

Why Gotama Resorted to Jhāna for Buddhahood

by Aggacitta Bhikkhu

Introduction

This is a topic that has been on my mind for some time that I would like to share with you, something which I had researched on, which I've been thinking about for quite some time. This is about why Gotama resorted to jhāna for Buddhahood and is an analysis according to the Pāli suttas.

The Story in Brief

Let's start off with a story in brief. We are going to look at his renunciation and then his attainment of the 3rd and 4th āruppas under his first two teachers, then going on to self-mortification and finally the attainment of Buddhahood. There are actually three accounts of how he attained Buddhahood. I think we are most familiar with this one: He developed the 4 jhānas leading to the threefold true knowledge.

But you may not be so familiar with this one which is: his reflection on the Law of Dependent Origination leading to the discovery of the Noble Eightfold Path. I think most of us would think that he reflected on the Law of Dependent Origination only after he got awakened; but actually no. It was prior to his awakening.

The third aspect is his reflection on the gratification, danger and escape in the case of the five aggregates. This is even less known by people.

So after we go through all these I'm going to come up with a sutta-based conclusion on why Gotama resorted to jhāna for Buddhahood. So now let's go into the details.

Renunciation

Let's look at his renunciation. This may be, I think, quite unfamiliar to most of you but this is what the Buddha actually said:

“Now I too am subject to old age and I'm not exempt from old age. Such being the case, if I were to feel repelled, humiliated and disgusted when seeing another who is old, that would not be proper for me. When I reflected thus, my intoxication with youth was completely abandoned...”

Sukhumāla Sutta (AN 3.39)

And he reflected in a similar way for health as well as for life. Then later he considered:

“Why being myself subject to birth do I seek what is also subject to birth? Why being myself subject to ageing, sickness, death, sorrow and defilement do I seek what is also subject to ageing, sickness, death, sorrow and defilement? Suppose that, being myself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, I seek The Unborn Supreme Security from bondage, Nibbāna.”

Pāsarāsi Sutta (MN 26).

“So at a later time, when I was still young, black-haired, endowed with the blessings of youth in the first stage of life, having shaved off my hair & beard — though my parents wished otherwise and were grieving with tears on their faces — I put on the ochre robe and went forth from the home life into homelessness.”

Mahāsaccaka Sutta (MN 36)

These come from different suttas and we have to collate them to get the whole picture. I don't think you have heard this. What you have heard is this: He saw the 4 sights. He took his charioteer out and on different days he saw different sights: he saw ageing, he saw sickness, he saw death and finally he saw a renunciant. After he had seen the renunciant, he went back home, felt the urge to renounce and then went out again with his charioteer, cut off his hair and asked the charioteer to go back home. Correct?

That's what you heard, but this is actually an account from *Mahāpadāna Sutta* (DN 14). It is the account of Vipassī before he became a Buddha; when he was still a young prince. Vipassī Buddha was the first among the 7 Buddhas that the Buddha talked about in the early suttas. In the early suttas, there were only 7 Buddhas. It is only in the later suttas, in *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Cariya Piṭaka*, that you have all these 28 Buddhas coming into the picture and beyond that you have thousands—beyond the Canon. That was what happened to him. He went with his charioteer and saw the first sight the first day, second sight the second day, third sight the third day and the last sight on the fourth day. He saw this renunciant, and he went down to interview him: “How come you are not dressed like normal people? Why are you dressed like that and what are you doing?” The renunciant told him what a renunciant is supposed to do. Vipassī went back home, felt the urge to renounce and then went out again with his charioteer, cut off his hair and asked the charioteer to go back home

But that didn't happen to Gotama. He didn't go to see anything. He just reflected on his own and then he renounced in the presence of his parents who were weeping. So you see: ‘copy and paste’.

And then you might have heard the story also about how he felt very disgusted

when he saw his female companions on the ground sleeping. That was because they had been entertaining him and when they saw that he had fallen asleep they also took a rest and fell asleep. But when he got up and saw them he felt very disgusted by their various postures and that also spurred him to renounce. And this one comes from the account of Yasa in *Vinaya Mahāvagga*. Yasa was the first lay stream-enterer, and that was an account of what happened to him but not to Gotama.

And also you would have seen this (picture), where he had a last look at his wife with his newborn babe suckling before he left home. This cannot be found anywhere. This as well as the preceding misinformation are found in Buddhaghosa's preamble to the Jātaka commentary. He pieced up everything together.

