

Attaining Nirvana

Blake McBride

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Different traditions use different words—nirvana, beatitude, bliss, enlightenment, salvation—to describe what they consider the highest human state. These are not different destinations. They are different names for the same outcome. While these words carry heavy religious and supernatural baggage, I am not using them in that sense.

Here, I use these terms to refer to a very specific, natural, psychological condition: a stable mental state in which one is largely undisturbed by circumstance and experiences a deep, ongoing sense of joy.

Although these words do not mean exactly the same thing in their original contexts, they all point toward the same underlying idea—a mental state of profound stability and calm that is not shaken by external events. When this state is attained, it is experienced as continuous and enduring joy. This is not excitement or pleasure in the usual sense, but a durable sense of peace, clarity, and well-being.

This state is not mystical, supernatural, or accidental. It does not arise from luck, divine favor, or wishful thinking. It is the result of understanding and disciplined practice. Many philosophers have identified this condition as the highest human good and the ultimate aim of life.

There are two essential steps required to attain it:

1. Wisdom
2. Inculcation of that wisdom through practice
 - (a) Inculcation meditation
 - (b) Continuous effort and lived practice

Neither step is sufficient on its own. Both are required.

Wisdom

Wisdom is a form of understanding, but not understanding in general. It is understanding the things that actually matter: what nature is, what you are, what other people are, and how all of these relate to one another. It is understanding your place in the world and how causes and effects operate within it.

This type of understanding can be achieved through studying Spinoza's *Ethics*.¹ That work is extremely difficult and demanding. It took me many years of study, which is why I wrote *Spinoza's Ethics Explained*—to make those ideas accessible. I will not attempt to reproduce that work here.

To illustrate the role of understanding, consider the following example.

Imagine a person who knows nothing about modern medicine, doctors, or surgery. They experience severe stomach pain and are rushed to a hospital. A doctor tells them that their body must be

¹McBride, Blake (2024). *Spinoza's Ethics Explained*. Amazon.

cut open and surgery performed, after which they will recover. To this person, the proposal sounds terrifying. Having had stomach pain before that resolved on its own, and imagining someone cutting into their body, they resist violently. Their fear is overwhelming.

Now imagine a second person in the exact same physical condition, but who understands medicine, surgery, and hospitals. When told the same thing by the doctor, they remain calm—even relieved. They understand what is happening and why. They know the procedure is routine and that it will likely solve the problem.

The only difference between the two situations is understanding.

The first person experiences panic and terror. The second experiences calm acceptance. The events are identical. The outcome is identical. Only understanding differs.

The same is true of fear in general. Fear is almost always a product of misunderstanding or incomplete understanding. To the extent that a person deeply understands relevant truths about themselves and the world, fear diminishes. Calm replaces anxiety. Acceptance replaces resistance. Spinoza's Ethics provides this kind of understanding.

Inculcating The Ideas

Understanding alone is not enough.

Imagine that you have never ridden a bicycle. You take a class and read a book explaining everything about cycling: pedaling, balance, steering, braking. You understand it all intellectually. Do you now know how to ride a bicycle?

Not really.

You do not truly know how to ride a bicycle until you actually get on one and ride it.

When you finally do, something interesting happens. All the separate concepts—pedaling, balance, steering—merge into a single, unified activity. You no longer think about mechanics. You think, I want to go to my friend's house. The knowledge has become part of you. It has been inculcated.

Wisdom works the same way. Intellectual understanding is necessary, but it is insufficient. Wisdom must be absorbed into who you are. It must shape how you perceive and respond to life automatically, without effort. This requires two tools: meditation and practice.

Meditation

Inculcation meditation² can be thought of as deliberate self-conditioning. It is a way of clarifying, reinforcing, and embedding ideas deeply into the mind. Without this, no matter how much you read or understand, very little will change. In moments of stress or emotion, you will revert to old habits.

Without meditation, you remain largely a product of your past experiences and circumstances. With it, you begin to become a product of what you consciously understand and choose.

Practice

Meditation alone is still not enough.

Without practice, when real situations arise, your mind will rationalize exceptions. It will insist that this situation is different, that this time your old reaction is justified. And often, in the moment, it will feel convincing.

Consider someone you regularly encounter—at work or school—who constantly insults you. Seeing them already puts you on edge. When they insult you again, you feel anger and distress. You may respond in kind. This reinforces the cycle.

²McBride, Blake (2017). Meditation.

A deep understanding of human behavior would reveal a very different way to interpret and respond to this situation—one that eliminates your distress and likely ends the insults. I will not describe that response here. It is described in Spinoza's *Ethics*.

Here is how practice works.

Through wisdom and meditation, you understand how you should perceive and respond. Yet, the first few times the situation arises, you fail. You react in the old way. You do this because your mind rationalizes that this situation is exceptional. Later, you see clearly that the situation was not exceptional. You recommit to responding differently next time.

After several such encounters, one day something changes.

The insult occurs—and this time, you respond in accordance with your understanding. You remain calm. You act as you intended. In that moment, you experience a powerful and unmistakable joy.

This joy is crucial.

First, you feel free. You were not controlled by the situation.

Second, you see clearly that your wiser response will likely reduce future conflict.

This joy is the emotional force that enables lasting change. You cannot overcome a destructive emotion by force of will. You can only overcome it with a stronger, opposing emotion.

Over time, you will notice something remarkable. You no longer feel anger toward that person at all. The situation loses its power over you. As this process repeats across more areas of life, joy becomes more frequent, more stable, and eventually continuous.

This is what we are after.

Peace within yourself—and peace in your interactions with others.

As you continue your practice, you will find that overcoming your old interpretations and habitual responses—and replacing them with wise interpretation and action—becomes increasingly frequent. Over time, this shift stabilizes, and what were once isolated moments of clarity and joy coalesce into a continuous and ongoing state of peace and joy.