

# Meditative Practices in the Context of Constructing and Understanding the Spatial World

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# 1. Introduction

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## The term “world “

1. First, instead of being a point or a thing, a world refers to a system or sphere of related factors and activities.
2. Second, a world distinguishes the entire existing sphere from any particular region, country, earth, or planet.
3. Third, a world is an entire existing sphere with temporal process and spatial extension of related factors and activities, rather than merely the material cosmos or physical universe.

# The term “spatial world”

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This term is not exactly a direct reference to the physical world as some people might think.

Just as the temporal world literally means the world pertaining to or concerned with time, so the spatial world means the spatial aspect of the world.

However, whether the space is simply material is an issue to be further studied and is not to be taken for granted.

Although the world can be studied from the aspects of space, time, or space-time, this paper will be mostly limited to the spatial aspect in weighing the relationship of such an aspect to meditative practices.

## Meditative practices (*bhāvanā; citta-bhāvanā*)

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Broadly speaking, meditative practices (*bhāvanā; citta-bhāvanā*) are not only about pertinent observation of the occurrence of psycho-somatic activities, but also about rigorous training in mental cultivation to achieve a state of mental stillness, tranquility, purity, and insight.

Throughout this paper, the term “meditative practices” is used in its broad sense including such practices as **meditative seclusion** (*pratisaṃlayana*), **mindfulness** (*smṛti*), **calm abiding** (*śamatha*), **insight meditation** (*vipaśyanā*), **meditative absorption** (*dhyāna*), **meditative attainment** (*samāpatti*), and **meditative concentration** (*samādhi*).

## 2. An Understanding of the Spatial World from a Buddhist Worldview

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Since the understanding of the spatial world is macroscopic in its perspective, the formation of a worldview could be a good start for gaining such an understanding.

In short, as a unified foundation to cognize and navigate the world, a worldview is constructed as an all-encompassing image of how the world is made, how it falls apart, how everything works, and who we really are.

**What are the Buddhist ideas about the world around us?** Two aspects:

The first has to do with the basic structure and process of the world; the second concerns the nature of the world.

# The Buddhist ideas about the world around us

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First, the spatial world is presented with a vertical structure of three realms (*tri-dhātu*) consisting of **desire realm** (*kāma-dhātu*), **form realm** (*rūpa-dhātu*), and **formless realm** (*ārūpya-dhātu*). The structure of these three realms, each divided into more planes of existence, is never static or fixed, but works dynamically based on the mechanism of causal efficacy of ordinary activities and religious cultivation.

Ordinary activities proceed and extend along six pathways of rebirth (*ṣaḍ-gati*), namely three good pathways and three bad pathways as corresponding occurrences due to the accumulation and fruition of previous deeds together with ongoing formation of worldly views and habitual grasp on the objectified world.

## The Buddhist ideas about the world around us

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By contrast, religious cultivation, especially meditative practices guided by sublime perspectives, can function as a crucial tool for mounting better pathways and even transcending all pathways of rebirth.

Second, in terms of being an accumulated formation (*saṃskāra*), **impermanent** (*a-nitya*), and **dependent co-arising** (*pratītya-samutpāda*), the nature of the spatial world is insightfully understood as **empty** (*śūnya*), **not-self** (*anātman; nairātmya*), **non-dualistic** (*a-dvaya*), **illusory** (*māyā*), and **transformational manifestation** (*vikurvaṇa; nirmita*).

### 3. The Interconnection among Ordinary Mindsets, Meditative Practices, and the Spatial World

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From a Buddhist worldview, the spatial world neither exists in itself, nor is it made by itself. Rather, the spatial world is constructed as a transformational manifestation of ordinary mindsets and meditative practices.

Buddhist teachings on **emptiness** (*śūnyatā*) or the state of **absence of own-being** (*niḥsvabhāvatā*) may illuminate an approach to the spatial world by directing the focus away from material entities and toward a bigger picture of how the various strands of realms and planes of existence are discerned, identified, pursued, grasped, and embodied by ordinary mindsets.

## Ordinary Mindsets as the Main Sources of the Spatial World

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The *Āgama/Nikāya* collections are filled with passages in which the spatial world, especially the desire realm consisting of six pathways of rebirth, is inseparably linked with ordinary mindsets shaped by **conceptualizations** (*saṃjñā*), **views** (*dṛṣṭi*), **defilements** (*kleśa*), **attachments** (*abhiniveśa*; *saṅga*), and so on.

