

Introduction to The Summary of Meditation Practice Method and Map By Lotus Vu

I started exploring Buddhism since I was a child. Having met my Zen teacher at 5 years old, I greatly benefited from my 41 years of relationship with him. I was influenced early from my aunt's dedication to the Zen practice and my mother's devotion to intellectually learning of the Dharma. Having benefited from a library of books and dharma audio lectures from the Buddhist University gifted by my teacher to my family, and also attending many retreats and hundreds of dharma talks during my early years. I tried out many different Buddhism practices before deciding on the Zen path when I was 15 years old. Even as a truly dedicated practitioner who is humbled by the Dharma, the practice and my teacher, I found the path of practice filled with trappings and delusions at every turn. Growing up studying, learning the Dharma from many teachers from many different traditions, and frequently visiting, staying at temples, monasteries, befriending monastics, going to retreats, I learned very early on that the many trappings of ego can be shaded and imbedded in the practice both in monastic and laity life. I tried to be mindful of these ego trappings as much as I possibly could, but they always present themselves in more cunning and skilful ways. Only with the sincere dedication, perseverance to the path of practice, personal humility, wise counselling others, and the compassionate guidance of my teacher, was I able to overcome many of the challenges I had faced in life and the practice. Not counting the many one-week long retreat I attended, the three solitary months long retreat I did under the guidance of three different hermit senior monastic teachers from three different traditions, gave me needed breakthroughs that helped to solidify my practice in ordinary life. The dharma, so supreme and sublime, at every pivotal and major challenges in my life, it transformed and deepened my practice in ways I could not have imagined. Faith in my own Buddha Nature, the Buddha's teachings, confidence in my teachers, and listening to good counsel was the always the right path forward. My faith did not arise from blind trust, but years of experience in learning to trust with discernment. I developed the strong desire for liberation (Bodhicitta) over the years of studying Buddhist texts and from experiencing the many sufferings in my early years both physically and mentally. I verified very early on, the first noble truth of the Buddha's teaching. Coming from a refugee family my parents had spent 30 years of their life in the throes of the Vietnam war, witnessing the ravages and desolation that war left behind, I had a good share of sufferings inherited from my background and family. My twenties were filled with continuous persistent learning and coming to myself and the dharma through life's experiences, this period culminated to the Kensho experience at 28 years old. It took me almost two decades of dedication to practice post-Kensho to truly experientially understand the full map of the Buddha's teachings on liberation from sufferings. It is truly a path unrivalled by any other life's experience or knowledge.

I prepared this document resulting from the study of the Buddhist texts and practice of Zen for the last 35 years, and recently from the breakthrough that culminated my path. But as the Zen saying: "Yesterday's enlightenment is today's mistake." I hope to inspire practitioners to keep inquiring and experiencing deeply their own practice at each moment with fresh eyes. However, the map is essential

in the practice. We have a saying in Zen from Vietnam: *“To study texts and not practice you’re merely a bag of books. To practice and not study the texts is to practice blindly and walk blindly on the path.”* I hope to provide practitioners with a short, concise, clear map of the practice, practical advice on the practice and pitfalls that you may encounter. This is a very brief outline. It’s not to be used alone but in conjunction with your practice, the support of a sangha and a guiding teacher. If this map helps one person to come to the end of path of practice, it would serve its purpose. My advice to practitioners are, never stop studying by yourself and stop studying with senior teachers.

A SUMMARY OF THE PRACTICE METHOD & MAP

A Summary of the Jhanas & Arupas

8 altered states of consciousness brought on by attention practice of sitting on the cushion

Meditative States		Description	Relations to 5 Aggregates
Access Concentration		Basic level concentration -Breath count, mindfulness of breathing, body scan, loving-kindness, mantra etc.	All present
1 st Jhana	Awareness of Body & Duality	Shift attention to hold on to pleasant sensation erupts to Piti (glee) & Sukha (joy/happiness) sustained. Piti rises like gooseflesh all over the body, all your cells dancing with pure pleasure.	All Present w/ Increase feelings & sensory pleasantness
2 nd Jhana		Background thoughts quieter/distant Inner tranquillity, unified through a calm, contented emotional experience, reduced Piti.	All present w/ Reduced feelings & increase Contentment & quietness
3 rd Jhana		The pleasure of contentment goes away, emotionally neutral, no Piti. The body's perceptions of limbs come and go like it is not there.	Sensory experience reduced
4 th Jhana		Steady stillness, in-distractibility, no more background thoughts A sharp mind with clarity	No thoughts
Base of Infinite Space		Expansive awareness, reduced awareness of body, joyous feelings of expansive freedom Loss of body awareness	No thoughts, no sensation, still feelings, Perception and consciousness
Base of Infinite Consciousness	Oneness	Disappearance of object perception, everything is the watcher/observer. As if everything is pure consciousness/oneness. This is where most spiritual traditions are falsely mistaken for enlightenment.	
Base of Infinite Nothingness	Non-Duality	Cessation of Feelings and Perceptions: Non-dual state, mind very clear. Outside of meditation, if experiencing this, all labels/Perception of objects perceived falls away.	No conceptualizing, no perception no feelings, no sensory
Base of Neither		Very reduced consciousness. Consciousness is collected in a small	

Perception nor Non-Perception		dim center. Like REM sleep, mental formations appear like blurry phantom images in the background. You cannot tell what you are experiencing from the sensory input from outside.	
Nirodha		Cessation of Perception, feelings, and consciousness	No consciousness

Sati/Mindfulness (Impartial Observation) leading to Wisdom (Realization)

Wisdom is not a practice but experience of realizations (insights) through observations. The Buddha never taught the "Vipassana" meditation system like what is popular today in the west. That "No Jhanas observation" system was invented by the Burmese about 150 years ago based on the [Visuddhimagga](#) or commentaries on meditation written much later, not originally what the Buddha taught. What the Buddha taught as passed down in the earliest written texts (Nikaya Suttas) was how to refine observations through the Jhanas and apply them to experiences via the "**four foundations of mindfulness**" in everyday life experiences to gain insights into the nature of existence and mind, to break free of mental defilements (kilesas) and cyclic existence of self-perpetuation (samsara) to liberation (Nibbana) in this very life.

Two reasons why so few people get to the end of suffering and realize the path and fruit of Non-Returner or Arahantship:

1. The core teachings of practice were misunderstood and misinterpreted. There is a rise in academia that philosophizes about the Buddha's teachings rather than experiencing them. The mind has a tendency to make practice complicated, the Buddha's methods is super simple. So simple that the mind doesn't believe it and go seeking for something complicated.
2. Modern life's distractions far exceed the simple agrarian lifestyle during the days of the Buddha. If the Buddha thought regular life during his time as a normal person in society was so distracting that he had to lead the simple homeless life, the current life we all live now with modern economics, gadgets, books, internet, social media etc., is exceedingly complicated for even a prince experiencing court intrigues like Siddhartha.

Modern Vipassana, One-Pointed Concentration and The Buddha's Tranquility Practice

There is a lot of confusion out there about the Jhana practice (Tranquility) and the One-pointed concentration practice out there. The best book I found out there about the Buddha's teachings of Right Concentration is "*Right Concentration: A practical guide to the Jhanas*" by Leigh Brasington or "*The Path to Nibbana*" by David Johnson. Everyone tries to invent their own system (even that goes on today), improvise from the original teachings of the Buddha, but I found that sticking to the original teachings of Zen and

the Nikaya Suttas is the best path forward. When Buddhism came to China, it came with the rise and remnants of centuries of academia the intellectualizing of the Buddha's teachings in India after the Buddha passed away, this diluted and confused practitioners, which resulted in fewer progress and deepened experiences. Zen was a movement of rebellion against the academic tendencies of Buddhism at that time, to stop the labelling and interpretations and focus on directly experiencing the teachings, returning to simplicity practice of the original teachings of the Buddha. You can't use the thinking mind to solve the problems that the thinking mind created in the first place. Some labelling is helpful if you have the experience, but without the experience, it's like debating on recipes without actually doing any serious cooking. If you haven't even got to the 4th Jhana, there is no point debating about the other states or insights into twelve dependent originations, because like a kitchen helper, you washed some vegetables but didn't cook yet. Keep an open-mind, don't dismiss/disagree with anything, don't believe it, lay it on the table and test it out with your own direct experience of going through the practice.

