

Buddhist Insight: A Phenomenological Study of Dependent  
Arising on the Path to Enlightenment

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study is an analysis of insight into dependent origination and how these two features are positioned on the path to Enlightenment. Through a phenomenological investigation into meditation experiences of Theravada Buddhist practitioners, this paper examines the mechanisms, applications and outcomes of insight. Using interviews with Buddhist meditators, key insights are highlighted which result in the fetter breaking experience for the practitioner. By mapping these insights onto an ontological and soteriological study of the Buddhist path, we can confirm certain aspects of the path as a living tradition which leads to awakening.

I have found that there is a similar psychological transformation for most Buddhist meditators who follow the same path of practice. These transformations result in fewer attachments and therefore less suffering. The maps we have been provided with, by the Buddha, certainly do chart a field of consciousness beyond normal cognition. This study demonstrates how insight provides us with a key to exploring the deeper parts of consciousness, thus allowing insight into the nature of reality.

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## Introduction

The key components which sum up the Buddha's' interpretation of reality are; existence is impermanent (*anicca*), existence is the result of suffering (*dukkha*) and no self (*anatta*). These three characteristics are the actual phenomenal reality of human existence (Gethin, 2003). The change in perception of these characteristics presents significant markers along the path to Enlightenment. From the time of the Buddha, Buddhist practitioners have carefully followed the path of insight and have recorded a change in perception of these three concepts as ignorance is removed and right view comes to vision (Buddhaghosa 2010).

But why does he again pursue knowledge of rise and fall? To observe  
the [three] characteristics. *Vishudhimagga* (Buddhaghosa 2010: 666)

The main aim of this study is to understand the nature of insight from a phenomenological perspective. To understand how the experience of insight affects one's view of the self and one's response to arising phenomena (thought, emotion and sensation). It is also an investigation into what agencies are at work in the process of becoming. By mapping the experiences of meditators onto a soteriological and ontological study of Buddhist doctrine, I have charted significant insights which result in the fetter breaking experience. To do this I have used interviews, scripture and meditation manuals as primary sources.

A scriptural study will only allow an etic understanding of the nature of this phenomenon. Bucknell (1993) suggests that the analysis of experience by non-practising scholars potentially allows misidentification of particular caveats within meditation doctrines. These caveats are subtle but important nuances in the method of contemplation as they could lead to completely different phenomenological outcomes. To overlook such nuances could lead to false identification with particular stages on the path to enlightenment (Schmithausen 1981).

A phenomenological enquiry offers support to a more precise definition of the scriptural translation and interpretation when referring to technologies of the mind (Flood 1999). It is for this reason that I have used interviews with Theravada Buddhist meditators to map out significant experiences of direct insight on the path to freedom. The path of insight is one which is so intimate and profound that it automatically changes

the psychology of the perceiver. A purely phenomenological approach, however, will only allow an emic perspective which does not qualify as a complete vision of the path to awakening. The only significant emic point of view which can relay the proverbial ‘forest from all the trees’ is from the Buddha himself. Unfortunately, we only have a treatise of the word of the Buddha written sometime after his *parinibanna* (Gombrich 2009).

To interpret the experiences of the interviewees, I have presented the first part of my analysis as a doctrinal study. To understand Buddhist experience, it is important to understand Buddhist ontological frameworks which underpin the path to awakening. The first chapter is an analysis of *dependent arising* and how it is situated on the path to Enlightenment. I have examined the mechanisms behind the components that dependently arise to make up our perceived reality (*samsāra*) using the *Abhidhamma* to frame my analysis (Gethin, 1998; Buddhaghosa 2010). I have concluded this section with a chapter on the interrelatedness of Vipassanā and Samatha practices as insight into dependent origination (the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering).

The final chapter is a phenomenological analysis of the experiences of meditators who follow the path of Samatha and or Vipassanā in the Theravada tradition. I have used meditation manuals and booklets written by famous meditation masters within the Theravada tradition. Such manuals are available for free at retreats and monasteries to support practitioners on their path to freedom. I have used these manuals to interpret the subtle differences in states of concentration and depths of insight on the path to awakening. Clear descriptions of experiences marked as ‘signs’ are often aligned with further instruction on how to go beyond the said ‘state’. Thus, chronologically positioning the experience on the path to enlightenment.

## **Methodology**

The guideline for the interviews consists of thirty-one questions divided into five parts. The first part establishes the background and practices of the practitioner. The second part establishes any significant experiences which have arisen as a result of certain meditation practices. The third involves questions which pertain to insight or experiences involving the perception of dependent origination. The fourth is dedicated to *jhanic* experiences which have arisen through *samatha* practices and lastly how such meditative experiences have changed one’s perception of the self and reality.

I have correlated quotes from different interviewees' experiences pertaining to the same experience to map degrees of insight and concentration along the path to awakening. Each interview can be found in the Appendix. I have removed any insignificant conversation detail and replaced it with “. . .” for coherence and flow. For the full interview, recordings have been provided. Of the interviews, I have drawn on five interviewees to analyse as they all attained access concentration; a starting point for deep insight into the nature of reality.

Due to the possible misunderstanding of the questions, I have allowed more spontaneity in the interview. This allows the interviewee to disclose significant experiences of insight which may not have been accessed through the interview questions. I used the interview guideline to make sure significant aspects of experiences were covered. Similes and metaphors were unavoidable as sometimes, the interviewee traversed states which were beyond the sense sphere.

### **Issues with Interviews and Solutions**

When using interviews to assess meditative states there are a few issues which must be considered and sought to overcome when interpreting experience through language. Sharf (1995) argues that the rhetoric of meditative experience in Buddhist modernism is limited by the tenuous link by what is said in the interview and what experienced.

The mind can only perceive such abstract ideas intellectually through a lens of ignorance. We must remember that ignorance in the Buddhist context is a distortion of reality which hides direct perception. It is for this reason that Husserl's notion of bracketing becomes a central facet when interpreting deep meditative states (Flood 1999). For this reason, the interviews will be interpreted within the framework of Buddhist soteriology and ontology (Garfield 2015).