Ordinary mindsets are not only a set of individual or collective mental dispositions, but also a series of mental activities and accumulations as presented in the **twelve links of dependent co-arising** (*dvādaśāṅga-pratītyasamutpāda*; *pratītya-dvādaśāṅga*). Through the link of birth, the series of ordinary mindsets is embodied as pathways of rebirth to various destinations of the spatial world.

# Meditative Practices as Pioneering Tools for Navigating the Spatial World

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Meditative practices are not merely good for reducing stress or maintaining inner peace. It is also crucial to expanding experiential horizons and gaining higher cognitions (*abhijñā*).

The perfection of meditation (*dhyāna-pāramitā*) is presented side by side with the perfection of wisdom (*prajñā-pāramitā*) to facilitate process of delving into the reality of the world and advancing to the utmost, right and perfect enlightenment (*anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhiḥ*).

Among various meditative practices, the “eight levels of liberation” (*aṣṭau vimokṣāḥ*) will be the focus of this paper.

## 5. From the Compounded to the Uncompounded: An Interpretation of the “Eight Levels of Liberation”

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Throughout the eight levels of liberation, it is obvious that the sequential liberation constitutes an axis from the realm of desire of the spatial world to the transcendence of the spatial world altogether.

The key to such transcendence lies in the twofold approach necessary to make Buddhism paths of cultivation:

1. first, never take the spatial world for granted;
2. second, pursue meditative practices to their fullest extent.

## 5. From the Compounded to the Uncompounded: An Interpretation of the “Eight Levels of Liberation”

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As paths of cultivation, Buddhism does not view the spatial world, either as a whole or in part, in a static or fixed manner.

Sentient beings complying with ordinary views are inclined to regard the spatial world as something that can be identified and distinguished by geographical and territorial boundaries.

To identify a territory is to **conceptualize** a certain place in the spatial world with territorial marking factors.

## 5. From the Compounded to the Uncompounded: An Interpretation of the “Eight Levels of Liberation”

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As a consequence, **conceptualization** (*saṃjñā*) of territories confines sentient beings’ cognition and activities within the framework of spatial identity and spatial distinction.

By contrast, while using such spatial terms as various realms and planes of existence, Buddhism consistently problematizes habitual projection of territorial marking factors, and such a strategy of **de-conceptualization** (*a-saṃjñā*) is evidenced by the enumeration of the eight levels of liberation.

## 5. From the Compounded to the Uncompounded: An Interpretation of the “Eight Levels of Liberation”

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The first level of liberation can be regarded as preparatory to further liberation in terms of de-conceptualization.

Admittedly, beginning practitioners still remain physically and mentally related to form/matter and even to various desires.

A fundamental breakthrough in the fight against various forms of bondage situations can be achieved through the right cognition of form/matter and desires.

As an antidote to such bondage, the right cognition conducive to de-conceptualization allows liberation to happen, and thus characterizes the first level of liberation.

## 5. From the Compounded to the Uncompounded: An Interpretation of the “Eight Levels of Liberation”

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Beginning with the statement “being unrelated to the conceptualization of form/matter internally,” **the second level of liberation** emphatically points out the importance of de-conceptualization in elevating the level of liberation.

It is worth noting that on the second level of liberation the cognition of forms/materials is carried out in a much subtler and sophisticated way: while the cognition of external forms/materials keeps on moving forward, the cognition of internal forms/materials is so progressively advanced as to go beyond the conceptualization of internal form/matter.

## 5. From the Compounded to the Uncompounded: An Interpretation of the “Eight Levels of Liberation”

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Based on the first two levels of liberation, **the third level of liberation** can be regarded as solely pursuing meditative practices to a higher level. As indispensable prerequisites of liberation, meditative practices do not succumb to, but instead overcome ordinary mindsets.

One of the features of meditative practices is that, on the one hand, the mind does not take the circumambient phenomena at face value as beautiful or pleasurable; on the other hand, the mind is so well trained and disciplined as to be capable of staying undefiled from the world. It is exactly due to such a mental cultivation that the mind can skillfully maintain its **profound purity (*śubha*)**. And the very purity of the mind characterizes the third level of liberation.

## 5. From the Compounded to the Uncompounded: An Interpretation of the “Eight Levels of Liberation”

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On **the fourth level of liberation**, not only conceptualization of internal or external form/matter but also that of any factor in whatever manner within the realm of form/matter must be overcome. Consequently, this level marks, on the one hand, going above the realms of desire and form/matter, on the other hand, ascending into the first plane of formless realm, i.e., the sphere of **infinite space** (*ākāśānantyāyatana*).

