

## 1b

## The Buddha Discovered Dhyana

The nature of dhyana as a basis for liberation

An essay<sup>1</sup> by Piya Tan ©20101 Significance of dhyana

Dhyana (P *jhāna*; Skt *dhyāna*) is as old as Buddhism itself, probably older. In early Buddhism, however, it developed into a progressive four-stage suprasensory experience of altered consciousness, and has become uniquely Buddhist.<sup>2</sup> The importance of dhyana in early Buddhism is attested by the fact that we have numerous discourses where the Buddha describes his experiences of them.<sup>3</sup> In such discourses, the Buddha frequently admonishes his disciples to attain dhyana. In the suttas, we also see the word *jhāna* used in both its two basic Buddhist senses: the general sense of “meditation,” and as “dhyana” or “mental absorption,” such as in this discourse:

If a monk cultivates the first dhyana (*jhāna*) for even the duration of a mere finger-snap, then, bhikshus, he is called a monk who dwells as one whose meditation is not in vain (*aritta-j.jhāna*): a doer of the Teacher’s teaching, a follower of his advice. He does not eat the country’s alms in vain [for nothing].<sup>4</sup> (Eka,dhamma Accharā,saṅghata Sutta, A 1.20/1:38)

The well known meditation monk, **Ajahn Brahmavamso**, opens his insightful experiential paper on “The Jhānas” (2003) with this important declaration:

In the original Buddhist scriptures, there is only one word for any level of meditation. *Jhāna* designates meditation proper, where the meditator’s mind is stilled from all thought, secluded from all five-sense activity and is radiant with other-worldly bliss. Put bluntly, if it isn’t *Jhāna* then it isn’t true Buddhist meditation! Perhaps this is why the culminating factor of the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path,<sup>5</sup> the one that deals with right meditation [ie *sammā.samādhi* or right concentration], is nothing less than the *Jhānas*. (Brahmavamso 2003:5)<sup>6</sup>

The four dhyanas (*jhāna*) (and the four formless attainments, *ārūpa*) as mundane states of deep calm, even in the preliminary stages in the path to awakening, help to provide us with *a basis for wisdom to arise*. The four dhyanas, however, emerge again in a later stage in the cultivation of the path, *arising in direct connection with wisdom*, when they are regarded as supramundane (*lok’uttara*) dhyanas. These supramundane dhyanas are the levels of concentration pertaining to the four levels of awakening called “the supramundane path” (*lokuttara,magga*) and the stages of deliverance resulting from them, the four spiritual fruits (*fruits*).

<sup>1</sup> I would like to record my profound gratitude to **Prof Edward Crangle** (Univ of Sydney, Australia) and **Dr Keren Arbel** (Tel Aviv Univ, Israel) for their kindness in sending me related materials on my request and their friendly and helpful suggestions in connection with this essay.

<sup>2</sup> See **Dhyana**, SD 8.4(7).

<sup>3</sup> See esp **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26.15-18/1:163-167) = SD 1.11 (details of the 2 teachers); **Mahā Siha,nāda S** (M 12.44-61/1:77-82) = SD 1.13 (details of self-mortification); **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36.20-31-44/1:242-249) = SD 1.12 (self-mortification); **Bhaya Bherava S** (M 4/1:16-24) = SD 44.2 (overcoming fear in solitary practice).

<sup>4</sup> *Accharā,saṅghāta,mattam pi ce bhikkhave bhikkhu paṭhamam jhānam bhāveti ayam vuccati bhikkhave bhikkhu aritta-j.jhāno viharati satthu sāsana,karo ovāda,paṭikaro amogham raṭṭha,piṇḍam bhuñjati*. This passage is actually the first of a series 191 variations of the formula, each substituting the reading “cultivates the first dhyana,” ie incl the other 3 dhyanas, the 4 *brahma,vihārā*, the 4 satipatthanas, etc. For the full list, see A 1.20; see also Gethin 2001: 269.

<sup>5</sup> Right concentration is the one-pointedness of the mind through the four dhyanas. A full def is given in terms of dhyana description and factors in **Sacca Vibhaṅga S** (M 141.31/3:252).

<sup>6</sup> See **The Layman and dhyana** (SD 8.5) which shows that Bhikkhu Bodhi’s view does not exactly concur with Brahmavamso’s view, highlighted here (underscored), and yet there are important areas where they concur.

Even after awakening (*bodhi*) is achieved, the mundane dhyanas are still useful to the liberated person as a part of his daily meditation experience. Even for the Buddha, throughout his life, he constantly abides in his “divine dwelling” (*dibba, vihāra*), living happily here and now.<sup>7</sup>

## 2 The Buddha and dhyana

**2.1 BRAHMAVAMSO’S CLAIM.** Not only does Brahmavamso regard dhyana as being of key importance in Buddha’s meditation system, he also declares that “the Buddha discovered *jhāna*.”<sup>8</sup> We shall here examine this statement in some detail. What is meant by *jhāna* here?<sup>9</sup> Does it mean that there was no dhyana before the Buddha’s time? What happens during dhyana? [6.5]. Do we examine our experiences with insight while in dhyana or after emerging from it? [6.2].

To substantiate his claim, Brahmavamso quotes **the Pañcāla,caṇḍa Sutta** (S 2.7). Since it is a very short sutta, it is here translated in full:

### SD 33.1b(2.1)

## (Gāthā) Pañcāla,caṇḍa Sutta

The Pañcāla,caṇḍa Discourse (Verses)<sup>10</sup> | S 2.7/1:48

Traditional: S 1.2.1.7 = Saṃyutta Nikāya 1, Sagāthā Vagga 2, Devaputta Saṃyutta 1, Paṭhama Vagga 7

Theme: The Buddha discovers dhyana

1 Originating in Sāvattihī.

2 At one time, the devaputra Pañcāla,caṇḍa stood in the presence of [before] the Blessed One and addressed him with this verse:

3 *Sambādhe vata okāsam  
avindi bhūri, medhaso,  
yo jhānam, bujji<sup>11</sup> buddho  
paṭilīna, nisabho munī ti.*

In the midst of the confined, the opening  
the sage of vast wisdom found—  
the Buddha who discovered [awakened to] dhyana:  
the lone lordly bull of a sage is he.<sup>12</sup> = A 9.42/4:449<sup>13</sup>

[The Buddha:]

4 *Sambādhe vā’pi vindanti<sup>14</sup>  
(pañcāla, caṇḍā ti bhagavā)  
dhammaṃ nibbāṇa, pattiyā,  
ye satim paccalathamsu<sup>15</sup>  
sammā te susamāhitī ti.<sup>16</sup>*

Even in the midst of the confined, they find it,  
(O Pañcāla,caṇḍa, said the Blessed One)  
the Dharma for the attaining of nirvana—  
those who have gained mindfulness,  
those who are fully well concentrated.

— evaṃ —

<sup>7</sup> D 3:220; DA 3:1006. On the 4 benefits of dhyana experience, see **Saṅgīti S** (D 33.1.11(5)/3:222 f), & **Samādhi** (A 4.41/2:44-46) = SD 24.1, see also SD 33.1a (3.2).

<sup>8</sup> See *Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond*, 2006:127-130.

<sup>9</sup> On def of *jhāna*, see **Dhyana** = SD 8.4 (3).

<sup>10</sup> Or, “The Discourse to Pañcāla,caṇḍa,” in **(Pañcāla,caṇḍa) Sambādha S** (A 9.42/4:449-451) = SD 33.2.

<sup>11</sup> So Be WT; Ce *jhanam, budhā* (another MS: *jhānam buddhābuddho*); Ee *jhānam abuddhi*; Se *jhanam abuddhi*.

<sup>12</sup> *Sambādhe gataṃ okāsam, avudā bhūri, medhaso | yo jhānam abujji buddho, paṭilīna, nisabho munī ti.* For *abujji* here, S (PTS ed) has vl *abuddhi* (with no change in meaning). S:B tr: “The one of broad wisdom has indeed found | The opening in the midst of confinement, | The Buddha who discovered *jhāna* | The chief bull, aloof (from the herd), the sage.” See S:B 386 n151.

<sup>13</sup> S 2.7/1:48 = A 9.42.1/4:449 (SD 33.2).

<sup>14</sup> So Be Ce WT; Se *sambādhe’pi ca tiṭṭhanti*.

<sup>15</sup> So Be Se WT; Ce *pacalathamsu*.

<sup>16</sup> So Be Ce WT; Se *susamāhitā ti*.

Notice that the key stanza here that Brahmavamso cites also appears in the *Āṅuttara Nikāya*, in the **(Pañcāla.caṇḍa) Sambādha Sutta** (A 9.42), whose protagonist is Ānanda. Also note that in the *Saṃyutta* account, the same stanza is spoken by a deva named Pañcala.caṇḍa before the Buddha, and in the (Pañcāla.caṇḍa) *Sambādha Sutta*, it is Ānanda who gives a full explanation of it to the monk Udāyī.<sup>17</sup> In other words, in both cases, the stanza is not spoken by the Buddha himself.

