

[The Buddha's process of cultivation, realization and enlightenment](#)

This article is an introductory summary of the teachings of Zen Master Thích Thông Triệt on the topic, mainly based on the oral teaching of Bhikkhuni Zen Master Thích Nữ Triệt Như given for the Fundamental Meditation Course. For a comprehensive in-depth understanding, the reader is encouraged to attend the complete nine-seminar teaching program and read the writings of Master Thích Thông Triệt that are being progressively translated into English.

The historic Buddha

Sakkamuni (Sanskrit: Sākyamuni, Vietnamese: Thích Ca Mâu Ni) Buddha is a historic person in the history of human civilization. Today, we can find historic records of the life of Sakkamuni Buddha. We can also visit historic sites in India and Nepal that commemorate the places where he was born, where he attained enlightenment, where he delivered his first sermon, and where he left this world. Among the archaeological artifacts at these sites are sculpted stone pillars erected by King Ashoka who reigned about 300 years after the death of the Buddha. After being converted to Buddhism, King Ashoka asked the fourth Buddhist patriarch, Upagupta, to take him to the places where the Buddha was born, attained enlightenment, started turning the wheel of dhamma, and entered nibbāna (S: nirvāṇa). At each of these places, King Ashoka erected a stone pillar with inscriptions that have remained to this day.

Sakkamuni Buddha was born in a royal family and could have led an easy life of privileges and luxuries. But since early childhood, he was preoccupied with human sufferings and aspired to save all beings from suffering. At age 29, he decided to abandon his palatial life, sever all family ties, and wander deep into the forest to seek liberation first for himself, and then for all other beings. Through a long and arduous process strewn with challenges and early mistakes, he finally reached his ultimate goal of enlightenment and realization of the truth. Following that, he decided to bring the light to all those who seek liberation, and dedicated the next 45 years of his life to teaching.

When he was a prince, his name was Siddhattha Gotama (S: Siddhārtha Gautama, V: Tất Đạt Đa Cổ Đàm). After he attained enlightenment, people called him “the enlightened Gotama” (Gotama Buddha), his disciples called him “Blessed One” (P: Bhagavant, V: Thế Tôn) or “Enlightened One” (P: Buddha, V: Đức Phật), others referred to him as “Friend Gotama” (P: Bho Gotama, V: Tôn Giả Cổ Đàm) or Monk Gotama (P: Samaṇa Gotama, V: Sa Môn Cổ Đàm). He was also called Sakkamuni (S: Sākyamuni, V: Thích Ca Mâu Ni) which means “the silent sage of the Sakka tribe”, and he called himself “Tathāgata” (V: Như Lai) which means “the one who comes as such” or “the one who is one with suchness” or “the one who has attained the tathā-mind”.

Early years

When Queen Māyā, wife of the King Suddhodana (V: Tịnh Phạn) of the kingdom of Kosala in Northern India, was near giving birth, she returned to her kingdom of origin, Koliya, to give birth, as was the tradition at the time. But before she could reach Koliya, she gave birth to prince Siddhattha in the garden of Lumbini. After a few days, she died from complications from the birth.

King Suddhodana organized celebrations throughout his kingdom to celebrate the arrival of the heir. A hermit named Asita came down from the Himalayas to pay a visit to the Prince. When Asita saw the Prince, he laughed and cried. When asked, Asita said: “In the future one of two things will happen: if the Prince remains in the palace, he will become a great ruler. And if the Prince chooses to become a monk, he will become a great enlightened being. This is why I laughed. But when he attains enlightenment, I will not be alive to learn from him, so I cried.”

Then 108 Brahmin came to visit, among them was Koṇḍañña who was renowned as an expert in astrology. He predicted that: “The Prince will later become a monk and attain full enlightenment”. Hearing these prophecies filled King Suddhodana with concern, as he wanted Prince Siddhattha to later succeed him to the throne.

Prince Siddhattha showed from early childhood that he had a quiet character and liked being alone. One day, at the royal ceremony to open the farming season, while everyone was enjoying the festivities, he sat crossed legged with his back straight under a rose apple tree (P: jambu, V: hồng táo) and started breathing in and out in awareness. When the King saw his child sitting in the lotus position with a still mind manifesting on his face, he was full of admiration, but was even more worried that the Prince would choose the spiritual path. King Suddhodana started a plan to prevent the Prince from taking this path.

He invited the greatest teachers in the country to the palace to teach the Prince literature, art and martial arts. The Prince was good at all subjects. Meanwhile, the King created an environment for the Prince to enjoy all the pleasures of palatial life. He also ordered that the Prince be prevented from getting in contact with life outside the palace, because he feared that the

Prince would decide to become a monk if he saw the miseries of the lives of common people.