## CHAPTER 1

### Buddhist Insight

Buddhist philosophy engages with the cognitive process of the mind which induces suffering (Gethin, 1998). To understand the core beliefs of Buddhism, it is intrinsic that we engage with the processes and the experience of insight as it is this very process which is the cause of liberation.

The experience of insight is more than just knowledge or understanding. Sayadaw U Pandita (1993) describes insight as *vicaya* which is synonymous with “wisdom” and “investigation”. *Vicaya* is a non-intellectual knowing which can distinguish certain features of *dhamma* through an intuitive knowing. This intuitive knowledge is imperceivable if the mind is clouded with the taints of craving and aversion (Buddhaghosa 2010).

The knowledge of rise and fall already dealt with, being disabled by the ten imperfections, was not capable of observing the three characteristics in their true nature; but once freed from imperfections, it is able to do so. *Vishudhimagga* (Buddhaghosa 2010: 666)

Gautama’s’ awakening was a result of insight of the fourfold noble path; the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) and the truth of the path of cessation of suffering. The truth of suffering is “The knowledge of the rise and fall”; that which has dependently arisen. To see the dharma is to see dependent origination; to see dependent origination is to transcend the volitional tendencies of the mind (Stcherbatsky, 1923). Insight; therefore, lies at the very heart of Buddhism.

#### 1.1 Pratīyasamutpāda

*Pratīyasamutpāda* or Dependent Arising describes the laws of nature which govern the process of becoming (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2013; Guenther 1957). Through the Buddha’s’ insight into this process, he was able to see a causal relationship between mentality and physicality which formed the human experience of birth, life, suffering and death. He was able to break down this whole process into stages which are known as the twelve links or twelve *nidāna* (Gethin, 1998; Payutto 1994).

And what is dependent arising? Conditioned by ignorance there are volitional forces, conditioned by volitional forces there is consciousness, conditioned by consciousness there is mind-and-body, conditioned by mind-and-body there are the six senses, conditioned by the six sense spheres there is stimulation, conditioned by stimulation there is feeling, conditioned by feeling there is craving, conditioned by craving there is attachment, conditioned by attachment there is existence, conditioned by becoming there is birth, conditioned by death there is old-age and death-grief, lamentation, pain, sorrow and despair come into being. And so there is the arising of this whole mass of suffering. *Nidāna-Vagga (SII 2-4)* (Gethin, 2008:210)

This process happens involuntarily. It is a process governed by its own laws of nature and the only way to stop this process is through meditative insight. Buddhaghosa (2010) describes anything that can be perceived is dependently originated and arises from the “soil”. Anything that arises from this soil is subject to decay, subject to fading away, subject to cessation and subject to impermanence. To identify with this process is a cause of suffering. As soon as one engages with the rising and passing of emotions then one is wrapped up in its web of ignorance.

The turn has now come for the exposition of the dependent origination itself, and the dependently-originated states comprised by the word “etc.,” since these still remain out of the states called the “soil” (bhūmi), of which it was said above, “The states classed as aggregates, bases, elements, faculties, truths, and dependent origination, etc., are the ‘soil’.” (XIV.32). *The Path of Purification* (Buddhaghosa 2010: 533)

Dependent Arising can be described in two ways. It can be seen as a process which spans over a whole lifetime until death. The karmic traces left behind at the moment of death give cause to a new rebirth thus continuing the whole 12 links of becoming (B. Bodhi, 1999). Dependent Arising can also be attributed to a process which is continually occurring from moment to moment (Payutto, 1994). For this study, I have analysed



Dependent Arising as a process which happens from moment to moment in order to understand the mechanisms involved in the soteriology of insight.

## **1.2 Abhidhamma and Dhamma Theory**

If we are to examine experience in Buddhist meditation, we must move away from our western empirical understanding of the separateness of mind and matter (Johansson 1985). To accurately interpreting the Buddhist experience of Enlightenment without reducing it to physiological or psychological events, we must take into account that all mind and matter are composed of the same essence in Buddhist doctrine (Buddhaghosa 2010; Gethin, 1998; Guenther, 1957; Karunadasa 1996).

We can see the very earliest deep phenomenological investigations into Buddhism came about in the *Abhidhamma* (the third book in the *Tripitaka*) amongst Indian philosophers such as Asanga, Vasubhandu and many more (Ronkin 2005). Bodhi Bhikku (1999) describes the Abhidhamma as something more than just a philosophical speculation of the ontological nature of reality but a real disclosure of organic unity based on the raw experience of insight into no-self and no soul.

### **1.1.1 Dhammas as moments of consciousness**

The Abhidhamma describes and categorises individual building blocks which make up mind-matter phenomena as *dhammas*. From a phenomenological perspective, each *dhamma* has its own characteristics which can be conveyed as having psycho-physical qualities. They arise into existence momentarily creating cause for the next *dhamma* to arise (B. Bodhi, 1999). These psycho-physical moments or *dhammas* arise into our conscious awareness and pass away making up our experiential world. (Cousins 1981; Gethin, 1998; Guenther, 1957; Stcherbatsky, 1923). The diverse characteristics of each *dhamma* interact with each other to make up the physical and mental world arising and passing away multiple times a second known by the theory of *citta-vīthi* (Cousins 1981). The compactness of this experience happens so fluidly and quickly that the mind forms the illusion of the self as a permanent solid entity, the fundamental basis for ignorance (Gethin, 1998).

### 1.2.1 The Causal Relationship Between Dhammas

The arising and passing away of a set of *dhammas* is conditioned by the arising and passing away of the previous set. This is what is known as dependent arising or Pratītyasamutpāda (B. Bodhi, 1995). Gethin (1998) describes *dhammas* as perfuming the next *dhamma* as it arises. This suggesting that they have the capacity to change the characteristics of the next *dhamma* that arises. However, if we are to go by the Abhidhammas' descriptions of *dhammas* pertaining to a different characteristic then each *dhamma* is fixed in its qualities (B. Bodhi, 1999). There must be a different mechanism at play between *dhammas*.