The **Saṃyutta Commentary**, explaining the phrase “in the midst of the confined” (*sambādhe*), says that there are two kinds of confines: the confines of mental hindrances (*nīvaraṇa,sambādha*) and the confines of the cords of sense-pleasures (*kāma,guṇa.sambādha*), and that the former is meant here (SA 1:-106). The Commentary is being somewhat technical, as we can take *sambādhe* just as well here to mean “in the household life.” After all, we often find *sambādha* (“crowded”) in the phrase *sambādho ghara,-vāso* (“the crowded household life”).<sup>18</sup> It is also likely that the Buddha is alluding here to his experience of the first dhyana as a young boy (M 36).<sup>19</sup>

**Bodhi** translates *jhānam abujjhi buddho* as “the Buddha who discovered jhāna,” by which he apparently takes “discovered” figuratively, in the sense that the Buddha “has awakened” or understood dhyana. **Brahmavamso**, on the other hand, takes *abujjhi* literally as “discovered,” in the sense that the Buddha “found” what no one before him had found in our history.<sup>20</sup> Brahmavamso explains:

When it is said that the Buddha discovered *Jhāna*, it is not to be understood that no one had ever experienced *Jhāna* before. For instance, in the era of the previous Buddha Kassapa, countless men and women achieved *Jhāna* and subsequently realized Enlightenment. But in the India of twenty six centuries ago, all knowledge of *Jhāna* had disappeared. This was one reason that there is no mention at all of *Jhāna* in any religious text before the time of the Buddha.<sup>21</sup>

(Brahmavamso 2003:5)

**2.2 THE BODHISATTVA AND DHYANA.** Brahmavamso goes on to explain that the Bodhisattva’s meditation training under Ājāra Kālāma (from whom he learns to attain the base of nothingness) and Uddaka Rāma,putta (through whom he masters *his father* Rāma’s teaching and attains the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception).<sup>22</sup> [3.1]

However, these two attainments could not have been connected to *Jhāna*, because the Bodhisatta recalled, just prior to sitting under the Bodhi Tree, that the only time in his life that he had experienced any *Jhāna* was as a young boy, while sitting under a Rose-Apple Tree as his father conducted the first-ploughing ceremony (M 36).

One of the reasons why *Jhāna* was not practised before the Buddha’s enlightenment was because people then either indulged in seeking pleasure and comfort of the body or else followed a religion of tormenting the body. Both were caught up with the body and its five senses and knew no release from the five senses. Neither produced the sustained tranquillity of the body necessary as the foundation for *Jhāna*. When the Bodhisatta began the easy practices leading to such tran-

<sup>17</sup> A 9.42/4:449-451.

<sup>18</sup> **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2.41/1:63), **Subha S** (D 10.29/1:1206), **Tevijja S** (D 31.41/1:250); **Cūḷa Hatthipadopama S** (M 27.12/1:179), **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36.12/1:240), **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 38.32/1:267), **Kandaraka S** (M 51.13/1:344), **Ghoṭa,mukha S** (M 95.15/2:162), **Saṅgarava S** (M 100.9/2:211), **Devadaha S** (M 101.-31/2:226), **Cha-b,bisodhana S** (M 112.12/3:33), **Danta,bhūmi S** (M 125.14/3:134), **Civara S** (S 16.11/2:219), **Thapati S** (S /55.6/5:350); **Attantapa S** (A 4.198/2:208), **Upāli S** (A 10.98/5:204), **Soṇa S** (U 5.6/59).

<sup>19</sup> On *sambādha*, see further **Sambādha’okāsa S** (A 6.26/3:314-317) & SD 15.6 (2.3.3).

<sup>20</sup> On explanatikon of “discovery” (*buddhi* etc), see KhpA 15 f = KhpA:Ñ 7 f.

<sup>21</sup> **The Dakkhiṇa Vibhaṅga S** (M 142) mentions the “outsider free from lust for sense-pleasures” (*bāhirakā kām-esu vitarāga*) that is, a worldly dhyana-attainer<sup>21</sup> (M 142.5/ 3:255). If such a meditator existed before the Buddha’s time in India or exists outside of Buddhism, then Ajahn Brahmavamso’s assertion that “the Buddha discovered *Jhāna*” may need to be re-examined (Brahmavamso 2003:5). See **The layman and dhyana** = SD 8.5(11c).

<sup>22</sup> See **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26.15a-17/1:163-167).

quillity of the body, his first five disciples abandoned him in disgust. Such a practice was not regarded as valid. Therefore it was not practised, and so *Jhāna* never occurred.

(Brahmavamso 2003:6)

In other words, according to Brahmavamso's argument, if we accept the 7-year-old Bodhisattva's jambu-tree dhyana experience [4.4.1] as true, we cannot accept his tutelage under the two teachers, Āḷāra Kālāma<sup>23</sup> and Uddaka Rāma,putta [3.1], as true, too. However, I think his argument seems a little forced. In fact, it is easier to understand why the Bodhisattva *so easily* masters the meditation teachings of the two teachers—*because* he has mastered dhyana or at least able to attain it at such a tender age! Of course, it is possible that the story of the two teachers might have been a later interpolation, in which case, we would have no problem at all with the jambu-tree dhyana account anyway. But it would give more weight to Brahmavamso's view that the Buddha "discovered" dhyana.

### 3 The two teachers

**3.1 RĀMA AND UDDAKA RĀMA,PUTTA.** The Bodhisattva's visits to Āḷāra and to Uddaka are recorded in a pericope preserved in a number of important discourses, namely, **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 29), **the Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36), **the Bodhi Rāja,kumāra Sutta** (M 85) and **the Saṅgārava Sutta** (M 100).<sup>24</sup> We have possible evidence from **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), that Āḷāra knows dhyana. It is recorded that Pukkusa, a follower of Āḷāra Kālāma's, relates to the Buddha how, once, his (Pukkusa's) 500 carts trundling near the meditating Āḷāra Kālāma do not trouble him at all. In other words, Āḷāra is not troubled by external sounds.<sup>25</sup>

Uddaka is very interesting because scholars have sometimes mistaken him for his father, Rāma. **EJ Thomas**, in his *Life of the Buddha as Legend and History*, notes that "[t]he visit to Uddaka Rāma,putta is then described in almost the same terms [as for Āḷāra Kālāma], but here the doctrine was that which had been realized and proclaimed by Rāma, the *father* of Uddaka" (1949:63).<sup>26</sup>

**Bodhi** is aware of this, for in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, his translation of the Majjhima Nikāya, he notes in his translation of the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta that

Both Horner in [*Middle Length Sayings*] and Ñ[ānamoli] in MS err in their translations of the account of Bodhisattva's meeting with Uddaka Rāmaputta by assuming that Uddaka is identical with Rāma. However, as his name indicates, Uddaka was the son (*putta*) of Rāma, who must have already passed away before the Bodhisattva arrived on the scene. It should be noted that all references to Rāma are in the past tense and the third person, and that Uddaka in the end places the Bodhisattva in the position of teacher. Though the text does not allow for definite conclusions, this suggests that he himself had not yet reached the fourth immaterial attainment.

(Bodhi, 2001:1217 n303; 1995, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 2001)

<sup>23</sup> Āḷāra, one of the Bodhisattva's early teachers, taught him meditation up to the base of nothingness (*ākāraṇīya*). Buddhaghosa says that Āḷāra was also called Dīgha,piṅgala; Kālāma was his family name (DA 2:569 = MA 2:171). The story of the Bodhisattva's first two teachers is found in **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26.15/1:163-168), **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36/1:240; **Saṅgārava S** (M 100/2:212); **Madhyam'āgama** of the Sarvāstivāda (T26.776b5-777a4; **Vinaya** of the Dharmaguptakas (T1428.780bt-c19); cf J 1:66; DhA 1:85; ApA 71; BA 6; DhsA 34; MahvS 66. See **Ariyapariyesanā S** (M 26), SD Intro 1.11(15).

<sup>24</sup> **M 26.15-17/1:163-166** (SD 1.11) = **36.14-16/1:240** = **85.11-13/2:93** = **100.10-12/2:211** f respectively.

<sup>25</sup> D 16.4.27/2:130 = SD 9. On someone in the first dhyana not being able to hear, see **Vitakka,vicāra** = SD 33.4(1.2).

<sup>26</sup> Peter Skilling discusses this point in detail in "Uddaka Rāma,putta and Rāma," *Pāli Buddhist Review* 6,2 1981-82a:99-105. See **Saṅgārava S** (M 100.11 f) in SD 10.9. See also A Wynne, "How old is the Suttapiṭaka?" 2003:22-28 Internet ed; see esp Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, 2007: 9-26.

However, it is clear from **the Uddaka Sutta** (S 35.103), that Uddaka Rāma,putta has no high spiritual attainment at all:

Bhikkhus, though Uddaka Rāmaputta was not himself a knowledge-master [*vedagū*], he declared: “I am a knowledge-master.” Though he was not himself a universal conqueror, he declared: “I am a universal conqueror.” Though he had not excised the tumour’s root [craving], he declared: “I have excised the tumour’s root.” (S 35.103/4:83. Bodhi’s tr; notes added)

It is possible that the ascetic **Rāma**<sup>27</sup> was the first (apparently the oldest) of the eight wise brahmins who attended the Nativity and performed the “protection rites” (*rakkha,kamma*, Miln 236) for the child Siddhattha. **The Milinda,pañha** lists the eight brahmins as follows: Rāma, Dhaja, Lakkhaṇa, Mantī, Yañña, Suyāma, Subhoja and Sudatta (Miln 236). **The Jātaka Commentary** gives the same names with minor variations, that is, Koṇḍañña (for Yañña) and Bhoja (for Subhoja) (J 1:56). According to the Jātaka Commentary, seven of the brahmins raised two fingers, prophesizing that the Bodhisattva would either become a universal monarch (*cakka,vatti*) (if he remains in the world), or the Buddha (if he renounces the world) (J 1:56).

Amongst those scholars who think that the tradition of the two teachers’ instructing the Bodhisattva was a *fabrication* were André Bareau,<sup>28</sup> Tilmann Vetter,<sup>29</sup> and Johannes Bronkhorst.<sup>30</sup> Those who have proven the two-teacher episode to be *historical* include Ghirgo Zafirovulo<sup>31</sup> and Alexander Wynne.<sup>32</sup> It is instructive to carefully study the works of these two groups of scholars to have an idea of the depth and insight of their respective researches.

**3.2 “THE BUDDHA DISCOVERED DHYANA” (BRAHMAVAMSO).** The story of the Buddha and the two early meditation teachers is found in the most ancient Buddha-story we have, that is, the one preserved in **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 29), and repeated in other early suttas.<sup>33</sup> Here, it is said that the Bodhisattva learns and masters the two highest formless meditations from the two teachers. He masters the attainment of the base of nothingness (*ākiñcaññ’āyatana*)<sup>34</sup> from Uddaka, and the attainment of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception (*n’eva,saññā,nāsaññ’āyatana*) using the late Rāma’s method given through his son, Uddaka<sup>35</sup> [3.1]. However, the Buddha explains, they do *not* “lead to revulsion (with the world), to cessation (of suffering), to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to nirvana,” but only to rebirth in that particular realm.

