

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 psychological changes that take place as one walks towards this ineffable experience. To understand the psychology of spiritual growth it is important to frame the meaning of awakening within the context of the tradition which is analysed. The context is the path, soteriology, textual and historical framework. Within the early Buddhist community, we often find reference to the path of insight or *panna* as a means to awakening through the popular practice of Vipassana. Although this is the key ingredient to the permanent psychological change involved in radical freedom, the path of *jhana* is often overlooked as an integral practice which supports insight. This paper focuses on the phenomenological attributes of *jhanas* and the importance of concentration or 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 are its phenomenological attributes. We can do this by examining how the *jhanic* states act as a support for insight to arise. Through the analysis of the definitions used in early textual sources such as the Pali Canon and Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* to describe the phenomenological outcome in each *jhana* we can understand how different meditative practices create appropriate conditions for awakened states to arise.

We see a major signpost pointing 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 into the sphere of nothingness. Gotama

reaches this state and rejects it as it does not satisfy the goal he is searching for; that of insight through cognition resulting in the end of suffering. From this, we can assume that an important factor which defines the Buddhist definition of enlightenment is insight. He equally 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 into 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 *nibanna*. Vetter argues that the Buddha first realises 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 jhanas (the four rupa jhanas and the four formless jhanas) in any order and at will. This results in permanent liberation (Gombrich, 1997; Gunaratana, 1985).

The above explanation delineates that *jhana* (concentration) is as important as *paññā* (insight). This is an immense subject for discussion which involves a phenomenological, historical, political and scriptural analysis which I will not develop in this study. I will argue that *Samatha* (calm abiding) practices form a foundation towards insight and are a major factor involved in removing the hindrances which 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 nibanna 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 practices due to the close causality of the two factors. *Dhamma* is a term which has a two-fold meaning, the first being that of the principle building blocks which 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 *Vissudhi Magga* 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, nibanna’ (A.ii,34). (Buddhaghosa, 1991, p. 286)

Gethin (1992, p. 150) argues that the definition of *dhamma* is somewhat disputed and concludes that *dhamma* has a fluid nature and pertains not so much to a set of things but a function of cognition. It is the unfolding nature of the mind which witnesses dependant origination (*paṭicca-sauppāda*). “To see *dhammas* is to see their interrelatedness; to see their interrelatedness is to see *dhamma*.” (Gethin, 1992, p. 151). *Nibanna* as the final unconditioned *dhamma* (Wynne, 2015, p. 129; Buddhaghosa, 1991). To unravel the type of insight needed to experience such subtle connections in causality requires an extremely subtle mind which surpasses that of normal consciousness. Meditative practices, therefore, become a key component towards 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 very mechanism which creates defilements thus causing craving (Gethin, 1998; Buddhaghosa, 1991). “The notion of the self is born from ignorance (*moha*) or delusion (*avidyā/avijjā*)” (Gethin, 1998, p. 145). The mind must be mindful to guard against any craving which leads to misidentification of the self. The Buddha elaborates on this point in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (Shaw, 2006; Gethin, 2008). The *Visshudhimagga* refers to how ignorance is removed as the path of purification (Buddhaghosa, 1991).

Jhana 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 *jhana* in his father's field while in a state secluded from desire. It is here the Buddha declares that the first *jhana* is certainly the path to awakening (Gethin, 2008). We can see this mirrored in the Buddhas' *parinibbāna* before dying and entering total cessation (Gethin, 2008). It was this very recollection that reminded the Buddha that there is no fruit in the path of extreme aestheticism and that he should follow the path of the middle way. The text goes on to describe how the Buddha moved through the *jhanas* and accessed the 'three knowledges' through which he can end the cycle of rebirth (Bucknell & Stuart Fox, 1993, p. 25) (Gethin, 2008). On the night of Gotamas' enlightenment, he describes moving through eight *jhanas*, the fourth being a platform for the *iddhis* (powers) to develop which leads to the development of insight. I will not discuss the debate which surrounds whether or not insight happens 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 Buddhas' recollection of his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, we can examine some of the important factors which apply to each *jhana* and the attainment of them (Gethin, 2008). Gunaratana (1988) describes the *jhanas* as meditative attainments born from centring one's attention on one object. The Etymology of '*jhana*' can be derived from the verb *jhāyati* (to meditate) or *jhāpeti* (to burn up); the latter referring to the burning away of defilements.