Modern Vipassana movements in the West are popular methods of observations of the mind and body developed in Burma and some in Thailand from the commentaries and the Visuddhimagga not the original Buddha's teachings. Vipassana is useful to modern psychology to alleviate some intense sufferings, but not much in any serious spiritual practice. It discarded the Jhanas as distractions and went straight into observation. This practice was developed because teachers believed that students couldn't practice the Jhanas due to everyday and modern distractions. One Theravada monk I met, after 37 years of practice in this method and changed to the Buddha's original method told me: "It's like putting the cart before the horse." You can't see anything with any depth without going through the refinement of your observation lenses by practicing the Jhanas. It is like a biologist observing things with the naked eye instead of relying on various zooms of the microscope to study biology in depth. The Jhanas and Arupas are these zoom lenses for the refinement your observation. The Buddha mentioned the Jhanas numerous times in the Nikayas Suttas, but only sparingly talks about Vipassana (correctly called Sati).

There is also a significant difference between one-pointed concentration Jhanas developed in later texts versus the Buddha's Jhanas. One pointed concentration is focusing on an object so intensely that one is totally absorbed in the object, losing all distractions and hindrances. This is a very effective method of suppressing the hindrances, it requires the sheer force of will and effort to suppress the hindrances, but once the meditator's attention moves away from the object of concentration, the hindrances arise

again. Like a dancer, musician, painter that found a lot of peace, tranquility and flow during the process of dancing, playing music, painting when they're absorbed in the activity. Outside of that activity, sufferings returns and the self-ing process tortures them. This is the same with one-pointed concentration Jhanas. It is because the practitioner doesn't release anything from the unconscious, but just suppressed them temporarily. This is not an effective practice to move things off the cushion to experience liberation in everyday life. The more effective method that the Buddha devised is the ***"Relaxing or Tranquilizing Jhanas"*** (Which I will talk about later). This method can be used on the cushion, and off the cushion to experience whatever you experience on the cushion in everyday life. Because you're using the breath and body to relax, let go of whatever stress/ anxiety or mental clinging in the present. Then in that relaxed state, you can move your attention to everyday things. Once you got used to it, conditioned your body and mind to be in this relaxed state more often, the relaxed state stays for moments at first, or at the higher level, for days. Tranquility is developed as a result off and on the cushion to allow you better observation (on and off the cushion) to deeply develop understanding by insights the teachings of the Buddha. In Zen, if you can't take things on the cushion off the cushion, it's a waste of practice. All you're doing is suffering management, using the Jhanas as an escape from suffering reality to release some stress you accumulated during the day. It is no different than a drug addict using drugs to get some euphoria to temporarily escape from their sufferings. Maybe at first, beginners find it helpful to do this, but in continuing on this path isn't the best way forward.

Observation method (Sati or Mindfulness) developed by the Buddha is very simple. As Bhante Vimalarasi puts it so simple, I'll borrow his words: *"Noticing how attention moves"* from objects to objects. You will notice consciousness identifies with the object it observes, totally immersed in it to produce desire (I want it, I don't want it), attachments (this is mine) and sufferings from resulting arising of emotions and more thinking leading to more emotions and thinking. Beginning meditators can observe arising and disappearing of bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings. These are all seen as tensions in the body at various different places. It is not until the later stages when a meditator is proficient in going in and out of the 7th and 8th Jhanas in everyday life, that they can see the rise and fall of perceptions and mental formations. In developing the Jhanas on and off the cushion, it's like refining the lenses on your microscope to be able to see clearer and zoom deeper into the nature of experience. All four aggregates can be observed, to behave differently in each Jhana, with gradual elimination of them which purified the mind for clearer observation and understanding of the nature of impermanence, suffering and non-self. Consciousness aggregate doesn't fall

until one goes into Nirodha-Samapatti or the 9th Jhana. Buddha nature remains during all these states in the background but not always obvious to the practitioner. The Buddha doesn't separate Precepts, Jhana and Mindfulness/ Sati practice into three categorial practice, he taught them to be done in unison on and off the cushion.

Teacher Student Relationship and Navigating The Buddha's Map

Always remember that this map, the instructions in it, is done in language as a pointer, it's not the actual experience. That can only be experienced in practice. You don't need the labels to have these experiences, that's why Zen didn't focus on the labels. But Zen is heavily dependent on the teacher-student relationship which one is humbly following a teacher's instruction to navigate this whole map. In the East, this is built into the culture, but in the west, this isn't the case, so the transmission of Zen isn't pure because students tend to leave their teachers before finishing their study and going all the way on the path to its end. They think (which is the ego speaking) "I know what I'm doing" and stop studying from their teacher, which basically means they stay stagnant at where they're at. Sincerity and humility are two key elements in the practice. Before you get to the end of your journey, don't ditch your guide, even if you have a map, you might not really know how to use it or truly understands its pointers.

Dokusan is a process of breaking down the ego by following the instructions of a meditation teacher to combat it. A true teacher, like a good friend, who wants nothing from you, willing to risk your disapproval to tell you the truth because of their unconditional love for you. A good teacher will always challenge your beliefs and clinging which stands in the way of your practice. The teacher will likely tell you what you don't want to hear. Teachers are not there to massage your ego but to help you break them down. You can disagree with your teachers and still keep them as a guide or companion on the path, that's what mature people do. You don't ditch your friends because they disagree with you. Especially a spiritual friend who gives you honest counsel. A good practitioner goes to Dokusan often to aid in the progress of their practice, the ones who want their ego intact, can't tolerate the challenges to their ego and whom develop enlightened egos, avoids Dokusan and thereby hindered their practice. Imagine university students who want to mark their own papers, give themselves a grade and graduation degree. That's the mentality of the practitioners who avoids going to Dokusan. They fear constructive criticism and can't tolerate the assault on their fragile ego. Some students project their internal expectations on their teachers, feeling guilty that they haven't made progress. That's the wrong attitude. A teacher is there to help you correct your mistakes and point you in the right direction, for you to remove obstacles on your path of

practice. You're supposed to make mistakes, the more you make them, acknowledge them, bring them to your teacher for advice, take the advice to practice in changing them, the more you learn experientially to correct them and deepen your practice. This is a quick route on the path, rather than trying to find your way up mount Everest by yourself by reading some books or watching some YouTube videos on it, it's easier and faster to elicit the help of a Sherpa (guide).

Zen or Jhana meditation practice is systematic and even loosely institutionalized in the East, mostly reserved for monastics, rarely taught to lay practitioners, but in the recent three decades have been increasingly encouraged for lay practitioners. Meditation is considered specialized training, reserved for one-on-one instruction, it's like graduate studies in research. A professor in graduate research training can only take a few students at a time. Or like a sculptor who can only train a few apprentices at a time, because of the hands-on intensive work that is involved in the process. It takes many years to train a highly skilled craftsman or a graduate student. The same applies to meditation training. It's not uncommon for the Zen or meditation training process to take 15-20 years in most Asian countries before one can become an independent teacher. In the West, anyone can call themselves a spiritual teacher without authorization from a recognized lineage or their supervising teacher. There are no checks and balance in ethical practice and in teaching quality. The Buddha's map is well laid out in the Nikaya Suttas and in the Mahayana Sutras, those who had taken textual studies in these texts in-depth before practice, has understanding of the map conceptually, and when walking on the path, can self-verify the terrain. Those without training in these preparational practices has to rely on a guiding teacher who is well versed in the map and the practice. In Vietnam, Zen training first involves studying the major Buddhism texts, both Mahayana and Theravada teachings for about 5-10 years before the meditation practice even begins in earnest. I spent my first 10 years of Zen practice studying the texts while my teacher was in solitary retreat for 10 years, then 14 years after Kensho in learning how to skillfully use it to aid my practice with my teacher's guidance. Even after my teacher gave me full independence to practice and guide others, I continued to seek his guidance and the advice of other wise teachers. Your root teacher who you seek consistent guidance with will be the one who knows you best, how to help you with your practice and how to advise you to remove the obstacles to your practice. When in doubt, always follow the Buddha's advice on seeking spiritual guidance in maintaining right view:

“Right view, Ānanda, when developed and cultivated, has as its final goal the removal of desires, the removal of aversion, the

removal of ignorance. Right intention ... Right concentration, when developed and cultivated, has as its final goal the removal of desires, the removal of aversion, the removal of ignorance.

