

How Do I Get Enlightened?

In this article, I would like to address the question of religious process in Buddhism. Is there such a process in Buddhism? How does one get enlightened? Why should one pursue enlightenment? Or, even more basic, questions like, why should I study Buddhism? What does Buddhism have to offer me? Are there steps or is there a process to understanding Buddhism? How do I know if I am progressing along the path? How can I measure my progress? Such questions are basic and common to any person who has sought the teachings and the path of enlightenment. Let me attempt to outline what I consider the three stages on the path to enlightenment.

1) Initial Stage

The initial stage is to take the first steps on the path to enlightenment. Like any other path of a beginner, whether it is in sports or learning an art like piano or dance, the first stage is awkward and frustrating, but also exciting because everything is new. The initiate enters the world of Buddhism and religion with many questions and curiosities. Initially, the beginner looks at Buddhism as a very goal-oriented religion. How do I get enlightened? What will enlightenment or Buddhism do for me? How long will it take?

In this country, the martial arts like karate have really taken off in popularity. People of all ages have taken some kind of martial art it seems nowadays. Initially, the beginner always asks, "How long will it take to get my black belt?" At first, we are more intrigued by the goal, than the process to get to the goal. We want to become a black belt. We want to become an accomplished pianist. We want to become enlightened. How long will it take?

Rev. Kusada at IBS once told us a story about a young apprentice who was learning a martial art. The novice asked the master on the first day of training how long it would take him to get his black belt. The master said, "If you train really hard it will take maybe ten years." The novice then said, "Ten years is a long time. What if I

practiced five hours a day, seven days a week? Then how long will it take me to get my black belt?"

The Sensei responded, "If you think that way, it will take you twenty years to get your black belt."

The novice said, "Twice as long? How can that be? What if I practice ten hours a day seven days a week? Then how long will it take?"

The Sensei then responded, "If you think that way, you will never attain the rank of black belt."

The Sensei was trying to break down the goal-oriented thinking of the novice. Practice is not a means to a goal. The goal is the practice, the training. The Sensei was trying to say to the student to practice as if it will take your whole life, and to forget about the goal, the reward, the black belt.

Initially, we are all like the novice learning a martial art. We wonder how long it will take and ask what is enlightenment, rather than begin the path to enlightenment.

In the initial stage, we think more materialistically about life and religion. A certain amount of effort should produce a certain amount of benefit. We hope and expect Buddhism to make us happier, to make us better human beings, to give us peace of mind, to help us in our married life, our family life, even maybe to improve our health or cure our cancer. These concerns and expectations are not totally false or out of line. They are the thoughts of one in the initial stage. As we will see, as we progress further along the path, our materialistic concerns religiously will change.

There has to be some kind of benefit to us and to our lives in this initial stage or else we would never go on to the second stage or step. If there is no benefit, no value that we see in Buddhism in our life, then why pursue it? Why put all the effort into the study and search for enlightenment if we see no value, no meaning, no benefit in our life? Buddhism does not negate such value or meaning, but attempts to point to something deeper and truer than those initial values and benefits of religion.

2) Secondary Stage

After entering the path and having gone through the initial stage of materially measuring the value, benefit, and meaning of Buddhism, one begins the second stage on the path to enlightenment. In the second stage, one struggles with listening to and learning the Dharma. There is both joy from learning and understanding fundamental teachings of Buddhism, but there is also doubt and questioning in other areas. One day you feel like you have learned so much, and then on other days you feel as if you don't know or understand a single thing.

What grows during this stage is the desire to listen and learn. An appetite for the Dharma is enhanced and books and lectures are devoured almost ravenously. However, although there is much that is learned and digested, there is also a gap that grows between intellectually understanding in your head, and truly knowing or understanding in your heart. Words like compassion, or the Nembutsu, have meaning to you in your head, but do not resonate in your heart.

While progress is being made on the path, you don't feel like you are making progress. It is so bad, in fact, that you even consider giving it all up. After years of study and dedication, you feel like you haven't gotten anywhere at all. At the point where you feel the furthest away from understanding, you are actually quite close.

3) Final Stage

In the final stage there is no thought of practitioner, practice, and goal. The goal, the person, and the practice have become one. Just like an artist who paints, but credits the inspiration of the painting to something beyond himself, so too does the person in the final stage live in oneness with the truth of the Dharma itself. There is a naturalness, a flow of life that is similar to that of artists and musicians. An accomplished musician might say that rather than playing the piano, "the music plays me." A dancer does not dance but is the dance.

Last week I heard our speaker at the minister's seminar, Prof

Daishun Uyema from Ryukoku University, talk about master Japanese landscapers. He said that such landscapers will sit and meditate in front of the rocks to be placed in a garden, and the rock tells the landscaper where it wants to go. In that manner the landscaper finds the most beautiful and natural location for rocks in a Japanese garden.

In the final stage, there is no questioning how long will it take, why should I practice, what benefit will it have. The ultimate meaning of practice and benefit are understood. The Dharma and life are one reality. There is nothing to gain, and nothing to lose.

Shinran Shonin experienced these three stages of enlightenment, and he calls it *sangantennyu*, or turning through the three vows. There are three vows from the Larger Sutra that symbolize, or represent each stage. The initial stage is the 19th vow that expresses doing various “practices” to get enlightened. Shinran did this for 20 years on Mt. Hiei. The secondary stage is represented by the 20th vow that expresses a mixed practice of Nembutsu and other practices. The final stage is represented by the 18th vow that expresses true Nembutsu, where Namuamidabutsu is not something that you say, but something you become.