Now, the question we need to ask is this: Did the two teachers teach dhyana or had they ever experienced it? We know from the Uddaka Sutta (S 35.103) that Uddaka is not awakened [3.1], but there is no mention of whether he is skilled in dhyana or not. Nor do we have any similar information on Ālāra, except for a remark by Pukkusa, a pupil of his, recorded in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16).<sup>36</sup> Technically, it is not possible to attain the formless attainments without first mastering the form dhyanas. So,

<sup>27</sup> Not listed in DPPN.

<sup>28</sup> *Recherches sur la biographie du Buddha dan les Sutrapitaka et les Vinaya anciens I* (Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient, 1963).

<sup>29</sup> *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 1986; New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> *L’illumination du Buddhha: de la quête à l’annonce de l’Éveil: essais de chronologie relative et de stratigraphie textuelle* (Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Innsbruck, 1993. He argues against Bareau’s thesis.

<sup>32</sup> A Wynne, “How old is the Suttapitaka?” St John’s College, 2003:22-28 Internet ed.

<sup>33</sup> M 26.15-16/1:163-166 (SD 1.11) = 36.14-15/1:240 = 85.11-12/2:93 = 100.10-11/2:211 f respectively.

<sup>34</sup> M 26.15/1:163-165 = SD 1.11.

<sup>35</sup> M 26.16/1:165 f = SD 1.11.

<sup>36</sup> The Sutta records how Pukkusa Malla,putta, Ālāra’s pupil, claims that Ālāra is an accomplished meditator, who, in his meditation, is totally undisturbed by the incessant rumblings of 500 carts passing close by (D 16.4.27/2:130 f) = SD 9.

theoretically speaking, if we accept that the two teacher's teachings are authentic, it is possible that they *have* experienced dhyana.

**Brahmavamso**, however, does not think so (the two teachers did not teach dhyana). Although there *was* dhyana before the Buddha's time, it was in the remotely distant past, in the times of past Buddhas, such as Kassapa (the Buddha just before our Buddha). Dhyana meditation, however, was forgotten after that, that is, until our Buddha teaches it again. In his book, *The Jhānas*, Brahmavamso gives the following arguments why the two teachers did *not* teach dhyana:

- (1) [The 7-year-old Bodhisattva's dhyana experience was] spontaneous...untaught, unplanned and since forgotten.<sup>37</sup> If that was the only *Jhāna* experienced by the Bodhisattva prior to his experience under the Bodhi Tree, then the two teachers Āḷāra Kālāma and Ud[d]aka Rāmaputta could not have taught *Jhāna* at all.
- (2) ...in the Mahāsaccaka Sutta (M 36), the Bodhisatta is shown rejecting the experiences under the two teachers as not leading to Enlightenment, and then exhausting just about every form of ascetic practice before concluding that that, too, did not lead to Enlightenment.<sup>38</sup> (Then he recalls his first dhyana experience, and turns to the middle way.)
- (3) One of the reasons why *Jhāna* was not practised before the Buddha's Enlightenment was because people either indulged in seeking pleasure and comfort of the body or else followed a religion of tormenting the body. Both are caught up with the body and its five senses and knew no release from the five senses. Neither produced the sustained tranquillity of the body necessary as the foundation for *Jhāna*.
- (4) When the Bodhisatta began the easy practices leading up to such tranquillity of body, his first five disciples abandoned him in disgust. Such a practice was not regarded as valid. Therefore it was not practised, and so *Jhāna* never occurred.
- (5) After the Buddha's Enlightenment, the very first teaching that He gave, even before the famous Four Noble Truths, was the exposition of the Middle Way, a way which had not existed before (except long ago in the eras of previous Buddhas), a way which leads automatically to *Jhāna* and then to Enlightenment.
- (6) It was as if, the Buddha said, that He had discovered a long lost path leading to an ancient city (S 12.65).<sup>39</sup> The ancient city was *Nibbāna* (Enlightenment) and the long lost path was the Eightfold Path culminating in *Jhāna*. Since the Buddha rediscovered the path, it can be said that the Buddha rediscovered *Jhāna*. (2003:5-7)

## 4 Dhyana before the Buddha's time

**4.1 SOURCE CRITICISM.** I think that any informed Buddhist or scholar would find it difficult to fully agree with much, if not all, of Brahmavamso's arguments presented above [3.2]. There is, however, one problem here: from *textual evidence*, we can say that dhyana *was* known before the Buddha's time. Here, I have found Israeli Buddhist scholar **Keren Arbel**'s conference paper, "Buddhist or Not? Thinking anew the role of the jhānas in the path of awakening" (2008), to be very helpful.<sup>40</sup> I am confident that we can reconcile the two seemingly contradicting views—that dhyana was known and practised *before* the Buddha's time, and that the Buddha *discovered* dhyana. In her investigation here, she uses the method of

<sup>37</sup> Analayo insightfully comments that "[p]ossibly his ability to enter the first *jhāna* so easily at this particular moment during his early youth was related to *samatha* practice undertaken in a previous life, an ability lost during his adolescence and later sensual indulgence as a young man, so that he had to develop it anew." (2003:76 n42)

<sup>38</sup> M 36.14-17/1:240 = **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26.15-16/163-166).

<sup>39</sup> **Nagara S** (S 12.65.19-21/2:105 f) = SD 14.2.

<sup>40</sup> 2008:4-14. My grateful thanks to Keren Arbel for her generosity in promptly sending me her conference paper.

“**source criticism**” (which presupposes that an ancient text carries imprints of the historical environment of its origin) to examine Buddhist and related Indian sources.<sup>41</sup>

Those who have some knowledge of non-Buddhist texts and systems before or around the Buddha’s time, will notice that a significant number of Buddhist terms are also found in other systems, that is to say,

- terms adopted and used with new senses, such as, *aggi* (fire), *amata* (the death-free), *brahma, cariya* (the holy life), *brahma, vihāra* (the divine abodes), *jhāna* (dhyana), *uposatha* (precept day), *veda* (knowledge);
- common terms with Jainism, such as *buddha* (awakened one), *pacceka, buddha* (self-awakened individual), *jina* (conqueror), *nibbāna* (nirvana), *tathāgata* (one thus come), *bhāvanā* (cultivation), *āsava* (influx), *kamma* (karma), *samaṇa* (ascetic), *pabbajjā* (renunciation);
- terms referred to but rejected, such as *attā* (abiding self or soul), *vaṇṇa* (colour, caste, class).<sup>42</sup>

As Arbel has noted:

Although we do not have access to all possible influences on early Buddhism, we do have three valuable sources—the Saṃhitas [the three Vedas], the Older Upaniṣads,<sup>43</sup> and references to practices exercised by other *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas*, recorded in the Nikāyas themselves. Other non-Buddhist texts such as Jaina materials,<sup>44</sup> the Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali<sup>45</sup> and some later Upaniṣads (such as the Maitrī Upaniṣads), which contain references to similar states, or better say, what looks similar, cannot be dated before the beginning of the Christian era.<sup>46</sup>

...we can assume justifiably that they might exhibit influences of Buddhist practice, and not the other way around.<sup>47</sup> (Arbel 2008:4 f; Sujato footnotes added)

During the Buddha’s time, there were only three Vedas:

- (1) the Ṛg-veda, hymns to Vedic deities; the oldest of which go back to 1500 BCE,
- (2) the Sāma-veda, sacred hymn-book for the Udgātṛ or Vedic cantor; and
- (3) the Yājur-veda, Vedic mantras and instructions on their proper usage in Vedic rituals.

By the Buddha’s time, Vedic literature comprised several different classes:

- (4) the four collections (*saṃhita*) of Vedic verses attributed to ancient seers (*isī*, Skt *ṛṣī*),
- (5) the ritual manuals (*brāhmaṇa*) on the elaborate Vedic sacrificial rituals, and
- (6) the “forest books” (*āraṇyaka*), explaining the esoteric meanings of such rituals.
- (7) the Upaniṣads (*upaniṣad*) teaches universal spirit and individual soul.

The Upanishads, the last class of Vedic literature, containing further esoteric commentary on the rituals, were still in the formative stage.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>41</sup> **Source criticism** started with western scholars investigating the texts of Classical antiquity (esp Homer’s Iliad). In the 18th century, Jean Astruc, a French professor of medicine, adapted this method to his own investigation into the sources of the Book of Genesis, which he anonymously published. As used in biblical criticism, it refers to the attempt to establish the sources used by the author and/or redactor of the final text. The term “literary criticism” is occasionally used as a synonym. It was subsequently considerably developed by German scholars in what was known as “the Higher Criticism,” a term no longer widely used. In general, the closer a source is to the event which it purports to describe, the more one can trust it to give an accurate description of what really happened. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Source\\_criticism\\_\(Biblical\\_studies\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Source_criticism_(Biblical_studies)).

<sup>42</sup> For further details, see **Why the Buddha hesitated** = SD 12.1 (6).

<sup>43</sup> See Sujato, *A History of Mindfulness*, 2005:128-136.

<sup>44</sup> See Sujato, *A History of Mindfulness*, 2005:147-152.

<sup>45</sup> See Sujato, *A History of Mindfulness*, 2005:142-147.

<sup>46</sup> According to Jain tradition, Mahāvīra’s teachings, the “old texts” (*Pūrva*) were lost. The council which compiled the Jain texts dated from the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> cent CE. As for the Yoga Sūtra, most scholars believe that its author, Patañjali, lived around the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> cent CE. The Maitrī Upaniṣad, which have echoes of Buddhist practices, dates from around the 1<sup>st</sup> cent CE. [Arbel’s fn; abridged]

<sup>47</sup> For an instructive study on how non-Buddhist sources and early Buddhism influences one another, see Edward Crangle 1994.

