

Buddhist Meditative Practices on the Path Towards Awakening

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Introduction

The phenomenon of awakening is beyond our ability to frame, deconstruct or analyse; however, we can observe the path taken and the psychological changes that occur as one walks towards this ineffable experience. To understand the psychology of spiritual growth, it is important to situate the meaning of awakening within the context of the tradition under analysis. The context comprises the path, soteriology, and textual and historical framework. Within the early Buddhist community, we often find reference to the path of insight (*paññā*) as a means to awakening through the popular practice of Vipassana. Although this is the key ingredient in the permanent psychological change involved in radical freedom, the path of *jhāna* is often overlooked as an integral practice that supports insight. This paper focuses on the phenomenological attributes of *jhānas* and the importance of concentration (calm abiding) on the path to awakening within the early Buddhist context. To contextualise the practices, we must first understand the early Buddhist notion of what awakening is and what its phenomenological attributes are. We can do this by examining how the *jhānic* states support the arising of insight. By analysing the definitions used in early textual sources, such as the Pali Canon and Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*, to describe the phenomenological outcome in each *jhāna*, we can understand how different meditative practices create appropriate conditions for awakened states to arise.

We see a major signpost towards the phenomenology of enlightenment in the *Majjima-Nikāya* (MN 26), where we meet Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. Until this stage, the Buddha has not attained his full arahatship and is still seeking teachings from renowned yogins (Anālayo, 2011, p. 175). Ālāra Kālāma immediately teaches Gotama the practice leading to the sphere of nothingness, which pertains to the mental qualities of confidence, energy and wisdom acquired by entering that sphere. Gotama reaches this state and rejects it, as it does not satisfy the goal he is seeking, namely insight through cognition resulting in the end of suffering. From this, we can assume that an important factor defining the Buddhist definition of enlightenment

is insight. He likewise rejects Uddaka Rāmaputta's teaching of the sphere of neither consciousness nor unconsciousness for the same reason (not to be mistaken with the Fourth *Āruppa* in the four formless spheres) (Gunaratana, 1985, p. 117). In the context of the four noble truths, the Buddha describes four foods which keep beings in the cycle of rebirth; "That of food in the literal sense, contact, intention and consciousness. All four arise from craving, this in turn from feeling, and he traces dependent origination in the standard way back to ignorance" (Gombrich, 1997, p. 48). Without the insight of Dependent Origination sentient beings are destined to remain in this repeating cycle of existence. Vetter suggests that the Buddha's experience of awakening only comes to full fruition after discovering the four noble truths: the realisation that craving is the cause of rebirth, as well as the key to understanding the way to *nibbāna*. Vetter argues that the Buddha first realised dependent origination but can only refer to himself as the Tathāgata once he has realised the four noble truths (Vetter, 1988, p. 19). Gombrich makes a reference to this type of realisation as being 'released on both sides' meaning that the aspirant has mastered the eight jhānas (the four rupa jhānas and the four formless jhānas) in any order and at will. This results in permanent liberation (Gombrich, 1997; Gunaratana, 1985).

The above explanation shows that jhāna (concentration) is as important as *paññā* (insight). This is an extensive subject for discussion, involving phenomenological, historical, political and scriptural analyses, which I will not develop in this study. This essay argues that *Samatha* (calm abiding) practices form a foundation for insight and are a major factor in removing the hindrances that cause ignorance (Buddhaghosa, 1991; Gethin, 1998).

One who wants to develop the recollection of peace mentioned next to mindfulness of breathing (Ch.III, § 105) should go into solitary retreat and recollect the special qualities of nibbana . . . (Buddhaghosa, 1991, p. 286)

Dhamma And Dhammas

The use of the term 'recollection' suggests that nibbana is always present yet hidden by ignorance. Through mindfulness, the mind pertaining to nibbana is revealed. It is clear from the doctrine of the Abhidhamma that ignorance and desire are intrinsically linked (Gethin, 1998). If you remove desire, you are freed from ignorance. If you have 'right view', you are freed from desire. They cannot be viewed as separate paths of practice due to the close causal relationship between the two factors. *Dhamma* is a term with a two-fold meaning: the first being the

principle building blocks that make up reality, and the second being the path that leads to awakening (the four noble truths) (Gethin, 1998; Buddhaghosa, 1991). Gethin demonstrates that dhamma (the path) is the highest principle and the most important in the awakening factor (Gethin, 1992, p. 147; Gethin, 1998). It is also through *dhamma* (components of reality) that the four noble truths can be experientially realised. The Vissudhimagga testifies.