So if you want to know the true life story of the Buddha, then you should look up this book by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli: *The Life of the Buddha: According to the Pāḷi Canon*. If you have a Gmail account you can go to Google Books and read it for free. However, if you want to buy it, you can also buy it from the Buddhist Publication Society. They have a paperback edition. Or if you want to download a PDF file, this can be found from this website. It's called "Reading Faithfully" It is a pariyatti.org website. It's a very good website. If you're into sutta studies, I recommend you visit this website to get very good translations which are freely available.

First Meditation Teachers

After Gotama renounced, he looked for someone to teach him, and his first two teachers were Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. Āḷāra Kālāma taught him the third āruppa, which is the third formless attainment. There are altogether four of them. He taught him the third and soon he mastered it and Āḷāra Kālāma was so happy. He was such a great being really; he didn't feel jealous. He was so happy that Gotama was such a good learner and so talented to be able to achieve what he had achieved within such a short time. And immediately he asked him to take over half of his students. But Gotama thought "This is not what I am looking for." So he went on to look for his second teacher who was Uddaka Rāmaputta.

Uddaka Rāmaputta taught the 4th āruppa, the base of neither perception nor non-perception. He had not attained that but his teacher Rāma had. Rāmaputta could mean the son of Rāma or it could mean a disciple who was like a son to Rāma. Rāma was Uddaka's teacher who taught the 4th āruppa and had already passed away. Uddaka himself had not attained it but he taught it anyway, and so when Gotama went to learn from him, Gotama also attained the 4th āruppa, something which Uddaka had not attained.

And this teacher also was a great being—he didn't feel jealous. In fact he was so happy he asked him to take over all the students. Very rare to get such great

beings, right? Usually the teacher will be very jealous, afraid that you've more influence than him but no, he was a great being. Anyway Gotama said, "This is not what I am looking for. This does not bring me to the end of suffering, to Nibbāna." So he left him too. And before we continue the story, you might want to know what exactly the āruppas are.

What Are the Āruppas?

This is an extract from one sutta. It is from *Mahāvedalla Sutta* (MN 43). This is a conversation between Āyasmā Sāriputta and Āyasmā Koṭṭhita, two of the most intelligent disciples of the Buddha who were famed for their analytical knowledge of the Buddha's teachings and their preaching in detail what the Buddha had told them briefly.

One was asking the other: "Friend, what can be known by purified mind consciousness released from the five faculties?" The answer: "Friend, by purified mind consciousness released from the five faculties, the base of infinite space can be known thus: Space is infinite".

And then he went on to repeat that for the others: "The base of infinite consciousness can be known thus: Consciousness is infinite ... and the base of nothingness can be known thus: There is nothing."

Mahāvedalla Sutta (MN43).

But it's interesting that he stopped at the third āruppa and he did not continue to the fourth one, because the fourth one is the base of neither perception nor non-perception. It's like you are neither here nor there. You're not really very conscious; so perhaps that's why he didn't say it's purified mind consciousness.

Now what are the five faculties? The five faculties are not the five spiritual faculties. The five faculties are the five senses. So, released from the five senses, when the mind has gone beyond the five senses, what can it be conscious of?

Let me go on to the next sutta reference.

"The eye itself as well as those forms will actually be present and yet one will not experience that base. The ear itself as well as those sounds will actually be present and yet one will not experience that base."

Ānanda Sutta (AN 9.37)

And the same is repeated for the other senses. So all the senses are there; they're in good working order. The objects or senses are there but the mind is not conscious of them. It's just like when you are asleep at night. Your five senses have not shut down. They are still working but you are totally oblivious of them.

So the question is:

"But, friend, if he is not percipient of what is happening at the five senses, then what is he percipient of?"

And the answer is:

“With the complete surmounting of perceptions of forms, with the passing away or perceptions of sensory impingement with non-attention, the perceptions of diversity, perceiving space is infinite. A bhikkhu enters and dwells in the base of the infinity of space. When one is thus percipient, one does not experience that base.”

Ānanda Sutta (AN 9.73)

That base means the five senses—the five sense experiences.

The Five Sense Experiences

So let's look at this in detail. Let's break down this description. What is meant by “complete surmounting of perceptions of forms”? Forms here could mean not just what you can see with the eyes. It could mean all the five senses, all the objects of the five senses because they are all material forms—what you see, hear, smell, taste or feel with the body. So that means to say, with the complete surmounting of perceptions of forms, he is not aware of what's happening at the senses.