**Edward Crangle**, who has explored meditation in the early Indian contemplative texts, observes that none of the Vedas or Saṁhitas give any indication of the doctrine of karma, or offer any clear method for liberation.<sup>49</sup> Even in the Upaniṣads, he notes, terms such as *mokṣa* and *mukti* (both denoting spiritual liberation) do not occur often (1994:70). The Āraṇyakas and the Brāhmaṇas, too, show only initial recognition of the power of the mind or meditation techniques, even though they show a shift from external sacrifice to internal worship or meditation (*upāsana*).<sup>50</sup>

**4.2 UPĀSANA.** In the older (that is, pre-Buddhist) Upaniṣads,<sup>51</sup> words derived from √DHYĀ (to think)<sup>52</sup> (from which we get *dhyāna*, P *jhāna*) occur only 26 times. In the Nikāyas, on the other hand, the four dhyanas occur in at least 86 different places.<sup>53</sup> In the early Upaniṣads, we hardly find the word *dhyāna* or its related forms, but words derived from *upa* + √ĀS (to sit)—such as *upāsana* mentioned earlier—appear at least 188 times.<sup>54</sup>

**Edward Crangle** (1994), following **Neela Velkar** (1967), has studied the term *upāsana* (meaning “sitting, being near or being near at hand; attending to”) in detail, and lists the its frequency.<sup>55</sup> In the Bṛhad Āraṇyaka, *upāsana* occurs 63 times, *dhyāna* 12 times, and *yoga* twice. In the Chāndogya, *upāsana* occurs 115 times, *dhyāna* 12 times, and *yoga* twice.<sup>56</sup> It is difficult to ascertain its meaning or meanings, but has been translated sometimes as “worship” and sometimes as “meditation.”<sup>57</sup> Here is a passage from the Bṛhad Āraṇyaka, where it occurs:

Next, this breath, water is the body, its light-form is that moon. As far as the breath extends so far extends water and that moon. These are all alike, all endless. Verily, he who meditate/worships (*upāsana*) them as finite wins a finite world. But he who meditates/worships them as infinite wins an infinite world. (BĀU 1.5.14)

**Crangle** explains *upāsana* as “a contemplative process wherein the object of worship is an object of concentration” (1994:74). **Sujato** observes that it “in fact seems to embody the shift from an external worship and ritual towards the inner contemplation.” (2005:131).

Crangle interestingly suggests that *upāsana* is related to the Buddhist term *satipaṭṭhāna* (Skt *smṛty-upasthāna*), especially the last element of the compound, that is, *upaṭṭhāna* (Skt *upasthāna*) (1994:198 f). **Sujato** agrees and adds that

This may be supported on a number of grounds. The sound of the words is almost identical, especially in Sanskrit (*upasthāna* and *upāsana*). Though they form from different roots, the construction and basic meanings are similar: *upa* + *as* means to “sit near”; *upa* + *sthā* means to “stand near.” From there they both developed the sense of “wait upon, serve, attend,” and then to “pray, worship.” In a more specifically meditative context they are both used largely in the sense of the initial grounding on the meditative/contemplative object, rather than the resulting state of absorption. We also note that some of the meditation objects for *upāsana* are also found in satipaṭṭhāna:

<sup>48</sup> These Upaniṣads are the Bṛhad-āraṇyaka, Chāndogya, Taittirīya, Aitareya and Kausītaki. See **Tevijja S** (D 13.13/1:238) = SD 1.8 Intro (2); see also Arthur Macdonell, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971:197.

<sup>49</sup> Crangle, *The Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices*, 1994:5 f.

<sup>50</sup> Crangle 1994:61 f.

<sup>51</sup> That is, Bṛhad-āraṇyaka, Chāndogya, Taittirīya, Aitareya and Kausītaki Upaniṣads.

<sup>52</sup> Martin T Adam 2006:75 & Keren Arbel 2008:6 give this root as √DHYAI; but I follow WD Whitney, *The Roots, Verb-forms and Primary Derivatives of the Sanskrit Language*, 1885:85.

<sup>53</sup> Paul Griffiths, “Buddhist Jhāna: A form-critical study,” *Religion* 13, 1983:57.

<sup>54</sup> E Crangle 1994:72.

<sup>55</sup> Neela Velkar, *Upāsana in the Upaniṣads*, unpublished PhD thesis, Bombay, 1969. E Crangle, *The Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices*, Wiesbaden, 1994.

<sup>56</sup> Crangle 1994:71.

<sup>57</sup> But see esp Crangle 1994:59-62, 72-138.

the breath, water, fire, space, bliss, mind, etc. So it seems that Crangle's suggestion can be accepted. The major contemplative practice of the pre-Buddhist period is *upāsana*, and this practice finds its closest Buddhist connection, surprisingly enough, not with jhana or samadhi, but with satipatthana. (2005:131 f; see further pp 132-136)

**4.3 FORMATIVE TEACHINGS.** Any research into pre-Buddhist meditation terminology is hampered by the fact that the Vedas and the early Upaniṣads have very little or nothing on meditation. The earliest clear descriptions of meditation outside of Buddhism are in the Upaniṣads and Jain texts, which are, however, later than the Buddhist suttas. So they are more likely to be cases of Buddhist influences, although there is a possibility that even late texts could preserve some ancient traditions.

Recent scholarship has cast doubt on the accepted wisdom that the early Upaniṣads were pre-Buddhist. We find no mention of the Upaniṣads in the suttas, except perhaps for **the Tevijja Sutta** (D 13), which in fact mentions the names of some of the early Upaniṣads (still in their evolving stages)—Adhvaryu, Taittirīya, Chāndogya and Bahvṛcā<sup>58</sup> and also the names of early Vedic sages—Aṣṭaka, Vāmaka, Vāma,deva, Viśvā,mitra, Jamad-agni, Aṅgi,rasa, Bhāra,dvāja, Vāsiṣṭha, Kaśyapa, and Bhagu.<sup>59</sup>

**K N Jayatilleke**, in his *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, gives the following concordance for the Adhvaryu, Taittirīya, Chāndogya and Bahvṛcā brahmins.<sup>60</sup>

<u>School</u>	<u>Text</u>
R̥gveda-bavhārijā Brāhmaṇā (Bahvṛcas)	Bahvṛvas Brāhmaṇa (lost) but incorporated in the Aitareya and Kauṣitaki Brāhmaṇas.
Sāma,veda-chandogā Brāhmaṇa (Chandogas)	Chāndogya Brāhmaṇa.
Yajur,veda-tittiriyā Brāhmaṇā (Taittiriyas)	Taittiriyā Brāhmaṇa.
Yajur,veda-addharyā Brāhmaṇa (Adhvaryus)	Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa.

This suggests that the Upaniṣadic schools existed in the Buddha's time, but their teachings were still formative. **Sujato** proposes that

Perhaps the Upaniṣads that we have today derive from the later settled tenets of each of these strands of Brahmanical thought.<sup>61</sup> But whether or not the Upaniṣads in their current form existed at the Buddha's time, there is no doubt that ideas we can call "Upaniṣadic" were prominent. In the sphere of metaphysics we can cite the Buddha's critique of such ideas as that the self is infinite (*anantavā attā*), or that the self is identical with the world (*so attā so loko*), or that "I am He" (*eso 'ham-asmi*); or indeed the Buddha's condemnation of the suggestion by a certain brahmin cosmologist that "All is oneness" (*sabbam ekattam*). It would seem only natural to connect such metaphysics with samatha attainments, as implied by the Brahmajāla Sutta [D 1]. (2005:133)

#### 4.4 EARLY BUDDHIST SOURCES

##### 4.4.1 Dhyana before the Buddha's awakening

<sup>58</sup> D 2.10/1:237 & SD 1.8 Intro (2). These are the original Sanskrit forms of the Pali: *Addharyā, Tittiriyā, Chandokā, Chandāvā, Brahmācariyā*. According to TW Rhys Davids, the first three were skilled in liturgy generally and probably referred to those adept in the Yajur, Sāma and R̥g Vedas respectively, and notes that "If we adopt the other reading [ie *Brahmacariyā*] for the last in the list, then those priests who relied on liturgy, sacrifice or chant would be contrasted with those who had 'gone forth' as *religieux*, either as *Tāpasas* or as *Bhikshus*." (D:RD 1:303 n2).

<sup>59</sup> D 2.13/1:238 & SD 1.8 Intro (2). See also V 1:245; D 1:104, 242; A 3:224, 229; M 2:200. For identification of these seers' names, see *Vinaya Texts* (tr Rhys Davids & Oldenberg) 2:130 n3 & V:H 4:337 nn5-9.

<sup>60</sup> Jayatilleke 1963:479-481. See further Sujato, *A History of Mindfulness*, 2005:132-136.

<sup>61</sup> See OH de A Wijesekera, "A Pali reference to Brāhmaṇa-carāṇa," *Adyar Library Bulletin* 20 1956.

4.4.1.1 THE BODHISATTVA’S FIRST-DHYANA. Although we are generally familiar with dhyana as being taught by the Buddha and practised by his early disciples (as often detailed in the suttas), there are at least two occasions recorded in the Nikāyas where dhyana *as a meditation experience* is definitively described as the Bodhisattva’s practice. The first is the well known episode of the child Bodhisattva experiencing the first dhyana under the jambu tree during the ploughing festival, as recounted in **the Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36)<sup>62</sup> [5.2]. In the first-dhyana episode, the experience is recounted in the language of the first-dhyana stock passage:

Then, Aggī, vessaṇa, I thought thus, “I recall that when my father the Sakya was occupied while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first dhyana that is accompanied by initial application and sustained application, zest and joy born of seclusion.”