Samyutta Nikaya 45.4

Having spiritual friendship in a Sangha, is seen by the Buddha as the whole spiritual life:

“Venerable sir, this is half of the holy life, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship?

Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship. When a practitioner has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path. A practitioner who has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path? Here, Ānanda, a practitioner develops right view, which is based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in letting go. He develops right intention ... right speech ... right action ... right livelihood ... right effort ... right mindfulness ... right concentration, which is based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release. It is in this way, Ānanda, that a practitioner who has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, develops and cultivates the Noble Eightfold Path.” Samuytta Nikaya 45.2

The Buddha also pointed out the hindrances in learning and practicing meditation:

“Monks, when there is a practitioner for whom five kinds of mental desolation have not been abandoned and five kinds of mental imprisonment have not been destroyed, it is not possible for him to attain growth, development, and fulfillment in this Dhamma.

What are the five kinds of mental desolation that have not been abandoned by him? Here, monks, a practitioner is uncertain and doubtful about the Teacher, and has not resolved his mind and become confident in the Teacher. Monks, when a practitioner is uncertain and doubtful about the Teacher and has not resolved his mind and become confident in the Teacher, his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving. As his mind does not tend towards ardency,

commitment, perseverance, and striving, this is the first kind of mental desolation that has not been abandoned by him.

Monks, this is another one: There is a practitioner who is uncertain and doubtful about the Dhamma... about the Sangha... about the training, and has not resolved his mind and become confident in the training. Monks, when a practitioner is uncertain and doubtful about the training and has not resolved his mind and become confident in the training, his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving. As his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving, this is the fourth kind of mental desolation that has not been abandoned by him.

Monks, this is another one: There is a practitioner who is angry and dissatisfied with his co-practitioners, who has an afflicted mind and a callous nature. Monks, when a practitioner is angry and dissatisfied with his co-practitioners, when he has an afflicted mind and a callous nature, his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving. As his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving, this is the fifth kind of mental desolation that has not been abandoned by him.” Mulapariyaya Sutta 1.1-1.6

The Buddha’s advice is practical. If you have no confidence in the university, the professors, the subject that you’re studying, the skills that you want to learn and practice from them, and the group of friends you’re studying and practicing with, it’s a waste of time. You likely won’t get far!

Basic Terminology for Meditation Practice

Kilesas (Sanskrit: Kleshas) are mental defilements (*desires/attachment, resistance/aversion, ignorance/unclear seeing, pride/conceit, doubt, wrong view*) that perpetuate samsara (*cyclic suffering existence*), the beginningless cycle of rebirth, dukkha, ceasing and arising again

Cessation = destruction of the taints (āśava) or 3 Karmic propensities:

1. Karmic propensities for sensual pleasures (kāṃāsava),
2. Karmic propensities for existence – self-experience generating process (bhavāsava), and
3. Karmic propensities for ignorance/unclear seeing (avijjāsava) where consciousness clings to objects and itself and does not see its non-self nature.

This is arrived through the practice of Jhanas and Sati. The Buddha's teachings of Sati (mindfulness) are very simple, and directions are implemented in the following Sutta (click the link below to read):

[Discourse on the Full Awareness of Breathing](#)

[Discourse on the Establishment of Four Mindfulness](#)

What the Buddha taught during his 45 years of teaching is summarized in a system as follows:

1. Sufferings
2. The causes of suffering (by twelve-link chains of Dependent Origination, 5 aggregates, 10 fetters, 5 hindrances, 3 poisons)
3. The ending of sufferings by the realization of Nibbana or Cessation of Sufferings
4. The way to end sufferings by 37 Factors of Enlightenment, 3 prong practices (Precepts, Meditation and Insight), 3 refuges (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha)

There are two types of Nibbana/Nirvana or Cessation:

1. **Mundane Nibbana/Nirvana** - this is experienced when clinging/desires/aversion arises, and one can identify it and let it go. After letting go, a brief moment of relief is experienced at the end; clarity, calmness, or gladness (Sukkha). Anyone can experience this if they practice mindfulness correctly.
2. **Supermundane Nibbana/Nirvana** - this experience at least once by the stream enterer, but not very clearly. It is rarely experienced by the once-returner, but with increasing clarity than the stream enterer, but often experienced by the Non-Returner and is consistently experienced by the Arahant. The 3 karmic propensities are cut off at the moment of Supermundane Nibbana/Nirvana.

5 Methods of Observation of the Mind

In the earliest Buddhist Texts written in Pali Language Nikaya Suttas, the Buddha taught 5 methods of directed observation meditation to cure specific ailments and unskillful tendencies of the mind that lead to suffering. The five meditation methods are as follows:

1. **Observation of the Breath by Counting the Breath & Awareness of Breathing**- This is what we do in Zen to reduce mind wandering and develop concentration. This method counters the mental tendency to be distracted, worrisome, agitated or dull, increasing the ability to

hold attention and calm. This method is the fundamental method of Zen to distinguish between mindfulness and mindlessness, to collect attention by grounding the mind in the counting and eventually breath and body.

2. ***Metta-meditation or Loving-kindness meditation*** - This meditation observation increases feelings of joy and sympathy towards other beings, increasing a person's empathy and generosity tendencies, countering ill-will, anger and aversion. It is easier to go from a positive state to calm state than negative emotional state to calm state. This meditation is recommended by the Buddha for those who experiences lots of anger, irritation and aversion in their daily life.
3. ***Observation of Dependent Origination Arising*** - This meditation observation counters the tendencies for fixed views and ignorance and self-centred tendencies, triggering insights into the nature of mind and reality, which increases Equanimity and non-attachment to things or rigid self-view. It is done in conjunction with the Jhanas right to the end of the path.
4. ***Observation of Death and Decaying*** - This meditation observes the various stages of a decomposing body to trigger feelings of disgust towards attachment to sensual desires. This meditation is used for those who is driven having high desires personality type, and easily attached to sensual pleasures.
5. ***Observation of Changing Mental States*** - This meditation observes the changing states of the mind through the [six realms of existence](#) and 18 factors of mental processes (six root senses: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body sense, cognition interacting with six stimuli: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, objects mediated by the six-consciousness serving as the intermediary: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, mind-consciousness). It is practiced in combatting the mind's tendencies to be attached to pleasurable states, avoid unpleasant states and attachment to self-view. This method is applied by default for all meditators.

These five meditation methods are designed to cure the five hindrances and obstacles to tranquillity (Jhana) practice. When the hindrances are present, a meditator cannot enter the Jhanas or Arupas.

1. ***Desire for sensory experience*** - taking pleasure through five senses contact with stimulus from outside. This effectively makes you attached and identifying with it.

2. **Ill-will or aversion** - avoiding experience or resistance to the present out of fear or avoidance tendencies. The more you avoid or resist, the stronger sufferings becomes.
3. **Sloth-and-torpor** - the mind is dull, half-aware, mindless, with no concentration or ability to focus. This feels like the mind state after you've eaten too much at dinner.
4. **Restlessness and worry** - Inability to calm and to feel constant underlying irritation, boredom, anxiety, and regrets about the past or future.
5. **Doubt** - lack of conviction or trust in one's ability or capacity to trust others or the path. A state of persistence and insecurity. This is the biggest obstacle for meditation progress.

Precepts - The inability to keep the five foundation precepts will also contribute to the five hindrances being continually problematic. Keeping the precepts helps the mind calms and enters the Jhanas easier. Keeping the precepts is the foundation of calming attention practice (Jhanas), which in turn fuels the observation practice (Vipassana). These three elements are the essential foundation of the meditation practice. Not keeping the precepts in everyday life hinders progress.