The next phrase is another way of putting what was said earlier: “with the passing away of perceptions of sensory impingement.” ‘Sensory impingements’ means what is impinged on your five senses. So there's no more perceptions of what is impinging on the five senses—what the five senses are perceiving.

Then the next phrase says, “with non-attention to perceptions of diversity.” Okay, so now he is no longer perceiving what's happening at the five senses, but the mind is still there and he can still perceive things going on in the mind. There could be thoughts, there could be visions, there could be images—whatever—but he's not paying attention to anything else except one thing. With non-attention to perceptions of diversity (in the mind), he perceives only one single thing which is: ‘Space is infinite.’ When percipient of that one thing he is no longer percipient of anything else either in the mind or at the five senses. All this is from *Ānanda Sutta* (AN 9.37).

So from these two extracts we see that the āruppas are absorptions in a single object of focus wherein all the five senses are completely cut off. That is what is true absorption.

True Absorptions

You see in the earlier citation, there was this question: When the five senses are still intact, i.e. the organs of the five senses are still there, yet one is not perceiving them, what could one be perceiving? So instead of saying that it's a jhāna, he said, “No, it's the āruppas.” So what does that mean? It means that apart from the āruppas, if you were in the jhānas, you could still perceive the five senses. Correct? Logical by implication because the jhānas are not mentioned there; but only three of the 4 āruppas.

And then Gotama found out that that wasn't what he wanted. That also couldn't lead to Nibbāna because you're just absorbed in your own world of thinking of one single thing. You are not aware of what's happening outside you. So how can that lead to the end of suffering? So he felt, “No, this is not the way.” And he went out to try on his own. He tried self-mortification in various ways.

Self-mortification

He tortured himself by sitting right under the sun during the hot season, and then he would stay in the open at night during the cold season, exposing himself to extremes of temperature and finally the last thing he did was: he fasted until he was so weak that he fainted. That brought him to his senses.

Remembering His First Childhood Experience of Jhāna

He recalled that when his father was occupied, he was sitting under the cool shade of a rose apple tree and at that time he spontaneously attained the 1st jhāna. He described the experience thus:

“Secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the 1st jhāna which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion.” And then he asked: “Could that be the path to enlightenment?” Then following on that memory, came the realization that is indeed the path to enlightenment.

Mahāsaccaka Sutta (MN 36)

How Did He Get It?

Now the question is: What was he meditating on to get to the 1st jhāna because it's not stated in this sutta? So again we have to do some searching to piece the jigsaw together. In *Padīpopama Sutta* (SN 54.8) in the *Ānāpāna Saṃyutta*, he was encouraging the monks to practise ānāpānassati.

And he said that he too, before he became fully enlightened, was actually practising ānāpānassati which led him to be liberated from the taints. So now we know he was doing ānāpānassati at the time he got the 1st jhāna when he was sitting under the rose apple tree.

Another observation that we can make is that when Gotama went to learn the ārūppas from his first two teachers they never taught him the jhānas; because if they had, why would he recall his childhood experience. Right? They went straight to the ārūppas.

The Āruggas Can Be Attained without the Jhānas

So you can actually go straight to the āruggas without having to go through the jhānas, although in the Visuddhimagga you're supposed to master all the 4 jhanas first and only after that go on to the āruggas. But in this *Padīpopama Sutta* (SN 54.8) in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, in the Discourses Connected with Breathing in and Breathing out, he encouraged the monks to practise mindfulness of breathing and he said that this could lead to the 1st jhāna, the 2nd jhāna, the 3rd jhāna, the 4th jhāna, the 1st ārugga, the 2nd ārugga, the 3rd ārugga, the 4th ārugga and also to *nirodhasamāpatti*—the cessation of perception and feeling. So what is the difference between the jhānas and the āruggas? The āruggas are also called āyatanas.

The Buddha never talked about eight jhānas although the commentaries tell us there are eight jhānas. The Buddha only talked about 4 jhānas and 4 āyatanas. The āyatanas are the āruggas. Āyatana means base: the base of infinite space, the base of infinite consciousness, the base of nothingness and the base of neither perception nor non-perception. In the Pāli Canon, we also have this word 'ārugga' meaning the formless. Let's now look at the difference between jhāna and ārugga.

