

The Buddha's Awakening – Seeing without Illusion

'Awakening is the discovery that the apparently objective is in fact "subjective," and the apparent entity has disappeared with the total appearance.'

Wei Wu Wei¹

'...the world is steeped in the notion of duality. It grasps either this end, or the other end. Hard it is for the world to understand the stance of the arahant couched in the cryptic phrase, neither here nor there nor in between the two". The worldling is accustomed to grasp either this end or the other end.'

Bhikkhu K. Ñāṇananda²

'The outside world of form-and-name and the inner world of thought and feeling are both no more than the construction of mind, and when the mind ceases, the weaving-out of a world of particulars is stopped. This stopping is called emptiness or no birth, but it is not the wiping out of existence, it is on the contrary viewing it truthfully unhammered by discriminative categories.'

D. T. Suzuki³

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is Awakening caused the Buddha to discover the answer to the question of suffering that initially arose when he observed the 'three sights' that made him realize the suffering of all beings. The Awakening was the culmination of the Buddha's long spiritual journey. After six years of strict asceticism, he realized that none of the ascetic practices had provided him with the answer to his question, so he took food and drink to regain his health. He sat under the Bodhi Tree, entered a deep contemplative state, and gained insight into the extent to which our total world of experience is dependent on a cognitive apparatus which we use to make 'sense' of, or construct, our experience. In other words, he became aware that the structuring of our world is dependent on our cognitive processes. Abstract categories of sensation are constructed by the way we perceive, name, categorize, and differentiate them. Our 'world', as well as our 'I', is subjectively constructed by the cognitive apparatus.

Emptiness

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e know that the Buddha's Enlightenment was a life-altering experience which gave him a radically new perspective. Awakening, or pure experience, unveiled for the Buddha the cognitively-based, dependent, complementary relationship of the subject-object world. In other words, his enlightened mind became free of the dichotomy of subject and object. This was a crucial distinction between mind and mind events. 'Mind' is understood as a direct awareness without any conceptualization, while mind events arise immediately when they become identified with an object. So, although there is a mind at pure experience that exists without mental events, we don't normally experience this. It was through this experience of emptiness that the Buddha confirmed that meditation allowed him to experience non-substantial wholeness.

This pure experience was a psychological transformation; it created a state of freedom for the Buddha – a realization that all things are empty – which led him to the cessation of craving, identification, and suffering. The meditation process that led to the achievement of Enlightenment was an incremental one during which the Buddha gained insights into the incompatibility of his multiple cognitive constructions with the possibility of seeing without illusion. Awakening is achieved only through a gradual process of psychological transformation – the Eight-factor Path.

But only the Buddha could point out that one cannot win release from form by resorting to the formless. Release from both should be the aim. How could that come about? By the cessation of the consciousness that discriminates between form and formlessness.

The aim of all Buddhist training is to break from the cycle of rebirth. This means understanding the Transcendental Reality with which *kamma* is released and freeing oneself from suffering. Pre-enlightened individuals do not know what this is, but they often have an intuition of something different. Reality's true nature is hidden from us by the veils of ignorance. The state of enlightenment is called *Nibbāna*, and it is inherently selfless (*anatta*). It is beyond the realm of duality, which is that of subject and object, or self and other-than-self.

As was suggested by Sogyal Rinpoche:

‘The real glory of meditation lies not in any method but in its continual living experience of presence, in its bliss, clarity, peace, and most important of all, complete absence of grasping. The diminishing of grasping in yourself is a sign that you are becoming freer of yourself. And the more you experience this freedom, the clearer the sign that the ego and the hopes and fears that keep it alive are dissolving, and the closer you will come to the infinitely generous “wisdom of egolessness.” When you live in the wisdom home, you'll no longer find a barrier

between "I" and "you," "this" and "that," "inside" and "outside;" you'll have come, finally, to your true home, the state of non-duality.⁴

The Buddha had the experience of freedom which provided a superior criterion of certainty rooted in actual experiential knowledge. The obstacle of mental constructions, ignorance and its accompanying egotistical, driven self, was removed.