Twelve Dependent Origination and Twelve Transcendent Arising

The Buddha's core teachings are to observe and notice the three marks of existence (impermanence, suffering and non-self) in one's mind and objects that the mind can observe, which are the five aggregates (sensations, thoughts/*thoughts/mental images*, feelings, Perception and consciousness). The Jhanas is used to refine the lenses of observation to increase clarity to see phenomena arising and disappearing. Insights into the nature of these phenomena gradually liberate the mind to reduce clinging. Then, at the final stage, all clinging ceases. Phenomena arise and fall on their own without anyone clinging to it. There are four ways to accomplish this through practice:

1. One develops insight preceded by tranquillity (Pali: Samatha-pubbaṅgamaṃ vipassanaṃ),
2. One develops tranquillity preceded by insight (vipassanā-pubbaṅgamaṃ samathaṃ),
3. One develops tranquillity and insight in a stepwise fashion (Samatha-vipassanaṃ yuganaddhaṃ),

4. One's mind becomes seized by excitement about the dhamma and, consequently, develops tranquillity and abandons the fetters (dhamma-uddhacca-viggahitaṃ mānaṣaṃ hoti).

Using these three different methods, one can observe the nature of the mind-body process of Dependent Origination (DO) and progressively goes through the process of Dependent Transcendence Arising (DTA).

Dependent Origination

1. **Ignorance (Avijja/Moha)** - Not experientially seeing the 12 dependent origination links that create the self and understanding the root cause of suffering clearly
2. **Mental Formations (Sankhara)** - Movements of elements forming the mind that can be below everyday awareness (observed during REM sleep).
3. **Consciousness/Awareness (Vijnana)** - It is the center of observation (the observer) that observes and cling to all objects/arising phenomena to identify as mine/self/I.
4. **Name & Form or Mind-Body Complex (Nama Rupa)** - Mental & Physical Existence experienced by people composed of 4 mental aggregates (sensations, feelings, thoughts/mental image, consciousness) and one body aggregates (Form)
5. **Six Sense Base (Slalayata)** - Eye, ear, nose, tongue, touch and mental faculties. *Yogacara/Buddhist Psychology* defines these as six consciousness. Since consciousness, through these faculties, receive sensory inputs from the outside, the mind (Manas) turns it into an object of the mind (Mental formations) and thinking/imagination/mental image constructed by the input from outside is perceived as an object inside. Everything is stored in Storehouse Consciousness (Buddhist Unconscious).
6. **Contact (Phassa)** - Through six senses based on input from outside combined with past conditioning, Perception of the object is in mind.
7. **Feeling (Vedana)** - From contact, combined with past conditioning, preferences arise to experience something pleasurable, painful or neutral.
8. **Craving/Desires (Tanha)** - From arising feelings associated with objects perceived, consciousness either grasps or averts (Desires or Resistance/Avoid) the object. Both acts are desires: Grasping is a positive desire, and Avoidance/Resistance is a negative desire.
9. **Clinging (Upadana)** - Upon grasping objects mentally, consciousness identifies with the object it clings to and creates a sense of self from them: my name, my characteristics/mental, physical habits, my

job/career, my things, my husband/wife/doctor/parents/kids etc. then existence comes to be.

10. **The existence (Bhava)** - Identification with objects to create a sense of self then stored in the unconscious/subconscious to continually arise when those seeds are perfumed by triggering conditions.
11. **Birth (Jati)** - Existence becomes hardened into continuously arising conditions one after another in consciousness to perpetuate the illusion of self/becoming.
12. **Aging & Death (Jara-marana)** - From birth, giving rise to decay and death as conditions arise and disappear.

The sense of illusory self is perpetuated by this unending cycle of Dependent Origination repeated in quick succession from stages 1-12. So quick that normal awareness cannot catch it. Only mastery of the Jhanas, like gradually increasing the zoom magnification on a microscope, Jhanas practice allows the clarity and depth of observation to observe these phenomena directly.

From the meditation practice, one can gradually observe the Twelve Dependent Origination travel backwards and release clinging process/self-ing process through Twelve Dependent Transcendence Arising.

Even a beginning meditator can learn to gradually identify the point of clinging, which happens at the sense doors when sensory experiences happen through the five senses, propelling feelings (negative, positive, neutral) to arise and desires (clinging or aversion) to happen. This requires clarity of mind arising from the practice of the first to fourth Jhanas, or close observing sensations in the body in everyday life. When clinging happens, the body-mind complex triggers conditions to arise (reactions so quick like a bullet), and past karma/conditions come out to present as a succession of thoughts/ feelings/ emotions/perceptions. One is spiralled into a state of suffering (mild stress or intense anxiety). The key to practice to go through all Jhanas and Arupas according to the Buddha's original teachings to go into the **Tranquilizing Jhanas and Observation** is this:

1. **Notice and realize you are attached** - thoughts, emotions, etc., capture your attention and identification with it.
2. **Return your attention to the breath and body** - ignore the contents of whatever got you attached; remove your attention gently from the object of fixation that captured your attention to observe the breath and the whole body and its sensations.
3. **Relax your body as you breathe out, let go** - as you pay attention to the breath and body, notice the sensations of tightness (located

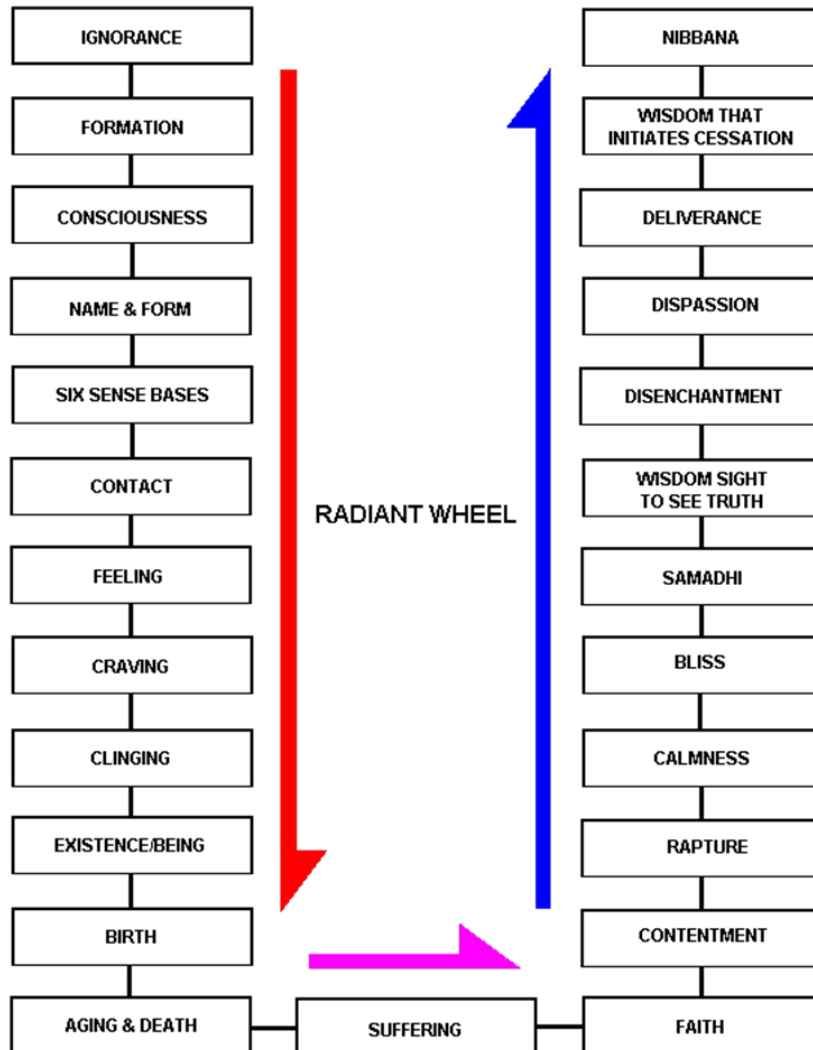
wherever) in your body. Take a deep breath and relax as you breathe out, relax the tightness without intention (basically, let it just happen, don't will it). Stop and do as many deep breaths as you need. Otherwise, just relax and continue doing this as you complete whatever you do.

4. **Smile** (even if you do not want to or feel like it) and return to whatever tasks you were doing before while watching your attention to see if it sticks again. Rinse and repeat.

This process can be done during sitting meditation and in everyday life. You do not need to think or feel while cleaning, cooking, walking, drinking coffee/tea, eating, showering, brushing teeth, walking up or down the stairs, sitting on the toilet, exercising etc., but the mind incessantly thinks/feels/seeking sensations, past regrets and future worries. The simple mental/physical exercise above is what the Buddha taught for you to experience **mundane Nibbana**. You repeat throughout your day for days or weeks, and mundane Nibbana will appear.