As part of the King's plan to retain the Prince, he organized his marriage, when he was 16, with Princess Yasodharā (V: Da Du Đà La) also aged 16. Later, the Buddha recounted his life at that time to the disciples thus: "My father built for me three palaces, a summer palace, a winter palace and a place for the rainy season. And all day there were songs and dances by beautiful women."

When the Prince was 29, he asked his father for permission to go outside the palace. The King agreed, but gave this order: "Wherever the Prince goes, the streets must be beautifully decorated, and only healthy and wealthy people can be allowed to meet and greet the Prince".

Channa (V: Xa Nặc), the charioteer, drove the Prince through the city. In between beautifully made garlands and cheering people, the Prince saw a person with bent back and white hair walking unsteadily. The Prince did not know who such person could be, so he asked Channa. Channa replied:

- "It's an old man.
- What is aging?
- Aging is having a bent back, white hair, wrinkled skin.
- Will I be old?
- Yes, you will be old, everyone grows old."

Upon hearing this, the Prince started to think deeply about the fate of aging that is the lot of every person. Full of sadness, he ordered his chariot back to the palace.

On another trip with Channa, the Prince saw a man carrying a cane who was walking unsteadily and then suddenly fell down, unconscious. He asked Channa, who responded:

- "It's a sick person.
- What is sickness?
- Sickness means no longer being in good health, being weakened, no longer having the strength of youth. You will be sick, Yasodharā will also be sick, nobody can avoid sickness."

Upon hearing this, the prince noted that sickness is a law of nature, no one can avoid it. Full of sadness, he ordered his chariot back to the palace.

During a third trip outside the palace, The Prince saw on the roadside a motionless body, wrapped in cloth that was carried on a makeshift bamboo pallet. People surrounding the pallet were mourning and weeping. He asked Channa, who responded:

- "It's a dead person.
- What is death?
- Death means that no one will see this person again.
- Where do they carry the dead person?
- They carry the dead person to the crematory pyre."

Leaving the palace in search for the path: the first realization

Over many days, the Prince couldn't find peace of mind. He realized that aging, sickness and death are natural laws that no one can avoid. With his indomitable spirit, the Prince vowed that he would not submit to these laws. He said to himself: "I will find the way to be free of aging, sickness and death, for me and for all humankind."

One early morning, the Prince rode out of the palace and arrived at a quiet place. He dismounted and was sitting by the roadside when he saw in the distance a monk wearing yellow robes and holding a begging bowl. The monk shone with a tranquil and peaceful demeanor. The Prince engaged with the monk when he approached, and learned that he had left his family life and was living alone in a quest to be free from aging, sickness and death. When he heard these words, the Prince felt as though he had just awakened from a dream. He saw that this was the answer to the questions that troubled him. He felt energized when he returned to the palace for he had seen his new direction: he would leave his family, live life without an abode and seek teachers to find the way.

This was the first awakening of Prince Siddhattha.

The second realization

At that time Princess Yasodharā had just given birth to her first son, Rahula (V: La Hầu La). One night after the banquet had ended and the whole palace was asleep, Prince Siddhattha came to visit his wife and new-born son for the last time. Then he woke up Channa, took out his horse Kanthaka (V: Kiền Trắc), and left the palace in the darkness of night.

After they reached the border, the Prince cut his hair, exchanged his princely clothes for ordinary ones, bid farewell to Channa, and traveled through the forest in search of teachers. He first met a very famous teacher, named Ājāra Kālāma, who had a strong following. Under this teacher, the Prince, now monk Gotama, learned the third stage of Yoga meditation called “The Base of Nothingness” (P: Ākiñcaññāyatana, V: Vô Sở Hữu Xứ). After a short period of time, the Buddha successfully attained this Yoga meditation stage and reported it to his teacher. The teacher was very glad and invited monk Gotama to share with him the role of teacher, as he had nothing more to teach. Monk Gotama declined the offer as this was not what he was seeking. He bid farewell to the teacher and left.

After that, he met another famous teacher named Uddaka Rāmaputta. This teacher taught the fourth and highest Yoga meditation stage called “The state of neither perception nor non-perception” (P: neva-saññā-nā saññāyatana, V: Phi tưởng phi phi tưởng). Again, after a short period of time, Monk Gotama successfully attained this Yoga meditation stage, reported this to his teacher and sought a higher learning. But the teacher had nothing more to teach him and invited him to stay and share with him the role of teacher. But this was not what Monk Gotama was seeking, so he bid farewell to the teacher and left.