The condition originates (*sadaya*) the dependent state, provides it with a source (*nidāna*) generates it (*jātika*), gives it being (*pabhava*), nourishes it (*āhāra*), acts as its foundations (*upanisā*), causes it to surge (*upayāpeti*). (B. Bodhi, 2007; 9)

The earliest analysis of the materiality of *dhammas* is outlined in the *Abhidharmahrdaya* by Dhamaśrī which is further developed by the *Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika* (Ronkin 2005). This view states that the most fundamental *dhammas* are the primary elements (*mahābhūtas*), earth, water, fire, air, which cannot be reduced further and constitute mentality and material reality (*rūpa-dhamma*) (Ronkin 2005).

The Paṭṭhāna<sup>1</sup> describes the causal relationship between the *dhammas*, stating that the *mahābhūtas* support the 'realness' of the *dhammas* that proceed it (Cousins 1981; Ronkin 2005, U. M. Sayadaw 2010; Stcherbatsky 1923). It gives presence to the later 'heap' of *dhammas*. The characteristics of mentality physicality vary depending on the combinations of *mahābhūtas*.

### 1.2.3 Dhammas As Phenomenological

In normal cognition, characteristics of a physical object or emotion arise into conscious perception and pass away creating an experience. *Dhamma* theory poses that the *mahābhūtas* create this *illusion* of 'experiential realness' by entering the sense doors of touch, taste, sight, or smell (Y. Karunadasa 1996). Each *dhamma* that arises in the

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<sup>1</sup> This is the last of the seven books of the Abhidhamma which deals with meditative practices of awareness of body, feelings and consciousnesses. The term *Paṭṭāna* relating to *satipattāna*.

consciousness moves to its appropriate sense door (smell to nose) and is experienced as a moment. The heap of *dhammas* seemingly arise together creating a whole phenomenon of experience (Buddhaghosa 2010).

Stcherbatsky (1923) states that the grasping nature of the sense doors catch the *mahābhūtas* along with its heap of *dhammas* and translates that heap as an object (a smell, feeling, image, or thought). Guenther (1957) extends Stcherbatsky theory of sense door perception and experience. He suggests that the senses require food or sustenance in order to thrive. He uses the metaphor of food to compare the grasping of the senses as a contraction much like the stomach walls when one is hungry. To relieve this tension (hunger), the senses must find sense stimuli (food). This reaction-action cause the whole 12 links to run its course.

Cousins (1981) argues that the mind adverts to the sense doors which probe and disturb *bhavaṅga*. In Buddhist ontology, *bhavaṅga* is known as the storehouse of karma and all *dhammas* arise from it. As soon as *bhavaṅga* is disturbed by the probing mind, *dhammas* arise and make contact with the sense doors. The *mahābhūtas* within the heap of arising *dhammas* activate sense consciousness.

Stcherbatsky (1923) suggests that consciousness arises as a sensation in the body. It is for this reason that any formation of consciousness that arises in our experience must be supported by a *mahābhūtas*. It is the *mahābhūtas* which gives rise to the physical sensation. Bodhi Bikkhu (1999) and Buddhaghosha (2010) support this concept in their analysis of wholesome and unwholesome states of mind causing pleasant and unpleasant sensation to arise respectively. Support for this argument lies in the wholesome nature of the jhanas, which are free from hindrances, gives rise to pleasant sensations.

Herein pleasure has the characteristics of experiencing desirable tangible sensations; pain has the characteristic of experiencing undesirable tangible sensations; happiness has the characteristics of experiencing what is either intrinsically or imagined to be desirable; . . . equanimity has the characteristic of experiencing the balance [between them]. *Summary in the Topics of the Abhidhamma and Commentary* (Anuruddha 2002; 90)

Buddha describes attention to the *mahābhūtas* as a means of insight into the nature of reality. Through careful examination of the physical experience, one can gain insight

into what mentality and physicality are. His attention towards the physical experience underpins his soteriological path.

The contents of the stomach. . . belonging to oneself, is solid, solidified, and clung-to: this is called the internal earth element. Now both the internal earth element and the external earth element are simply earth element. And that should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my-self. When one sees it thus as it actually is with proper wisdom. *Mahāhatthipadopama-sutta* (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 1995)

In the above quote, the Buddha is alluding to the self and all that surrounds the self as the same thing, composed of the same elements. When we observe reality from an enlightened perspective we can see that *dhammas* which make up our 'outside' reality are the same components that make up our 'inside' physicality and experience.

### **1.3 Insight into Impermanence**

The impermanent factor of dependent arising is that *dhammas* arise from nothing and pass away into nothing (Buddhaghosa 2010). This process is causing the human continuum of existence.

All formed bases should be regarded as having no provenance and no destination. For they do not come from anywhere prior to their rise, nor do they go anywhere after their fall. On the contrary, before their rise they had no individual essence, and after their fall their individual essences are completely dissolved. . . since they exist in dependence on conditions and in between the past and the future. Hence they should be regarded as having no provenance and no destination. *The Path of Purification* (Buddhaghosa 2010: 496)

Cousins (1981) argues that each dharma does not arise and pass into nothing but from *bhavaṅga*, the unconscious storehouse of karma. When *bhavaṅga* is disturbed then *dhammas* arise. When it is undisturbed it is clear and translucent, allowing insight into the past, present and future of all what has arisen and what will arise.

Anuruddha's *Summary of the Topics of the Abhidhamma* states that the taints continue to arise if insight into the nature of reality is not naturally attained. As soon as one truly sees the nature of that which arises to be impermanent and without substance then the taints are destroyed (Anuruddha 2002). The suttas support this notion.

I say that it is when one knows, when one sees that one destroys the taints, not when one does not know, when one does not see. But knowing what, seeing what, does one destroy the taints? How physical form is, how it arises, how it comes to an end; how feeling is . . . how conceiving is . . . how volitional forces are . . . how consciousness is, how it arises, how it comes to an end. Knowing this, seeing this, one destroys the taints. *Specific Basis (S II 29–32)* (Gethin, 2008; 35)

Kuan (2008) confirms that the basis for insight into impermanence begins with concentration and equanimity. A state which is absent of desire and remains unmoved by objects experienced through the senses. It is from this position that one can establish mindfulness on the impermanent nature of reality.