(M 36.31/1:246) = SD 1.12

4.4.1.2 THE BREATHINGLESS MEDITATION. The second account is also found in the same Sutta (M 36), where the Buddha describes his asceticism before his awakening. Several of such self-mortifying practices include what is said to be the “breathingless meditation.”<sup>63</sup> In fact, before the Buddha’s time, it is only here, apparently, only in these two places, is the term *jhāna* associated with a specific meditation technique, that is, the Bodhisattva’s first-dhyana experience under the jambu-tree [5.2], and the “stopping of the in-and-out-breath” (*assāsa, passāse uparundhim*), which uses the significant verb *jhāyeyyam* (“What if I were to meditate on the breathingless meditation? *Appāṇakam jhānam jhāyeyyam*)—this latter, as a part of the Bodhisattva’s ascetic practice.<sup>64</sup>

Arbel hypothesizes that, in the context of the “breathingless meditation”—that is, the “stopping of the in-and-out-breath” (*assāsa, passāse uparundhim*) (as recounted in **the Mahā Saccaka Sutta**, M 36), the verb *jhāyeyyam* could have come from the root  $\sqrt{K\dot{S}A}$  (or  $\sqrt{K\dot{S}\ddot{A}}$ ) (to burn, be consumed), and not from  $\sqrt{DHYAI}$  (or  $\sqrt{DHY\ddot{A}}$ ) (to think), and therefore the term *jhāna* here, “might point to an ascetic practice, in which the Bodhisattva tried to gain control over the breath; control which ‘burns’ or ‘consumes’ past karma... Yet this exertion, this severe practice, caused him to be exhausted, and did not lead him to awakening.” (2008:9).

Such an account is also found in **the Mahāvastu** (Mvst 3.149), which relates how a hermit’s son falls in love at his first meeting with a beautiful girl. Preoccupied with thoughts of her, he fails in his daily duties. Noticing this, his father asks, *kin<sup>65</sup> tuvaṃ dhyānam dhyāyasi*, “what kind of dhyana are you meditating on?” or more simply, “what are you thinking about?”<sup>66</sup> The Pali version of this story is **the Naḷinikā Jātaka** (J 526), which instead reads *kim nu mando’va jhāyasi* (“what are you thinking stupidly about?”).<sup>67</sup>

We can translate the verb *jhāyati* (Skt *dhyāyati*) either generally to mean “he meditates” or more specifically to mean “he attains dhyana.” But we have another pair of possible meanings, as shown in the Mahāvastu story and its Jātaka counterpart above, that is, *jhāyati* (Skt *dhyāyati*) can either mean “he meditates (on)” or “he thinks about, broods over.” A further fifth meaning is possible, that is, *jhāyati* (Skt *kṣāyati*), “he burns” or figuratively, “he is consumed (by). All these meanings (except as “dhyana”) can apply to the hermit’s son in the two stories.

4.4.1.3 TWO MEANINGS OF *JHĀNA*. In other words, the Buddhist Sanskrit form, *dhyāna* has two senses: from  $\sqrt{K\dot{S}\ddot{A}}$  (to burn) we have the Sanskrit verb *kṣāyati*, or the Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit verb *\*dhyāyati*, and Pali *jhāyati* (it burns; it is consumed), and from  $\sqrt{DHYAI}$  or  $\sqrt{DHY\ddot{A}}$  (to think), we have *dhyāyati*, Pali

<sup>62</sup> M 36.31/1:246 = SD 29.4. Also MA 2:290; J 1:57.

<sup>63</sup> The Sutta recounts him as reflecting, “What if I were to meditate on the breathingless meditation? (*appāṇakam jhānam jhāyeyyam*). (M 1:36.21/1:243) = SD 49.4

<sup>64</sup> M 36.31/1:243,5 = SD 29.4.

<sup>65</sup> Basak reads *kim* here (2004:92,6).

<sup>66</sup> Senart 1897:149,2; Mvst:J 3:144.

<sup>67</sup> J 526/5:201. For a detailed study of the different versions of this story, see Heinrich Lüders 1940b.

*jhāyati* (he meditates). However, Edgerton's Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary (BHSD) lists \**dhyāyati* as a starred form, that is, it is a reconstructed word or a back-formation, and does not really exist.

Arbel's hypothesis might well be plausible, but I think there is simpler explanation. The term *dhyāna* existed in pre-Buddhist times, but it refers to some kind of mystical or self-mortifying meditation, and not to the *jhāna* of the Buddha. In fact, what Arbel says further here clearly supports my proposition:

It is important to note that only in two contexts the term *jhāna* is associated with this verb, and in both of them the Buddha refers to a type of *jhāna* he does not recommend. In all other places, except from this occurrence, the *jhānas* are mostly associated with description of awakening, and always as a model of four gradual states, in which a person enters (*upasampajja*) and abides in (*viharati*) without any reference to the practice of stopping the breath or other ascetic practices. That is, the *jhānas* in the fourfold model are never referred to as *appāṇakam jhānam*. They are mostly described by an adjective that indicates their number in this mode—namely, the first *jhāna*, the second *jhāna*, the third *jhāna* or the fourth *jhāna*. Sometimes only the first *jhāna* is described, and then it is also called “the first *jhāna*,” which indicates again, that it is a part of a series of states. (Arbel 2008:9)

4.4.1.4 THE DOṆA BRĀHMAṆA SUTTA. An interesting discourse in the Aṅguttara, called **the Doṇa Brāhmaṇa Sutta** (A 5.192), clearly states that the brahmins before the Buddha's time practised the four dhyanas. When the brahmin Doṇa complains to the Buddha that he disrespects the venerable brahmin elders, the Buddha explains to him that there are five kinds of brahmins, everyone of whom lived as a celibate student, that is, under tutelage (*komāra, brahmacariya*) for 48 years, thus:

- (1) the brahma-like brahmin (*brahma, sama brāhmaṇa*), who then renounces the world to practise the four divine abodes,
- (2) the deva-like celibate brahmin (*deva, sama brāhmaṇa*), who then renounces the world to practise the four dhyanas (which are listed by way of the traditional pericopes),
- (3) the bounded brahmin (*mariyāda brāhmaṇa*), who keeps to the brahminical code, but does not meditate,
- (4) the bound-breaking brahmin (*sambhinna brāhmaṇa*), who supports himself only through the charity of others, but marries any woman for pleasure as well as for progeny, and
- (5) the outcaste brahmin (*caṇḍāla brāhmaṇa*), who who engages in any kind of work, marries any woman for pleasure as well as for progeny. (A 5.192/3:223-230) = SD 36.14

It is clear from such internal evidence that meditation, at least from the early Buddhists' viewpoint, that meditation and dhyana were practised and experienced well before the Buddha's time. We need, therefore, to discover and define the uniqueness of Buddhist dhyana elsewhere.

**4.4.2 Dhyana in the Buddha's time.** As regards the early Buddhist sources, most of **the four Nikāyas**—the Dīgha, the Majjhima, the Saṃyutta and the Aṅguttara—along with much of **the Sutta Nipāta** form the earliest strata, dated before the rise of the various early Buddhist schools (around 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE), for whom these probably form a common scripture.<sup>68</sup> These ancient texts have also been preserved in Chinese translation, called Āgama.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> For a detailed study, see Sujato, *A History of Mindfulness*, 2005:19-91.

<sup>69</sup> The early sutras, called Āgama Sūtras or simply Āgama (Chin 阿含經 Ahánjīng; Jap 阿含部 Agon-bu); see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C4%80gama\\_\(Buddhism\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C4%80gama_(Buddhism)). They are preserved in vols 1-2 (order 1-151) of the 100-volume Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō (大正新脩大藏經)(The Taishō Revised Tripiṭaka). See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taisho\\_Tripitaka](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taisho_Tripitaka). For the Taisho database: [http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/index\\_en.-html](http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/index_en.-html). Today they are a valuable source for source-critical and comparative studies of the Pali suttas.

It is interesting, as Arbel notes (2008:8), that in these ancient Buddhist texts, the dhyanas are never associated with Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta (most likely Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism),<sup>70</sup> or with the Ājīvikas.<sup>71</sup> In fact, in **the Nigaṇṭha Nāta,putta Sutta** (S 41.8), both Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta and Acela (naked ascetic) Kassapa are described as not believing that dhyanas are possible.<sup>72</sup> And as we have noted [3.2], meditation as an organized system did not exist before the Buddha's time.<sup>73</sup> Whatever hint of meditation we find in pre-Buddhist India (according to the ancient texts) were sporadic and formative.

Furthermore, as Arbel has noted (id), the dhyanas always appear in the Nikāyas as being attained by the Buddha and his disciples. This is, as a rule, contrary to accounts of asceticism and meditation done by the Bodhisattva (that is, before the Great Awakening), and which are proclaimed by the Buddha to be not conducive to the spiritual quest, such as stated in **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11) and **the Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36).<sup>74</sup> No such declaration is ever made by the Buddha regarding the four dhyanas.

**4.4.3 Jhāna as meaning “meditation.”** From the external accounts and internal evidence of the use of the term *dhyāna* (P *jhāna*) that we have examined so far, we can safely say that the term and its various forms *were* known even before the Buddha's time. As Poussin has proposed in 1917, the Buddha probably borrowed *the term* (but not the method) from a “common store of mystical devices.”<sup>75</sup>

THE 4 DHYANAS. When we closely study the suttas, we will, of course, mostly come across reference to the four dhyanas (as taught by the Buddha) either in brief, or defined in stock passages, such as these:

#### BRIEF STATEMENT ON DHYANA

Bhikshus, if a monk should wish, “May I become one to obtain at will, without trouble, without difficulty, *the four dhyanas*, the higher minds, dwelling happily here and now,” let him fulfill moral virtue, be devoted to inner stillness of the mind, not neglect meditation, be possessed of insight, and dwell in empty abodes.<sup>76</sup> (**Ākaṅkheyya Sutta**, M 6.9/1:33) = SD 59.1<sup>77</sup>

Note here that in the phrase “not neglect meditation” (*anirākata-jjhāna*), *jhāna* can only mean “meditation,” otherwise it would sound redundant, as the four dhyanas (*catunnam jhānānam*) have already been mentioned earlier.

