 10.13]

So in order to fully awaken, one must overcome these ten fetters.

Let me pause here and make some basic comments about the Buddha’s teaching. I have been told many things over the years that did not make any sense to me at the time. And the reason for that is simple: they don’t make any sense. I just described, for example, the stages of awakening as “attainments.” They are goals. But I have had teachers who say that there are no goals, and there are no attainments. But the Buddha used these terms repeatedly. Of course there are goals. Of course there are attainments. What would be the point if there were not?

I have also been told that I am already enlightened. No, I’m not. If I were enlightened, I would not suffer.

OK. Back to our regularly scheduled program. So, how do we get to a full awakening?

According to the Buddha’s teaching, we attain a full awakening by going through four stages, and these stages are usually defined in

terms of overcoming certain fetters. The first stage of awakening—the one in which most of us are interested—is called “stream-entry.” In Pāli the word is “sotāpanna.”

Before I go onto discuss these stages, let me say that you may not necessarily go through all of them. There are many cases in Buddhist practice where there are stages. For example, there is the practice of jhāna. Jhāna is samadhi, the eighth path factor. The usual definition of jhāna is that there are four of them. But you may not experience all of them. Some people are known to experience only three of the four jhānas: one, two, and four. The Visuddhimagga—the Theravadan work whose name translates to the “Path of Purification”—lists five jhānas. So these are not like steps on a ladder.

This is true for awakening as well. Some people jump right to full awakening. For others there may be no stage two or three or even one. So in all cases it is useful to let your own practice and your own experience be your guide. Trust your own judgment and observations.

So, using the formula of the fetters, the stream-enterer overcomes the first three fetters:

1. Belief in a permanent, unchanging self.

This is non-self. I have given a talk on non-self. The text of that talk and a YouTube video of it are online.

Working with non-self is incredibly liberating. There is a sense of freedom. When you begin to see yourself as something dynamic and fluid, it is like body surfing instead of standing before the waves as they pound you.

2. Skeptical doubt.

This is doubt in the Dhamma and the Buddha. In particular, it is belief in the Buddha’s awakening. It is sometimes called “confirmed confidence.” It is not an opinion. You see if for yourself.

One of the things that I love about Buddhism is that it is not a belief system or a philosophy or even a religion. The Dhamma isn’t something you believe. It is something you discover. The Buddha gave us a roadmap, and that is his discourses as found in the Pāli

Canon. It is a treasure map. Enlightenment is the treasure. You follow the map to get to the treasure.

And as I said, it is not all or nothing. You will have “ah, ha!” moments when something you read or heard suddenly becomes clear. Perhaps a teaching you first heard ten years ago will become understood in a way that it becomes part of your bones. It is not something you read and believe. It is like seeing the sky. No one can convince you that the sky doesn’t exist, and if someone asked you to convince them that the sky exists, you would hardly know where to begin. This is what happens to you when you enter the stream.

3. Clinging to rites and rituals.

The above quote from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* translates this as “wrong grasp of behavior and observances,” which is not very clear. I think that “clinging to rites and rituals” is more understandable.

Let me describe this in two ways. I will start with the original way as it would have been understood at the time of the Buddha and into modern times in India.

At the time of the Buddha the predominant religion in India was “Brahminism.” This eventually morphed into modern Hinduism. Probably the biggest difference between Brahminism and Hinduism is that Brahmins performed animal sacrifices which—of course—no Hindu would do. This was the influence of Buddhism on Brahminism from the time just before and after the year zero BCE when Buddhism was the predominant faith in India.

Hinduism is predicated on the idea that you are born into a caste, and if you perform the obligations of that caste, you will have a good rebirth. One of these obligations is the practice of rituals that are conducted by priests. These rituals occur at auspicious times such as births, weddings, deaths, and so on.

In presenting the third fetter as a condition for stream-entry, the Buddha is refuting the efficacy of these rites and rituals.

So that is the classic, traditional way to understand the third fetter.

However, I think you can see how in the West in modern times, there are also people who cling to such things. I grew up in a modest household in the German Reformed faith. The German Reformed

religion is distantly related to the Amish and the Mennonites. They all believe in simplicity. There is a derogatory German word “hochmut” which means “showy” and “ostentatious.” It’s not a good thing.

Now in the German Reformed communities, ceremonies like weddings are simple. In fact, most community observations were similar. For a wedding, there was a simple service followed by a potluck dinner. And don’t underestimate those dinners. The Pennsylvania Germans really know how to cook.

When I grew older and left that community, I was introduced to what I will call the “traditional Western wedding.” Most of these were Christian and one was Jewish. I was, frankly, appalled. Horrified. Even offended.