This is the second realization, that on the spiritual path the teaching is more important than the teacher. If the teacher does not teach the right method, the student should leave the teacher and search for a method that will fulfill the student’s aspirations.

Self-mortification practice

Monk Gotama was not discouraged and continued his spiritual quest. Shortly after, he met five monks led by Koṇḍañña, who taught him the self-mortification practice. The practice uses strong will to shut down the desires and cravings of the ego. For example: restrict food intake to a minimum, such as eating a sesame seed or drinking a drop of water a day; lying on thorns; not wearing clothes; living near a graveyard or in the jungle; living like an animal; applying mud and ash to the face and body; not shaving.

Although he practiced the same method as the other five ascetic monks, Monk Gotama inflicted on himself the most extreme practices. Sometimes he went into the jungle to live alone, naked. In winter, he slept outside in the cold. In summer, he lay under the burning sun. Sometimes he slept in the graveyard, sometimes he slept on thorns, sometimes he didn’t bathe for months, sometimes he took three baths in the river a night, he never shaved his hair and beard. Later, the Buddha recounted this period to his disciples: “My limbs became like blades of grass ... My eyes, which used to shine brightly, were now deep in their sockets like in a deep well ... The skin on my head was wrinkled and dry like the skin of a white pumpkin prematurely cut ... If I thought “I am touching the skin of my stomach” then I would, in reality, touch my backbone... The skin of my abdomen clung to my spine ... If I thought “I want to urinate or defecate”, then I would collapse, face down, on the ground ... If I massaged my limbs, the stale and decaying hair would drop off...” (Mahāsīhanāda Sutta, “The Great Discourse on the Lion’s Roar”, Majjhima Nikāya, “The Middle Length Discourses”, Sutta number 12).

The Middle Path - The Third Realization

After six years practicing self-mortification, Monk Gotama started to have doubts because, although he had successfully vanquished the demands of the body, this did not lead him to enlightenment and liberation. One day, he fell, exhausted and unconscious by the river’s edge. Fortunately, a young shepherd girl passed by and gave him some sheep’s milk to drink, this helped him to slowly recover consciousness.

At that point, he had a new realization: that the body and physical health are precious. The body helps us in our spiritual practice, we cannot continue our practice if we die. Furthermore, living in a human body is the result of merits accumulated over many re-incarnations, this is quite rare and difficult to achieve, and a not-to-be-missed opportunity for spiritual practice. Since that time, he advocated the Middle Path that strikes a balance between not indulging the senses as when he was a Prince, but also eschewing self-mortification as when he was practicing with the five ascetic monks. The middle path would result in keeping sufficient physical health for spiritual practice.

This was the third realization of the Buddha.

Monk Gotama ended the self-mortification practice and resumed begging for food to recover his strength. He remembered the time when he meditated under the rose-apple tree during the opening of the farming season ceremony. He remembered that he wasn’t disturbed by the sounds coming from the celebrations. On the contrary, his mind became very still and a

pleasant feeling enveloped his whole body, a feeling that can be called rapture and happiness (P: pīti-sukkhā, V: hỷ lạc). He decided to try this method of breathing again and immediately achieved the same blissfulness that he experienced when he was a child.

He went back to the five ascetic monks and informed them that he had decided to end the self-mortification practice, take food to recover his health and practice the breathing technique that he experienced in his youth. On hearing this, the five ascetic monks criticized and expressed contempt for him, saying that he had abandoned the self-mortification practice in order to satisfy the senses, and they left him to go elsewhere to continue their practice.

The spiritual realization process

One day, as he was meditating, a young girl named Sujātā came by with some kheer cake that she intended to offer the gods to help her have a baby boy. This was an opportune supporting condition as it allowed Monk Gotama to concentrate on his practice without the need to seek food to nourish him.

With the help of the nourishing kheer cake, Monk Gotama regained his strength. He decided to cross the Nairājanā river (V: Ni Liên Thiên) and chose a clump of large pipphala trees (now known as the bodhi tree, V: bồ đề) as a place to practice meditation. Along the way, a young buffalo herder offered him four bundles of kusha grass. Monk Gotama laid down the kusha grass and sat with his back towards the pipphala trees and his face towards the river. He made this vow: “Even if my skin, tendons, bones, blood and flesh become dry, I will not leave this seat until I have achieved the supreme enlightenment”.

First stage of samādhi - Preliminary Samādhi

He started by practicing the breathing technique that he discovered in his youth, called “Awareness of breathing in and breathing out” (P: Ānāpāna Sati Samādhi). As a first step, Monk Gotama said silently: “*I know I am breathing in, I know I am breathing out ...*”, focusing on keeping his awareness together with the silent talk. The effectiveness of this step is to stop the habit of silent chatter that arises from the thinking mind, intellect, and consciousness. The mind of Monk Gotama became peaceful and relaxed and a feeling of rapture and happiness arose. What is important in this step is that the inner talk should constantly go together with the awareness of breathing.