#### STOCK PASSAGE ON THE 4 DHYANAS (From the Sāmañña,phala Sutta, D 2)

(1) Quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome mental states, he attains and dwells in the **first dhyana**, accompanied by initial application and sustained applica-

<sup>70</sup> Johannes Bronkhorst, in “The riddle of the Jainas and the Ājīvikas in early Buddhist literature,” suggests that Nātaputta and Mahāvīra were not the same person (2000:517). He refers to the two Jain sects: “The followers of Pārśva, who wore clothes, and the followers of Mahāvīra, who were naked.” The latter might have been included in the category of Ājīvikas, and not the disciples of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta (2000:512). [From Arbel's fn]

<sup>71</sup> A generic name for sectarian naked ascetics, incl Makkhali Gosāla and Pūraṇa Kassapa. The term *acela* or *acelaka* prob is a general term for a naked ascetic who does not belong to any particular sect. See AL Basham, *History and Doctrines of the Ājīvikas*, 1951:107-109.

<sup>72</sup> S 41.8/4:298-302 = SD 40a.7. On Jain beliefs, see **Upāli S** (M 56) = SD 27.1 Intro (2.1).

<sup>73</sup> See Arbel 2008:8 f.

<sup>74</sup> See, respectively, S 56.11.3/5:420 = SD 1.1 & M 36.20-31/1:242-247 = SD 49.4.

<sup>75</sup> Poussin, *The Way to Nirvana*, 1917:163.

<sup>76</sup> *Ākaṅkheyya ce bhikkhave, catunnam jhānānam ābhicetasikānam diṭṭha,dhamma,sukha,vihārānam nikāma,-lābhī assa akicchā,lābhī akasīra,lābhī ti, sīlesv'ev'assa paripūra,kārī ajjhataṃ ceto,samatham anuyutto anirākata-jjhāno vipassanāya samannāgato brūhetā suññāgārānam.*

<sup>77</sup> See also **Paṭisallāna S** (It 2.2.8/39 f) = SD 41.4.

tion, and with zest and joy *born of solitude*.<sup>78</sup> He permeates and pervades, floods and fills this very body<sup>79</sup> with the zest and joy born of solitude.<sup>80</sup>

(2) And, furthermore, maharajah, with the stilling of initial application and sustained application, by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, he attains and dwells in **the second dhyana**, free from initial application and sustained application, with zest and joy *born of concentration*.<sup>81</sup> He permeates and pervades, floods and fills this very body with the zest and joy born of concentration.

(3) And furthermore, maharajah, with the fading away of zest, he dwells equanimous, mindful and clearly knowing, and experiences joy with the body. He attains and dwells in **the third dhyana**, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Happily he dwells in *equanimity and mindfulness*.’ He permeates and pervades, floods and fills this very body with the joy free from zest.

(4) And furthermore, maharajah, with the abandoning of joy and pain<sup>82</sup>—and with the earlier disappearance of pleasure and displeasure—he attains and dwells in **the fourth dhyana**, that is neither painful nor pleasant, and with mindfulness fully purified by equanimity. He sits, pervading the body with a *pure, bright mind*,<sup>83</sup> so that there is no part of his entire body that is not pervaded by a pure, bright mind. (D 2.77+79+81+83/1:73-76) = SD 8.10<sup>84</sup>

DHYANA AS MEDITATION AND MEDITATING. Occasionally, we will notice (as in the quote under “Brief Statement on Dhyana” above) that the word *jhāna* means simply “meditation” (that is, not specifically dhyana as an altered state of consciousness). The Eka Nipāta of the Aṅguttara Nikāya has a chapter—**the Aparā Accharā, sāṅghāta Vagga**—which lists all the Buddhist meditations and practices (eg the eightfold path),<sup>85</sup> beginning with this exhortation:

Bhikshus, if even for just the moment of a finger-snap a monk cultivates (*bhāveti*) (the first dhyana, etc), he is called a monk. His meditation is not in vain (*aritta-j, jhāno*). He acts in accord-

<sup>78</sup> “Born of solitude,” *viveka, ja*; ie it is the result of abandoning the hindrances: on the 3 kinds of solitude, see **The Body in Buddhism**, SD 29.6a (1.5). On the omission of “one-pointedness of mind” (*cittassa ek’aggatā*) and “concentration” (*samādhi*) here, see **The Layman and Dhyana** = SD 8.5.

<sup>79</sup> Here “body” (*kāya*) refers to the “mental body” (*nāma, kāya*), ie feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), formations (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāna*) (Vism 4.175/169).

<sup>80</sup> These are the dhyana factors: *vitakka vicāra pīti sukhasa ek’aggatā*, respectively.

<sup>81</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> dhyana is known as “the noble silence” (*ariya, tunhī, bhāva*) because within it initial application and sustained thought (thinking and discursion, *vitakka, vicāra*) cease, and with their cessation, speech cannot occur. (S 2:273); cf. S 4:293 where *vitakka* and *vicāra* are called verbal formation (*vacī, saṅkhāra*), the mental factors responsible for speech. In **Ariya, pariyesanā S** (M 1:161), the Buddha exhorts the monks when assembled to “either speak on the Dharma or observe the noble silence” (ie either talk Dharma or meditate). See **Dutiya Jhāna Pañha S** (S 40.-2/4:263 f) = SD 24.12.

<sup>82</sup> “Joy and pain,” *sukha-dukkha*: this refers to the physical feelings. The next phrase—“pleasure and displeasure,” *domanassa-somanassa*—refers to mental feelings, which have been transcended earlier. Mental feelings need to be overcome first so that the mind is not distracted by itself, as it were. Then, all the other feelings (arising from the physical sense-contacts) are transcended. On the significance of this, see **Sall’atthena S** (S 36.6/4:207-210) = SD 5.5.

<sup>83</sup> See **Accharā Vagga** (A 1.6.1-2): “Monks, this mind is radiant (*pabhassara*), but it is defiled by defilements from outside. The ignorant ordinary person does not understand this as it really is. As such, for him there is no personal development.” (A 1:10). On reaching the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana, the practitioner becomes directly aware of the truly and naturally pure nature of the mind. See also A:ÑB 1999 §4.

<sup>84</sup> Further, see **Dhyana** = SD 8.4.

<sup>85</sup> The traditional ref (Chaṭṭha Saṅgayaṇa & World Tipiṭaka) is **A 1.18.1-181** (Aṅguttara Nikāya 1, Ekaka Nipāta 18, Aparā Accharāsaṅghata Vagga 1-181).

ance with the Teacher’s teaching. He follows his advice. He does not eat the country’s alms in vain. How much more so if he were to often cultivate it!<sup>86</sup> (A 2.20.2/1:38)

The expression *aritta-j,jhāna* (“his meditation is not in vain”) applies to all the meditations *that do not lead to dhyana* (such as the loathsomeness of food, analysis of the elements, the six recollections, and recollection on peace), and also practices like the individual limbs of the eightfold path, the five spiritual faculties, and so on. Clearly, *jhāna* here generically means “meditation,” and not dhyana (that is, as a profoundly blissful altered state of consciousness).

We have already noted above, that in the phrase “not neglect meditation” (*anirākata-j,jhāna*) as a verb, an action. Similarly, in this well known passage, the Buddha exhorts us to *meditate*, thus:

These, bhikkhus, are the foot of trees;<sup>87</sup> these are empty huts.<sup>88</sup> Meditate,<sup>89</sup> bhikkhus! Be not heedless! Regret not later! This is our instruction to you.<sup>90</sup>

WRONG DHYANA. In fact, the general rule is that the verbs *jhāyati* (3<sup>rd</sup> sg indicative), *jhāyasi* (2<sup>nd</sup> sg imperative), *jhāyatha* (2<sup>nd</sup> pl imperative), *jhāyeyya* (3<sup>rd</sup> sg optative), and so on, all refer to the *act* of meditating, not necessarily for the attaining of or the abiding in dhyana. In the **Gopaka Moggallāna Sutta** (M 108), Ānanda explains to the brahmin Vassa,kāra, chief minister of Magadha, that “the Blessed One does not praise all types of dhyana” (*so bhagavā sabbam jhānam na vaṇṇesi*). In this case, a person meditates with his mind troubled by a hindrance (*nīvaraṇa*)<sup>91</sup> but he does not understand it as it really is, nor the escape from such a hindrance. In this misdirected “dhyana,” one “meditates, over-meditates, under-meditates, out-meditates” (*jhāyati pajjhāyati nijjhāyati apajjhāyati*).<sup>92</sup>

Here, we clearly see the word *jhāna* as having the general sense of “meditation,” and the verb *jhāyati* meaning “he meditates.” On the other hand, the four dhyanas that the Buddha approves of are, namely, the first dhyana, the second dhyana, the third dhyana, and the fourth dhyana, are well defined through the Nikāyas (as shown in the “Stock Passage on the Four Dhyanas,” above). If *jhāna* is here used in a generic

<sup>86</sup> *Accharā,saṅghāta,mattam pi ce, bhikkhave, bhikkhu paṭhamam jhānam bhāveti, ayam vuccati, bhikkhave—bhikkhu aritta-j,jhāno viharati, satthu,sāsana,karo ovāda,patikaro, amogham raṭṭha,piṇḍam bhuñjati. Ko pana vādo ye nam bahulī,karontī ti* (A 2.20/1:38-43).

<sup>87</sup> “Those are the foot of trees,” *etāni rukkha,mūlāni*. “Foot” here is usually single, like “bottom.”

<sup>88</sup> Sometimes rendered as “empty place”.

<sup>89</sup> “Meditate!” *jhāyatha*, lit “cultivate *jhāna*” (M 1:45, 118; S 4:133, 4:359, 361, 362, 368, 373; A 3:87, 89, 4:139, 392). Syn *bhāvettha* (2<sup>nd</sup> pl), “cultivate!”

