**THE PROCESS OF AWAKENING**

The list below describes what are recognized by Theravadin Buddhists as reliable “landmarks” realizable on the path of awakening. The system was developed in the 5th century C.E. by a Sri Lankan monk, Buddhaghosa, and is called the *Visuddhimagga* (The Path Of Purification), and is a quite elaborate commentary on the understanding of Buddhist teachings of that era.

Here is the way Wikipedia describes the process described in a sutta as the “seven relay chariots”, and the goal is the experience of nibbana (nirvana):

**Seven Stages of Purification**

This comparison between practice and "seven relay chariots" points at the goal. Each purity is needed to attain the next. They are often referred to as the "Seven Stages of Purification" (*satta-visuddhi*):

1. Purification of Conduct (*sīla-visuddhi*)
2. Purification of Mind (*citta-visuddhi*)
3. Purification of View (*ditthi-visuddhi*)
4. Purification by Overcoming Doubt (*kankha-vitarana-visuddhi*)
5. Purification by Knowledge and Vision of What Is Path and Not Path (*maggamagga-ñanadassana-visuddhi*)
6. Purification by Knowledge and Vision of the Course of Practice (*patipada-ñanadassana-visuddhi*)
   1. Knowledge of contemplation of rise and fall (*udayabbayanupassana-nana*)
   2. Knowledge of contemplation of dissolution (*bhanganupassana-nana*)
   3. Knowledge of appearance as terror (*bhayatupatthana-nana*)
   4. Knowledge of contemplation of danger (*adinavanupassana-nana*)
   5. Knowledge of contemplation of dispassion (*nibbidanupassana-nana*)
   6. Knowledge of desire for deliverance (*muncitukamyata-nana*)
   7. Knowledge of contemplation of reflection (*patisankhanupassana-nana*)
   8. Knowledge of equanimity about formations (*sankharupekka-nana*)
   9. Conformity knowledge (*anuloma-nana*)
7. Purification by Knowledge and Vision (*ñanadassana-visuddhi*)
   1. Change of lineage
   2. [The first path and fruit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sot%C4%81panna)
   3. [The second path and fruit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sakadagami)
   4. [The third path and fruit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An%C4%81g%C4%81mi)
   5. [The fourth path and fruit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arhat_%28Buddhism%29)

The "Purification by Knowledge and Vision" is the culmination of the practice, in [four stages](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_stages_of_enlightenment) leading to liberation and Nirvana.

The emphasis in this system is on understanding the three marks of existence, [dukkha](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dukkha), [anatta](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anatta), [anicca](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anicca). This emphasis is recognizable in the value that is given to [vipassana](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vipassana) over [samatha](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samatha), especially in the contemporary [vipassana movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vipassana_movement). Downloaded 10/29/14 from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visuddhimagga#cite_note-FOOTNOTEGunaratana1994143-174-3>

The graphic below and the following comments describe my understanding of how the progression evolves. I have some direct experience of some of the stages, and the rest is derived from my studies over the years. A useful introductory book for understanding these stages is “A Meditator’s Atlas”, by Matt Flickstein, one of my teachers. A much more advanced book is “Wisdom Wide And Deep” by Shaila Catherine.

**STAGES OF AWAKENING**

**Purification of Knowledge and Vision of Path Progress** has several sub-stages:

**Purification of Knowledge and Vision** takes "as object the unconditioned, the standstill of existence, the absence of becoming, cessation, **NIBBANA**"

**Knowledge of Equanimity and Adaptation of Truth** is the opening to one of the characteristics, then:

**Knowledge in Reflecting Contemplation**, an increasingly clear awareness of the three characteristics.

**Knowledge of Desire for Deliverance** is the emerging desire to be rid of the torment. This leads to:

**Contemplation of the Fearful**, a pervasive, reflexive reaction to what appears to be annihilation of self.

**Contemplation of Dissolution** is awareness that self-states collapse immediately, leading to:

**Contemplation of Rise and Fall** increasingly knows the rapid emergence and dissolution of self-states.

**Purification of Knowledge and Vision of What is the Path and Not-Path** is increasing awareness of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self. At this stage, jhana-like rapture, clarity and energy may emerge, called *the corruptions of insight*. Mindful investigation of conditioned arising and passing away prevents getting stuck. Awareness of arising and passing away becomes reliable and easily done.

**Purification of Overcoming Doubt** is the process of observing cause and effect. An intention always precedes a thought, mood or action, with an extremely rapidly evolving development. This insight establishes an awareness that consciousness arises to reflect the mental object, then fades momentarily until the next object arises. By inference, it becomes clear that it always has been and always will be this way.

**Purification of View** is the increasingly frequent realization that what the sense doors receive is only provisionally interpreted by the mind. The interpretation is distorted by greed, hatred and delusion. This insight begins the process of deconstructing the false view of an enduring, reliable self.

**Purification of the Mind:** samadhi, with jhana, or at least access concentration. Hindrances are subdued & the 7 awakening factors are activated.

**Purification of Virtue:** cultivating the precepts and generosity, patience, renunciation, wisdom, effort, truthfulness, lovingkindness, equanimity, etc.