Difference between Jhāna and Ārugga

In *Mahāvedalla Sutta* (MN 43), in the conversation between Āyasmā Sāriputta and Āyasmā Koṭṭhita, the question was asked:

“What are the five things that the 1st jhāna has abandoned, and what are the five things that the 1st jhāna possesses?” The answer: “The 1st jhāna has abandoned the five hindrances and it possesses five factors.”

I think you are already familiar with the five hindrances which are sensual desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and finally, doubt. We will look at the five factors later.

The jhānas are defined by the jhāna factors, not the objects of focus. Throughout the suttas we can see very vivid, very detailed descriptions of the jhānas but the Buddha never stated what the object of meditation was. Only the jhāna factors were stated and the experience of jhāna but not the object. Therefore the jhānas can take any object whether it's an object of the mind or the objects of the five senses.

In fact, there is one sutta in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, called the *Samkkhitta Sutta* (AN 8.63), where the Buddha asked the monks to develop the 4 brahmavihāras and the 4 satipaṭṭhānas at different levels of samādhi which include the jhāna factors. Although the word jhāna is not used, the jhāna factors are there. They are mentioned and he said that one can develop the 4 brahmavihāras and the 4 satipaṭṭhānas at different levels of samādhi.

The āruppas, on the other hand, are not defined by the jhāna factors but are defined by the objects of focus. So the 1st āruppa is defined by its object of focus which is infinite space, the 2nd āruppa is defined by its object of focus which is infinite consciousness, the third, nothingness and the fourth, neither perception nor non-perception. Why? Because the mental factors in the āruppas are almost all the same as those in the 4th jhāna. And we can see this in Anupada Sutta in Majjhima Nikāya 111. First, we have the five mental factors. The mental factors of the 1st jhāna are: vitaka, vicāra, pīti, sukha, and cittekkaggatā (thought, examination, rapture, pleasure, unification of mind).

Tabulation of Mental Factors in Anupada Sutta (MN 111)

No.	Mental Factors	Jhāna				Āruppa		
		1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	1 st	2 nd	3 rd
1.	Thought (<i>vitakka</i>)	☑						
2.	Examination (<i>vicāra</i>)	☑						
3.	Rapture (<i>pīti</i>)	☑	☑					
4.	Pleasure (<i>sukha</i>)	☑	☑	☑				
5.	Unification of mind (<i>cittakkaggatā</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
6.	Contact (<i>phassa</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
7.	Feeling (<i>vedanā</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
8.	Perception (<i>saññā</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
9.	Volition (<i>cetanā</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
10.	Mind (<i>citta</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
11.	Zeal (<i>chanda</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
12.	Decision (<i>adhimokkha</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
13.	Energy (<i>vīriya</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
14.	Mindfulness (<i>sati</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
15.	Equanimity (<i>upekkhā</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
16.	Attention (<i>manasikāra</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑

Tabulation of Mental Factors in Anupada Sutta (MN 111)

No.	Mental Factors	Jhāna				Āruppa		
		1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	1 st	2 nd	3 rd
17.	Internal confidence / tranquility (<i>ajjhata sampasādana</i>)		☑					
18.	Mindfulness & clear comprehension (<i>sati-sampajañña</i>)			☑				
19.	Neutral feeling (<i>upekkhā adukkhamasukhā vedanā</i>)				☑			
20.	Mental unconcern due to tranquillity (<i>passaddhattā cetaso anābhogo</i>)				☑			
21.	Purity of mindfulness (<i>satipārisuddhi</i>)				☑			
22.	Perception of the base of infinite space (<i>ākāśānañcāyatanaññā</i>)					☑		
23.	Perception of the base of infinite consciousness (<i>viññāṇañcāyatanaññā</i>)						☑	
24.	Perception of the base of nothingness (<i>ākāśañcāyatanaññā</i>)							☑

Now let's go back to the five things that the 1st jhāna has abandoned, the five hindrances, and the five things that it possesses. And those are the five mental factors mentioned above. Now we look at the 4th jhāna. Practically all the factors in the 4 jhāna are similar to the āruppas; so you cannot define an āruppa by the mental factors. You define an āruppa by the object of its focus.

So that's the difference between the āruppas and the jhānas.

Realisation that Jhāna Is the Path to His Goal

So coming back to the story. After his self-mortification, he found that it was also futile because it could not lead him to what he wanted. Then when he recalled his childhood experience of having spontaneously attained the 1st jhāna, he came to the realisation that this was the path that would lead him to what he wanted. So

he started to nourish himself to get more strength to practise the jhanas. He developed the 4 jhānas and this led to the recollection of past lives and then to the Divine Eye, seeing beings passing away and reappearing according to their actions. So this is where cause and effect comes in, the law of Kamma. And finally he attained the destruction of the influents due to the realisation of the Four Noble Truths. This is found in *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (MN 36).

