

The Four Stages in Attaining Nibbāna



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1. The 31 realms discussed in “[31 Realms Associated with the Earth](#)” are divided into three main categories based on the sense faculties and the level of suffering:

- The lowest eleven realms belong to the “*kāma lōka*”, where all five physical sense faculties are present; “*kāma*” is the indulging in the five sense faculties.
- Beings in the next sixteen realms have only two physical senses: vision and hearing. They have less-dense bodies, and this subset of realms is called the *rūpa lōka*. In *rūpa lōka* there is mainly *jhānic* pleasures corresponding to the first four mundane *jhānas* that are attainable by humans. There is relatively less suffering in the *rūpa lōkas*.
- The highest four realms correspond to the higher *arūpa jhānic* states (*jhānic* levels five through eight) that are also attainable in the human realm. Thus there is mainly *jhānic* bliss in these realms, and relatively less suffering. These realms are commonly known as *arūpa lōka*, because the beings have very fine bodies with no physical senses and only the mind.

2. The lifetimes of the beings in the *rūpa lōka* are very long, and those in the *arūpa lōka* are even longer. Lifetime in the highest *arūpa lōkas* are so long (84,000 aeons or *mahā kalpas*), that it is beyond comprehension to us.

This is why the ancient *yōgis* mistakenly thought that such realms correspond to *Nibbāna*. But the Buddha (or rather Siddharata Gōtama), who attained the eighth *jhāna* within months after leaving the palace to become an ascetic, realized that this realm is also subjected to the transient existence, i.e., does not correspond to permanent happiness. Also, even this long time is insignificant in the *samsāric* time scale (see, “[Samsāric Time Scale, Buddhist Cosmology, and the Big Bang Theory](#)”), which is infinite (see, “[Infinity – How Big Is It?](#)”).

3. One in the human realm can experience the *jhānic* pleasure of both *rūpa* and *arūpa lōkas* by attaining such *jhānic* states via *samatha* meditation.

Furthermore, it is possible to gain access to both *rūpa lōkas* and *arūpa lōkas* in the next birth by developing the corresponding *jhānas* and by being in a *jhānic* state at death. As I understand, this is the goal of most Hindu practices.

4. What the Buddha pointed out was that even the highest *jhānic* state is temporary (even though long), and once that *kammic* energy is exhausted, it is possible to be born in any of the 31 realms. **In fact, unless the being had attained at least the *Sōtapanna* stage, it is guaranteed that at some point in the future rebirth in one of the lowest realms is inevitable.**

He said that many of the beings still in the rebirth process (*samsāra*), i.e., we all, are

likely to have been born in the higher *arūpa lōkas*, as well as the lowest realm (*niraya*) in the past. The *samsāra* is that long.

5. From this discussion it is clear that the actual suffering is mostly in the *kāma lōkas*. But the problem is that beings spend most time in *kāma lōkas* in their beginning-less journey in the *samsāra*.

The Buddha gave a simile to describe this situation. We leave home only to go on short, or may be even extended, trips; but we always come back home. **The Buddha said that the four lowest realms (the *apāyas*) are the home base for most living beings.**

Suffering in the *Kāma Lōka*

1. Suffering in the *kāma lōka* ranges from unfathomable suffering in the lowest realm, the *niraya* (hell), to relatively little suffering and highest sense pleasures in the *dēva lōkas* (the highest six realms in the *kāma lōka*).

- Just below the *dēva lōkas*, there is the human realm with both suffering and sense pleasures at about equal levels.
- Below the human realm, there is *preta lōka* (hungry ghosts), *asuras*, animal realm, and the *nirayas*, and the level of suffering generally increases in that order.

2. The lowest four levels in the *kāma lōka* are collectively called the *apāyas* (the undesirable realms). **More than 99% of the beings are trapped in these four realms.** The problem is that once born in any of those four realms, it is virtually impossible to get out.

- This is because these realms are such that one is forced to commit *apunnābhi sankhāra* or evil actions (see, "[sankhāra, Kamma, Kamma Beeja, Kamma Vipaka](#)") by the very nature of that existence. For example, in the animal realm, most animals have to kill others for survival. In the *niraya*, virtually every thought is of hate, because of the incessant suffering.
- **Still, when we analyze *Abhidhamma*, we will be able to see that the *javana* of the *cittas* are much less potent for animals**, and thus the *kammic* power of those actions are relatively small compared to *kammic* power of such actions by humans. This is an important point that I wish to discuss in the future.

3. Just as it is likely that we have been born in the higher *rūpa lōkas* in the past, it is even more certain that we ALL have been in the *apāyas*. Luckily we do not remember those past lives.

But in certain realms (particular the *preta realm*) beings do remember their past lives and that increases the level of suffering.

Why We Need to Strive Now

1. From the above discussion it is clear that most suffering is in the four lowest realms, below the human realm which is the fifth realm. Essentially, there is relatively less suffering above the human realm, starting with the *dēva lōka* which is the highest realm in the *kāma*

lōka.

2. Even though the suffering is highest in the lower four realms, the beings there are helpless to do anything about the suffering. Their limited minds are not capable of grasping the causes that lead to suffering.

- **Many people wrongly believe that one needs to feel suffering in order to understand it, and to get an incentive to seek *Nibbāna*. But when one really suffers (say, when one gets too old) it is NOT possible to clearly contemplate the deep concepts of Dhamma.**
 - The Noble truth on suffering needs to be seen with wisdom (*paññā*), not via feelings (*vēdana*), i.e., by understanding the complete world view AND the Three Characteristics of this “wider world”: *anicca, dukkha, anatta*; see, “[Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta](#)”.
1. Beings in the realms above the human realm, the 26 realms starting with the *dēva* realms, do not even feel much suffering. **This is the other extreme; there is no incentive for them to be concerned about suffering.**

The only real suffering there is that when their lifetimes get near to the end, they do realize that and become distraught.