**Purification of Virtue:** This represents the virtue aggregate of the eightfold path, Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. It also aligns with the transition from self-state conflict (the absence of virtue) through self-state integration (the ability to systematically cultivate a virtuous lifestyle). This ethical base provides the platform for liberating the mind from distress and confusion through the remaining stages.

**Purification of the Mind:** This represents the training aggregate of the eightfold path, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. It provides the self-awareness and self-discipline necessary to evolve from self-state conflict to self-state integration. The systemic energy of a person’s life is not bogged down in the hindrances, temporarily, and the seven awakening factors are increasingly identifiable, accessible, and effective. This sets the stage for the true purpose of vipassana, to know directly the reality of impermanence, the cause-and-effect of dynamics of craving and clinging which produces suffering, and that there is no isolated, autonomous, enduring self.

**Purification of View:** This is frequently called *knowledge of nama-rupa*. Nama (nah-mah) is the process through which the mind creates meaning, and rupa (roo-pah) is the realm of sensational stimulation that provides the feeds into nama. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and physical sensation in the body are rupa. Nama and rupa are transitory phenomena—subjective experience is constantly changing, and this changes in relationship to the dynamic changes that occur in the physicality of sensationally stimulating events. Our practice develops the ability to track these changes in an alert and ongoing way. Mindfulness of breathing combines the two and is the foundation for investigating nama-rupa—the touch and temperature sensations are rupa and mindfulness is the subjective awareness of the sensations. One of the important aspects of mindfulness of breathing meditation involves the determination to track the transitory qualities of the in-breath and out-breath while being aware of how the mind describes the experience: “This breath is longer and more vividly noticed than the previous one.” At this stage, there is the capacity to know that the way the mind interprets sensation is not entirely certain or reliable. Here’s an example from my experience that is different than the simple process of mindfulness of breathing: On a retreat, the visual process is stimulated by a variable array of light stimuli--this is rupa, the process of nama adds the label “person”, and then would further develop the initial impression with the name of the person and, perhaps, some judgement that develops along with the name. My mind elaborates a story about that person, perhaps judging her “performance” as a meditation practitioner; the story could be that she’s very competent, or that she’s doing it all wrong! All that is known is that light hit the eye and perceived a part of the light stimulation as a female person, and the rest is pure imagination on my part. Being able to see this process as it is occurring is an important way to notice the delusional process produced by craving and clinging—the processes are products of nature and impersonal—the body’s function organically is manifested as sensation, while the brain’s function is to create thoughts; craving and clinging “makes a self” out of an impersonal process.

**Purification of Overcoming Doubt:** This stage is sometimes termed *knowledge of cause-and effect*. Following on the insight regarding nama-rupa, the emergence of the “selfing story” is known as impersonal and provisional, not certain or enduring. Because the hindrances have been set aside, the awakening factor of Investigation of Mental Phenomena can begin to notice the initial transformation of the raw sense data into some mental concoction. The ability to apply meaning to sensational input is a valuable part of being human, but, as we all know, it can get out of hand! During this stage of practice, we can practice investigating how the mind conditioning factor of Intention inclines toward a particular meaning. The Pali word *cetana* (chey-tah-nah) is often interpreted as *intention* or *volition*. It is the function of the mind that sorts through various possible meanings associated with sensational stimuli at a very rapid pace, multiple sortings per second. If a person isn’t alert to this process, the resulting story can be quite mistaken in understanding and subsequent behavior. When the awakening factors are operating effectively, the ability to be aware of the emerging potential meanings of an event in the process of becoming, combined with the ability to apply Right Effort quickly, changes the flow of energy towards seeing the three characteristics, *impermanence, the danger of craving and clinging*, and *non-self*. This stage is called *overcoming doubt*, because the more proficient one becomes during this stage, the more confidence emerges regarding the value of the Buddhist teachings. Subjectively, with sufficient diligent awareness, the arising of mental phenomena can be noticed with clarity, that is, the beginning of a potential thought, without being particularly drawn to pursuing that thought.

**Purification of Knowledge and Vision of What is the Path and Not-Path:** The emergence of confidence has great benefits, but also some significant potential obstacles to Awakening. Because the awakening factors of Energy (as Right Effort), Joy (as enthusiastic, engaged interest), Tranquility and Equanimity reach a new level of Concentration (unified awareness), the mind is very alert and eager regarding the practice. The ability to track the rapid arising and subsiding of self-states becomes easier and more fulfilling. These factors can become quite dramatic in operation, producing imbalances of energy, manifesting as blissful feelings, deep tranquility, overconfidence (leading to a diminishing commitment to Mindfulness and Investigation of Mental Phenomena), and enthusiastic flights of imagination, including “past life regressions”. There also may be strong urges to convince others to emulate one’s practices, beyond what is polite. Apparently, these self-states can become a significant distraction away from deepening practice. These experiences are called *corruptions of insight*. The antidote for these mental phenomena is a determined commitment to continue vipassana practice—the impermanent and impersonal nature of subjective experience. The result of this further investigation is called *Insight into what is path and not path*. During this phase it is very helpful to have the active support of someone who has already navigated these sorts of insights and can encourage further investigation.