But we can even look at more mundane examples of how we are attached to rites and rituals. They are habits. We do the same things the same way, and if we can’t, we suffer. Now to be sure, some habits are very nice. Monasteries have them. They are intended to incline our minds a certain way. But if you absolutely must have that afternoon tea or evening chocolate, that is an attachment. The important point is that these habits make you suffer. By letting go of those attachments, you overcome a cause for suffering.

So that is the classic formula for stream-entry. We abandon the fetters of self-identity view, skeptical doubt, and attachment to rites and rituals.

Having said that, some of you may recall that I told this story in one of my other talks. I will give an abbreviated version here.

The classic formula for stream-entry is found in the Majjhima Nikāya, the Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha. But in the Saṃyutta Nikāya—the Connected Discourses of the Buddha—there is a different formula. There stream-entry is achieved by attaining four qualities. These are 1) complete confidence in the Buddha, 2) complete confidence in the Dhamma, 3) complete confidence in the Saṅgha, and 4) confidence in virtue.

Virtue is important because I know people who try to skip steps on the way to enlightenment. Many years ago, when I was regularly going to retreats at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, I heard a

story about a retreat where the sole intent was awakening. People showed up and they stressed and they strained to awaken. And according to the staff at BCBS, they were the most insufferable people who showed up there at any of their retreats.

So keep it simple. Be a nice person. Be kind. Be generous.

And before we leave the topic of stream-entry, let me say this. You may occasionally wonder if a teacher or someone you know is a stream-enterer. You may even be tempted to ask them.

Now, there is a monastic rule against discussing such attainments. That is a good rule. Being a this or a that—and certainly being attached to being a this or a that—is a problem. It is a source of attachment and pride, and those are both hindrances. The important question isn't what you have attained, but what you still have left to do.

The second thing I will say is that I have read accounts of people who claim to have attained stream-entry. After reading these accounts, I concluded that if someone claims to be a stream-enterer, it is almost a surefire guarantee that they are not.

I was at a retreat many years ago with Lama Surya Das. Some of you may know him or know about him. At that retreat he said point blank that he was fully enlightened. I didn't think much about it at the time.

Years later I discovered that Surya Das had committed numerous acts of sexual misconduct, coercing his female students into having sex with him. He was married, and eventually his wife divorced him because of his infidelity. He was a member of a group of Tibetan Buddhist teachers who expelled him because of his behavior. As you will see in the next two stages of awakening, it is not possible to even *have* a desire for sex and be enlightened. So beware of people making such claims. And if you are an arahant—someone who is fully awakened—you wouldn't say that anyway. It is not how you think.

OK. Continuing with the stages of awakening.

The Buddha's definitions of the stages of awakening are defined in terms of rebirth. A stream-enterer will become enlightened in no more than seven lifetimes. These lifetimes can be either in the human

realm or one of the deva realms. A stream-enterer will also not be reborn into one of the lower three realms, that is, the hell realms, the hungry ghost realm, or the animal realm. You won't be a coyote or a rattlesnake. That's pretty good.

Just to make sure you don't think I am making this up, here is a passage from the Alagaddupama Sutta, which is Majjhima Nikāya sutta 22:

...those monks who have abandoned (the first) three fetters, are all stream-winners, certain, never again destined for the lower realms, headed for self-awakening. This is how the Dhamma well-proclaimed by me is clear, open, evident, stripped of rags. — [MN 22.45]

And there is this from Saṃyutta Nikāya 13.1:

So too, bhikkhus, for a noble disciple, a person accomplished in view who has made the breakthrough (*to stream-entry*), the suffering that has been destroyed and eliminated is more, while that which remains is trifling. The latter does not amount to a hundredth part, or a thousandth part, or a hundred thousandth part of the former mass of suffering that has been destroyed and eliminated, as there is a maximum of seven more lives. Of such great benefit, bhikkhus, is the breakthrough to the Dhamma, of such great benefit is it to obtain the vision of the Dhamma. — [SN 13.1]

The next stage of awakening is called “Sokadāgāmi.” This means “once-returning.” A Sokadāgāmi will be reborn in a sense realm no more than one time. The human realm is a sense realm, and there are also deva realms that are sense realms. The sense realms are dominated by the five senses. And note that this does not mean that you *will* be reborn in a sense realm. It just means that you will be reborn no more than *once* in a sense realm, and that does not—of course—include the three lower realms.

A once-returned weakens the next two fetters, which are sense desire and ill-will.