He thinks, "Now the path will arise." Equanimity about formations, after comprehending formations as impermanent, or as painful, or as not-self, sinks into the life-continuum. Next to the life-continuum, mind-door adverting arises making formations its object as impermanent or as painful or as not-self according to the way taken by equanimity about formations. *The Path of Purification, Pañña* (Buddhaghosa 2010; 698)

## CHAPTER 2

### The Interrelated Paths of Samatha and Vipassanā as a means to Enlightenment

In the following chapter I have analysed the two paths to Enlightenment; complete cessation and insight. (Cousins, 1984). That of *samatha* (concentration) through the jhanic path and that of *vipassanā* (insight) through investigation. Both concentration and insight generate non-sensual happiness which arises from a mind free from hindrances (Buddhaghosa 2010). However, the mechanisms which remove the hindrances are different. One is born from the seclusion of hindrances (*samatha*) and one is born from mindfulness of hindrances (*vipassanā*) (Cousins, 1984; King 2015). To understand the practical application of these two methods we must understand that one path supports the other to enable right view (Cousins,1984).

The *Satipatthana-sutta* and *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* are pivotal suttas when looking at the nature, the practice and the outcome of insight (*vipassanā*) (Kuan 2008). Its meditation instructions act as a preparation for wisdom (*pañña*) or insight to arise in a threefold manner. By mindfully guarding oneself against the taints, desire, aversions, etc. one cultivates a mind which is pure, steady and wholesome allowing insight to arise naturally (Buddhaghosa 2010; Cousins, 1984). We are also cultivating a concentrated mind in preparation for the jhana factors and ultimately complete cessation. Finally, witnessing the arising and passing away of phenomena thus removing ignorance and disempowering desire and aversion (Fuller 2005; Gethin, 1998; Vetter 1988).

The *Satipaṭṭhāna-Sutta* describes a release from craving (the cause of suffering) through concentrated mindfulness. This insight comes from developing equanimity and applying it to observation.

He lives watching the way things rise in terms of qualities; or he lives watching the way things pass in the case of qualities . . . Further more his mindfulness that there are qualities is established so that there is knowledge and recollection in full degree. *The Satipaṭṭhāna-Sutta* (Gethin, 2008:150)

Schmithausen (1981) reasons that insight into the perpetual creation of *samskaras* causes distaste for mundane existence resulting in the cessation of craving.

Simultaneously there is a realisation of the blissful existence that is without craving (*nirodhastyā*).

Vetter (1998) argues that there is no release until there is knowledge of the origin of suffering. Complete enlightenment does not ensue until the four noble truths have been experientially discovered. Gotama is only a Buddha once he has insight into the continual arising and passing away of dhammas. Vetter (1988) holds that although the jhanic path plays a significant role in the suttas, they are not entirely responsible for the fetter breaking experience.

The *Bodhirājakumāra-sutta* describes the Buddha's enlightenment (cessation) under the Bodhi tree as a result of a clear mind from the fourth *jhana* and insight into dependent arising (Gethin, 2008).

I lived having attained the pure equanimity and mindfulness of the fourth absorption which is free from happiness of unhappiness. . . I applied and directed my mind towards the knowledge of the destruction of taints. I truly knew what suffering is, I truly knew what the arising of suffering is, I truly knew what the cessation of suffering is, I truly knew what the practice leading to the cessation of suffering is. I truly knew what taints are, I truly knew what the arising of taints is, I truly knew what the cessation of taints is, I truly knew what the practice leading to the cessation of taints is. In the course of knowing this and seeing this, my mind was freed from the taint of sense desire, my mind was freed from the taint of being, my mind was freed from the taint of ignorance. And when it was freed, there was knowledge that it was freed: I understood, "Birth is destroyed. The spiritual life has been lived".  
*Bodhirājakumāra-sutta* (Gethin, 2008; 186)

Buddhaghosha (2010) states that complete cessation (*nirodha-samāpatti*) occurs in the final formless state of neither apperception nor non-apperception. It is not disputed that complete cessation happens at this point (Vetter 1988; Gethin, 1998); however, insight into the impermanent nature of phenomena would be impossible if there were no phenomena to observe. To what extent does Enlightenment require complete cessation and insight? The *Udāna* describes the end of stress (suffering) as a result of neither perception nor non-perception, the last formless state.

There is that dimension, monks, where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind; neither dimension of the infinitude of space, nor dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, nor dimension of nothingness, nor dimension of neither perception nor non-perception; . . . And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor staying; neither passing away nor arising: unestablished, unevolving, without support [mental object]. This, just this, is the end of stress. *Udāna 8:1 Unbinding (1) Nibbāna Sutta* (Thānissaro 2012; 111).

Gotama is able to gain enlightenment from the fourth jhana where the mind is clear steady and free from happiness and joy. However, in the Buddha's exclamation of complete enlightenment in the *Bodhirājakumāra-sutta* there is no mention of the four formless states as a necessary component to awakening. Gethin (1998) describes the four formless abodes as refinements of the fourth jhana; an extension to the *iddhi* or 'higher knowledges' described in the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*. He also attributes the four formless abodes to the *brahma-vihāras*, an ancient Theravadin meditation practice which was a path to Enlightenment in its own right.

Gotama refuted Ālāra Kālāma's and Uddaka Rāmaputta's claim that the sphere of nothingness and the sphere of neither perception or non-perception was final liberation in the *Bodhirājakumāra-sutta* (Gethin, 2008). This supports Vettters' (1998) argument that the older texts were a combination of Buddhist scriptures and Bramanical practices which contained the formless spheres. This concept evolved into the idea that insight into the nature of dependent arising from the fourth jhana caused a 'release of the heart' (*cettovimuti*), resulting in the four formless abodes and complete cessation (Cousins, 1984).

The *Vissudhimagga* concludes that complete cessation in the final formless state is the highest attainment after insight (Buddhaghosa 2010).

(ii) Who attains it? (iii) Who do not attain it? No ordinary men, no stream enterers or once-returners, and no non-returners and Arahants who are bare insight workers attain it. But both non-returners and those with cankers destroyed (Arahants) who are obtainers of the eight attainments attain it. For it is said: "Understanding that is mastery,



owing to possession of two powers, to the tranquilization of three formations, to sixteen kinds of exercise of knowledge, and to nine kinds of exercise of concentration, is knowledge of the attainment of cessation” And these qualifications are not to be found together in any persons other than non-returners and those whose cankers are destroyed, who are obtainers of the eight attainments. That is why only they and no others attain it.