Dependent Origination Transcendence Arising

Dependent



Dependent Origination and Dependent Transcendence Arising in Meditation Practice in Conjunction with Stages of Enlightenment

Either through Kensho/Satori's breakthrough to Stream Entry or gradual meditation through the Jhanas to observe the mental-physical phenomenon of the Twelve Dependent Origination, the awakening process is the same for all schools of Buddhism meditation but described differently like different people making maps of the same terrain would put sign-posts at different places and name it differently. The terrain, in essence, is the same.

Everyone later after the Buddha likes to invent new maps or to “improve” on what the Buddha taught. To be honest, that’s just more ego pride in making their mark on history. I generally find it much more helpful to stick to the Buddha’s original map, it’s more accurate and concise. I disagree with the Abhidhamma which unnecessarily complicates things for practitioners. The Zen rebellion against this unnecessary complication is a good way to go, but taken to extreme, discourages practitioners from learning from the texts and they end up claiming attainments or experiences not in alignment with the original Buddha’s teachings, leaving even the most earnest practitioner stagnant in their development and the transmission shallow with teachers not being very far on the path leading others only as far as they can go. My recommendation is if you come up against the teacher’s maximum progress on the path, you keep your relationship with your root teacher but seek out other counsel from senior teachers who are further on the path. Give some reverence to the root teacher who had taken you as far as they can with their compassion and patience for you. If your root teacher disagrees with you on this path forward, then this person has some more work to do. My teacher encourages me to study with other teachers he knows that has good skills he doesn’t have, and doesn’t distinguish if they are from the Zen tradition or not as long as he felt I had something to learn from them. I am forever indebted to him for this openness and compassionate stance.

The Buddha’s path is the same for all meditation experiences, so semantics is not important, don’t get caught up in words, have the experience. Early Buddhism based on Nikaya Suttas (earliest Buddhist texts), this is recognized as attaining "Path" (Magga) and "Fruit" (Phala). At each successive state of Awakening. The path is realizing the way in, and fruit is the completion of stage by practice where one is totally in. Zen has the 10 Ox-herding pictures, which are so intuitive that it is impossible to explain in words. Therefore, we will use the early Buddhist map.

Stream Entry

The authentic path of practice forward only truly begins at the Stream Entry or Kensho/Satori point. At Stream Entry/Kensho, one experiences a split second of *Nibbana* (Skr. Nirvana), followed by overwhelming joy that lasts for days or weeks. The realization of *Nibbana* (unconditioned awareness or Buddha Nature), even for a split second, weakens the three fetters (at initial experience - or Magga/Path Entry) but is only truly eliminated through further practice to destroy all identity views. This results in fully integrating the initial realization or Fruition (Pali: Phala) in everyday life to eliminate all of identity views. Identity views are: “I am this in my career.” “I am a good person.” “I am a bad person.” “I am my name.” “I am a son/ daughter/ wife/ husband/ father/ mother”. All these identifications happen

very quickly below normal awareness, deeply embedded in the storehouse consciousness (unconscious). They all have to be released after path entry to gain fruition of the Stream Entry stage. This can take a few years to a couple of decades, or even a lifetime, depending on the practitioner's level of sincerity, humility and dedication to the meditation practice.

The three fetters at Path realization (Kensho/ Satori moment) plant the seeds for further elimination of these three fetters by practice to integrate the realization in gaining Fruition (The fruit of realization) of Stream Entry are:

1. **Belief in a self** (*Pali: sakkāya-diṭṭhi*) – one can no longer believe that the self or clinging to thoughts, feelings, sensations, body or identity exists.
2. **Doubt or uncertainty about the Buddha's teachings** – Real faith arises from unshakable direct experience. The practitioner is on the first step of Twelve Dependent Transcendence Arising.
3. **Attachments to Rites and Rituals** (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*) – One understands rites and rituals are not necessary for the practice. They can be an aid to be used and discarded when necessary. The actual practice is the cessation or stopping of desires that facilitates the self-ing process.

Spiritual Emergence or Spiritual Crisis

It is important to note that during the stage of integrating Stream Entry realization and for some, even during the second stage of the once-returner. The practitioner will experience a spiritual emergence or “dark night of the soul” at least once. This is where the memories of past traumas surface as intense physical and emotional pain, sometimes depending on the person. It can be filled with hallucinations and weird thoughts. Depending on the strength of a person's Jhana practice, the mind can go into a state of panic and potential loss of relative reality. This is the arising of the most insidious karma or conditionings stemming from past traumas of birth or life experiences which are stored and repressed, deeply buried in the unconscious, which propelled one's life the entire time. This conditioning is always there, reinforcing the self at the core and using it to build a solid and ingrained personal identity. Without the practitioner's determination to face the pain and sufferings of the past, this cannot be overcome to break down the most hardened core of the self-ing process.

Nevertheless, with the strength of the collected attention of the Jhana practice and mindfulness practice, one can overcome it by being a dispassionate observer instead of identifying with it. Some people with a very traumatic past or repeated traumas in the past may have to elicit the

help of a trauma therapist to overcome this stage. It is virtually impossible to break down the core of the self with therapy alone because the danger of therapy is replacing that with another self, such as: "I am no longer a victim, I am a survivor." If a person has not experienced Kensho/Stream Entry, they replace their old suffering self with a more positive but angry self. They become activists or narcissistic in demanding others recognize their identity as a survivor or past victims. Alternatively, if they are not careful to be humble in following the guidance of a spiritual teacher, they develop an "enlightened ego" after this process, thinking, "I am enlightened," and go out and teach others on their own without continual guidance or a teacher to watch over them. This is very dangerous and a significant setback for practitioners as they invite another spiritual crisis to happen again to break down that ego further. The Koan study practice post-Kensho is designed to erode the ego slowly to ease the practitioner through this process instead of repeatedly experiencing spiritual emergence or emergency. It's not comfortable, but better than taking a real hard hit that disorients your everyday life. If you don't solicit the assistance of a teacher and the Dokusan process, life will come along and bring about crisis after crisis to break down your ego. If you build it back up, it brings another one. If the process is not complete before you die, death is the last crisis. The Buddha had taught that it will take up to another seven lifetimes for the Stream Enterer to move to the final stage. You can take your time or decide you want all your sufferings to end in this lifetime.

It is advisable that a person goes into solitary practice or reduce distractions in daily life for a period of months to a year, depending on the person and their diligence in the practice or a place of seclusion away from the world's distractions during this period to navigate this experience successfully. The more you avoid the pain and trauma of the past, the more you reinforce it, and the longer it takes to transform the sufferings of the past into peace and tranquillity in the present. In the meantime, you are suffering and prolonging that suffering. Until all remnants of identity or personality views are broken through and its conditioning let go/released from the unconscious, the spiritual emergence process is not complete and will return. Once this spiritual emergence process completely breaks down personality and identity views, one cannot progress to the next stage.

Distractions: Psychic Openings and Siddhis

These occurrences can happen to some meditators or some people naturally before Stream Entry stage, it definitely happens to all meditators during some part of Stream Entry integration, especially if they are diligent enough to apply the practice off the cushion in daily life. If the meditator goes on long-term solitary retreat for more than a month and accesses the

Arupas to stabilize it, this usually arises and becomes very evident. Experiences of synchronicity, precognition, premonition, astral travelling, seeing aura, healing the sick, energetic openings, seeing past lives etc. these are called Siddhis in Indian spirituality which means “distractions.” It is important for the meditator to talk to a guiding teacher when these things happen to eliminate the distractions of psychic openings and dwelling in the “spiritual realm” or “dream realm” or “altered dimensions” to not waste time and get pulled into a spiritual crisis. Meditators can lose 5 to 10 or more years being distracted with psychic openings, special powers or dwelling in different altered dimensions, communicating with spirits to heal people etc. The Buddha warned against all of these happenings as distractions as it doesn’t eliminate sufferings and lead to true wisdom that ends suffering. He had forbidden his monastics to display psychic powers if they have them. Psychic powers only attract people who seek to have them to reinforce the specialness of the self-identity or those who seek to worship those who have them to satisfy their self-cravings. It is detrimental to the meditator’s practice and reinforces the self’s specialness when they think they own these powers. I’ve met meditators who displayed amazing psychic powers, yet their suffering conditions and delusions remains intact, some even expressed regrets to me about dwelling in these distractions and lost years of opportunity to deepen their practice. Listening to a teacher who keeps you on the path to avoid distractions is vital to ground you in navigating through these experiences. I had experienced some of these psychic openings, they are very alluring and attractive, designed naturally by samsara to suck you in and distract you. I’m truly indebted to my teacher to keep me grounded during those times, because what I found later through deepening of my practice was like a diamond compared to the trash that are Siddhis.