The insight of Emptiness undercuts clinging attachments and releases boundless compassion. Unfortunately, this is always a difficult topic for the untrained, because it creates a lot of confusion to say that emptiness is a state of mind. We are so accustomed to our dualistic thinking that it is not easy to transcend this characteristic of our samsaric existence. We normally function on a dualistic level, which means that we are continuously making distinctions between things like black and white, good and bad, hard and soft, subject and object. This type of reasoning is the basis for our ability to think logically, using concepts. However, the ultimate goal of the Eight-factor Path is Awakening: to see without the illusion of polarity and instead lead to a non-dualistic experience, the realization of Emptiness.

In fact, the Enlightenment that the Buddha found in this deep meditation gave him critical insights into the ignorance that characterizes the workings of our cognitive apparatus. Meditation is, according to the Buddha and universally, an incremental process during which perception is unloosed from the ways in which our multiple cognitive constructions have constrained it – what Hamilton labels the ‘normal pre-enlightened way.’⁵ Therefore, through the Eight-factor Path, our ‘world’ becomes characterized, in incremental stages, by the lessening of multiple cognitive constructions.

Although it is sometimes metaphorically described as ‘death,’ the emptiness of *Nibbāna* is not the ending of life or of consciousness. Rather, the metaphor of ‘death’ refers to the cessation of ignorance about the subject/ object, the ending of the ‘I,’ and the cessation of the creation of mental constructions and cravings.⁶ It is the ‘death’ of every psychic construct of selfhood: the narcissism, the intolerance, the coveting, the obligations and demands of self and other, dissatisfactions and stress. Whatever mental ‘spectator’ had remained from his years of meditative practice was now absent. The Buddha awakened under the Bodhi Tree free from the conceptual constructions of self and of an objective, separate world. He experienced *Nibbāna*, a ‘pure’ experience, which is a psychological state of feeling totally released, liberated, and simplified. All the past psychic knots are finally released and a profound tranquility reigns. William James said that what is experienced in pure experience is ‘a that which is not yet any definite what, tho’ ready to be all sorts of whats.’⁷ This unconditioned consciousness, the realization that all things are ‘empty,’ leads to the cessation of craving, attachment, and suffering.

Pure Experience

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xpressed in the words of Kitaro Nishida, perhaps the most significant and influential Japanese philosopher of the twentieth century, pure experience is:

‘To experience is to know facts just as they are, to know in accordance with facts by completely relinquishing one's own fabrications. What we usually refer to as experience is adulterated with some sort of thought, so by pure I am referring to the state of experience just as it is without the least addition of deliberative discrimination. The moment of seeing a color or hearing a sound, for example, is prior not only to the thought that the color or sound is the activity of an external object or that one is sensing it, but also to the judgment of what color or sound might be. In this regard, pure experience is identical with direct experience. When one directly experiences one's own state of consciousness, there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified. This is the most refined type of experience.’⁸

Nishida continues: ‘In pure experience there is not the slightest interval between the intention and the act. Every action is a unity indivisible into temporal stages [...] there is no prior or posterior, no inner or outer; no experiencer precedes or generates experience.’⁹ Nishida’s student Keiji Nishitani explicates further:

‘To speak of a mind that sees things, a self within that views what is on the outside, does not refer to experience in its pure form but only in a later explanation of experience. In direct experience there is no self, no-thing, nothing separate or individual at all. [...] We cannot think in terms of things existing on the outside and a mind existing on the inside. This is a later standpoint; the prior standpoint is that of pure experience where subject and object is one and undifferentiated. The ultimate integrity of experience is in its indivisibility into “experience” and “content.”’¹⁰

In other words, pure experience, as Nishida and Nishitani describe it, unveiled for the Buddha the cognitively based dependent/complementary relationship of the constructed subjective/objective world.