Monk Gotama dwelt in this stage of samādhi for a week. We should note that a week in those days does not necessarily equate to seven days. The Buddha later called this samādhi stage “Samādhi with inner talk and inner dialogue”. “Inner talk” is Vitakka in Pāli (V: Tâm) and “inner dialogue” is Vicāra in Pāli (V: Tứ). Here, using inner talk with a single content and keeping it together with awareness has the effect of preventing inner dialogue from arising from the memory areas. This results in progressively dissociating the mind from old habits of restlessness. The mind becomes quieter and easier to control.

Later, the Buddha recounted: “I left behind any desires, any unwholesome states and experienced and dwelt in the first stage of samādhi. I reached a state of rapture and happiness caused by the absence of desires, still with inner talk and inner dialogue... Bliss arose and stayed in my mind, but did not influence my mind” (Mahāsaccaka Sutta, *Majjhima Nikāya*, “The Middle Length Discourses”, Sutta number 36).

Second stage of samādhi - Samādhi without inner talk and inner dialogue

When he experienced the first stage of samādhi, Monk Gotama felt a feeling of joy and elation permeate his whole body and a sense of peace in his mind. He realized that this result was largely due to ceasing desires and unwholesome states. He then moved to the second stage that consisted of stopping the inner talk and just keeping the awareness: “*Aware of breathing in, aware of breathing out*”. His breath moved in and out naturally, he just maintained his clear awareness of the breath going in and out without using his consciousness or intellect to observe, monitor or control his breathing. He then entered the second stage of samādhi called “Samādhi without inner talk and inner dialogue” (V: Định không tâm không tứ) in the suttas. Monk Gotama dwelt in this meditation stage for a week.

During this stage, he was clearly aware of the breath going in and out, whether it was raw or subtle, long or short, deep or shallow, without any inner thought arising about his awareness. There was only a silent awareness. This is also called bare awareness or empty awareness. There is no subject being aware, there is only the awareness of the breath going in and out. Through this practice, Monk Gotama’s mind became pure, tranquil and had a clear awareness of all body sensations. A feeling of joy and elation enveloped his whole body.

Later, the Buddha recounted: “I stopped the inner talk and inner dialogue and experienced and dwelt in the second stage of samādhi. I felt rapture and happiness arising from the state of samādhi, without inner talk or inner dialogue, with inner tranquility and a unified mind ... Bliss arose and stayed in my mind, but did not influence my mind” (Mahāsaccaka Sutta, *Majjhima Nikāya*, “The Middle Length Discourses”, Sutta number 36).

Third stage of samādhi - Letting go of elation and dwelling in equanimity samādhi

As he entered the third week, Monk Gotama was aware of rapture and happiness arising but did not feel enjoyment for this feeling, instead dwelling in the tranquility and peacefulness of his mind. This stage of samādhi is called “letting go of elation and dwelling in equanimity” (V: Ly Hỷ Trú Xả) or “Full and Clear Awareness” (P: *Sati Sampajañña*, V: Chánh Niệm Tĩnh Giác). In this stage, there is clear and complete awareness of the external and internal worlds without any attachment arising.

At this stage, Monk Gotama’s awareness became a stable energy. Although feelings of joy enveloped his whole body, he was not attached to them. He felt bliss permeate his whole being. At this stage the thought system became still, there were no concepts arising. Feelings and sensations and perception no longer disturbed his mind. Monk Gotama dwelt in this meditation stage for a week.

Later, the Buddha recounted: “I left elation behind and dwelt in equanimity. I attained full awareness while my body had feelings of bliss, ..., I experienced and dwelt in the third stage of samādhi ... Bliss arose and stayed in my mind, but did not influence my mind” (Mahāsaccaka Sutta, *Majjhima Nikāya*, “*The Middle Length Discourses*”, Sutta number 36).

Fourth Stage of Samādhi - Immobility Samādhi

In this stage, the state of wordless awakening awareness that Monk Gotama had attained in the third stage became wordless cognitive awareness. His mind entered a state of immobility. The little attachment that remained as the state of bliss (“equanimity”) also disappeared. His mind fell into a state of deep stillness. His consciousness was immobile. The energy of wordless cognitive awareness became clearer and clearer. His breath fell into a pattern of stopping automatically at intervals; this is called pure breathing (V: tịnh tức).