Once-Returner

Upon releasing all identity/personality views from the unconscious/storehouse consciousness, the stream-enterer reached the Once-Returner Stage. No moment marks this entry but the gradual deepening sense of “I am not this, I am not that” when thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions arise to perpetuate clinging to the identity view. Nevertheless, the once-returner still believes in the ever-present consciousness or oneness of all things, which is still the wrong view.

The once-returner had effectively eliminated all first three fetters and significantly weakened the next two.

4. **Sensual Desires** (kāmacchando) – attachment to sensory experience (from the five senses) and sexual experience.

5. **Ill will** (vyāpādo or byāpādo) – Resistance to life, anger, resentment, negative thinking/feelings about others or situations that produce bad karma.

At this stage, the once-returner experiences the rise of sensual desires and ill will in body and mind only momentarily, then it disappears. They cannot carry attachments to sensory experience and aversion for more than a few seconds/ minutes. They can be observed to be very relaxed, joyful and patient.

The once-returner often experiences the 2nd to 7th of the Dependent Transcendence Arising steps (*Contentment, Rapture or whole body of joy, Bliss or Sukha, Samadhi and Equanimity, Wisdom or Insight into cessation*). The first step of DTA, eliminating doubt in the Buddha's path, had been firmly grounded at Stream Entry. These experiences from 1st to 7th links on the chain of Dependent Transcendence Arising can be experienced by the Stream Enterer, but not as clear or stable in daily life as during the once-returner stage. During the once returner stage, the non-dual experience is a fact of daily life off the cushion, the bliss/ rapture had diminished and majority of the distractions of psychic and siddhis experiences are all gone. The once returner had abandoned all of their conditioned arisings in the past that generates sufferings and they seldom arise, if at all. Effectively at this stage, about 80% to 90% of the practitioner's sufferings from before Stream Entry breakthrough, has been eliminated.

If the Stream Enterer has not yet fully mastered the Arupas or Formless Jhanas to bring it to everyday life. At this stage, one works to experience the Arupas most often than normal awareness outside of sitting meditation. Once the non-dual experience of the 7th Jhanas is experienced as a norm in everyday life, the once-returner is ready for the next stage.

A once-returner who had sufficient years of integrating their practice into daily life can usually switch from ordinary consciousness right into the 7th Jhana during meditation or everyday life (which Theravada teachings called Equanimity of Formations where all arising and clinging are quickly let go) where emptiness is experienced. Life becomes easy with flow as the state of being often. However, this flow state is not the same as a normal flow state where someone is performing dancing, doing martial arts or painting. That is a flow state based on concentration and absorption into the object of observation. This flow state comes from the unconditional release of control, desires or will. It is one of seemingly with a total lack of intention where awareness is open and expansive, not focused or absorbed on a single object or activity. If the once-returner does not understand that even this non-dual state is impermanent, one should not be desired or attached to it.

They get stuck in this stage, always trying to get back into it and make it last longer. Many people waste a lifetime doing this and never get to the next stage. They think the total dropping of self-identity is the end. It is not! On careful observation in daily life, if the practitioner is authentic and honest with oneself, they will see the rising of conceit (I'm better, the same, or less than others), irritation, and desires, even if it is just momentarily. This is a good pointer for practice. If these three still rise, the attachment to self is still there in its most subtle form.

Non-Returner

The Non-Returner stage is marked by the slow entry into the experience (or non-experience) of Nirodha-Samapatti and the slow exit of it. At Stream-Entry, the experience of *Supermundane Nibbana* is so brief (only for a split second) that it is not long enough for the person to see the process of Twelve Dependent Origination and indeed come clarity of insight into the mind-body self-ing process to gain liberation. It takes the skills of being able to progressively go up the Jhanas from the first four to up the Arupas (Base of Infinite Space, Base of Infinite Awareness, Base of Nothingness, Base of Neither Perception nor Non-perception) and finally Nirodha-Samapatti for the meditator to see the process of Dependent Origination by looking around after arriving at each state to gain a direct experience/ understanding of its characteristics in relations to the self-ing process of Dependent Origination is built by the blocks of five aggregates. As the aggregates drop away progressively up the Jhanas, Arupas and finally, the last of it (consciousness) drops at Nirodha-Samapatti. The practitioner comes to the ultimate realization of non-self or Nibbana/Nirvana. It is the complete extinction of the self at Nirodha-Samapatti and the last gateway to bring insight into final liberation from all sufferings.

Without consistently practicing mindfulness outside of sitting meditation, one cannot sustain enough clarity during the sitting to master the progressive entering and to go up each Jhanas, Arupas to Nirodha-Samapatti. Loss of clarity and distractions in everyday life without constant mindfulness (Sati) will cause a significant loss of ability to relax and hold attention to the Jhanas/Arupas, much less to have enough clarity of observation in them to see the subtle nature of those states to gain insights from them. Many people enter the Jhanas to escape life, release stress and take a break from suffering. That is the wrong attitude to practice. The Jhanas are done to refine the lenses of observation to observe daily life with clarity. The only way to overcome this non-clear lens during meditation is to experience the Jhanas and eventually Arupas outside of meditation in everyday life. Theravada school calls this Equanimity. There are ten classifications of Equanimity, which equates to applying insights gained from

observing, understanding the Jhanas and Arupas and experiencing the Jhanas and Arupas in everyday life.

After mastery of the Jhanas, Arupas, and finally arriving at Nirodha-Samapatti (some refer to it as the 9th Jhana), the practitioner makes a breakthrough into Non-Returner. Mastery of the 8th Jhana or Arupa of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception must be achieved before the practitioner can successfully enter Nirodha-Samapatti since the fear of extinction from the self-ing process is too great and will stop the practitioner from going there. Going into Nirodha-Samapatti is like consciously dying on the cushion. You do not die, but the self-process dies. In the process of going in and out of Nirodha-Samapatti, one can observe in clarity the process of consciousness reduced into a small still center from the earlier expansiveness of Formless Jhana 5th to 7th. If the earlier Arupas had a characteristic of intense clarity of consciousness, at the 8th Jhana, it takes on two qualities (either bright or dimmed). Many people mistook the brightness as the authentic approach and marvelled in clarity of awareness, and they shun away from dimming consciousness/awareness, thinking this is and hindrance of sloth and torpor (sleepiness or dullness) like they had experienced earlier in their practice before entering the 1st Jhana. When they shy away from exploring Neither Perception nor Non-Perception, they waste years or even a lifetime of practice to be unable to come to this stage. This is because they cling to the non-dual experience/state of the 7th Jhana/Base of Nothingness or the oneness experience/state of the 6th Jhana/Base of Infinite Consciousness. Upon careful observation in everyday life, it is unsustainable to remain in these states permanently. All states of mind are impermanent, the bad, the good and the transcendental. Without realizing this, the practitioner is stuck as a once-returner and does not move further on the path.

Upon slowly entering Nirodha-Samapatti from the state of Neither Perception and non-perception and coming out of it, the practitioner experiences the most liberating insight into the process of Dependent Origination. At this point, they have practiced and lived with the experience of entering the Jhanas from the 1st to 8th daily, being able to sustain it at least for 10-15 minutes at each state. They have directly experienced gradually falling away of the aggregates and investigated the process to gain many insights into what is not self. Alternatively, during meditation, they might jump right into the Arupas and ignore the lower Jhanas to get to the Base of Nothingness and the Base of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception. Most importantly, if the Spiritual Emergence process has not completed its work, the conceit and self-ing process are still strong. Suppose the once-returner has become dissatisfied with sensual desires and ill-will (resistance to life) to reduce them significantly. In that case, the pull of those things will distract

the meditator from further exploring Neither Perception and Non-Perception to ultimately experience Nirodha-Samapatti.