As Hamilton writes:

‘This is what *pure experience* is: neither the world nor “I” in it other than experience.’¹¹ Hence, the realm of pure experience is not an ontological category, but the ordinary world of phenomena experienced directly, with no intervening conceptualization. In the words of Henri Van Zeyst:

‘With emptying the mind, delusion ends when the mind empties itself of all conditioning, of all desires, hopes and fears, in which the mind does not concentrate on a pre-chosen object or

*state, but just watches with direct awareness of what is. By direct perception of what is one is without judgment, there is an emptying of the mind of all conditioning, of all distortion, delusion, conflict, of all "self" deception and hypocrisy. It is just all and complete, with tenderness and subtleness, always fresh and new, without memory and without clinging, without hope and without fear, without projection in time and space and without craving for continuance. There is no "I," it does not embrace the "I," it does not absorb the "I." There is just stillness, peace, release, freedom.'*¹²

Finally, Joanna Macy explains that 'Bare attention (in its purest, freest form) yields no experienter separable from experience, and the Buddha's teaching about the self becomes more than a theory. The absence of a permanent, separable self erupts as a reality that changes the face of life.'¹³ That is, there arises an understanding of the two poles (subject/object or name/form) and the middle (consciousness). In short, it boils down to the understanding that what one has so far taken and conceived as the so-called object and the so-called subject is merely a mirage. All ignorance is attributable to the illusion that is found in pre-enlightened cognition. It is because of this cognition that grasping and craving occur, so much so that one who is free from *samsara* is free from grasping and craving also. The implication is that the arahant has seen through all that and discovered its vanity, hollowness, and essencelessness. This purified, non-deluded awareness is the goal of Buddhist practice.

A New Perspective

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he Buddha's Enlightenment was a life-altering experience, and it gave him a radically new perspective. In the Four Noble Truths, he incorporated descriptions both of his experience and, after a period of reflection, what he had realized from it. A correct understanding of the Buddha's Enlightenment does not center primarily on the concept of impermanence (even though this is a consequential insight) but rather on his 'pure experience' of knowing the truth of the cognitively dependently originated, complementary nature of our existence.

As David J. Kalupahana writes:

'When metaphysical beliefs in the self and ultimately real objects are relinquished, the influxes (asava, or mental biases), such as desire, becoming, views, and ignorance cease. The constant thirsting for this and that causing worry and frustration ceases along with it. With the waning of influxes, the constraints (nirarana) or hindrances relating to perception and conception are removed. Yet the removal of the hindrances does not mean that the perceptions and conceptions are themselves eliminated. Only that one is not strictly confined or constrained by any of the perceptions and conceptions [...] Elimination of hindrances represents freedom. This elimination of hindrances would definitely bring about a transformation of the human

*personality. The transformation would be both physical and psychological.*¹⁴

In seeing the nature of dependent origination through Emptiness, the Buddha understood that our cognitive manifestations are relative, constructed, and impermanent. Hamilton argues that this 'is completely different' from the then contemporary teachings of the *Upanishads* in that the Buddha's focus 'on understanding the workings of one's cognitive apparatus [...] is entirely epistemic. And, further, it is clear that it is here that a key aspect of impermanence, the intrinsic characteristic of existence, lies. There is nothing about process of experiencing *qua* process that is in any sense permanent: it is, rather, at all times dynamically in process. Nothing that is epistemic can be anything other than impermanent.'¹⁵ Therefore, the ever-changing 'stream' of the cognitive processes represents nothing but preferences and varying degrees of agreed-upon, validated constructs within our 'world.' This insight transforms the basic mode of cognition from conscious discernment into direct knowing. Direct knowing is non-conceptual; it has no interpretive overlay.

The Elimination of Ignorance

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he elimination of conceptualization is the elimination of ignorance about the nature of things. It is a radical insight into the relative validity of worldly concepts, their fraudulent nature, and their mistakenly perceived permanence. To understand that there is no separation between a single subject-self and an external world of objects is to become free of ignorance about the nature of things. The spiritual authority of the Buddha stemmed from his freedom from ignorance, which was purified of concepts and void of desire and suffering. All suffering had ceased, and instead he had the affective experience of the bliss of freedom. Subsequently, the Buddha's compassion prompted him to take up teaching, which had to be conceptual despite his acknowledgment of the impurity of conception-based communication.

Pre-Enlightened 'World'

As distinguished from Enlightenment, our pre-enlightened cognitive 'world' is ignorance, and with that ignorance we easily become rigid, habituated, and 'boxed into' our idiosyncratic personal perspectives. Our personal happiness/unhappiness is based on a personal ideal construct with which we justify, sometimes vehemently, what seem to us to be logical and correct premises. In our pre-enlightened world, these justifications can be so 'rock solid' that sometimes people create much suffering both for themselves and other people, often without any remorse, based on these 'truths.' We can become remarkably psychologically and physically 'stiff,' which makes us unsympathetic to

points of view we decide are not worth entertaining – or those that are too threatening to entertain. We then can very tightly shut out others who risk invading our world, and perhaps upsetting it, even if they upset it with kindness and love. We perceive and interpret our world into dichotomies, contraries, and polar opposites. We categorize our thoughts into either/or, is/is not, good/ bad, and so on.