<sup>90</sup> *Etāni bhikkhave rukkha,mūlāni, etāni suññāgārāni. Jhāyatha bhikkhave, mā pamādattha, mā pacchā vippaṭṭisarino*. This is stock: **Sallekha S** (M 44.18/1:45); **Dvedhā,vitakka S** (M 19.27/1:118); (**Nava Purāṇṇa**) **Kamma S** (S 4:133) = SD 4.12; **Kāya S** (S 43.1/4:359) = SD 12.21.1, & all suttas in the same **Asaṅkhata Saṃyutta** (S 43.2-44/4:360-373); **Yodh’ājīva S 1** (A 5.73.7/3:87), **Yodh’ājīva S 2** (A 5.74.7/89), **Vinaya,dhara S** (A 7.70.4/4:139), **Devatā S** (A 9.19.4/4:392); cf **Mahā Palobhana J** (J 507). A search for *jhāyatha* in the Sutta Piṭaka reveals about 70 occurrences.

<sup>91</sup> **The 5 mental hindrances** (*pañca,nīvaraṇa*) are: (1) sensual lust (*kāma-c,chanda*), (2) ill will (*vyāpāda*), (3) restlessness and remorse (*uddhacca,kukkucca*), (4) sloth and torpor (*thīna,middha*), and (5) doubt (*vicikicchā*). For occurrences, see **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39.13/1:274); see also **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22.13); **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10.36) on how to deal with the hindrances during meditation; **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2.68/1:71) = SD 8.10 (def of dhyana with imageries). For discussions, see: (1) **Bhāvanā** = SD 15.1 (8.2), (2) **Mental Hindrances** (SD 32) & (3) **Saṅgārava S** (S 46.55 = SD 3.12).

<sup>92</sup> M 108.26-27/3:13 f = SD 33.5. In a manner of speaking (*pariyāyena*), we could associate the last 3 terms with the 3 unwholesome roots: *pajjhāyati* is to meditate “consumed” by greed (*lobha*) or lust (*rāga*), *nijjhāyati* is weighed “down” by hate, and *apajjhāyati* is led astray and “way out” by delusion. In a negative sense, *jhāyati* here, following the text, is to meditate troubled by the 5 hindrances. I don’t think the suttas use these terms technically, but only in a reiterative and mnemonic sense, simply meaning “to meditate troubled by the 5 mental hindrances,” which the first and key should be understood in this context.

way, it would include “dhyana,” that is, the four stages of Buddhist *jhāna*, too. Its particular sense should be teased out from its context.

Thus, Arbel observes,

In all other places, except from this occurrence, the *jhānas* are mostly associated with description of awakening, and always as a model of four gradual states, in which a person enters (*upasampajja*) and abides in (*viharati*) without any reference to the practice of stopping the breath or other ascetic practices. That is, the *jhānas* in the fourfold model are never referred to as *appānakam jhānam*. (2008:8 f)

In summary, we have the following meanings of *jhāna* and its verbs, as used in the Nikāyas:

- (1) as a general term for *meditation* (such as the imperative verb, *jhāyatha*),
- (2) as a term referring to any non-Buddhist meditation, especially wrong ones, and
- (3) as *dhyana meditation* or mental absorption, found (as a noun) only amongst the Buddhists.

THE FALSE INDIVIDUAL’S DHYANA. **The Sappurisa Sutta** (M 113) warns us against spiritual arrogance, that is, priding ourselves in religious learning, practices and attainments. It is interesting that the Sutta states that even a “false person” (*asappurisa*) may be able to attain dhyanas and the formless attainments, but he would not be able to attain the cessation of perception and feeling.<sup>93</sup>

This is very significant in our study of dhyana in the Buddha’s time. It shows that almost *anyone* is capable of attaining dhyana, but not everyone, especially a “false person” (*asappurisa*), is capable of gaining liberation from it. Indeed, a false person might try to gain dhyana *not* for the sake of awakening, but for priding himself or for religious one-upmanship.

Or, perhaps, the false person could use dhyana for heavenly rebirth, for “eternal life” in heaven, as elaborated in two parallel discourses, **the (Nānā,karaṇa) Mettā Sutta 1** (A 4.152)<sup>94</sup> and **the (Nānā,karaṇā) Puggala Sutta** (A 4.123).<sup>95</sup> While the former shows how the four divine abode (*brahma, vihāra*) can bring about heavenly rebirths, the latter shows how dhyanas can do the same, too. But once the heavenly spell is broken, the being falls into a subhuman plane reborn as a hell-being, an animal or a preta.

All this shows that noble as the experience of dhyana may be, it could be used for baser purposes. Or, perhaps, it might be true that such a person starts off quite rightly with his practice of dhyana, but he lacks right view. And it is only when dhyana is attained with right view that it brings about full spiritual benefits. [5]

## 5 Dhyana and awakening

**5.1 DHYANA AS RIGHT CONCENTRATION.** Let us return to our original question: Did the Buddha discover dhyana or not? We will take a closer look at some of the internal evidence and summarize our arguments. Why is the Buddha’s discovery of dhyana unique and different from the other teachings and systems? Firstly, as mentioned, the story of the two teachers and the Bodhisattva’s attaining of the two highest formless attainments are found in the earliest Buddha biography (the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta) and repeated verbatim in a number of other early texts. As such, there is no good reason to reject the authenticity of this story.

Secondly, this ancient sutta account *does* mention the two attainments. Ālāra himself tells the Bodhisattva that the level he has attained is *the base of nothingness*, while Uddaka declares that his father, Rāma, *had* attained *the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception*. Besides these two statements, we do not seem to have any other evidence showing that these are actually the formless attainments taught by

<sup>93</sup> *Saññā, vedayita, nirodha* or *nirodha, samāpatti*, M 113/3:37-45 = SD 23.7. It is listed as the 9<sup>th</sup> or last stage of as the 9 “progressive abidings” (*anupubba, vihāra*), ie the 4 form dhyanas (*rūpa jhāna*), the 4 formless dhyanas (*arūpa jhāna*), and the cessation of perception and feeling (D 3:265, 290; A 4:410). See M 43.25/1:296 & Vism 23.51/709; cf S 22.95/3:143\*; Dh 41.

<sup>94</sup> A 4.125/2:128 f = SD 33.9.

<sup>95</sup> A 4.123/2:129 f = SD 23.8a.

the Buddha himself. Conversely, there is no evidence for denying that they are not the same states as those of the Buddhist system. Giving them the benefit of the doubt, let us accept that the two attainments are similar to those taught by the Buddha.

Thirdly, even if we accept that the two formless bases taught by the two teachers are similar to the Buddhist ones, there is an important factor missing from these attainments of the two teachers. **The Cat-tārīsaka Sutta** (M 115) tells us that right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*) must be present in the dhyana for it to be right concentration (*sammā samādhi*).<sup>96</sup> It is not just a matter of being able to attain dhyana, no matter how profound, but as stated in **the Saṅgaṇikā, rāma Sutta** (A 6.68), without purifying view, it is impossible to cultivate right concentration,<sup>97</sup> much less to attain nirvana.

As such, Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāma,putta (or his late father Rāma before him), despite their ability (or claim)<sup>98</sup> to attain dhyana, or even the formless attainments, *their practices lack right view*. If these practices were endowed with right view, the Bodhisattva would have awakened through any of these attainments. As such, it is not just a matter of attaining dhyana, but such an attainment must be attended by right view, too.<sup>99</sup> It is useful to reflect on what **Sujato** has written on this vital point:

Elsewhere it is said that ordinary people attain samadhi (here the four jhanas (A 4.123)<sup>100</sup> and the four divine abidings<sup>101</sup>), are reborn in the Brahmā realms, and after a long period of bliss fall back into lower realms.<sup>102</sup> But noble disciples, after reaching the Brahmā realms, attain Nibbana from there.

The difference is not in the states of samadhi as such—these are just manifestations of the mind at peace. The difference is in the views and interpretations, the conceptual wrapping that the experience is bundled up in. The path must be taken as a whole.

If one starts out with wrong view, one's meditation experiences are likely to simply reinforce one's preconceptions. If one practises samadhi with the view that one's soul will become immersed in some exalted state of being, well, one will get what one wishes for.

(Sujato, *A History of Mindfulness*, 2004b: 95 f; 2005b: 137 f; normalized)

In conclusion, we can say that Brahmavamsa is right in claiming that *the Buddha discovered dhyana*, but we need to qualify this, that is, the Buddha borrowed the term *jhāna* from a common religious vocabulary) and yet it is an innovation as it is dhyana *with right view*. The two teachers—Ālāra and Rāma—too, must have experienced dhyana, but it is without right view (that is to say, they still held some self-view or have not really directly seen the nature of not-self).

Around the Buddha's time, there was such a religious fervour, with a significantly large number of people practising meditation. It is not hard to stretch our imagination in saying that there were many others who had experienced dhyana—in the sense of transpersonal concentration or samadhi, but *without* right view. As such, it is the Buddha who discovers dhyana with *right view*, which brings about liberation.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>96</sup> M 117.2-3/3:71 + 35/3:76 = SD 6.10.

<sup>97</sup> A 6.68/3:423 = SD 65.12.

<sup>98</sup> See **Uddaka S** (S 35.103), where the Buddha declares that Uddaka is *not* awakened but claims to be so (S 35.103/4:83 f).

<sup>99</sup> See further “Did Ālāra & Rāma teach dhyana?”: **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26) Intro (4.1).

<sup>100</sup> (**Nāna, karaṇā**) **Puggala S** (A 4.123/2:126-128) = SD 23.8a.

<sup>101</sup> Eg (**Puggalā**) **Mettā S 1** (A 4.125/2:128 f).

<sup>102</sup> See eg **Brahmā Nimantanika S** (M 49). The Buddha relates to the Brahmā Baka how he, from being a 4<sup>th</sup>-dhyana Brahmā of Veha-p.phalā (Abundant Fruit), passes away from there and is reborn as a 3<sup>rd</sup>-dhyana Brahmā of Subha, kiṇṇā (Radiant Glory), and then as a 2<sup>nd</sup>-dhyana Brahmā of Ābhassarā (Streaming Radiance). From there he is reborn into the present 1<sup>st</sup>-dhyana world of Mahā Brahmā. This is in fact a spiritual devolution, a gradual falling from high places! (M 49.10/1:326-1331) = SD 11.7.