## What matters most is how the relationship between form/matter and space is understood

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First of all, space is neither identified with nor reduced to any particular factor of form/matter, or the totality of form/matter, nor is it exactly the same as form/matter.

On the fourth level of liberation, it is presented as infinite space (*ākāśānantya*) through the total overcoming of conceptualizations of form/matter. On the fourth level of liberation, it is presented as infinite space (*ākāśānantya*) through the total overcoming of conceptualizations of form/matter.

infinite space does not exist separately from meditative practices, but appears by way of *āyatana*, which functions as a navigable gate or route between two parts of conveyance or communication, and can be translated as gate, media, or sphere.

## What matters most is how the relationship between form/matter and space is understood

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As a meditative gate or meditative sphere, infinite space can be approached, entered, and realized, and thus can constitute one of the major steps in sequential order of liberation.

In the same way, infinite space can be transcended to a higher level of liberation. Such a transcendence can occur mainly due to infinite space remaining in a compounded state (*saṃskṛta*/ or conditioned, constructed, fabricated), which is constructed through the process of cause and effect, thus undergoing a process of change.

Meditative practices, although regarded as one kind of the compounded activities, are supposed to make a great effort to move upward along the liberation-oriented axis.

## 5. From the Compounded to the Uncompounded: An Interpretation of the “Eight Levels of Liberation”

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Having transcended meditative sphere of infinite space, the mind in meditation can accordingly ascend into the second plane of formless realm, i.e., the sphere of infinite consciousness (*vijñānānantyāyatana*), tagged as **the fifth level of liberation**. On this level, infinite space has been overcome and has turned out to be infinite consciousness.

The consciousness thus cultivated is said to be infinite. However, infinite consciousness in such a context is not to be confused with any substantialist views of the so-called pure consciousness because it appears by way of *āyatana* and remains in a compounded state.

## 5. From the Compounded to the Uncompounded: An Interpretation of the “Eight Levels of Liberation”

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What is true of the fourth and fifth levels of liberation is also true of **the sixth level of liberation**, i.e., the sphere of **nothingness** (*ākiñcanyāyatana*), also known as the third plane of formless realm. Although it is presented as nothingness through the intention “**that is nothing at all**” (“*nâsti kiṃ-canê*”*ti*), it is by no means the same as the so-called nothingness in any nihilist sense. Nothingness in such a context is not to be fooled by its literal expression or superficial appearance. After all, such nothingness also appears by way of *āyatana* and remains in a compounded state.

## 5. From the Compounded to the Uncompounded: An Interpretation of the “Eight Levels of Liberation”

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As strange as it may sound, the sphere of nothingness is still subject to be transcended. The level into which the sphere of nothingness is transcended, i.e., **the seventh level of liberation**, seems much more inconceivable than any other technical terms in human languages. This level is presented as the sphere of neither conceptualization nor **non-conceptualization** (*naiva-saṃjñā-nāsaṃjñāyatana*), also known as the fourth plane of formless realm.

## 5. From the Compounded to the Uncompounded: An Interpretation of the “Eight Levels of Liberation”

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Although the seventh level of liberation is located at the topmost layer of the world, and does not have much ongoing connection with the world, it can still be transcended because it remains in a compounded state, and thus entails problems of ontological restraints and mental vibrations or oscillations. The solution to such problems is [the eighth level of liberation](#), the final level of the path to liberation.

## Three points are worth noting concerning the uniqueness of the eighth level of liberation.

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1. First, unlike the preceding seven levels, the eighth level of liberation neither appears by way of *āyatana* (meditative gate or meditative sphere), nor is it related to the spatio-temporal world.
2. Second, unlike the preceding seven levels, the eighth level of liberation no longer remains in a compounded state, and thus remains in an uncompounded state (*a-saṃskṛta*).

## Three points are worth noting concerning the uniqueness of the eighth level of liberation.

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3. Third, meditative practices and insightful wisdom toward liberation basically deal with problems of vibrations or oscillations (*vṛtti*), including mental, physical, and social. Wherever there are vibrations or oscillations, there are compounded activities related to the spatio-temporal world. Meditative practices and insightful wisdom of the preceding seven levels are still within the realm of the compounded. By contrast, the eighth level of liberation is the uncompounded by way of cessation (*nirodha*) of any vibrations and oscillations, especially the cessation of conceptualization and feeling.

