

The Buddha's two awakenings?

In 2001, British Buddhistologist, Alexander Wynne, spoke of the possibility of two divergent doctrines of awakening found in the early Buddhist texts (EBT).¹ The first doctrine, found in **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (or Dhamma,cakka Sutta for short, S 56.11), the “first discourse,” that is, that the Buddha’s awakening comprises “the knowledge and vision of the 4 noble truths.”² The second doctrine, found in **the Tapussa Sutta** (A 9.41), where the Buddha describes his awakening as consisting of the 9 progressive abodes or cessations,³ that is, the 4 form dhyanas, the 4 formless attainments and the cessation of perception and feeling.

Wynne, the insightful scholar who wrote *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation* (2007), thinks that these two accounts contradict one another. This is actually a scholar’s problem, but a good one, that practitioners should consider, too, for a better understanding of the EBTs.

Wynne is helpful here in not finding fault with the EBTs, but merely wondering if there is any serious contradiction. As a practitioner who loves studying the suttas, I think this is only an apparent problem, even a non-problem. Sutta students and scholars are well aware that the Buddha rarely gives any comprehensive lectures or academic theses. His teachings are essentially incidental, instrumental and therapeutic.

The Buddha’s habit is to teach the ripe and ready in a manner that suits them. Occasionally, such as in **Dh 97** (SD 10.6), he uses riddles to tease the world so that we can train our minds on higher meanings and purposes in life.⁴ Often, he gives brief teachings; sometimes—as in the case of *Āṅgulimāla* (M 86)—just a few terse sentences.⁵

In the issues raised by Wynne, we see the Buddha recounting different aspects of his awakening experience. In other words, he is putting into words what is really a personal ineffable inner transformation—the great awakening that makes him the fully self-awakened Buddha. He is recorded to have spent 7 weeks (49 days) immediately following his awakening to prepare, as it were, to present himself and his awakening to the world and posterity.

In **the Dhamma,cakka Sutta**, the Buddha presents to us his awakening in a cognitive manner, by way of ideas and teachings, showing the meaning of life (1st and 2nd noble truths) and the purpose of life (3rd and 4th noble truths). The first truth can be expanded into the 5 aggregates.⁶ The first two truths are also presented in the form of dependent arising (up to 12 links altogether).⁷ The last two truths work as the breaking of its conditioning chains, that is, as dependent ending, leading to liberation and awakening.

¹ “An interpretation of ‘released on both sides’ (*ubhato-bhāga-vimutti*), and the ramification for the study of early Buddhism.” [Paper at UK Assoc for Buddhist Studies conference, Univ of London: SOAS, 3 July 2001.] *Buddhist Studies Review* 19,1 2002:31-40.

² S 56.11/5:420 ([SD 1.1](#)).

³ A 9.41/4:448 (SD 62.16); also see **Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26,34.2-42), [SD 1.11](#).

⁴ **Dh 97: Two levels of religious language**, [SD 10.6](#).

⁵ M 86 ([SD 5.11](#)).

⁶ See SD 17, beginning with **(Dve) Khandhā Sutta** (S 22.48), [SD 17.1a](#).

⁷ See **Dependent arising**, [SD 5.16](#).

The **Tapussa Sutta** teaching is a model that is based on the 4th noble truth—the path—especially that of meditation. Here, the Buddha presents what I call the affective approach, since it deals with the whole gamut of early Buddhist meditation. This is the 9 progressive abodes or cessations (as mentioned at the start)—the 4 form dhyanas, the 4 formless attainments and cessation of perception and feeling.

Meditation, as an “**affective**” process, deals with feeling (without the s)—or better, how we feel (*paṭisaṃvedeti*). To “feel,” in meditative terms, is to directly experience, especially beyond the cognitive processes of the 5 physical senses and the mind. In short, the mind is used, as it is, as a powerful deep-meditation tool, rising beyond the sense worlds and form worlds (of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch), and beyond the formless world (beyond time and space).

This amazing inner journey can and have been done by others, too, such as the recluse Gotama’s second teacher’s father, Rāma, who was able to attain the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.⁸ Such meditators before the Buddha were able to reach even the formless dhyanas but were unable to awaken—for a simple reason: they had wrong views. More specifically, they believed in some kind of universal essence or abiding soul or unchanging self (*attā*). In other words, the Buddha discovered dhyana with right view, a truly selfless or “non-self” dhyana.⁹

The Tapussa Sutta highlights the meditative aspects—the whole range of the progressive abodes or cessation. It is a well known fact that any of these meditations alone, or in any combination, would not bring about awakening. In fact, if we read the Sutta closely, we will see that in each of the first 8 stages, he attains a state he describes as being “peaceful.” Then, he notices that each of these meditative stages have a dhyana-factor or factors that hold the meditator back.

Only when this “setback” (the dhyana-factor/s) is properly given up or renounced, would he progress to the next stage, and so on. Finally, in the 9th and last stage, having given up even the subtlest of mental objects, he finally experiences what it is like when all suffering ceases—this is the attainment of cessation of perception and feeling (*saññā, vedayita, nirodha*).¹⁰

It should further be noted that—since all thinking or cognitive processes as we know them do not occur in any of the 8 dhyanas—he must emerge from each stage, and with his calm and clear mind, the Bodhisattva reviews the “disadvantage” of each of these stages.

The last stage—cessation—is not part of the awakening process. It is something that he gets into, and is, as such, conditioned and impermanent (like the other dhyana stages). However, this is the stage where he is able to actually experience the bliss of nirvana here and now.

The question now is where do the 4 noble truths fit in? Every one of the first 8 stages is structured—albeit implicitly—on an experience of **the 4 noble truths**. After fully experiencing each dhyanic stage, the Bodhisattva realizes its unsatisfactoriness. Based on the 1st dhyana, for example, he notes the danger of sensual pleasures. In each of the subsequent dhyanas, he

⁸ See **Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26,16), [SD 1.11](#).

⁹ See **The Buddha discovered dhyana**, [SD 33.1b](#).

¹⁰ On cessation, see [SD 48.7](#) (3.2).

notes what is unsatisfactory in it—an affliction (the 1st noble truth). However, he also notices the peace which is dependent on that state; hence, one that is defined and limited by it (the 2nd noble truth).

In due course, he learns to transcend this by letting it go, by cultivating the insight towards it (the 4th noble truth). Then, he is able to move beyond that stage for the next one, which is even subtler (the 3rd noble truth). Here, we see the 4 truths in the “practice” sequence—as 1, 2, 4, 3.¹¹

The two accounts—that of the Tapussa Sutta and the Dhamma,cakka Sutta—do not contradict one another. The former presents the Buddha’s awakening in *affective* terms of meditation, while the later, presents it in *cognitive* terms of the 4 noble truths. In a way, we can see these two processes as the workings, respectively, of calm (Tapussa Sutta) and insight (Dhamma,-cakka Sutta). The reality, however, is that, they work together in harmony.

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

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¹¹ On the “teaching” (1, 2, 3,4) and the “practice (1, 2, 4, 3) models of the noble truths, see also [SD 1.1](#) (6.2.2.2) & [SD 41.9](#) (2.4).