It's funny to me that although the Buddha made the abandonment of sense desire a centerpiece of his teaching, you don't hear about it much in Buddhist circles. The Second Noble Truth, in fact, tells us that craving and clinging are the cause of our suffering, and what

could be a more obvious example of craving and clinging than sense desire?

The obvious reason we don't hear about sense desire much is that this isn't a very popular idea. People want an attractive sex partner. They want good food. They want to collect experiences, aka, the famous bucket lists. Very few people want to accept that these are causes of suffering.

The Buddha said this:

...with sensual pleasures as the cause, sensual pleasures as the source, sensual pleasures as the basis, the cause being simply sensual pleasures, kings quarrel with kings, nobles with nobles, brahmins with brahmins, householders with householders; mother quarrels with son, son with mother, father with son, son with father; brother quarrels with brother, brother with sister, sister with brother, friend with friend. And here in their quarrels, brawls, and disputes they attack each other with fists, clods, sticks, or knives, whereby they incur death or deadly suffering. Now this too is a danger in the case of sensual pleasures, a mass of suffering here and now...the cause being simply sensual pleasures. — [MN 13.11]

34% of the women and 6% of the men who are murdered in the U.S. are killed by people with whom they have had a romantic relationship. 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men in the U.S. are victims of domestic physical abuse. 62% of senior financial fraud is by family members. That's not exactly Hallmark material.

Conversely, there are no crimes of dispassion. No one commits a violent act because they are serene.

(Every time I read that last line it makes me laugh. So out of curiosity I did a Google search on "crimes of serenity." I found references to people named "Serenity" who were victims of crimes. So technically there have been crimes that involved "Serenity.")

This is a radical change in view. From birth we have been taught that the path to happiness is worldly desire. It is wealth. It is power. It is status. And most of us spend our lives chasing just these things.

There is a story from the Canon that I quite love about the joy and peace that comes from abandoning these things. Thich Nhat Hanh used to love telling this story. It is the story of Bhaddiya.

Bhaddiya was originally from a privileged and wealthy family. But he decided to abandon his rich, powerful, and wealthy lifestyle to become one of the Buddha's monks.

So Bhaddiya was at a monastery, and he was overheard on a number of occasions to exclaim, "What bliss! What bliss!" The monks who heard him assumed that because he had come from a family of such wealth and privilege, he was thinking about his former life and how wonderful and opulent it was:

"There's no doubt but that Ven. Bhaddiya, Kāḷigodhā's son, doesn't enjoy leading the holy life, for when he was a householder he knew the bliss of kingship, so that now, on recollecting that when going to the wilderness, to the root of a tree, or to an empty dwelling, he is repeatedly exclaiming, 'What bliss! What bliss!'"

It is worth pointing out what busybodies this makes the monks out to be. And being busybodies, they naturally reported Bhaddiya's behavior to the Buddha. They told on him.

So the Buddha summoned Bhaddiya to discuss this with him. The following dialog ensued:

...the Blessed One said to him, "Is it true, Bhaddiya that—on going to the wilderness, to the root of a tree, or to an empty dwelling—you repeatedly exclaim, 'What bliss! What bliss!'"

"Yes, lord."

"What compelling reason do you have in mind that—when going to the wilderness, to the root of a tree, or to an empty dwelling—you repeatedly exclaim, 'What bliss! What bliss!'"

"Before, when I was a householder, maintaining the bliss of kingship, lord, I had guards posted within and without the royal apartments, within and without the city, within and without the countryside. But even though I was thus guarded, thus protected, I lived in fear—agitated, distrustful, and afraid. But now, on going alone to the wilderness, to the root of a tree, or to an empty dwelling, I live without fear, unagitated, confident, and unafraid—unconcerned, unruffled, my wants satisfied, with my mind like a wild deer. This is the compelling reason I have in mind that—when going to the wilderness, to the root of a tree, or to an empty dwelling—I repeatedly exclaim, 'What bliss! What bliss!'"

This is such a beautiful story.

The dirty little secret of Buddhism is that this path leads to a joy that is unimaginable in conventional terms. To be sure this is not easy. But again, to use the example of an athlete in training, world class athletes exert great effort to do what they do. The greatest athletes are often described as being the hardest working. But they also love what they do.

The importance of joy on this path cannot be underestimated. I have heard teachers disparage enjoyment and pleasure. There is a difference between the pleasure of meditation and the pleasure of worldly desire. When the Buddha describes his path to awakening, it contains this epiphany:

“I recall that when my father the Sakyan was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states. I entered upon and abided in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. Could that be the path to enlightenment? Then, following on that memory, came the realization: ‘That is indeed the path to enlightenment.’” — [MN 36.31]

Rapture and the pleasure born of seclusion. It doesn’t say stress, strain, struggle, and pain. It says, “rapture and pleasure.”