Moreover, many of our perceptions and understandings of the world are strongly influenced by our prejudices and fantasies. In our ignorance, we believe that entities have a permanence and reliability that, in reality, they simply do not have. These characteristics that we impute to things are simply false attributions of our ignorance. Because we do not understand that we are not separate and not independent, we want things that we mistakenly believe to be separate from ourselves; we have, as Hamilton describes, 'all manner of self-centered aspirations and responses, and self-absorbed, narrowly subjectively focused states of mind. All these activities and their consequences constitute the operation of Karma as taught by the Buddha, explained in the Second Noble Truth as the way one's experience (*dukkha*) is fuelled.'¹⁶

In our pre-enlightened affective experience, to either crave objects or to want to avoid them is to be fascinated and intoxicated with them. This is how we ordinarily interact with things. A question is how we can come to understand or grasp the nature of the world and still live our lives while avoiding craving and obsession. The enlightened person, a Buddha, knows things as they are and remains unattached, able to engage with the world without misunderstanding its nature. Conception-free cognition is enlightenment because it alone has the freedom gained from the insight of the complementary, dependent origination of subject and object which, in ignorance, induces desire and suffering. With this insight, the attachment to subject and object is voluntarily relinquished, because the subject and object are understood to be unworthy of desiring. One's *kamma* is neutralized. A reconciliation of diametrically opposed, polarized, either/ or mindsets takes place through the understanding that contraries are complementary. An Awakened person's post-enlightenment experience of cognition is indeed one of objects, but it is pure and free of desire because attitude and thus intent are transformed by the insight achieved through an understanding of the dependent origination of cognitive content.

However, the experience of pure non-conceptual perception was not unique to the Buddha, for 'thousands of mystics throughout the world unanimously assert that they attained a complete vacuum of particular mental content.'¹⁷ But the Buddha, in reflecting on his experience with an emphasis on the *khandhas*, did not make an ontological event of the pure experience. Nor did he mystify it by pointing to the 'oneness of all' as the primary importance of the experience.

The Buddha's Enlightenment was free of the mistaken substantialist conceptual construction of subject and object that creates desire and grasping:

*'This state (state of Enlightenment) is said to be without thought, not because all consciousness is gone, but because there is no thinking in terms of substantial entities. Hence there is nothing to grasp on to as a real object. It is supramundane knowledge, not because it constitutes a transcendent intuition, but because the dispositional tendencies, the character of the fundamental consciousness is transformed. Instead of consciousness looking for an ultimate real subject or an absolutely real object, a person deals with the world of experience as it has come to be. Such knowledge reveals things as they have come to be. Unperturbed by any mystery, not looking for the hidden something, a sage leads a life free from influxes. [...] It is a state of happiness not punctuated by suffering. It is the highest state of release enjoyed by the enlightened ones. The doctrine of the Great Sage pertains to this state of freedom and happiness.'*¹⁸

Enlightened Cognition

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In short, correct cognition is defined as the removal of the obstacles that prevent us from seeing dependent causal conditions in the manner in which they actually arise. These causal foundations are cognitive, not metaphysical; they are the mental and perceptual conditions by which sensations and thoughts occur. What is known through correct cognition is how things are. 'Objects' are cognitive objects. Enlightened cognition is defined as free of all cognitive errors. As Luang Pu Doon, the late master of the forest tradition from Surin, Thailand said: 'In fact the arahants themselves do not know many things at all. They only train the mind so that they fully understand the khandhas. They fully understand dependent origination. They cease searching; they cease having fabricating mental activities. This is all there is to it. And it all ends here. What remains is only pure, clean, bright, empty. It is Great Emptiness.'¹⁹

