



American Expression E2704 Pipe dream

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“Pipe dream” is an English idiom used to describe a hope, plan, or idea that is unrealistic, impractical, or unlikely to ever happen. When someone calls something a “pipe dream,” they are suggesting that it is more fantasy than achievable goal, often lacking a clear path to success.

The origin of the phrase is commonly linked to the use of opium pipes in the 19th century. People who smoked opium sometimes experienced vivid, dreamlike hallucinations, which felt real but were disconnected from reality. Over time, the expression “pipe dream” came to represent ideas or visions that, like those hallucinations, seem appealing but are not grounded in practical possibility.

In modern usage, “pipe dream” is often applied to ambitions that are overly optimistic or based on wishful thinking. For example, someone might describe a plan to become extremely wealthy overnight without effort as a pipe dream. It highlights a gap between imagination and realistic planning.

However, the term is not always used purely to dismiss ideas. Sometimes it reflects skepticism rather than outright rejection. An idea labeled a pipe dream may still inspire discussion or motivate people, even if others doubt its feasibility. In this way, it can serve as a critique of unrealistic expectations while still acknowledging creativity.

Context plays an important role in how the phrase is perceived. When used harshly, it can discourage innovation or ambition by dismissing ideas too quickly. When used more gently, it can act as a caution, encouraging individuals to think more critically about the steps needed to achieve their goals.

Interestingly, many ideas once considered “pipe dreams” have eventually become reality through persistence, innovation, and changing circumstances. Technological advancements, social progress, and scientific discoveries have often turned seemingly impossible concepts into everyday realities, showing that the line between fantasy and possibility can shift over time.

In conclusion, “pipe dream” is a vivid expression rooted in historical imagery that captures the tension between imagination and reality, often used to question the practicality of an idea while also reminding us that what seems impossible today may, with vision, effort, and the right conditions, become achievable in the future.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. What distinguishes a “pipe dream” from a realistic but ambitious goal?
2. Can ideas initially dismissed as pipe dreams eventually become achievable, and what factors make that possible?
3. How does labeling an idea as a pipe dream influence motivation and decision-making?
4. In what situations might calling something a pipe dream be unfair or premature?
5. How can individuals balance imagination and practicality when pursuing goals?