Meaning of Āsavas

The Pāli word āsavas is sometimes translated as the taints, sometimes as the influents. These are the things that flow into the mind. Āsavati means ‘to flow in’. There’s one sutta in the Aṅguttara Nikāya where the Buddha says the mind is luminous and it is defiled by visiting defilements. So that’s why they are called influents—because they flow into the mind to pollute the mind.

So this is one version—he developed the 4 jhānas using ānāpānassati and then after that he recollected his past lives, developed the Divine Eye and realised the Four Noble Truths.

Another interesting observation is that he had already attained the āruppas prior to his development of the jhānas. Why didn’t he use the āruppas to do all these things, i.e. recollect past lives, develop the Divine Eye and realise the 4 Noble Truths? Why?

Reflection on the Law of Dependent Origination Leading to Buddhahood

The second version is that he reflected on the Law of Dependent Origination when he was still a bodhisatta, not after he became a Buddha. When he was still a bodhisatta, he reflected on this. While doing so, towards the end, when he came to “with the cessation of birth, then everything else will cease”, word ‘nirodha’ (cessation) made an impact on him, and he said, “Now I have found a way. This is the way.” So he said, “This is the Noble Eightfold Path,” and then he followed the Noble Eightfold Path and finally he achieved the destruction of the influents due to the realisation of the Four Noble Truths. This is found in *Nagara Sutta* (SN 12.65)

So you could say that his recollection of past lives and his attainment of the Divine Eye (being able to see how beings pass away and are reborn due to their previous actions) is also another way of seeing conditionality. But this paṭicca samuppāda, the Law of Dependent Origination, is something more detailed and can be found in *Nagara Sutta* (SN 12.65).

Now let’s compare this with Vipassī Bodhisatta. The story of Vipassī bodhisatta is found in the *Mahāpadana Sutta* (DN 14) in which he also reflected on the Law of Dependent Origination. But, merely reflecting on it did not get him enlightened.

After that, on another occasion, he repeatedly observed how the five aggregates arose and fell. So in the same way, in an earlier citation, we saw that Gotama also reflected on the Law of Dependent Origination, and then towards the end of his reflection, he realised that, “Oh, the cessation of birth will lead to the cessation of everything else,” and then he said, “This is the path, this is the Noble Eightfold Path I rediscovered,” and then he followed it. So he actually followed the Noble Eightfold Path. He didn't get enlightened just by reflecting on the Law of Dependent Origination just as Vipassī also didn't get enlightened just by doing that.

Vipassī had reflected on it and that was already in the background, at the back of his mind. So, as he was watching how the five aggregates arose and passed away, he saw the link: cause, conditioning, effect. That's how he attained complete liberation of his mind from the influents.

In the same way Gotama followed the Noble Eightfold Path. Vipassī Bodhisatta had to repeatedly observe the five aggregates, not just arising and passing away, but how—to see the cause and condition, why they arise and why they pass away. The third account, the third version of how he got enlightened is: he reflected on the gratification, danger and escape in the case of the five aggregates. And that led to directly knowing all this ‘as it really is’. What does that mean? What is the gratification in the case of the five aggregates?

Reflection on the Gratification, Danger and Escape in the 5 Aggregates.

Gratification is the pleasure that arises by getting what the five aggregates want. Whether it is pleasure in the forms that one perceives through the five senses or whether it is through the pleasure of feeling or the pleasure of a memory (*saññā*), or the pleasure of *saṅkhārā* (thinking). There are some intellectuals who just love thinking. That's why they cannot meditate because meditation to them is very boring. Correct? You have to just focus on one single object of breathing in, breathing out. So boring that you fall asleep. So the mind will start thinking, right? Get intellectual stimulation.

During my retreats, I will tell people: observe noble silence; don't talk; surrender your phones—cannot look at your phone; don't read free distribution Dhamma books ... and then what do they do? Cannot talk, cannot use the phone, cannot read Dhamma books ... so, they go around looking at posters and notices—just to get intellectual stimulation. Right? Ask them to watch the five senses and after some time they get so bored and they start to think. So that is the gratification, the pleasure of thinking, just for the sake of thinking.