*Vissudhimagga* (Buddhaghosa 2010).

This path is known as ‘released on both sides’ (*ubhato-bhāga-vimutti*) (Whynne, 2002). The defilements are permanently eradicated through mastery of all four jhanic states and four formless states, specifically *nirodha-samāpatti*. There is also perfect insight into the nature of phenomena.

Bodhi Bikku (1995) describes the “dry insight meditator” (*sukkhavipassaka*) as someone who does not lack deep serenity; however, without the support of the fine-material-jhana sphere, one lacks eminent concentration. Bodhi Bikku (1994) states that absolute cessation of perception and feeling can only be mastered through a combination of concentration and insight. It is not enough that these eight states are merely attained. Instead, one must be completely fused with these states so that ignorance is completely eradicated.

Gethin (1998) argues that the path of insight and the *jhanic* path are both very much tied up with one another. The *jhanic* path works as a means to temporarily push aside the defilements yet it does not destroy them from the root. Only insight removes the roots of defilements; however, one must obtain a clear mind acquired through the *jhanic* states (Buddhaghosa 2010).

The *Culahatthipadopama Sutta* describes Enlightenment as a moment of complete knowing. A moment after the jhanas and siddhis, after insight into the cause of suffering and the cessation of suffering and so leads to complete Buddhahood. It is a point of knowing that there is no more karma and no more rebirth.

When he knows, and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: 'It is liberated.' He understands: 'Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had

to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.  
. . . It is at this point that a noble disciple has come to the conclusion:  
'The Blessed One is fully enlightened. Culahatthipadopama Sutta  
(Gethin, 2008: 277)

## CHAPTER 3

### Interpretation of Meditation Experiences

In the following analysis, I have organised my interview data into three parts. I have examined how deep insight is born from concentration. Insight into the impermanent nature of dependent arising and no-self and finally how insight leads to the removal of fetters. These divisions are not clear cut categories as the interviewees often describe these three factors happening simultaneously. For the sake of a coherent analysis, I will focus on each aspect in a singular manner. However, the concurrent arousal of concentration, insight and right view is an important aspect to the fetter breaking. I have summarised this aspect at the end of my analysis.

#### 3.1 Insight Through the Jhanas

In this section, we will examine how the jhanic states support insight through the experiences of long term meditators. The suttas describe the fourth jhana as a significant point at which the body is calm and the mind is subtle enough for the conditions to allow insight into dependent origination (Gethin, 2008). From this position, there are no more hindrances obstructing clear seeing (King 2015). Buddhagosha (2010) states that by abandoning the hindrances insight arises naturally. It is for this reason that we must look at jhanic states as an important factor to insight.

##### 3.1.1 Insight from the fourth Jhana

*Interview 1* describes the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> jhanas as very pure states of concentration yet too intense and too gross for insight to arise (see Appendix for interview 1). As soon as the *piti* and *sukkha* settle, *interview 1* enters the fourth jhana and is able to observe phenomena arising and passing away from a position of perfect equanimity free from hindrances. Interview 1 describes insight arising naturally from the fourth jhana. There is no intentional investigation but he notices a fabrication of the self.

##### Interview 1

It's pretty empty . . . The joy has gone. It's just like you're in interstellar space . . . There is awareness of body, there is awareness that there is mind . . . The self is long gone . . . The self is fading through the jhanas. There is awareness but it is not my awareness. . . It became possible see

an occasional fabrication of self happening. . . It can be clearly seen, it's just another ripple on the pond, the transformative moment for me was to have a very heightened direct experience of the attempted process of the self-fabrication and a clear understanding that it was a small region of a larger space of mind.

The path of stilling the mind (*samatha*) and the path of investigation (*vipassanā*) are different processes as far as meditation practice is concerned (Vetter 1988). One path is born from pure concentration and the other is born from investigation. However, as one progresses in meditation practice, concentration supports insight. Deep investigation can only arise from a pure, steady mind (Buddhaghosa 2010, P. U. Sayadaw 1993).

The equanimous mind does not reach for sense experience and can, therefore, investigate phenomena in great depth (V. Mahāthera, 1993). The hindrances are kept at bay due to deep concentration. Although the fourth jhana is acquired by fixing the attention to a single object, one then has the choice to open the range of awareness, still maintaining concentration. This is referred to as *khaṇika-samādhī*. In this state, the arising and passing phenomena can be observed in one continuous awareness without clinging (B. Bodhi, 1994).

Out of the interviews, two interviewees entered into the *samatha jhanic* states. Both interviewees claimed that these states transformed their meditation practice by deepening concentration.

#### **Interview 1**

I'm not sure if you need to practice the jhanas and I am cautious about overdoing the jhana part of the path. It is true, however, after 15 years of dry insight that my jhana retreat was a bit of a game changer and it was like, bham, I'm gonna turn the dial up with my practice.

#### **Interview 5**

Having done my first retreat with Leigh [Brasington] . . . I thought wow, I have been really missing out all these years on not doing this and I think there should be more focus on more *samatha* . . . It's so wholesome and so positive and it really makes the whole insight [practice] a lot easier.

### 3.2 Access Concentration

The Venerable Mahāthera (1993) describes three types of concentration which keep the hindrances at bay, access concentration or concentration just before the first jhana (*upacāra-samādhī*), absorption concentration (*appanā-samādhī*) and momentary concentration (*khaṇika-samādhī*). The first two are a result of calm abiding practices and the last is a result of insight practices. All three of these states support insight knowledge yet only the first two states support access concentration into jhanic states. Below are examples of possible directions to go in access concentration as well as a comparable experience between the three interviewees. Namely, the arising of *pīti* and removal of hindrances and insight.

#### Interview 5 Just before entering into jhana

Pre-first jhana when the mind is in access [concentration] . . . The mind is quiet and the thoughts are in the background. Breath is gone to almost nothing . . . It's like the finest thread and there is an urge to go [gulps air] but you don't need to and often there is a light at this stage. However, you don't need to do this as now I just go 'oh sod off thoughts' and I'll go straight into it that way, so maybe there's more than one way in. There's something else I did (I checked with Leigh and he said it was alright) I might deliberately restrict my breath and that seems to be a way in . . . It's funny how little you breath.