After all, the final solution to problems with living in the world lies in cessation of any compounded activities. The meditative mind in such cessation is the final liberation, the uncompounded, i.e., *nirvāna*.

# 6. How Meditative Practices Can Construct and Understand the Spatial World

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1. The realm of desire can be clearly understood in terms of the eight levels of liberation. It is called the realm of desire because the major strands and axis are, in sum, about desires.

What really matters is not what we ostensibly do, but what we do with what we do.

If what we do is in the service of interests, benefits, and desires, be they individual or collective, private or public, which are contained in a bounded spherical domain, then we fabricate ourselves the realm of desire.

## 6. How Meditative Practices Can Construct and Understand the Spatial World

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2. it is almost impossible to experience and construct the realms of form and formless without properly engaging in the necessary meditative practices and insightful wisdom toward liberation step by step. Meditative practices provide mental qualities with calmness and mental powers with penetration. Insightful wisdom offers opportunities for practitioners to reflect on the causes, conditions, situations, limitations, and problems of thus meditatively developed and expanded, and to take major steps in moving beyond what has already been achieved.

## 6. How Meditative Practices Can Construct and Understand the Spatial World

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3. the *nirvāna* of both the mind and the world is realized through meditative practices and insightful wisdom overcoming any occurrences of vibrations and oscillations.

To sum up, meditative practices and insightful wisdom go hand in hand to make a huge difference in understanding how the realm of desire is constructed, in meticulously constructing the realms of form and formless level by level, and finally in transcending the three-realm spatial world altogether. In terms of penetrating wisdom rather than phenomenal knowledge, the spatial world cannot be correctly and thoroughly understood without knowing how it is fabricated and realizing how it can be surpassed. This is exactly what the set of “eight levels of liberation” is about.

## 7. The Construction and Understanding of the Spatial World in the *Samdhi-nirmocana-sūtra*

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Philosophically speaking, the *Samdhi-nirmocana-sūtra*'s explication of the construction and understanding of the spatial world can be reconstructed as a sequence of reasoning steps.

**Step one:** Putting the focus on “related factors” (dharmas) rather than chasing after superficial phenomena or customary sayings.

**Step two:** Delving into how various related factors come forth and move along the process of change and transformation, instead of passively accepting them at face value.

## 7. The Construction and Understanding of the Spatial World in the *Samdhi-nirmocana-sūtra*

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**Step three:** Understanding both differentiating construction and other items on which differentiating construction depends are mainly mental activities.

**Step four:** Undertaking meditative practices to reorient cognition and enhance cognitive abilities.

**Step five:** Keeping pushing the limits of meditative practices further and further.

## 7. The Construction and Understanding of the Spatial World in the *Samdhi-nirmocana-sūtra*

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Far too many people don't excel in life because they believe that they are restricted by limits of life on Earth and elsewhere in the universe. One cannot become great by remaining attached to the conceptualization of a self or by tenaciously adhering to the restrictions imposed onto the borders and boundaries of space.

A Bodhisattva regards the world and related factors as integral to the way meditative practices function and therefore not separable in any way from any other aspect of the Bodhisattva Path.

As meditative practices push the observed objects to its limits at any given stage, so the horizons of the world and related factors expand. The reality of the world and related factors is that there are no limits whatsoever.

## 8. Conclusion

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In Buddhist teachings, the spatial world in which sentient beings live can be understood at least concerning its axis, reality, and antidote.

The [axis](#) of the spatial world consists in the impermanent process of phenomena of conditioned co-arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*) or dependent on others (*para-tantra*).

The [reality](#) of the spatial world can be expressed in a single word: empty, not-self, non-dualistic, illusory, transformational.

An effective [antidote](#) to the overall problems of being constrained within the spatial world is to set out on a path toward either liberation or the utmost, right and perfect enlightenment through meditative practices and insightful wisdom.

## 8. Conclusion

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Although the *Āgama-sūtras* and the *Samḍhi-nirmocana-sūtra* are thematically consistent in pointing out the major role played by mental activities and meditative practices in constructing and understanding the spatial world, these two texts differ especially in regard to the goals to be respectively accomplished.

The *Āgama-sūtras*, taking the “eight levels of liberation” for example, use meditative practices to attain the final liberation in a sequential manner. The “limits of items” (*vastv-anta*) is the very epitome of “items of objects of observation” (*ālambana-vastu*) in the *Samḍhi-nirmocana-sūtra*, in which a Bodhisattva pushes meditative observation to its limits, goes beyond the limits, and ultimately actualizes and awakens to Buddhahood.

– THE END –