Upon slowly entering Nirodha-Samapatti and exiting it, the meditator can observe the process of Dependent Origination backwards and then forward: watching the slow disappearance of the self-ing process until consciousness blinks out and watching it re-booted back up, the meditator is able to gain the insight of liberation. In some meditation practice, even the stream enterer experiences this, but only with integration off the cushion can lead to completion of a stage. If identify view is not totally eradicated in daily life, a person hasn't completed stream entry stage. Experiences on the cushion has to translate to life off the cushion. If it doesn't, a stage is not completed.

Nirodha-Samapatti is a state deeper than in dreamless sleep. The whole mind switches off and is in a complete state of rest, while the body still minimally functions. To the outside observer, the person looks dead, but their heart still beats faintly, and their metabolism still functions. Only with the repeated entry into Nirodha-Samapatti does the meditator reaches the stage of Non-Returner, because of their mastery of the Jhanas/Arupas and intense clarity of observation and skilled reflections on the experience that sets them apart from the Stream-Enterer, who only caught a glimpse of it for a split second whether by instantaneous method (Kensho/Satori) or through the gradual method (Jhanas/Arupas), having no ability to observe it happen slowly.

After the initial slow entry into Nirodha-Samapatti, the meditator experiences a deep dissatisfaction for sensual cravings and ill-will upon exiting. He/She no longer has any arising desires to live regarding career, people or things, dwelling in the enjoyment of the five senses or resistance to whatever arises in the present. Deep dissatisfaction with all these arises, and the meditator has reached stage 8th of Dependent Transcendent Arising - *Disenchantment*. At which point, the meditator wants nothing but complete liberation from all of it: Nibbana or Extinction. He/She thinks this can only be accomplished by continually going in-out of Nirodha-Samapatti, sometimes remaining in it for seven days. No one can stay in Nirodha-Samapatti for more than seven days because past seven days, the body shuts down and dies. This does not stop the Non-Returner from yearning for it.

At the stage of Non-Returner, all five lower fetters are cut off. They are:

1. Identity view
2. Doubt in Buddha's teachings
3. Attachments to rites and rituals
4. Sensual desires and sexual desires

5. Ill-will or aversion

The five fetters remain at the non-returner stage as follows:

6. **Lust for fine-material existence, lust for material rebirth** (ruparago) – This is being attached to the experiences of the first four Jhanas. It is not the same as the normal attachments of beginners who first experience these Jhanas but the refined enjoyment of these states in everyday life in the now. There is no clinging to the past or future, but if the person enjoys these experiences in everyday life, even if just momentarily in the now, he/she is still attached to them. This attachment kickstarts the finer self-ing process. The self arises momentarily to enjoy these states.
7. **Lust for immaterial existence, lust for rebirth in the formless realm** (aruparago) – When the non-returner, even after knowing the Dependent Origination's self-ing process, can momentarily forget it and in the present enjoys the states of the formless realm of the Arupas. Even in this, the self-ing process starts, and the self appears, giving rise to a basis for conceit/pride.
8. **Conceit** (mana) – This is not the usual arrogance of the CEO who thinks everyone is inferior, but all identifications with thoughts/perception/feelings relating to "I know or have this, I am better. I know or have the same. I am the same. I know or have less. I am inferior." At the level of non-returner, there is no longer an identification with personality or identity view but remains this subtly as rising of conceit as the "I" awareness in the center of all experiences. It is a slight tension in the middle and around the top of the head. Unless one pays attention at all times to release this tension, the clear awareness continues to have a point of origination of observation: a self.
9. **Restlessness** (uddhacca) – Is an underlying state of boredom in bringing the mind to seek stimulation, even quiet/calming ones like reading and painting or gardening. The average person notices this when all stimulating things are taken away. When one is locked into a room with four blank, bare walls, it is torture for the mind not to have anything to seek. In the case of Anagami, when the mind seeks and moves from the stillness of Equanimity (Equanimity of Formations), it is considered a subtle form of restlessness, even if it moves to the Jhanas or Arupas states.

10. **Ignorance** (avijja) - Ignorance is the absence of clear, direct understanding coming from experience through meditation and life experiences that the Dependent Origination, Dependent Transcendence Arising, Four Noble Truth, and Three Marks of Existence are the foundation of all reality. This cannot be destroyed until the once-returner realizes that his ignorance, conceit and subtle desires for existence or non-existence are still there and further investigate the mind through the same process as reaching the once-returner to reach the insight that opens the Path of Arahantship.

The accomplishment of reaching the stage of non-returner is very rare in modern times. The non-returner effectively severed the leading cause of rebirth into samsara: attachment to sexual and sensual desires. Sexual desires are the root where procreation happens, where consciousness binds to a form to give rise to birth. Ill-will and aversion are effectively eliminated at this stage. In the mind of the non-returner, there is no such thing as resistance to life in the present moment. The non-returner lives in a state of ever-present surrender, but subtle desires for liberation and Nibbana exist. The seeking has yet to end. When all seeking ends, all desires cease, and the last five fetters are cut off. That is when the non-returner becomes the Arahant.

There is a point of contention that I had for a long time struggled with. Being raised in Canada and educated in both Western and Asian context, I had many reservations against the need for celibacy to attain liberation. My teachers left my point of disagreement with him on the table, he neither forces me to change my views or agreed with me. He often said to me when I disagree with him: "Keep practicing, you'll see." So I went on having very satisfying sexual relationships and explored all different aspects of it no matter how controversial at the time, to understand the nature of mind while engaging in these relationships. I never wanted to give up sexual activities. I thought of them as natural as eating and sleeping. Yet, I was surprised to find that the entry into this stage marked the end of the compelling need to indulge in them. I would have to at this point verify for myself the Buddha's teachings and the lived experiences of many past lay Zen masters in China and Vietnam that they begin to lose all attraction to sex and sensual desires at a certain point in their practice. This would be the point! This was clearly recorded in the life and teachings of [Layman Pang](#) in China and [Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ Trần Quốc Tung](#) in Vietnam and many other lay Zen practitioners recorded in China and Vietnam that I have read in my years of textual study. Because of my textual background, and my recent lived experience, I can no longer deny the reality of experiences at this stage. You can't have full liberation without the falling away of all sexual and sensual desires. Which

are what westerners don't want to hear. It wasn't what I wanted to hear for many years, but I was willing to lay it on the table and test it. If nothing, my Zen practice as about continual humility on the path, the willingness to be proven wrong in the face of reality and deepened experiences. For me, nothing is more important that complete liberation or the non-arising of desires, aversion and non-clarity. If that meant no sex or sensuality, let it be, but it needs to happen naturally, not forced or repressed.

The non-returner, upon realizing the path, has to integrate it and bring it to fruition, eliminating even the momentary arising of three poisons (desires, anger, ignorance) and working on severing the last five fetters. When the non-returner successfully integrates and brought the initial realization to fruition, that's when they are ready for entry into Arahantship.

At this point of practice, the integration of nirodha-samapatti experience and the intense non-dual experience of nibbana after coming out of nirodha are to be integrated into everyday life. The three gates of liberation (emptiness, signless-ness, aimlessness) are something that is an absolute requirement for practice at this point. It can be experienced by the non-returner and Arahant outside of sitting meditation. It is my experience that the intense stillness of nibbana immediately after coming out a nirodha-samapatti in daily sittings helps to fuel the enduring experience of nibbana off the cushion in daily life. The gates of liberation are more of a description of the experience of liberation than a prescription. Emptiness pertains to the non-dual experience of nibbana, which is very intense after coming out of nirodha-samapatti. Signlessness points to the falling away of labels on all objects of experience or the mechanism of perception that filters our experiences. It is also another way to describe emptiness. Aimlessness points to a goalless existence, where the linearity of experience of time is gone. The practitioner only experiences the present as a complete stillness that pervades everything. Time loses its essence. The past, present and future has no essence. The concepts of time drops away as it is truly seen as an illusion. Life happens in absolute stillness of mind. As Zen master Ikku of Japan states: "When I have no destination, I'm never lost."