The next stage of the purification process is often subdivided, as illustrated in the graph above. As the previous stage matures past the attractive self-states, the ability to notice arising and passing away becomes much more frequent and effortless, and thoughts are momentary, arising and passing away with extreme rapidity. It’s possible that at this stage, the ability to convincingly “know” what the contents of the thoughts are is compromised, because they arise and pass away so rapidly. It is reported that once this stage becomes quite familiar, the practice takes on a very different tone, analogous to what the Christian mystics might call “the dark night of the soul”. Some commentators state that this is when the “real” practice of vipassana matures, that is, clear, immediate awareness of impermanence, dissatisfaction and non-self is known with increasing frequency and clarity.

**Contemplation of Rise and Fall:** As the ability to notice impermanence becomes more routine, the rapid arising and passing away of mental phenomena can occur whether one consciously intends that insight or not. This stage may persist for extended time in one’s life, maybe even years, or it may be fairly quickly transited through. Currently, I’ve become more frequently aware of arising and passing away in this manner. My experience is the thoughts are fleeting, “transparent” and incomplete; they seem to “shred” or dissolve very quickly. This doesn’t happen with the high level of frequency or as automatically as what I’ve read, which probably means that insight isn’t fully mature yet.

**Contemplation of Dissolution:** As the previous stage matures, the ability to track impermanence becomes so agile that the process of “selfing” seems to collapse, sometimes without intending for that to happen. I was on a retreat many years ago and had the experience of thoughts collapsing before attaching a “self” to them. It seemed as if my mind was trying to get “traction” regarding meaning making, but the “ground” was too slippery, and the selfing process was just falling apart. This awareness lasted only a few seconds, but my mind recoiled away from that reflexively, and I realized, by inference as well as having previously read about it, that this is a fundamental phenomenon of cognition. It startled and shocked me. I sat and wept for quite a while, realizing that this characteristic had always been operating in my life in the past, and would be for the rest of my life! This is the onset of “the dark night of the soul” phase of practice. Obviously, it can be quite daunting. Fortunately, I was well-informed enough and had enough confidence in the eightfold path that I didn’t hesitate in continuing my practice.

**Contemplation of the Fearful:**  Continuing the practice at this point is quite important, but, obviously, it can seem like the whole sense of self is a fabrication, which is true. The fictional characteristic of the self doesn’t deny the reality of life, however, because self-identity is essential for social functioning. What it does accomplish is a direct knowing of this phenomenon as impermanent and not indicative of a self. Once again, it is very important to have conceptual and personal support while coming to terms with this experience. By the way, I only had that experience one time, but, by inference, it validated, then and now, the truth of the teachings. I would be OK with experiencing it again in the future, but, according to the teachings, being able to confront the knowing awareness again may not be necessary.

**Knowledge of Desire for Deliverance:** As the knowing of the dissolution of self-states is confirmed and there’s enough equanimity to investigate the experience, the opportunity is there to know the characteristics of impermanence, dissatisfaction and non-self at the most “granular” level. *The fear of losing the assurance of an enduring self is the problem, not the awareness of impermanence!* This will become clearer through knowing the next stage.

**Knowledge in Reflecting Contemplation:** With the full development and integration of the seven Awakening Factors, that is, Mindfulness, Investigation of Mental Phenomena, Energy, Joy, Tranquility, Concentration and Equanimity, there’s a direct knowledge of the nature of craving and clinging. Reflecting upon how craving and clinging seem to require an enduring self for lived experience to be “real”, and seeing through that misperception by directly knowing the dissolution of self states, creates conditions sufficient to ultimately understand what the Buddha taught in the most deeply liberating way.

**Knowledge of Equanimity and Adaptation of Truth:** Upon reflection that the real problem is attachment to the misperception of reality which causes dissatisfaction, it becomes possible to surrender craving and clinging. This may seem odd, but, upon reflection, the misery of trying to sustain the “hard-edged” belief in a self is so evident that the stage is set for deliverance.

**Purification of Knowledge and Vision:** In previous articles, I described the “revisiting” of the eightfold path. Right Understanding matures into Right Knowledge, and Right Intention matures into Right Liberation. With the direct knowledge of the essential insecurity and dissatisfaction of craving and clinging to the misperceptions of regarding that which is truly impermanent as permanent and that there is a separate, autonomous self when there’s direct knowledge that there isn’t, comes the opportunity to drop those views and let go into the unconditioned, Nirvana. This realization doesn’t deprive someone of the richness of life but frees up the mind to be more appropriately adaptive to the realities of life, unburdened by ego defense and ego gratification.

When I first started studying and practicing Buddhism seriously in the early 1980’s, I believed that experiencing the unconditioned was extraordinarily rare, with only a few examples in the history of humankind. These days I read reports of many people experiencing Nirvana, and realize that, with enough information, support and commitment, the possibility for Awakening is here for many, perhaps tens of thousands, in each generation. I hope that this article is helpful for you in the quest for freedom from distress and confusion.