. . . the stilling of all suffering as follows:

‘Bhikkhus, in so far as there are dhammas, whether formed or unformed, fading away is pronounced the best of them, that is to say, the disillusionment of vanity, the elimination of thirst, the abolition of the reliance, the termination of the round, the destruction of craving, fading away, cessation, nibbāna’ (A.ii,34). (Buddhaghosa, 1991, p. 286)

Gethin (1992, p. 150) argues that the definition of *dhamma* is disputed and concludes that dhamma is fluid and pertains not so much to a set of things as to a function of cognition. It is the unfolding nature of the mind that witnesses dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). “To see dhammas is to see their interrelatedness; to see their interrelatedness is to see dhamma.” (Gethin, 1992, p. 151). Nibbāna is the final unconditioned *dhamma* (Wynne, 2015, p. 129; Buddhaghosa, 1991). Unravelling the insight needed to experience such subtle causal connections requires an extremely subtle mind that transcends normal consciousness. Meditative practices, therefore, become a key component in developing such a subtle, malleable and focused mind. The very act of identifying with the self or thinking of another object, person or thing as ‘other’ is the mechanism that creates defilements, thus causing craving (Gethin, 1998; Buddhaghosa, 1991). “The notion of the self is born from ignorance (*moha*) or delusion (*avidyā/avijjā*).” The mind must be mindful to guard against any craving that leads to misidentification of the self. The Buddha elaborates on this point in the Sāmaññaphala Sutta (Shaw, 2006; Gethin, 2008). The Visuddhimagga describes how ignorance is removed on the path of purification.

Jhāna as a Path to Awakening

Although there are many paths to awakening, the Buddha makes a point of describing his first enlightening experience in the Maha-saccaka Sutta. He describes entering the first jhāna in his father’s field while in a state secluded from desire. The Buddha recollects the first jhāna as a decisive turning point leading him toward awakening. (Gethin, 2008). We can see this mirrored in the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*, the state of total cessation before death (Gethin, 2008). This

recollection reminded the Buddha that there is no fruit in the path of extreme asceticism and that he should follow the middle way. The text goes on to describe how the Buddha moved through the jhānas and accessed the ‘three knowledges’ through which he can end the cycle of rebirth (Bucknell & Stuart Fox, 1986, p. 25). On the night of Gotama’s enlightenment, he describes moving through eight jhānas, with the fourth serving as a platform for developing *iddhis* (powers) that lead to insight. I will not discuss the debate surrounding whether insight occurs before or after the four formless states, as the subject area is too vast for this study; however, it is important to consider that this concept plays a major role in Buddhist practices (Shaw, 2006; Gethin, 1992).

From the Buddha’s recollection of his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, we can examine some important factors that apply to each jhāna and its attainment. Gunaratana (1988) describes the jhānas as meditative attainments born of centring one’s attention on a single object. The etymology of ‘jhāna’ can be derived from the verb *jhāyati* (to meditate) or *jhāpeti* (to burn up); the latter refers to the burning away of defilements. The Maha Saccaka Sutta describes the first jhāna as pleasure arising from separation from sensuality and accompanied by initial thought (*vitakka*) and sustained thought (*vicāra*) (Shaw, 2006). Gethin translates the two terms *vitakka* and *vicāra* as "thinking" and "examining," respectively. Bucknell and Stuart-Fox delineate that *vitakka-vicāra* are ‘thought streams’ which ‘continue to flow as usual’ as though they were normal discursive thought (Bucknell & Stuart-Fox, 1993). At this point, we know that Gotama is removed from his hindrances, which require a very high degree of concentration. *Vitakka-vicāra*, therefore, indicate that Gotama is locked into concentration and that this is not normal discursive thought. We can take these two terms to imply that Gotama has developed the ability to focus his thoughts on a single object and examine it completely and clearly. These two cognitive functions, in combination with non-attachment and non-desire, give rise to the first jhāna (Shaw, 2006; Gunaratana, 1980). This gives reason to believe that Gotama has already attained a very pure state of mind through previous practice and that overcoming the hindrances has a direct effect on entering the jhānas (we will unpack this idea when discussing meditative practices).