#### Interview 2

Does everyone need jhanas? . . Just before jhanas you seemed to be very present and untroubled . . . Thoughts are just bubbling in the background . . . At that point then you can go into to the first jhana and get into the pīti, the physical sensation, the bliss in the body . . . Or you could get interested in the nature of experience you could see what objects are presenting themselves and notice the three characteristics.

#### Interview 1

There is an intimacy with the breath after an extended period time and by noticing the signs of an upwelling of pīti. . . Some wanting starts to arrive and you can sort of see it or feel it beginning to take shape and

then you sort of direct the mind towards somehow cutting that off and allowing it dissipate. . . I can see this arising and I allow it to pass, I'm not gonna get on that train, which isn't the same as suppression.

Sayadaw U Pandita (1993) describes two types of samadhi, fixed concentration and moving concentration. In order to investigate the nature of mind and matter, one must be able to examine a wider field of phenomena rather than one point. Pa-Auk Sayadaw (1998) describes the breath disappearing as a definite sign of access concentration. All interviewees described this experience before deep insight (see appendix).

### 3.3 Vipassanā Jhana

The insight tradition is to focus on cultivating wisdom (*paññā*) and the three characteristics (impermanence, the nature of suffering and no self) (Moneyya 2006). Access concentration is an important meditative state on the path as it acts as an entry point into perceiving the true nature of phenomena.

The development of wisdom is known as *The Progress of Insight* and can be broken down into five *vipassanā jhana* (Sayadaw U Pandita, 1993; Bodhi Bhikku, 1994). Within traditions which focus largely on insight, practitioners are advised to ignore the uprising of *piti* and focus on awareness of what is arising and passing (V. Mahāthera 1993). *Vipassanā jhana* arises with deep absorption on the arising and passing of phenomena and manifests as 'rapture and joy born of seclusion', much like the *samatha jhanas* (B. Bodhi, 1994). These states resemble *samatha jhana* yet *piti* and *sukha* do not arise with the same intensity. It is the deep absorption which causes the *jhana* factors to arise; however, the dispersed concentration over a wider field of investigation reduces the intensity of the feeling (P. U. Sayadaw 1993).

In the following section, we will survey the experiences of insight which arose from these different *vipassanā jhanas*. Each experience describes a different depth of concentration and a correlation of detail and clarity to the experience. V. Mahāthera (1993) describes the path of awakening through insight as not so much what one sees but *how* one sees it. Grasping diminishes when one sees the impermanent nature of reality. Delusions of self disappear when one can see that everything arises from nothing and falls into nothing and there is no observer of this phenomena.

### 3.3.1 First Vipassanā Jhana

Sayadaw U Pandita (1993) describes the difference between the first *vipassanā jhana* and the second *vipassanā jhana* as the difference between effortful concentration and deep effortless concentration respectively. Much like the application of concentration (*vitakka*) and sustained concentration (*vicāra*) of access concentration before entering the first samatha jhana (Vetter 1988). In the second *vipassanā jhana*, insight into the rising-falling nature of phenomena become clear. The extract below describes moving from the first vipassanā jhana to the second.

#### Interview 2

There are times when the experience of the observer disappears, so for example, listening to a sound. . . Listening to a bird and I'm noting<sup>2</sup> hearing hearing, hearing . . . and then the curiosity comes in of where does the sound of the bird finish and I begin? . . . Who is hearing the bird? . . . There might be some noting but it's really in the background . . . If the interest is strong then I don't need the noting. . . All of a sudden there is just the sound of the bird and there is an openness and spaciousness that appears . . . I am not separate from the bird; the sense of self disappears and there is the sound of the bird but there are not thoughts around it. There is no evaluating it but there is an intuitive sense that it is insubstantial . . . There is a flow . . . because the bird isn't a fixed thing it's a whole subtle world of change and movement.

This experience is a clear marker of insight into the nature of reality resulting in the dissolution of the self. As a result of maintaining mindfulness on the arising and passing away of objects of attention, concentration deepens and wisdom (*vicaya*) arises (B. Bodhi, 1994). The first insight into the interrelatedness of mind and matter causes the first *vipassanā jhana* to arise. As focus continues to penetrate the nature of the phenomena the self begins to fade into the background.

#### Interview 2

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<sup>2</sup> Mahasi noting meditation is a mindfulness technique where every thought, volition, action and sensation is labelled as it arises

In my experience, it was that these things did come up separately but in a fast flow. Things were going so quickly, fleeting feelings of pleasure and pain or neutrality . . . They would arise seemingly separately . . . Sometime it would be me noticing my pain, my pleasure, my aversion but there were other times 'I' wasn't there so much . . . It sort of receded into the background and there was more peace and space around the process of observation . . . There were also times when the sense of the observer totally disappears.

Sayadaw U Pandita (1993) refers to this phenomenon as *anatta* or absence of the self in the rising and falling of phenomena. *Anatta lakkhaṇa* is a characteristic of *anatta* where one is able to notice that phenomena arises and passes in a manner which responds to their own set of laws. Laws which we can be observed but not controlled. Mahasi Nyanaponika (1965) describes a moment when the meditator realises that all bodily and mental processes can be witnessed as separate things arising and passing away in fast succession.

### **3.3.2 Second Vipassanā Jhāna**

Sayadaw U Pandita (1993) describes that in the second *vipassanā jhāna* the observer disappears and the exact laws of nature are observed with more clarity. The mind is steady and clear. There is no discursive thinking in this state, just bare attention. At this stage, there is insight and a lack of hindrances.

Interview 6 describes a separateness of arising and falling phenomena which happens of its own accord. Through absorption, there is less craving and therefore, less identification with the process. As a result, the self begins to fade.

#### **Interview 6**

You start to be able to see the relationship between observed and observer. Mental and physical and how they interplay with one another. It's like sensation arises and part of the mind recognises something has arisen, then there's observation then there's reaction. It's very subtle and quick but it repeats itself. . . Physical form breaks down a bit. It's not physical form . . . you feel it subtler. With insight meditation, you do not choose the experience you are about to have. . . If you are deep in your practice you are aware that is just arising and passing.



