

How the Buddha awakened

The most important event in religious history for millions of Buddhists the world over, indeed, for all of mankind, is the Buddha's awakening. Although some Buddhists have some idea of what such an awakening may mean, most people, even Buddhists, know almost nothing about this momentous event. Worse, some of us go on to invent our own accounts of what this awakening is according to our wish or hope.

However, if we care to diligently and carefully examine and analyze the early Buddhist texts, we will have a very good idea of how the Buddha has awakened. **The Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (the Greater Discourse to Saccaka) (M 36), for example, contains valuable insights into the Buddha's struggle for awakening and how he finally awakens fully through his own effort.

To understand the Buddha's quest for awakening, we should begin at the time when, the Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be), as "a black-haired youth," first leaves home. Then, he learns meditation under the two teachers, Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta.¹

Under Āḷāra Kālāma, he learns and masters the 3rd formless attainment.² This is where the mind is able to fully focus on "nothing."³ Then, under Uddaka Rāmaputta, he learns his father Rāma's method, with which he attains the 4th formless attainment, where consciousness is so subtle that it cannot be said to exist or not exist.⁴

It is interesting that a number of major translators erroneously say that the Bodhisattva learns meditation under "Uddaka Rāmaputta." The Pali text clearly shows that Uddaka is "Rāma's son" (*rāma,putta*). It is "Uddaka's father, Rāma," who was the teacher, and the Bodhisattva uses his method of meditation.⁵

There is no good reason not to take the Bodhisattva's training under the 2 teachers as historical. If we accept this premiss, then the fact that he is able to reach either of these 2 formless attainments implies that he has mastered the 4 dhyanas, but still lacks the right view regarding their significance.

The Bodhisattva's ability to learn quickly from the 2 teachers is clearly because of his spiritual disposition, especially his propensity for deep meditation. The same Sutta (M 26) tells us that, once (during the ploughing festival, as a young child), he attains the 1st dhyana. With this ability, he would have easily picked up the teachings of the 2 teachers, mastered the other 3 dhyanas, and go on to attain the last two formless attainments. Anyway, finding that neither method brings him awakening, he leaves the 2 teachers to practise on his own.

The Mahā Saccaka Sutta then tells us that the Bodhisattva arrives outside Senā, nigama near Uru,velā, where he finds "a pleasant spot...conducive for spiritual effort" [§16]. There, he

¹ See **Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36,14+15), SD 49.4.

² There are 4 formless dhyanas (*arūpa,jhāna*), but are usually called "attainments" (*samāpatti*), because they can arise only when we have mastered (attained) the 4th dhyana.

³ It is technically known as "the base of nothingness" (*ākiñcaññ'āyatana*).

⁴ It is technically known as "the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception" (*n'eva,saññā,nāsaññāyatana*).

⁵ See **M 36**,15.8 n (SD 49.4).

diligently practises self-mortification to such extremes that he becomes so emaciated as to threaten his own life.

The most interesting of these self-mortifying practices is the 4-stage “**breathless**” **meditation**. He goes through these meditations until they give him terrible tearing and searing pains in his ears, head, belly and body. Clearly these are his experiences of the 4 dhyanas. The terrible pains arise from his apprehension that the bliss of such form dhyanas is “unwholesome,” and he fights it off, as it were.

On the other hand, he must have experienced the 4 dhyanas in order to reach the formless attainments under the 2 teachers. Perhaps, here, the Bodhisattva did not think anything of the form dhyanas, but simply sailed through them, letting the dhyanic bliss arise and pass away, to reach the last two attainments under the guidance of the two teachers. In other words, he is still unaware of the blissful nature of the dhyanas.

Understandably, someone like the Bodhisattva as a renunciant in his last life would have been adept with the 4 form dhyanas. However, he is still under the influence of the notion popular amongst the recluses and brahmins of his day that any kind of pleasure, even spiritual pleasure, is “defiling,” and hence to be rejected. This is the wrong view that prevents the Bodhisattva from fully benefitting from his early dhyanic experiences under the 2 teachers and when he is doing the “breathless” meditations on his own.

However, in the face of death through his extreme self-mortification, the Bodhisattva is wise enough to realize that “dying for the world” would not help it. There must be another way to self-awakening. The answer comes to him when he realizes that he should “not fear the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states.”⁶ In other words, all he needs to do is to fully accept his dhyanic bliss just as it comes, and just let it go.

Furthermore, reflecting on the fact that even these dhyanas are impermanent, he realizes that they are also unsatisfactory, despite their profound sublimity. Since they are impermanent and unsatisfactory, they cannot have any kind of eternal essence or permanent quality, that is, they are all mentally conditioned; in short, they are non-self.

It is the realization of the last characteristic -- that of non-self – that completes the puzzle of awakening. Impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self are intimately connected with conditionality. Reflecting on the conditions of beings and being, he sees the truth of dependent arising. He now knows than he needs to truly understand the nature of life as that of impermanence. There is meaning only in impermanence. Whatever exists must be impermanent.

A corollary to this meaning of life is that this impermanence-based **conditionality** arises from ignorance, which is the root of craving and every other defilement that trouble us. Ignorance is the root-cause of suffering, which is itself our own lack of self-knowledge. This is called **dependent arising** (of suffering). It has nothing to do with God or Soul or some external thing or agency. It is all within our own minds.

We may deny God, but we cannot deny suffering. If we believe that God created the world, life and us, then we are always haunted with the question of who created God. Understandably,

⁶ M 36,32.2 (SD 49.4).

God-centred religions boil down to faithfully but desperately thinking of ways to prove or show that God exists. Notice how almost every “proof” that God exists seems imaginative and miraculous: they come like ominous meteors, and then are gone – they, too, shall pass.

The Buddha’s way is very simple. If we ask who created the world? Why are we here? Why is there suffering (especially if there is a “good” creator God)? The answer is and must always be the same: we don’t know. **Ignorance** is at the root of it all. Isn’t that at the root of the law of dependent arising discovered by the Buddha?

Once we understand dependent arising – that everything arises from many conditions, bringing about many possible results – then we also understand **dependent ending** (of suffering). The Buddha realizes that we can work our way out of ignorance and craving (the natural roots of suffering). First, we need to understand and tame our **body** (the senses) and speech.

When the body is cultivated in this way, we are able to calm and clear the **mind**. With a clear mind, we can truly see the real causes of our sufferings. It’s like knowing a disease and its cure, and then working on the cure; taking the medicine, and becoming totally healthy. This healthy state is one that is free from ignorance and craving. It is called **nirvana**, a blissful state way beyond any paradise or heaven we can imagine or not.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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