The company line in Buddhist circles is that there is a danger in becoming attached to samadhi. I’m saying, “Get attached.” It’s part of the path. It is a crucial part of the path. It’s the eighth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. You can’t awaken without it. The Buddha says so. Of course, you will eventually get—frankly—tired of it—it’s limited—and you will go looking for something better. And that will happen when the time is right.

So that is sense desire as a fetter and its role in becoming a once-returned.

The other fetter overcome by a once-returned is the weakening of ill will. This is metta. Metta is joined at the hip with the second jhāna, the state of samadhi or meditative absorption. The experience of metta—as well as the second jhāna—has an energy center at the heart chakra. When you are in the second jhāna, you can make a subtle shift into metta. You will find it impossible to feel ill will toward anyone.

I should also make this comment about metta. Metta isn't about approving bad behavior. It is about loving someone despite their bad behavior. It is the love of a mother for her child, even if that child is less than perfect.

In a more subtle Buddhist sense, true happiness only comes with kindness, so in wishing goodwill for anyone, the hope is that they will see this. They will become truly happy through kindness and generosity.

This isn't some fantasy. There are numerous examples of people behaving quite badly and then seeing into the evil of their ways and changing.

In 1988 George Bush was running for President against Michael Dukakis. His campaign manager was Lee Atwater, and Atwater engaged in many cruel and vicious attacks on Dukakis. Later Atwater got cancer, and in facing his death, he experienced remorse over these actions. Before he died, he apologized to Dukakis for what he had done, and he used his remaining energy to raise money for charitable causes.

In Buddhism you never write anyone off. It is the reason that the one political issue on which Buddhists have held a firm position is opposition to the death penalty. As Ajahn Brahm says when he is asked how many times you should forgive someone, the answer is always the same: "One more time."

So that is the second stage of awakening, "once-returning" or "Sokadāgāmi." You have abandoned the first three fetters and greatly weakened the fourth and fifth fetters. You are nearly free from the shackles of worldly desire and ill will.

From there, things get better. The third stage of awakening is "Anāgāmi." This means "non-returner." In it you fully abandon worldly desire and ill will. Non-returners will be reborn in one of the five highest deva realms. These are called the "Pure Abodes." And you will never be reborn in the human realm. There are all sorts of subtleties and complications to being reborn as a non-returner, but for our purposes, I think this simple explanation is enough. By the time you are a non-returner, you won't need someone to explain this to you, anyway.

This leaves the final stage of awakening, and that is full awakening. Someone who is fully awakened is called an “arahant.” “Arahant” literally means “worthy one.” 19th century Western scholars translated this in what I used to think was a rather quaint way, and that is “saint.” However, I have come to embrace this translation. Arahants are certainly worthy of being thought of in this way.

Arahants abandon the final five fetters, the “higher fetters.”

1. Desire for rebirth in a material realm (one in which there is a physical body)
2. Desire for rebirth in an immaterial realm (one where a being is pure mind)
3. Conceit.
4. Restlessness
5. Ignorance

I will touch on these briefly.

“Ignorance” is replaced by wisdom. Wisdom in Buddhism usually means penetrating the Four Noble Truths. This also means more generally penetrating causality, that is, everything comes into being because of causes and conditions, and when those causes and conditions are no longer present, they no longer exist.

“Restlessness” is one I have always found intriguing. I am guessing that you all experience restlessness in their meditation. And when I first heard that this won’t disappear completely until I am fully awakened, I found this both heartening and disheartening. It is disheartening in that I will have to contend with restlessness until I am a saint. Bummer. The heartening fact is that when I do experience it, I am not alone. This is normal, and it is not going to go away anytime soon.

The third higher fetter is “conceit.” Although the sense of a permanent, unchanging self is overcome in stream-entry, the experience is still “self-referential.” There is a feeling that “I” have abandoned the lower fetters. An arahant would only think that he or she has, as the Buddha put it, “done what had to be done.”

And to be sure, along the way, conceit can be useful, so do not be too ideological about it. If you have a sense of conceit that you want to act in wholesome ways and abstain from unwholesome acts, that is

a helpful conceit. And you will abandon all conceit at the appropriate time because it won't be useful anymore.

The first two higher fetters point to abandoning desire for any type of rebirth.