4. Thus it is only at the human realm that one is at least exposed to the suffering, even if one may not be subjected to much suffering. Furthermore, the human mind is the best suited for grasping the true nature of “this world of 31 realms”, i.e., the Three Characteristics (see, “[Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta](#)”).

This is why the Buddha said that a human should not miss this opportunity to attain *Nibbāna*.

The Four Stages of Attaining Nibbāna

1. The first stage of *Nibbāna*, is attained by “seeing” (**not just reading about, but actually grasping**) the true nature of the existence: *anicca, dukkha, anatta*.

- Thus one needs to first learn from someone (like from this website), the nature of existence with the 31 realms, the aimless wandering of a being through endless rebirths (*samsāra*), the reasons for the rebirths, etc.
- Thus the key areas to understand are the Three Characteristics, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path. No one but a Buddha is capable of finding these and this is why it is important to have exposure to the PURE DHAMMA.

2. At the first stage (*Sōtapanna* or Stream Enterer), one partially comprehends the validity of the Buddha’s world view. This is called attaining *Sammā Ditthi* (elimination of defilements through clear vision/understanding) to a significant extent.

He/she understands the “true nature” of existence: significance and true meaning of the Three Characteristics of Existence (see, “[anicca, dukkha, anatta](#)”).

3. The realization that it is not worthwhile or fruitful to stay in any of the 31 realms in the long run, makes one to conduct oneself in a moral fashion; one’s mind makes the decision

that it is not worthwhile or beneficial to do those actions that destine oneself to birth in the lower four realms.

This realization leads to a *Sōtapanna phala citta* (one thought moment of realizing the *Sōtapanna* stage). When that is achieved, one will never again be reborn in the lower four realms (“free of suffering in the *apāyas* forever”); why this is so is explained in, “Akusala Citta – How a Sōtapanna Avoids apāyagami Citta”.

4. At this stage one has realized the First Noble Truth of suffering (*dukkha*), and one earnestly starts on the Noble Eightfold Path. At this stage he still has greed and hate left in him to some extent, but at the next stage (*Sakadāgāmi*), he loses more of the strength of such greedy or hateful thoughts.

- A *Sakadāgāmi* is not fully released from the *kāma lōka* since he/she will be born in the *dēva lōka* (but not in the human realm).
- In the *dēva lōka* (and in the *brahma* realms above that where a *Sakadāgāmi* can be born subsequently), the bodies are not subjected to diseases. Thus a *Sakadāgāmi* is said to be “healthy forever”.

5. When the third stage of *Anāgāmi* (Non-Returner) is attained, the mind loses any desire to be born in the *kāma lōka*. One is not capable of generating any greedy or hateful thoughts belonging to the *kāma lōka* (one is said to be “happy and peaceful forever”) and he will be born only one time more in a higher *Brahma* world reserved for the *Anāgāmis*.

6. All through these three stages, *avijjā* or ignorance gradually diminish. But it is completely removed only at the *Arahant* stage.

Once the *Arahant* stage is reached, the mind becomes totally pure (*anidassana viññāna* or *paññā* is attained), and is incapable of desiring anything “in this world of 31 realms”. Thus there is no more rebirth, and one attains the perfect happiness the peak of *nirāmisā sukha*.

Also, see “Nibbāna” and “The Way to Nibbāna – Removal of asava”.

Why Living a Moral Life Would Not Prevent a Birth in the Four Lower Realms

1. We desperately cling to “things in this world” because we have the perception that lasting happiness can be achieved. We crave the sense pleasures. As mentioned before, there is nothing or no one holding us in this world of 31 realms. We cling to existence in these realms like an octopus grabbing its prey with all eight legs.

2. Even some Buddhists would, in the back of their minds, like to stay in this world a bit more. They do not realize the level of happiness associated with the Nibbanic bliss; see, “Three Kinds of Happiness – What is nirāmisā Sukha?”.

A popular blessing given by some Buddhist monks even today goes like, “May you be reborn in prosperous (*dēva* or human) realms AND THEN attain *Nibbāna*”. Even they do not understand the permanent happiness associated with *Nibbāna* or the possibility of much suffering even in the next birth.

3. The danger in such thinking is due to the following reason: We all have done both good and bad deeds in the lives before and have acquired uncountable *kamma* seeds both good and bad; see, "[sankhāra, Kamma, Kamma Beeja, Kamma Vipaka](#)". **At death it is possible for any one of those seeds to bear fruit: if it is a good *kamma* seed, one will get a good birth, but if it is a bad *kamma* seed one will get a bad birth.**

4. Our future births are not necessarily determined by how we live this life, because we have done uncountable number of both good and bad kamma in previous lives.

- This is why the Buddha said that even if one lives a perfectly moral life he cannot say that one will get a good rebirth, UNLESS one has attained at least the *Sōtapanna* stage: A *Sōtapanna* has made ineffective all those bad kamma seeds that could give a birth in the lower four realms.
- The Buddha also said that even if one lives immorally that also does not necessarily lead to a bad life in the next birth unless a *ānantariya kamma* (an extremely bad *kamma* like killing one's parents) was committed; however those bad acts will bear fruit at some point in the future. It is just that there are many good seed as well as bad seeds with any life stream; see, "[What is Kamma? Is Everything Determined by Kamma?](#)".
- Thus the goal of this life should be to attain at least the *Sōtapanna* stage of *Nibbāna*.

A different analysis on *Nibbāna* can be found at, "[Difference Between Giving up Valuables and Losing Interest in Worthless](#)",

Next, "[nirāmisā Sukha \(Happiness Arising from Dissociating from the 31 realms\)](#)",