At this stage, the knowledge of no-self is beginning to arise. The dependently arising phenomena are perceived on a physical and mental level. Detail into the relationship between physicality and mentality is becoming more clear as the physicality starts to dissolve. Interview 6 becomes aware that they are not an agent in what is arising or passing (Moneyya 2006).

#### **Interview 6**

At a certain point, you can feel the rising and passing . . . it's happening constantly . . . it's very gross initially but it becomes subtler and subtler and subtler. . . Then you start to realise that hindrances, memories, and they initially they arise and pass with great velocity. . . It's physical at first, as sensations in the body . . . The physical feeling would arise and depending on the nature of that feeling a mental response would happen. . . The more concentrated you become the more you see. As you dissolve you become subtler. . . The phenomena can't be recognised as self because it's just arising passing. Phenomena is happening without you. You are not creating this.

### **3.3.3 Third Vipassanā Jhana**

Ledi Sayadaw (1998) describes the impermanent nature of the arising and passing away of principal *dhammas* which can be analysed through sensation in the body. He likens the body to a mass of foam constantly appearing and disappearing. The sensation of the constant arising and passing away of tiny bubbles awakens deep insight into impermanence (*anicca*). (Moneyya 2006) describes the arising and passing bubbles as *rupā-kalapas*. Interview 4 describes a similar insight from an equanimous state (see appendix for details).

#### **Interview 4**

I think atomic is a good interpretation. I felt that I was in the building blocks. . . Because everything was changing constantly (in the body) . . . Constantly arising, constantly changing over the whole body, just constant tiny little bubbles and little bits . . . Very tiny sensations and feelings . . . There is something magnetic about them. . . Polarising and depolarising.

Ledi Sayadaw (1998) describes this depth of insight as the third *vipassanā jhana*. One is able to see the impermanence of human experience. Phenomena arise from nothing and pass away into nothing. There is no more excitement or joy at this stage, only equanimity (V. Mahāthera 1993).

#### **Interview 4**

Once I was in the Equanimeous space it didn't matter . . . In that head space, everything was interesting. . . It wasn't about pain or pleasure; it was just curiosity that was keeping me going . . . Maybe this was an Equanimeous emotion . . . It doesn't rely on anything being good or bad. . . It was all just interesting.

### **3.3.4 Fourth Vipassanā Jhana**

In the following extract interview 6 is able to take this observation further on a 20 day Vipassanā meditation retreat. He describes the arising and passing away as a three-fold phenomenon. Thought and feeling is intrinsically tied to sensations in the body. The arising and passing of groups of *rupā-kalapas* (possibly *dhammas*) have an elemental quality to them. This quality can be distinguished by the manner in which they arise (Ledi Sayadaw, 1998; Moneyya 2006). Each arising and disappearing takes on the nature of its principal element (*mahābhūta*) whether it is an emotion, thought or sensation. With a *vipassanā* mind, one can experience that objects are only affected by the supporting *mahābhūtas* creating the illusion of solid, liquid or gas (V. Mahāthera 1993; Moneyya 2006).

#### **Interview 6**

You feel a sensation and you can notice if they have a predominance of a type of element. . . This is when you are very deep and that is all you are doing . . . You can see that this deep emotion is coming up and it has a predominance of an element by its nature and the way it behaves. You can see it through the velocity that arises. It's the velocity of its resonance of how it feels. These are very subtle feelings. . . Air would feel lighter . . . It's a physical thing . . . In the moment, it changes . . . It's a thought but it's not . . . Each sensation has a different resonance, vibratory. . . but then they respond in some way to emotion

and thought. It's like this weird interplay, all behaving as one thing . . . They can be very gross and go to very subtle . . . It goes through (your body) and pulsates. . . You can see the nature of what is arising in the sensation . . . It's all about the vibration . . . It all has a different nature and a different quality . . . It feels like they are made from different things . . . It can be very quick. . . It's like 'oh look here it comes, gaseous, it vibrates very fast'.

Sayadaw U Pandita (1993) describes this state as the fourth vipassanā jhana. It is only from this stage that such detail and clarity can be observed. The mind must be steady and extremely pure. Any rapture has completely faded and balance (*tatramajjhataṭṭā*) comes to the foreground.

Through deep concentration, one can see that each experience arises as a cluster of different qualities (B. Bodhi, 1994). Mahāthera (1993) refers to this insight as the delimitation of mind and matter. Moneyya (2006) notes that the elemental quality is hard to experience unless you direct your attention to noticing the elements. He describes this depth of insight only available after *samatha jhana*. Interview 6 did not practice *samatha jhana* but they did describe many experiences of *pīti* and *sukkhā* (see appendix). This insight gains wisdom into each phenomenon as a 'heap' of many thought moments layered on top of each other as described by the Abhidhamma.

### **3.4 The Removal of Fetters through Insight**

Ajhan Sumedho (1987) describes the fetter breaking experience as something which happens on its own as a result of bare attention. With mindfulness, the arising dhammas arise and disappear without an agent. It is only with craving or clinging to the arising heap of dhammas that we create new heaps of arising dhammas. Ajhan Sumedho describes this mindfulness as gentle recognition without absorption in the object of the senses. This concept reflects the experience of Interview 2.

#### **Interview 2**

At one point on the retreat, I was being mindful. I noticed this thought of another cup of Horlicks coming and the wanting and the craving and the intense wanting. . . at that point, I was a bit more present and then the wanting just disappeared. I didn't empower it, I didn't follow it, it

just disappeared, and I didn't have the second cup. I felt 'Ahhh thank God for that, I didn't want it anyway'. . . When I was grounded and present with the wanting I didn't have to follow my habit. . . It was a release of tension. That was an interesting example of getting in the way of feeling and becoming.

Establishing oneself in equanimity allows the fetters to arise and pass away into nothing without creating an emotional response thus creating more karma. This process can be taken to a very deep level especially from an equanimous mind. P. U. Sayadaw (1993) describes an ability to remove pain through insight ensuing a feeling of bliss and tranquility (*upasama sukha*). By witnessing the exact composition, characteristics and behaviour of pain, penetrating insight can remove it completely. Interview 4 describes this experience on a Vipassanā retreat.