The Buddha maintained that only 'contact,' the mutual functioning of senses and consciousness, should be understood to produce experience. Pure experience, then, is the unadulterated primary experience of sensation and sense organ. It is the very first contact of consciousness with these two factors. Once that is realized, the rest as subjectively constructed dichotomous thinking and construction is clearly seen. The Buddha made no room for theory or conceptualization, because once these are employed, experience loses meaning. He saw no role for anything beyond contact, for "no theories, no conceptions, and no experience can go beyond contact and still remain meaningful"²⁰ and not lead to obsession. Having understood the nature of conceptualization, enlightened individuals no longer identify with conceptions; they remain unhindered by them. The pre-

enlightenment understanding is identification with an enduring object by an enduring separate subject who considers him – or herself made by it, of it, considers it his or her own, and delights in it. It is only through the realization of, and insight into, the dependent origination of experience that enlightenment and freedom can be attained.

The Magic Show

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wonderful simile which illustrates the letting go of which we speak is the following lesson shared by the Buddha:

‘Suppose, monks, a magician or a magician’s apprentice should hold a magic show at the four crossroads and a keen sighted man should see it, ponder over it and reflect on it radically. Even as he sees it, ponders over it and reflects on it radically, he would find it empty, he would find it hollow, he would find it void of essence. What essence, monks, could there be in a magic show? Even so, monks, whatever consciousness, be it past, future or present, in oneself or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, a monk sees it, ponders over it and reflects on it radically. Even as he sees it, ponders over it and reflects on it radically, he would find it empty, he would find it hollow, he would find it void of essence. What essence, monks, could there be in consciousness?’ The Buddha went on, ‘Seeing thus, the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness. Disenchanted, he grows dispassionate. Through dispassion, he’s released. With release there’s the knowledge, “Released.” He discerns that “Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.”’²¹

In other words, once the illusion of duality is discovered – there is no one to see and nothing to see; there is only a seeing – one becomes disenchanted and disillusioned by the show, just as does the person seeing through the illusion of a magic trick, and after that he or she does not take it seriously. There is no magic to see; apart from having clearly seen nothing but a show, there is nothing substantial; ‘in the seen is just the seen.’²²

Like the spectator at a magic show, the Buddha discovered upon Awakening that there is only a seen but nothing substantial to see. As distinguished from everyone else coming out from the show, the Buddha had an insight into the magic show. The Buddha saw the magic show of consciousness so well that he saw through the illusions of the show, and he turned away with an equanimous attitude from the bogus magic spectacle. So we see, in the case of the magic performance, our very ignorance of the magicians’ tricks is what accounts for the apparent reality of the magic. Once ignorance is eradicated, the magic show loses its illusion for the audience. However, and this is a very

interesting point, quite often it is not only the magician's secret illusions that give rise to the audience's mystification, but also the contribution of the audience's active mental participation in and, therefore, creation of that mystification. We can compare this participation to those who go to the cinema and readily and willingly create for themselves various moods and emotions as if what they were seeing on the screen were real. This active and enthusiastic emotional and cognitive participation in the creation of our illusions shows the fascination we have with our bound consciousness to the dualistic pleasures with which we identify.

Another comment on the fervor caused by our willing anticipation, creation, and fascination comes from the Japanese waka poet and aristocrat Ariwara no Narihira (825-880). This poem, called 'Anticipation' concerns the people of Kyoto, Japan, and their annual anticipation of the beautiful cherry blossom flowers:

*'If cherry blossoms
One day ceased to exist
In this world of ours,
Perhaps our hearts in spring
May know some tranquility.'*²³

Progression to Less Cognitive Constructions

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On the path to enlightenment, as a result of meditative training, one progresses through increasingly formless or cognitively de-constructed levels of states of mind.

Through the Jhanic expansion of empathic feelings such as friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy, non-partiality, and empathy it also becomes clearer that our 'ego' boundaries are constructed, self-imposed, and impermanent. At each level of evolving understanding, one finds a degree of 'freedom of mind;' this is freedom from being grounded in the lower, more condensed levels of experience. Eventually, a formless level described as the complete 'transcending of apperceptions or conceptions of form,' 'unbound' and 'the plane of no-thing-ness' is experienced. Having experienced these levels, and having realized the role of cognition-dependent construction, one sees 'the way things really are' in their original state; one is then able to uproot the tendencies toward binding rebirth.