The *Maha Saccaka* sutta describes the first *jhana* as pleasure which arises from being separate from sensuality and accompanied with initial thought (*vitakka*) and sustained thought (*vicāra*) (Shaw, 2006). Gethin translates the two terms *vitakka* and *vicāra* as thinking and examining respectively (Gethin, 2008, p. 184). Bucknell and Stuart-Fox delineate that *vitakka-vicāra* are 'thought streams' which 'continue to flow as usual' as though it were normal discursive thought (Bucknell & Stuart-Fox, 1993). At this point, we know that Gotama is removed from his hindrances which I would argue require a very high degree of concentration. *Vitakka-vicāra*, therefore, indicates that Gotama is locked into concentration and it is not normal discursive thought. We can take these two terms to imply that Gotama has established the ability to focus his thoughts on one object and examine it completely with clarity. These two cognitive functions in combination with non-attachment and non-desire give rise to the first *jhana* (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

have a direct effect on entering the *jhanas* (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 *jhana*, 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 *jhanic* state as 'inner clarity' and 'mental unification', existing 'mindfully' and 'fully aware'. The second *jhana* is a state which provides a deeper state of meditation and is further protected from the hindrances. How these states evolve out of the other is important to discern as it is the development of meditative attitudes which steer the meditator towards different types of concentration. By letting go of effort required for sustained thought and the cognitive processes of examining, a subtler focus can arise which enables inner clarity. *Vitakka-vicāra* are seen as a more gross level of thought compared to the purity of the unification of mind (Gunaratana, 1980). The unification of mind (*cetaso ekodibhāvam*) implies that the meditator has become established in one-pointedness, the mind naturally flows towards concentration rather than through sustained thought. (Gunaratana, 1980, p. 105). The Abhidharma sometimes adds a nine-fold path by including a state of concentration (*samadhi*) in the second *jhana* where there is *vicāra* (sustained thought) but no *vitakka* (initial thought) (Shaw, 2006).

Mindfulness of awareness becomes more important at this stage as the bikkhu must be careful that they are not drawn into the pleasure of the second *jhana* thus bringing them out of the *jhanic* state. The strength of the rapture meets a pinnacle point as described in the Digha Nikaya (DN. 1:74-75) (Gunaratana, 1988). It is through abandoning joy that the third *jhana* is attained. Rapture from the second *jhana* 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).

Up until the third *jhana* we can see that there are joy and physical pleasure. The joy that Gotama experiences is a result of his body being tranquil and happy. There is no tension in his muscles which allows 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 *jhana* 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 (Gunaratana, 1980). The third *jhana* 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 *jhana* arises as a result of abandoning pleasure and pain accompanied by equanimity and mindfulness. Vetter argues that the fully embodied state of equanimity suggests 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 *jhana* is a foundation to the next phase of the Gotamas awakening as he enters into the four formless spheres. He has abandoned hindrances of the body, the mind and emotion at this stage and is still fully mindful and full of equanimity. In this state the mind is not being drawn by external objects thus, the *bikkhu* can direct the mind towards understanding. We can see this from the moment Gotama directs his attention to the *iddhis*. It is from this position that he is arguably able to access insight into dependent origination. The calm abiding allows the subtle concentration necessary to witness *dhamma*.

Cause of Insight

These subtle states are the result of 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* allows the cultivation calm joy in the body and mind so that concentration can be attained which leads to insight (Bronkhorst, 1993). Gunaratana

(1988) argues that although liberation can be attained through dry insight, it is not an easy one and the path of the *jhanas* establishes oneself in 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 to purify the feelings (*bhavana*), mind and body. This focus takes a different direction to that of insight meditation. Rather than developing knowledge which leads to insight, we are developing concentration which leads to abandoning the *dhammas* and therefor leads to insight (Buddhaghosa, 1991).

Fixing the mind on an object to develop one-pointedness results in strength in concentration which can overcome the distraction of desire and aversion. (Gunnaratana, 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 (*samañ*) 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 is dependent on the defilements which need eradicating. The object of concentration can be used as an antidote for 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 as a result of attraction to the body (Shaw, 2006).

A second factor in developing concentration is mindfulness. We can see through examining the four *jhanas* that mindfulness is constantly present. The *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* teaches that through mindfulness one is able to guard the doors of the senses so that they are not causes for desire and aversion (Gethin, 2008). The Buddha's childhood *jhana* experience in his father's field describes entry into the state through observation of breathing (Bucknell & Stuart Fox, 1993). We can glean from this that mindfulness establishes itself as a fundamental component towards guarding against desire when entering into a *jhana* state.

I would argue that the interrelatedness of mindfulness and concentration required to enter into the *jhanas* is evident in the way that the *bikkhu* moves through each *jhana*. To become subtler in mind, each of the attainments must be abandoned without losing concentration and being mindful that attachment does not take a hold of oneself (Gethin, 1992). Buddhaghosa describes the different types of triadic concentration combinations as the *bhikku* moves through

each *jhana*. As a more gross type of concentration is abandoned, another type of concentration emerges and joins with the less gross remaining absorption. The previous *jhanas* merge to form one state even more established in concentration so to invite a subtler focus (Buddhaghosa, 1991, p. 87).

Conclusion

We can see that enlightenment is an awakening which happens as a result of the abandonment of the hindrances and the realisation of *paṭicca-sauppāda*. The natural flow of sense perception to form creation is cause to more delusion of the separate self and is only reversed through tremendous effort. Through meditative practices, we are able to cultivate a steady focus of mind which does not let the mental hindrances 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 *dhammas*) can be established. Just as a solid can transform into gas through heat so too can the mind dissolve to subtler states through concentration which results in the recollection of radical freedom as described by the Buddha.

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