I lived completely secluded from sense desires and unwholesome qualities of mind, having attained the joy and happiness of the first absorption, which is accompanied by thinking and examining, and born of seclusion. (Gethin, 2008, p. 184).

The second *jhāna*, full of rapture, arises as a result of stilling directed thought and is born of concentration.

Then, by stilling thinking and examining, I lived having attained the joy and happiness of the second absorption, a state of inner clarity and mental unification without thinking and examining, and born of concentration. (Gethin, 2008, p. 184).

Gethin's translation describes this *jhānic* state as 'inner clarity' and 'mental unification', existing 'mindfully' and 'fully aware'. The second *jhāna* is a deeper state of meditation, further protected from the hindrances. Understanding how these states arise from one another is important, as the development of meditative attitudes steers the meditator towards different types of concentration. By letting go of the effort required for sustained thought and the cognitive processes of examining, a subtler focus can arise, enabling inner clarity. *Vitakka-vicāra* are seen as a grosser level of thought compared with the purity of the unification of mind (Gunaratana, 1980). The unification of mind (*cetaso ekodibhāvaṃ*) implies that the meditator has become established in one-pointedness, and the mind naturally flows towards concentration rather than through sustained thought (Gunaratana, 1980, p. 105). The Abhidharma sometimes adds a ninefold path by including a state of concentration (*samādhi*) in the second *jhāna*, in which there is *vicāra* (sustained thought) but no *vitakka* (initial thought) (Shaw, 2006). Mindfulness of awareness becomes more important at this stage as the bhikkhu must be careful that they are not drawn into the pleasure of the second *jhāna* thus bringing them out of the *jhānic* state. The strength of the rapture meets a pinnacle point as described in the Dīgha Nikāya (DN. 1:74-75) (Gunaratana, 1988). It is through abandoning joy that the third *jhāna* is attained. Rapture from the second *jhāna* fades leaving the state of equanimity, mindfulness and alertness accompanied with physical pleasure.

By having no desire for joy, I lived equanimously, mindful and fully aware; I experienced the bodily happiness of which the noble ones speak, saying "Equanimous and mindful, one lives happily", and so I lived, having attained the third absorption. (Gethin, 2008, p. 184).

Until the third *jhāna*, we can see that there is joy and physical pleasure. The joy that Gotama experiences results from his body being tranquil and happy. There is no tension in his muscles, allowing him to feel the rapture of awareness moving through his physicality. With calm abiding, better concentration is inherent (Buddhaghosa, 1991; Bucknell & Stuart-Fox, 1989).

The limiting factor of the first and second jhāna is the grossness of the state of rapture. Having abandoned any interest in rapture or happiness, a more subtle mind is able to emerge, that of equanimity. The third jhāna is often associated with a calm confidence. The mind is fully established in meditation, and there is no need to direct thought as a means of overcoming hindrances (Shaw, 2006, p. 64; Gethin, 1992). The fourth jhāna arises from the abandonment of pleasure and pain, accompanied by equanimity and mindfulness. Vetter argues that the fully embodied state of equanimity indicates that all emotion, including craving, has been abandoned (Vetter, 1988).