If you watch your mind, you will know that it is really such a busybody. Whenever any of the five senses comes into contact with any object, it will start to comment, start to judge, start to make all sorts of stories in the mind.

So Gotama saw that directly knowing all this as 'it really is' is not just understanding intellectually but actually observing. Actually this is what is happening to the mind, all the time.

As for the danger; the danger is that all these pleasures are transient. They come and go. You have a wonderful memory of good times that you had. You think about it. How long can you get pleasure out of that memory? It will come and it will go.

And as for whatever food you eat, how long do you taste it? If you really eat mindfully, you'll know how boring eating is, but because we don't eat mindfully, while we are munching, we are talking, or thinking of this and that. We think the food is nice, but actually the actual moments of enjoyment are very few when you really watch your mind. Most of the time you're busy chewing, chewing, chewing, munching, munching away the food. What looked so delicious and so crispy has now become mulch in your mouth. If you spit it out, do you think you can eat it? And you thought it's tasty, it's nice, but when you look at it, yuck! So he directly knew all this as it is through experience, not just through intellection.

The danger is, of course, it is transient or has drawbacks. It is transient and you go through so much suffering to get what you are craving for and finally how much pleasure do you derive from it and for how long? Once finished, you go on to the next round, something else, something new to go after and then you start the whole cycle of suffering again.

So, what is the escape? The escape is: don't entertain the desire, don't follow the desire. Once you catch it, stop it. Nip it in the bud. Don't follow it—you want this, you want that, you yearn for this, you go after this ... Once you catch a desire, stop it. That is the actual escape from it. The discipline of desire.

And so he said that only when he had directly known all these things—the gratification, the danger and escape in the case of the five aggregates—did he become awakened to the unsurpassed perfect Enlightenment. This is another version. So there're actually three aspects of how the Buddha got enlightened. So now we come to the sutta-based conclusion on why Gotama resorted to jhāna for Buddhahood.

Conclusion: Why Gotama Resorted to Jhāna for Buddhahood

Since, with Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta he had already attained such high levels of samādhi, why did he need to fall back on the jhānas? The fourth jhāna is equivalent to the āruppas in terms of the mental factors, whereas the first, second and third are actually below/inferior in samādhi. So why? Well, though the āruppas are very deep levels of samādhi, they are merely absorptions—totally separated from the five senses.

Look at Gotama's path to Buddhahood. He was looking at beings arising and passing away, dying and getting reborn according to their past actions. He was contemplating the Law of Dependent Origination; he was looking at the gratification, danger and escape in the case of the five aggregates. All these you can't do when you are in the āruppas, when you're locked in your own world of nothingness, can you? What do you see? You see nothing. Literally you see nothing. So that's why although awakening requires samādhi, it requires the samādhi in which one is still conscious of what's going on at the senses.

Why? In order to be able to discern conditionality, expressed in the Four Noble Truths and the Law of Dependent Origination, he needed the jhāna he had attained through ānāpānassati. That was just ideal for this because jhāna through ānāpānassati is something which is not an absorption, unlike what many people think. Jhānas are not absorptions. Absorptions happen only in the āruppas. Now let's look at the 4 tetrads in Ānāpānassati Sutta, the so-called 16 steps but not necessarily in a sequential way.

4 Tetrads of Ānāpānassati Sutta (MN 118)			
Kāyānupassanā		Cittānupassanā	
Aware of long breath		Experiencing citta	
Aware of short breath		Gladdening citta	
Experiencing whole body		Composing citta	
Tranquilising kāyasankhāra		Liberating citta	
Vedanānupassanā		Dhammānupassanā	
Experiencing rapture		Repeatedly observing impermanence	
Experiencing happiness		Repeatedly observing fading away	
Experiencing cittasankhāra		Repeatedly observing cessation	
Tranquilising cittasankhāra		Repeatedly observing relinquishment	

You have the first four: you're aware of a long breath, aware of a short breath, experiencing the whole body, tranquilising kāya saṅkhāra or tranquilising the breath under kāyānupassanā. And then vedanānupassanā: you're experiencing rapture, experiencing happiness, experiencing cittasaṅkhāra which is feeling and perception, and then you are also tranquilising the feeling in the process. So you can't do all these things with just the āruppas because you are totally absorbed in one single object and you don't know what's happening elsewhere; but here Gotama was aware of so many things. Right? So while you are doing the jhānas

you can also go straight to the last anupassanā: repeatedly observing impermanence (your breath is impermanent, comes and goes). Your thoughts also come and go, right? Even though your thoughts have not completely gone yet and you have not attained to the 4th jhāna, on the way there you can go straight to practise dhammānupassanā to see what's happening. Right?