#### **Elimination of Pain with attention. Interviewee 4**

I felt that I could eliminate pain completely . . . Through observation . . . I could work my way through or scan any pain that I found whether it was in the leg or lower back, I could mentally massage that pain . . . The pain became visual, it was an entity, it was in my mind's eye . . . The pain had its own identity and it was alive . . . It was quite organic, quite spikey, totally alive. It would try to escape where I was trying to rub it out with my observation. I had to be in an Equanimous space and I would breathe while I was doing it. . . The pain would try to escape to the side and you would follow it and wipe that bit out. . . There is no aversion, I'm fascinated from where I am. . . It was like I had to get rid of these things and I would work my way through and at the end of it I could sit there in stillness.

In interview 4's situation, an equanimous mind (without craving and aversion) enabled clear insight into the insubstantial composition of pain. Consequently, it was allowed to arise and dissolve without creating new pain (A. Chan, 2011).

Pure concentration removes hindrances through a different mechanism. When the mind is focused, there is no room to entertain desire, aversion, sloth, restlessness and doubt. As a result, the mind purifies (P. U. Sayadaw 1993; V. Mahāthera 1993; Ven.

Yogavacara Rahula n.d.). Interview 1 describes entering into the first jhana and reflects on the exact method applied to the seclusion of hindrances.

#### **Interview 1**

There is an intimacy with the breath after an extended period time and by noticing the signs of an upwelling of *piti*. . . some wanting starts to arrive and you can sort of see it or feel it beginning to take shape and then you sort of direct the mind towards somehow cutting that off and allowing it dissipate. . . I can see this arising and I allow it to pass, I'm not gonna get on that train, which isn't the same as suppression.

The application of concentration (*vitakka*) demonstrates an active choice to continually apply the mind to the object of absorption. At the same time, the meditator is choosing to not engage with any thoughts or grasping.

A third position from the hindrances are removed is when there is complete cessation. Interview 5 describes a number of experiences which define a significant falling away of the self (see appendix for all instances).

#### **Interview 5**

I was always told the only place to cut the chain was between craving and clinging or contact and feeling . . . but it's not true, it's *avidya* . . . From this place, it's clear seeing . . . Sense of self just drops away. The whole lot [dependent arising] just stops happening.

The depth of experience does remove an element *avidya*, not completely but significantly. Ajhan Chan (2011) describes much of the fetter breaking experience as elimination of doubt. When one knows that there is no-self there is no more clinging to a false identity of the physical body.

#### **Interview 1**

Little by little softening attachments and letting go of delusion and freeing oneself from clinging. Things like jhana practice can be a bigger step along the path . . . It shakes out the attachments, so the delusion of the self, the attachment to self-view takes a pretty serious knock. It hasn't gone away, it still comes back but it has a little less authority and

a little less insistence, from my point of view. . . I don't take the immediate enlightenment too seriously. . . The gradualist story accords better with my experience and intellectually more plausible.

### **Interview 2**

With the vipassanā mind, the non-dual mind, the sense of wonder, happiness, peacefulness, what that is to me is a growth of confidence, wisdom which are the opposite of doubt and being stuck in self-belief. . . It strengthens these. It shows you, oh I have this resource . . . It's one or the other [self or non-dual mind] . . . you realise I don't have to be stuck in the self . . . There is another mind, the Vipassanā mind . . . There is a skilled way of paying attention which seems to diminish those fetters.

It is clear after close analysis of insight gained in Theravada meditation practices that common experiences do arise as a result of practising the same path. Although certain details within individual experiences differ due to the remnants of the fetters that arise, the knowledge of impermanence, no-self and the nature of suffering correlate with each interview. The type of practice steers the outcome of the experience in the initial stages; however, as one progresses on the path the three factors of enlightenment present themselves naturally and more vividly.

Insight into the nature of phenomena, the cultivation of wisdom and letting go of fetters seem to happen in a pattern or stages of deepening insight. All the interviewees said that insight and concentration go hand in hand. Deep meditative experiences cannot happen without concentration and insight cannot happen without deep concentration.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of insight on the path to awakening. It is also an investigation into the nature of reality and how this can be experienced. Finally, it is an investigation into the actual experiences and insights which arise as a result of Buddhist meditative practice.

As a result of conducting the interviews, I have been able to take a closer look at the nature of the mind in deep states of absorption. The interviews provide evidence that the practices shape the insight that arises. The nuanced directions in where to point ones' attention and how to examine the rise and fall of phenomena gently nudge meditators towards the stream of awakening. This gives us more of an understanding as to why the *suttas* are mainly pedagogical and not metaphysical descriptions (B. Bodhi, 1999). Realisation must be experienced for oneself.

It is also evident that the fetter breaking experience, insight into dependent arising and knowledge of no-self are all interrelated experiences. The accumulation of insight and cessation support a deepening experience of freedom.

It could be argued that the path to awakening is slowly diminishing since the Buddha's *parinibbana*. However, through the phenomenological study of Buddhist experience, we may find that many *Arahants* are walking among us (Sirimane 2016). Through the collaboration of Buddhist meditators and scholarly interpretation of texts, we can build a clearer understanding of the path and the nature of reality. To experience the path is deep and profound and must not be overlooked by the academic community.

From the perspective of the meditator, wisdom is a living thing which moves in and out of view as a response to behaviour, thought and types of practice. Equally, scholars can interpret texts and instructions of the path for a wider audience to follow, study and practice. To separate scholar and practitioner is to create two different inaccurate fields of knowledge. The path cannot exist without these two fields communicating and co-existing. With this prospect in mind, this study is an important contribution to the field

of Buddhist Scholar and practitioner. Buddhist Phenomenology is the bridge between scripture and insight.

There are a few areas of study which would support this specific research. Initially, a look at how Buddhist meditative practices have changed since the time of the Buddha and how it is practised now. We must discern which practices belong to another time and which ones we need to cultivate.

Another area of phenomenological research is the effect of morality and behaviour on meditative concentration. Hindrances on the path play an important role in the progress of insight as it is the lack of hindrances which allow deeper absorption. This is an important area of study which could support the growing mindfulness movement.



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