The Pāli word for enlightenment is “nibbāna.” The Sanskrit word is “nirvāṇa.” These words literally mean “extinguish,” as in extinguishing a flame. In India at the time of the Buddha, they had this notion of fire and how it feeds on its fuel. In the context of the Dhamma, we are feeding on craving and clinging. The attainment of nibbāna means that this feeding has come to an end and so has suffering:

“When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it was liberated, there came the knowledge: ‘It is liberated.’ I directly knew: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.’” — [MN 4.32]

OK. This is a lot. I know. But now let me come back to our practices and our lives.

If we can attain stream-entry, of course, that is wonderful. We will have a good rebirth. We will have no more than seven lifetimes in saṃsara. And let me add a note, and that is that at the time of death, it is wonderful to be able to conjure up the desire to be reborn in a way that is auspicious for Dhamma practice. This type of aspiration at the moment of death can be quite helpful.

But even if you don't attain stream-entry, do not despair. The Buddha described the eight types of noble people. The Buddha said this:

“Bhikkhus, these eight persons are worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of reverential salutation, an unsurpassed field of merit for the world. What eight? The stream-enterer, the one practicing for realization of the fruit of stream-entry; the once-returner, the one practicing for realization of the fruit of once-returning; the non-returner, the one practicing for realization of the fruit of non-returning; the arahant, the one practicing for realization of the fruit of arahantship. These eight persons, bhikkhus, are worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality,

worthy of offerings, worthy of reverential salutation, an unsurpassed field of merit for the world.” — [AN 8.59]

There is certainly the implication that anyone practicing diligently and sincerely for stream-entry has, in fact, gained something important. It isn't stream-entry, but it is pretty good. And I think the implication is that even though you are not officially on your way, you are close enough as long as you do not waver. For those of you familiar with the *Bardo Thodol*, the “Tibetan Book of the Dead,” that volume certainly gives this impression.

Finally, let me say this. One of the reasons that I object to teaching that there are no goals and no attainments, is that if you never make the aspiration to do something, you won't. Of course, you don't want to be like those insufferable people at BCBS. Don't turn it into a problem. When you go through the day, be the best person you can be. When you meditate, keep it simple. It's breath-by-breath. But in the back of your mind there should always be the notion that there is this exquisite goal out there. And keeping this in mind should be a motivation for you to stay the course and not get complacent.

So this is awakening. And don't think you can't do it. Of course you can. The Buddha was a human being. You are a human being. You have everything that he had. You have a heart and a mind. You have his guidance in the Dhamma. It is all spelled out for you. He didn't have that, but we do. He gave us a head start, a big one.

So let me summarize.

The first stage in awakening is stream-entry. In stream-entry, we overcome the first three fetters. These are 1) a belief in a permanent, unchanging self, 2) skeptical doubt in the Buddha's teaching and his enlightenment, and 3) attachment to rites and rituals. And attaining stream-entry means that you will have no more than seven births in a sense realm.

In the second stage of awakening, you will weaken sensual—worldly—desire and ill will. This is a “once-returner,” which is “*Sokadāgāmi*” in Pāli. A once-returner will have no more than one rebirth in a sense realm.

The third stage of awakening is “non-returner,” which is “*Anāgāmi*” in Pāli. A non-returner completely abandons sensual desire and ill

will. They will have no more births in the human realm. They will be reborn in one of the Pure Abodes, which are the five highest deva realms. You can see the Buddhist cosmology in the split screen. The Pure Abodes are highlighted as are the sense realms into which a stream-enterer and a once-returner can be reborn.

I have also italicized the Tusita heaven and the Tāvatiṃsa heaven. These are destinations that are particularly common—if that is the right word—for those who have attained the first and second stages of awakening. The Buddha’s birth mother Maya Devi and the Buddha’s most prominent lay supporter, Anāthapiṇḍika, were reborn in the Tusita heaven. The Buddha manifested in the Tusita heaven before being reborn and enlightened, and he is said to have ascended to the Tāvatiṃsa heaven to teach the Dhamma.

And then... there is Nibbāna. Final release. Final abandonment of all suffering. You enter the spiritual ether, the fabric of goodness that permeates all of existence and brings benefit to all beings.

I will leave the final words to the Buddha. This is from Majjhima Nikāya 22.42:

“Bhikkhus, the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus is clear, open, evident, and free of patchwork. In the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus, which is clear, open, evident, and free of patchwork, there is no [future] round for manifestation in the case of those bhikkhus who are arahants with taints destroyed, who have lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached their own goal, destroyed the fetters of being, and are completely liberated through final knowledge.” — [MN 22.42]

Thank you for the gift of your attention.