Now, there's this interpretation of Ānāpānassati Sutta on the practice of mindfulness of breathing that is actually very contrary to the suttas. They say that when you do ānāpāna, you watch your breath until a nimitta (a visual image) arises. Then you stop watching the breath. You focus on that image and then you try to become skillful with the image—you try to manipulate it, try to make it big, small and so forth until you're skilled in doing that and then you get absorbed in it. That is precisely why the Buddha ran away from it. Right? He saw that absorption was not the way to get to Nibbāna.

So that's why if you look at the 4 tetrads, it is not absorption. You are still aware of what's happening to the senses, still aware of what's happening to the 5 aggregates. Watching that nimitta is not ānāpānassati. It is ānāpāna-nimitta-sati meditation, not ānāpānassati meditation. It is meditation on the nimitta that arises out of ānāpāna. Because here, from the beginning until the end, the Buddha said, you're still aware of breathing: you're breathing in, breathing out. Then you train your mind to repeatedly observe impermanence. You breathe in and breathe out. Then you train your mind to experience the citta and so forth.

This is my conclusion on why Gotama resorted to jhāna for Buddhahood. Now it's question time.

Questions & Answers

Q: Venerable has given a thesis linking all the suttas of Gotama until he became a Buddha. So now we can see why he did certain things and why he didn't. Earlier, we just didn't bother about it, especially the āruppas and the Dependent Origination, the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. My question is: it looks very complicated. We have to cover a very wide field to be enlightened, and yet we also know in the suttas about certain yogis like Āṅgulimāla listening to the Buddha and becoming enlightened ...

A: No, no, he didn't. That's also another misconception. He did not get enlightened when he listened to the Buddha. He had to go back to meditate to get there.

Q: But then, the suttas mentioned that during some of the sermons, 500 of them listening got enlightened. So it seems that there are ways that you can reach it without having to go through such a complicated path like the Noble Eightfold Path. The other question I had in mind is: In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, it is mentioned that it's the only way...

A: 'Direct' not 'only'. It's not the 'only'... there's no 'only', it is the direct way.

Q: Okay, direct way. So Venerable mentioned three methods of Buddhahood ...

A: Three versions. Actually he attained Buddhahood once only, but these are described from three different angles.

Q: It appears that the third one, when you see your aggregates rise and fall, and see things as they are—it seems to be very short compared to the other two. I would like Venerable to give some ideas about it. Sādhū!

A: Yeah, of course it is. As far as I know, all the lay people during the Buddha's time didn't attend retreats to get enlightened. All they did was listen to the Buddha give a Dhamma talk and they got enlightened there—one talk only. How many have you listened to? How many books have you read; how many retreats have you done? But it's different you know. Circumstances were different. Beethoven was able to compose a symphony at the age of 12. A symphony, you know! You were still playing with your piano keys “Do, Re, Me...” Why? Because he did his homework in the past. It was something that was done in the past and was brought forward. So, child prodigies are not just miracles. It is because of something that is brought forward from what they did in the past. Right? We don't really know what we did in the past. So, we keep on trying whatever works for us. And the Buddha also gave so many different ways of getting enlightened. The Buddha knew what a person needed and he would tailor his discourse to suit the needs of that person. But he's no longer around now, right? So that's why we have to do a lot of window shopping.

Q: Bhante, how does one practice seeing the arising and passing away of the five aggregates during meditation?

A: You have to attend a retreat to do that. Usually I will tell people—only when you get to the stage of thought-free meditation can you see the five aggregates in the ultimate sense. Otherwise, you're just looking at activities of the five aggregates: thinking, dreaming, commenting. These are activities of the five aggregates. These are not the five aggregates in the ultimate sense. When you have gone beyond thoughts; at that time there's only the five aggregates left, and that's when people don't know what to do because they are not used to doing that. So when you get there, you need to know what the five aggregates are in order to be able to identify them. Right? And also you need to have some background knowledge: right view of cause and effect.

Q: So Bhante, the āruppas are not sammāsamādhi? But the 4 jhānas are sammāsamādhi, since the āruppas do not lead to nibbāna.