Arahant

Upon the final realization, through observing the process of dependent origination backwards and forwards, in and out of Nirodha-Samappatti, the non-returner realizes the path of Arahantship. The realization is as follows:

The non-dual state experienced during the stage of Stream-Entry and Once-Returner is not the true emptiness that the Heart Sutra talks about. On close observation by the meditator during the non-dual state, it can be observed that in the middle of the emptiness, there is a consciousness in the

middle of it all, observing the emptiness like an object of observation. Because the object is no longer localized and is one of emptiness, one thinks upon reflections when exiting that state that the self is extinguished, but the subtle self (*avijja-manas*) build from identification with consciousness is still there. As long as one does not enter through the gradual process of observing the slow shifts between the state of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception into Nirodha-Samapatti, consciousness does not blink out, and the center of observation in the middle of all phenomena, including emptiness, does not disappear the subtle remnants of clinging to the aggregate to create selfhood is not eradicated. After arising slowly out of Nirodha-Samapatti, a brief experience occurs where the mind is clear without a center; consciousness no longer has the subtle identity of the experiencer in the middle of it. Right in the middle of Buddha's Nature is ignorance, falsely seen as the source of many insights and wisdom. In the book "*Aranattamagga Arahattaphala: The Path to Arahathship*," Venerable Acariya Maha Boowa, head monk of the Thai Forest Tradition, talks about this subtle delusion that had evaded almost all of the most sincere and dedicated meditation practitioners on the Buddhist path.

"The radiance, produced by the convergence of the various defilements (*kilesas*), will be clearly-perceived point of brightness, a very refined radiance that is centered at a specific point within the mind (*citta*). A refined and corresponding dullness will occasionally tarnish that radiant center, which also causes an equally subtle form of *dukkha* to emerge. In truth, brightness and dullness are two sides of the same coin: both are conventional realities. At this level, radiance, dullness, and *dukkha* are companions, appearing together."

Upon coming to the above realization by direct insight while in the Base of Neither Perception or Non-Perception, the meditator proceeds to investigate further and relaxes, to let go of the radiant center, even if it dulls, sinking deeper and deeper. The body gradually relaxes as if going into sleep (it can even snore), and the head drops forward, losing consciousness. This can be a brief moment or up to seven days (depending on how often or skilled the practitioners were during the Non-Returner stage at entering Nirodha-Samapatti). The final realization happened when the practitioner exited Nirodha-Samapatti and saw that the center of consciousness had fallen away. It could be a brief time or longer before it reappears, but the clarity of mind to observe this phenomenon is so great that the practitioner saw it. Then he/she realizes that even the clarity of mind without a center is too an aggregate of consciousness. He/she broke all illusions of self that clings to or identified with consciousness to perpetuate samsara. This clinging to consciousness is the reason for rebirth or reincarnation. That

consciousness moves from form to form to develop the later aggregates to form the self. This very consciousness is the storehouse consciousness that stores all experiences and sense of knowing the past and future, responsible for all the Siddhis experiences that had been experienced in the first two stages of enlightenment. At this realization, the sense of disenchantment, dispassion and yearning for Nibbana/Nirvana ceases. The destruction of the taints/defilements (kilesas) is complete. It is as if Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz had seen the man and the machine operating behind the curtains to produce the illusion of the Wizard. She can no longer be fooled that the powerful and amazing Wizard of Oz exists. The same goes that the self-ing process of Dependent Origination can no longer fool the meditator that it is real. The practitioner, at this point as reached the path of Arahantship. The everyday non-dual experiences of the once-returner and non-returner is now purified with no center of awareness anymore. The Arahant experiences this daily. This is the true experience of Supermundane Nibbana with remainder. The Supermundane Nibbana without remainder happens at the death of the Arahant. Supermundane Nibbana with remainder means that the five aggregates still works and functions, some mental, emotional conditioning remains enough to take care of the body and mind in daily life. The remaining work to do is to integrate the realization it into everyday life, basically to continue to experience Six Factor Equanimity where no attachments happen. To say it is work, but it is not really work. It is work to pick up things, but there isn't any work in not picking up anything. In Six Factor Equanimity there is no one to pick up, five aggregates rise and fall on their own, the body has significantly less tension and is always in a state of being relaxed.

At path entry, the Arahant had overcome the experience of *disenchantment* and *dispassion* of the Dependent Transcendental Arising during the Non-Returner Stage and proceeded to the deliverance, wisdom that initiates cessation of Sañña (Perception) and Vedanā (feeling) and final realization of Supermundane Nibbana. Not all Nirodha can lead to Nibbana. Non-returner can enter and exit Nirodha but do not experience Nibbana after. That is because the Non-returner still does not fully understand or have direct wisdom into the links of dependent origination or have insight into the presence of the last remnants of the self (ignorance) embedded right in the center of Buddha Nature (Awakened Awareness). Their insights are at a point where the last five fetters are still present in everyday life. If the practitioners can still see these arises, ever so subtly, they're not at Arahant fruition stage.

At some point, after realizing the path of Arahantship, with the continual effortless practice, the practitioner will lose all desires, and the

identification with even the last subtle remnants of the self-ing process collapses. The practitioner successfully cuts off the last five fetters and comes to experience the fruit of the Arahantship. Everything had been done. He/she has laid down the burden of samsara and lives in a state of uninterrupted six-factored Equanimity. The six-factored Equanimity (*upekkhā*) links to each of the six senses: "*Having seen a form with the eye, a monk is neither joyful nor saddened, but dwells equanimous, mindful, and clearly comprehending...*" (*Aṅguttara Nikāya [AN] III 279*). This knowing repeats for each sense associating the sense organ to its corresponding function: "*heard a sound with the ear,*" "*smelled an odour with the nose,*" "*experienced a taste with the tongue,*" "*felt a tactile object with the body,*" and "*cognized a mental phenomenon with the mind*" (*AN III 279*). The mind (Citta) of pure awareness prevails over all experienced phenomena as the phenomenon rises and falls on its own with no one at the center to grasp it to make a self. The Arahant's mind at this point becomes like Teflon; nothing can stick to it and make it grasp to start the process of Dependent Arising. The non-returner can often experience this Teflon experience (called the six-factored equanimity) but not consistently or perfectly. I truly believe that the only difference between the non-returner and arahant is the degree of non-clinging and therefore pervasiveness of six-factored equanimity in everyday life. The non-returner's citta (mind) still has subtle clinging and not completely purified with all past kileasas released. Therefore the non-returner must work diligently to release all past kileasas and remaining fetters to breakthrough to the last stage.

At the stage of Stream-Entry, Once-Returner to Non-Returner, the practitioner is motivated by the desire towards liberation (Bodhicitta) and desires stemming from compassion (Bodhisattva way) to help all sentient beings to come to liberation. They can be effective and very public teachers whose personality is evident to those around them and those listening to them. Upon realizing the fruit of Arahantship, they stop all public teachings and seeking to help others. There are no such desires left since all desires had left them. The path of the Bodhisattva is complete. The practitioner had gained enough merit through compassionate work to bring them to the last stage, the ending all sufferings. This is where they become recluses or blend into the crowd as a very ordinary person. This person would live a very simple, quiet life. If not one of a hermit, it would be hermit-like. If someone comes along and asks about the dharma, he/she would answer that person's question, but when that person leaves, like a calm pond, he/she returns to the ever-present clarity and emptiness. If something arises in the present moment that needs to be done, they do, then everything rests. Some old habits remain from before, which they had always done, but if those preferences are not satisfied, the Arahant is not disturbed. He/ She would

never go looking to save someone, change the world, or do something about the future with an idea or goal in their head. If someone asks the Arahant to do it, he/she may or may not at the present moment respond to it, but all goals and future pursuits, all points of fixations, have ended. His/her personality disappears to them, and the personality of those around them disappears to them as well. He/ She no longer sees people as this or that with a past formulation of characteristics and discrimination (Black, White, Asian etc.). There is only arising and passing of phenomena in complete stillness. Other people are passing phenomena where there is no self to cling to any of them. The end of all seeking had arrived. Normal calculations of time, such as past, present, and future, do not have any essence in their minds, there is the usefulness of it, but they do not live in it by clinging on to it. Like a mirage, the past, future and present thoughts rise as mental formations and fall by themselves. The same goes for all the other aggregates.

If you meet an Arahant, you probably will not recognize this person as an Arahant because this person is very unassuming and ordinary. We always look for specialness, attractiveness, and exuberant personalities or characteristics. The Arahant will likely not have any of these or charisma. What he/she does experience at all times is the end of suffering. If that is not important enough to achieve in a lifetime, I do not know what is?