Later, the Buddha recounted: “With equanimity towards bliss or sorrow, I left any prior feelings of elation or worry, and experienced and dwelt in the fourth stage of samādhi. I did not feel any elation, any sorrow, my awareness was pure” (Mahāsaccaka Sutta, *Majjhima Nikāya*, “*The Middle Length Discourses*”, Sutta number 36).

This meditation stage is called Immobility Samādhi, where the language formation process, the thought formation process, and the bodily process are all immobile. Immobility of the language formation process was achieved in the second stage of samādhi when inner talk and inner dialogue, i.e. all silent muttering, are quietened. The thought formation process is initiated by feelings and sensations which in turn activate perception. When feelings and sensations and perception are silent, the thought formation process is quiet and the mind is free of any attachment. Immobility of the thought formation process was achieved in the third stage of samādhi. In the fourth stage of samādhi, the breath stops automatically at intervals, this is called immobility of the body process. Monk Gotama dwelt in this meditation stage for a week.

Realization

On the last day of the fourth week, with his mind immobile and deep into the fourth stage of samādhi, three wisdoms, also called “the three realizations” (V: ba minh), progressively appeared in Monk Gotama’s mind, like images that start to reflect on a mirror that is now clear of dust. The light of enlightenment illuminated his pure mind.

The Buddha said: “*With my mind in a state of bare cognition, pure, bright, unblemished, rid of sorrow, malleable, beyond reasoning, wieldy, steady, imperturbable, I turn my mind towards knowledge of my past lives ...*” This mental state is called suchness-mind or tathā-mind. It is a completely silent, serene, detached mind where only a clear, wordless, cognitive awareness remains.

The first wisdom was the knowledge of his own past lives (V: túc mạng minh), which appeared in general outline and detail, and the causes and conditions that led to the present. Monk Gotama realized knowledge of his past lives in the first watch of the night.

On the second watch of the night, he recognized the causal relationships that apply to all living beings. He clearly saw the good karma or bad karma they generated in one or several past lives and how these affect their present life or death, success or failure, appearance and level of happiness. This wisdom is called knowledge of the celestial vision (V: thiên nhãn minh).

On the third watch of the night, he saw the answer to the question that had troubled him since the day he started his spiritual quest, that is “Why do people have to endure birth, aging, sickness and death.” This wisdom is called knowledge of the termination of mental defilements (V: lậu tận minh).

Mental defilements are the passions, addictions, infatuations and desires that people cannot discard. They are what people have repeatedly experienced over many lives past, which are still affecting them in the present. Mental defilements are the

real energy that generates speech karma, intention karma and bodily karma, they are what corrupt our mind, the cause of suffering and the endless cycle of births and deaths. Monk Gotama saw the causes of suffering and mental defilements, as well as the path to terminating suffering and mental defilements. Based on knowledge of the termination of mental defilements, the Buddha later developed the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Buddha said: *“I know as reality: ‘This is suffering (... mental defilements)’, ‘This is the origin of suffering (... mental defilements)’, ‘This is the cessation of suffering (... mental defilements)’, ‘This is the path to cease suffering (... mental defilements)’”*.

After realizing knowledge of the termination of mental defilements, Monk Gotama attained complete liberation, was cleansed of all mental defilements, and was no longer subject to rebirth in any of the six realms of existence. The Buddha later said: *“By attaining this knowledge, my mind was free from all three categories of mental defilements: desire, craving for existence and ignorance ... In me arose the knowledge: ‘I am liberated’. I knew that: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, after the present life there is no more coming to any state of being’”*. (Mahāsaccaka Sutta, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *“The Middle Length Discourses”*, Sutta number 36)

This realization is called *“Full Realization”* (P: Abhisamaya, V: Chứng ngộ hoàn toàn). Monk Gotama then attained the state of Arahāt, one who has been cleansed of all mental defilements and who is no longer subject to rebirth.

Enlightenment

After attaining the three realizations, Monk Gotama stayed for another seven weeks under the bodhi tree to re-examine the truths that he had realized. He looked at worldly phenomena while in his tathā-mind and saw the true nature of worldly phenomena. This is the law of dependent origination that the Buddha later summarized in four verses:

*“Because this is, that is
Because this arises, that arises
Because this is not, that is not
Because this ceases, that ceases.”*

That was the beginning of his second realization, the realization of the law of dependent origination. Monk Gotama had attained full enlightenment; he had achieved the Ultimate Enlightenment (P: anuttara sammā sambodhi, V: vô thượng chánh đẳng giác); he became the Buddha.

The Law of Dependent Origination will be further discussed in the text *“The Twelve Links of Dependent Origination”*.