A: Yeah. In fact, in the definition of sammāsamādhi, āruppa is not there. Only the 4 jhānas and one placement of mind, supported by the 7 factors of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Q: So it's not really necessary to practise the āruppas?

A: Of course it's not. All those lay people who got enlightened during the Buddha's time just listened to the Dhamma talk. Which āruppa did they get?

Q: How do you link open awareness to ānāpānassati and jhāna to obtain liberation?

A: As I said, jhāna is defined by the jhāna factors, not by the object. So it could be objects of the 5 senses; it could be just your breath, which is also one of the 5 senses, right? And so, as long as you are able to get to a stage where the jhāna factors are there—you have abandoned the 5 hindrances and you have initial and sustained thought, rapture, comfort, happiness and one placement of mind—then this is already the 1st jhāna, right? And also in order to become enlightened, at that moment one has to have at least the 1st jhāna (whether to be a stream-enterer or an arahant).

Q: Is reflection on gratification etc. and dependent origination, vipassanā development? May I ask about the path to enlightenment? Seems like there are many paths. Some suttas say develop samatha then vipassanā, or vipassanā first then samatha. Do reflecting on the gratification, danger as well as reflecting on dependent origination comprise the vipassanā section? Because, once we have developed samatha then we move on to vipassanā. Are these two what we call vipassanā development?

A: Yeah, you could say so. You see, there are 4 ways: samatha first, followed by vipassanā, vipassanā first followed by samatha, and both at the same time and finally none of the above. This one sounds more like vipassanā. Vipassanā is essentially looking at saṅkhāras in a certain way—to see them in terms of anicca, dukkha and anatta. And also, saṅkhārā by definition is conditioned phenomena, constructions, right? So they are already causes and conditions for saṅkhāras to arise.

Q: Thank you Bhante, for the very inspiring talk. There seems to be so much misconception and actually this is the first time I hear about these misconceptions. Will there be some corrections so that we will not go on believing all this so-called misconceptions?

A: This is one attempt. Up to you to propagate it to others. I think every Sunday school teacher should get hold of the book *The Life of the Buddha according to the Pāḷi Canon*.

Q: But somehow the Jātaka tales are very attractive to children. So from childhood, we already have this misconception.

A: Yeah, what to do? That's why you have to change. Restart.

Q: So that means we have to rewrite the Sunday School Dhamma book.

A: Right, exactly. Yes, yes. Theravada Buddhist Council of Malaysia is supposed to do that. I hope they come up with it.

Q: Saṃkhitta Sutta mentioned the different levels of samādhi. What are the different levels of samādhi, Bhante?

A: They are not listed according to the jhānas, but it says you should develop the samādhi with vitaka (initial thought)—that's one type of samadhi. Then you develop another type of samādhi with vitakka and vicāra. Then you develop another type of samādhi with vicāra only, without vitakka. Another type of samādhi is without vitakka and without vicāra. You develop another type of samadhi with rapture, and another type of samādhi with happiness, and so forth. So it's listed in that way.

Q: Some teachers teach jhānas as states of absorption where we are totally immersed in them and there's totally no thinking. The reflection comes after we emerge from the jhānas, and jhānas cannot be achieved when walking—only by sitting down, no movement at all.

A: That's another misconception. Yeah, we already saw that, didn't we? If that's the case then why did the Buddha have to go back to do the jhānas? He could just come out of the āruppas and then start to observe things. But he didn't do that. He had to go back to the jhānas and then from there he moved on.

Actually, you are right if you say the second jhāna cannot be attained by walking because the second jhāna has got no vitakka, no vicāra. If you're walking, you have vitakka, vicāra, right? Your intentions to lift your foot, intention to walk and turn and all that. So the 2nd jhāna cannot be attained while walking but the 1st jhāna can.

Anyway you don't really need that deep level of absorption/ concentration to be able to start to observe things that are happening around and to see how they relate to one another. You just need a modicum of it. In fact, in Jhāna Sutta (AN 9.36), the Buddha said that the 1st jhāna can lead to the destruction of the taints; so can the second and also the third and fourth. Similarly you can do it with any of the 4 āruppas, and even nirodhasamāpatti (the cessation of perception and feeling). However he himself didn't do that.

Q: How do we know that we are in the 1st jhāna?

A: At the 1st jhāna? When all the factors are there: there's initial thought, sustained thought, rapture, comfort or happiness and your mind is composed. It is

not distracted by what's happening around you. You see, in the jhānas you are still conscious of what's happening in the senses but you're not distracted by them.