By letting go of happiness and unhappiness, as a result of the earlier disappearance of pleasure and pain, I lived having attained the pure equanimity and mindfulness of the fourth absorption, which is free of happiness and unhappiness. (Gethin, 2008, p. 184)

This jhāna is a foundation for the next phase of Gotama's awakening as he enters the four formless spheres. At this stage, he has abandoned bodily, mental and emotional hindrances and remains fully mindful and equanimous. In this state, the mind is not drawn to external objects, so the bhikkhu can direct it towards understanding. We see this when Gotama turns his attention to the *iddhis*. From this position, he is arguably able to gain insight into dependent origination. The calm abiding provides the subtle concentration necessary to witness dhamma.

Cause of Insight

These subtle states arise from training the mind in awareness, concentration, calm abiding and mindfulness. The two paths of insight and concentration are Vipassana and *Samatha*, respectively. The practice of *Samatha* cultivates calm joy in the body and mind, enabling concentration, which in turn leads to insight (Bronkhorst, 1993). Gunaratana (1988) argues that although liberation can be attained through dry insight, it is not an easy path, and the path of the jhānas establishes the serenity necessary to attain one-pointedness. In harmony with this study, we will focus on the practices associated with *Samatha*. Shaw describes *Samatha* practices as a means of purifying the feelings (bhavana), mind, and body. This focus takes a different direction from that of insight meditation. Rather than developing knowledge that leads to insight, we are developing concentration that leads to the abandonment of the dhammas and therefore to insight (Buddhaghosa, 1991). Fixing the mind on an object to develop one-pointedness strengthens concentration, which can overcome the distractions of desire and aversion. (Gunaratana, 1988, p. 23). Chapter III of the *Visuddhimagga* describes concentration in more detail:

. . . It is concentration (samādhi) in the sense of concentrating (samādhāna). What is this concentrating? It is the centring (ādhāna) of consciousness and consciousness-concomitants evenly (samaṃ) and rightly (sammā) on a single object; placing is what is meant. [85] So it is a place of virtue of which consciousness and its concomitants remain evenly and rightly on a single object, undistracted and unscattered, that should be understood as concentrating. (Buddhaghosa, 1991, p. 85)

Due to the nature of individual minds, the required object of focus depends on the defilements that need eradicating. The object of concentration can serve as an antidote to the defilement itself (Buddhaghosa, 1991). For example, by meditating on the foulness of the body and its constituent parts, the practitioner can abandon any attachment to beauty or desire that arises from attraction to the body (Shaw, 2006). A second factor in developing concentration is mindfulness. We can see from examining the four jhānas that mindfulness is constantly present. The Sāmaññaphala Sutta teaches that through mindfulness, one can guard the doors of the senses so that they do not cause desire and aversion (Gethin, 2008). The Buddha's childhood jhāna experience in his father's field describes entry into the state through observation of breathing (Bucknell & Stuart Fox, 1993). From this, we can glean that mindfulness is a fundamental component in guarding against desire when entering a jhāna state.

I would argue that the interrelatedness of mindfulness and concentration required to enter the jhānas is evident in the way the bhikkhu moves through each jhāna. To become subtler in mind, each attainment must be abandoned without losing concentration, while remaining mindful that attachment does not take hold (Gethin, 1992). Buddhaghosa describes the different types of triadic concentration combinations as the bhikkhu moves through each jhāna. As a grosser type of concentration is abandoned, another type emerges and joins with the less gross remaining absorption. The previous jhānas merge into a single state, even more established in concentration, inviting a subtler focus (Buddhaghosa, 1991, p. 87).

Conclusion

We can see that enlightenment is an awakening that arises from the abandonment of hindrances and the realisation of *paṭicca-samuppāda*. The natural flow of sense perception to form creation is a cause of more delusion of the separate self and is only reversed through tremendous effort. Through meditative practices, we can cultivate a steady focus of mind that does not allow

mental hindrances to take over perception. This, combined with mindfulness, allows us to steer the cognising self towards subtler abodes of concentration. With the unfolding clarity this brings, the nature of reality becomes apparent. It is only through developing enough discipline in moral conduct that the practice of focusing the mind and developing pure *citta* (assemblage of *dharmas*) can be established.

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