The Buddha's Enlightenment

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t his Enlightenment, the Buddha had an epiphany, a sudden moment of great revelation and intuitive insight which reoriented his cognitive apparatus. That, in turn, transformed his attitude toward the objects that occur in constructive cognition. This reorientation prompted him to disengage from affective binding and obsessive responses to anything that was a part of his cognitive experience. It was the Buddha's use of meditation that brought about this reorientation.

Applying Right Action, hence, the awakening orientation, was always an option for the Buddha. It was not a constriction, moral compulsion, or obsession. The insight that came with enlightenment provided a corrective insight into his existential questioning and showed him the Truth. His evolution into a being with this Right Understanding later became the basis for his teachings. The Buddha's radical reorientation of his cognitive apparatus was created through emptiness, Nirodha, when he stopped conceiving of multiplicities and verbal differentiations and ceased apperceiving separateness. In other words, when the Buddha experienced emptiness, he gained insight into the fact that our cognitive apparatus creates the constructions rather than seeing the cognitive constructions as intrinsic.

The cognitive transformation creates also transformation of the personal characteristics of an awakened person including knowing about the nature of the complementary relationship; the awakened can conceptualize between dualities with great flexibility. They have a playful, permissive, and energetic relationship with others and the environment, even as they perform mundane activities of living. They act based on a clear, deep wisdom and compassion. Their more genuine human relationships are based on their deep sense of kinship with all living beings. While the contentious aspects of life cannot be denied, they are approached with more objectivity and equanimity by the awakened. Most importantly, awakened people remain directly, totally, and completely in awareness with the present moment, living an ongoing 'suchness'. They are totally at home in the flow of Reality.

The Buddha's Bliss

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he Buddha's moment of great revelation was not emptiness alone; it combined emptiness with bliss in a single entwined experience. The Buddhist texts refer constantly to the fact that, upon

Enlightenment, the Buddha experienced bliss. For example, in the Dhammapada, the Buddha says of *Nibbāna* that it is 'the highest happiness,' a happiness qualitatively different from the limited, transitory happiness derived from an impermanent state. Contrary to the sense-based or even *samādhī*-based transitory bliss of a pre-enlightened person looking at beautiful objects, hearing beautiful sounds, or the like, the Buddha's bliss was of a pure form. It was uncontaminated by ordinariness; it was free from desire, hatred, and ignorance and thus from all defilements; it was essentially sublime and pure. Thus, the Buddha not only experienced an Emptiness which revealed to him the accompanying insights of dependent origination and the non-substantialist nature of his cognitively constructed world; he also experienced the accompanying pure bliss which effectively extinguished his grasping and cravings for the objects of the pre-enlightened mind. Through this intertwining experience, he became the Awakened One; thereafter, the Buddha remained dispassionate toward, yet empathic to, other sentient beings.

The Buddha's teachings are intended to help us achieve *Nibbāna*. Through the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddha showed what we need to do to go beyond our pre-enlightened consciousness, which creates our suffering. *Nibbāna*, then, is attainable in this lifetime if we devote ourselves to the implementation of the necessary conditions to achieve it. As we positively transform ourselves, we also positively transform the world in which we live. This is the optimistic message of the Buddha.

Notes

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One common misunderstanding of Enlightenment is that the empty or 'luminous' mind (*pabhassaram citta*) of Early Buddhism means 'originally luminous or pure mind' (*prakṛti-prabhāsvara-citta*), as was put forth in the *Lankāvatāra*. To clarify, David J. Kalupahana writes: 'This idea, that what was already present is being manifested, an idea that carries all the metaphysical implications of substance, could not be acceptable to the Buddha. [...] The tendency to look upon the consciousness of the Freed One as being different from consciousness involved in the sensory experience seems to have been strengthened in the Theravada tradition as a result of Buddhaghosa's theorizing. Nānanda's view, that in the state of freedom both sense experience and conception are totally eliminated and replaced by a new kind of awareness, represents a continuation of this

transcendentalist view advocated by Buddhaghosa and, before him, the *Lankāvatāra*.” Yet, as argued here, the Buddha taught that all perceptions, apperceptions, and concepts are dependently arisen; this stance is incompatible with a substantialist viewpoint as described above by Kalupahana.

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