<sup>103</sup> See eg (**Nāna, karaṇā**) **Puggala S 1** (A 4.123/2:126-128) = SD 23.8a cf (**Nāna, karaṇā**) **Mettā S 1** (A 4.125/-2:128 f) = SD 33.9.

**5.2 THE BUDDHA DISCOVERED DHYANA WITH RIGHT VIEW.** In his first public discourse, **the Dhamma, cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11), the Buddha proclaims that the path to liberation must avoid the two extremes of preoccupation with the body, that is, either indulging in bodily pleasure or in self-mortification. Only in keeping to the middle way (the eightfold path), can liberation be reached.<sup>104</sup>

**The Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36) records how, after realizing the mortal danger and utter futility of self-mortification, the Bodhisattva seeks a middle way to liberation. He recalls that when he is only 7, against the backdrop of the ploughing festival, sitting under a jambu tree, focussed on his breath, and attaining the first dhyana [4.4.1]. Reflecting on his meditative bliss on that occasion, he realizes that he has nothing to fear regarding a *pleasure that is wholesome*.<sup>105</sup> Thus, directing his mind to his breath, the Bodhisattva attains dhyana, and, through his own effort, gains self-awakening.<sup>106</sup>

It is important to understand here that dhyana *alone* would not bring awakening. After all, the child Bodhisattva has attained the first dhyana under the jambu tree, but does not gain spiritual liberation [4.4.1]. Although the two early teachers—Ālāra Kālāma and Rāma—are able to reach even the formless attainments (meaning that they have mastered the form dhyanas, but without right view), they have not realized nirvana.

Even after mastering the two highest formless attainments from the two teachers, the Bodhisattva does not win liberation. So he decides to practise on his own. Using the breath meditation that he is familiar with, the Bodhisattva quickly lets go of all mental hindrances, and gains the four dhyanas. Emerging from the fourth dhyana, he directs his mind to attain the knowledge of the recollection of his own past lives (*pubbe, nivāsānussati, ñāṇa*) during the first watch (10.00-2.00 am) of Vesak Day, 2600 years ago.

Using this rebirth knowledge, the Buddha is able to *recall his most spiritually significant past life*, as confirmed by **the Ghaṭikāra Sutta** (M 81), that is, as the monk Joti, pāla, a disciple of the immediate past Buddha, Kassapa,<sup>107</sup> under whom he would have surely learned the Dharma, especially the teachings of rebirth, karma and not-self. Then the Buddha attains the knowledge of death and rebirth (*cutūpapāta, ñāṇa*) or the “divine eye,” with which he is able to see how beings fare through numerous lives according to their karma.

Through *recalling his own past lives and those of other beings*, he sees a common pattern of how the three unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion, condition our sufferings, and how through understanding and accepting the universal characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self, suffering is overcome and liberation won. All this is confirmed by his recalling the teachings he has received from Kassapa Buddha.

As right view arises in our Buddha, he is finally able to directly see into true reality, and so gains the knowledge of the destruction of the influxes (*āsava-k, khaya ñāṇa*), that is, the drying up the floods of sense-desires, views, existence and ignorance. With this, he attains self-awakening and spiritual liberation.<sup>108</sup> In other words, it is not dhyana alone that liberates the Bodhisattva, but it is the true Dharma (*saddhamma*) that makes him Buddha.<sup>109</sup> The vital point here is that the dhyana must be right concentration (*sammā samādhi*), not wrong concentration (*micchā samādhi*).<sup>110</sup> **Right-samādhi dhyana**, in other words, must be developed along with the other limbs of the noble eightfold path, especially right view.

<sup>104</sup> S 56.11.3/5:420 = SD 1.1.

<sup>105</sup> M 36.21-32/1:236 f = SD 1.12.

<sup>106</sup> For a description of the Buddha’s awakening, see **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26.18/1:167) = SD 1.11, **Mahā Sīha, nāda S** (M 12.56-63/1:81-83) = SD 1.13, & **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36.31-44/1:246-249) = SD 1.12.

<sup>107</sup> M 81.6/2:46 & 81.23/2:54 = SD 49.3. The **Buddha, vaṃsa** records our Buddha as recalling as the monk Joti-pāla under the Buddha Kassapa, he “illuminated the Conqueror’s teaching” (*sobhayim Jina, sāsanam*, B 25.15)

<sup>108</sup> The 3 knowledges (*te, vijjā*) are listed at **M 2.10/1:8**, **9.70/1:55**; **D 33.1.10.58/3:220**, **34.1.4.10/3:275**; **A 3.59/1:166 f**, **3.67/1:197-199**, **6.63/3:414**, **10.102/5:211.**; see also **Te, vijja S** (D 13) = SD 1.8 Intro (2.2). For a list of 6 superknowledges & defs, see **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2.89-100/1:77-100) = SD 8.10.

<sup>109</sup> On the Buddha’s respect for the Dharma, see **Gārava S** (S 6.2/1:138-140) = SD 12.3.

<sup>110</sup> There are numerous refs to *micchā, samādhi*, eg **D 3:254**; **M 1:42**, **3:77**; **S 5:1**; **A 2:221**, **5:212**; **Nm 1:78**; **Pm 2:88**; **Dhs 76**; **Vbh 373**; **Kvu 619**.

In short, the practitioner must realize for himself the nature of not-self (*anattā*), and the calm and clear mind arising out of dhyana will facilitate this realization.<sup>111</sup> In other words, the Buddha is the first person to experience dhyana *with right view*, and so awaken himself. In this sense, the Buddha is the first to discover dhyana—just as other Buddhas before him have done, too.

## 6 Scholarship, practice and dhyana

**6.1 TWO VIEWS ON DHYANA.** More has been written and read about meditation, I think, than there are those who regularly meditate and experience its wholesome benefits. Most books on meditation available today have been written by non-practitioners, many of whom are not Buddhist, or by those who claim to have meditative experience or have some sort of affinity with Buddhism. Conversely, the writings of avowed practitioners of meditation leading Dharma-centred lives, especially monastics, are assuredly worthwhile reading.

It is interesting to see how the theoretical knowledge and understanding of meditation and dhyana are presented to us in clearer ways, especially those based on personal experience and confirmed by the Buddha's teachings. For the rest of this paper, I would like to compare the key ideas and teachings, regarding meditation and dhyana, of two well known meditation teachers of our time, that is, **Henepola Gunaratana Mahathera** (a senior Sinhala monk resident in USA) and **Ajahn Brahmavamso** (an English monk of Ajahn Chah's forest tradition resident in Australia).<sup>112</sup>

For our present purposes, I will confine our discussion mainly to views on dhyana found in **Gunaratana's** paper, "Should we come out of Jhāna to practice Vipassanā?" (2007) and **Brahmavamso's** teachings.<sup>113</sup> What is of special interest here is that their teachings on dhyana seem to *contradict* each other, and we will here investigate this interesting problem. We shall also look at the views of a few other teachers and scholars who have shown a special interest in meditation and dhyana. We shall examine Gunaratana's main views, expressed in his paper entitled, "Should we come out of Jhāna to practice Vipassanā?" (2007), namely:

- (1) that in a dhyana state, the meditator "sees and knows what is going on in his mind" (page 1) [6.2];
- (2) that "the meditator does not become one with the object" (page 8) [6.3];
- (3) that the mental hindrances return immediately when we are out of dhyana (page 4) [6.4];
- (4) that reflecting on the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness of these factors (that is, the dhyana-factors) should be done while they are present" (page 10) [6.5].

### 6.2 WHILE IN DHYANA CAN WE EXAMINE OUR OWN MIND?

**6.2.1 The nature of dhyana.** Before we go on, we should have some idea of the nature of the dhyanas. The numerous passages in the early Buddhist texts describe that dhyana arises with the abandoning of all mental hindrances,<sup>114</sup> that is, when the five physical sense-doors have been closed, revealing only the mind. In this way, we are experiencing the mind directly: we *are* the mind.

Free from the mental hindrances, the practitioner goes on to attain **the first dhyana**. A rudimentary thought-process still lingers in the first dhyana, but this is directed to the meditation object and anchored there—this is known respectively as "initial application" (*vitakka*) and "sustained application" (*vicāra*). With this mental focus, there arise zest (*pīti*) and bliss (*sukha*) "born of solitude" (*viveka, ja*).<sup>115</sup>

<sup>111</sup> See **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (3.1) & **Paṭhama Jhāna Pañha S** (S 30.1) = SD 24.11 Intro (1), esp (1.3). See also Analayo 2003: 75 f.

<sup>112</sup> These two teachers are well known to me, as in late 1967 I spent a stint as novice (*sāmaṇera*) of the Siyam Nikaya under the tutelage of **Bhante H Gunaratana**; and I have known **Ajahn Brahmavamso**, since 1974, when we met in Wat Srales, Bangkok, where I acted as his interpreter just before his ordination there, and from whom I learned the forest meditation of Ajahn Chah's lineage.

<sup>113</sup> See SD 33.1a biblio for their respective works relevant to our discussion here.

<sup>114</sup> The 5 mental hindrances (*pañca, nīvaraṇa*) are: (1) sensual lust (*kāma-c, chanda*), (2) ill will (*vyāpāda*), (3) restlessness and remorse (*uddhacca, kukkucca*), (4) sloth and torpor (*thīna, middha*), and (5) doubt (*vicikicchā*): see above (3.3.2) n.

<sup>115</sup> ie mental solitude, a mind free from the 5 hindrances. On the 3 kinds of solitude, see **The Body in Buddhism**, SD 29.6a (1.5). On def of the 4 dhyanas (with images), see **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2.77-84/1:73-76) = SD 8.10.

When the mind is aware of itself, there is no more need of even the subtlest thought (which would be like a speck of dust on the lens of a giant telescope). At this stage, the mind continues to enjoy zest and bliss, free from all thinking (which also means free from all knowing). This is the experience of a full concentrated mind that is “born of concentration” (*samādhi,ja*), that is, **the second dhyana**.

In **the second dhyana**, the meditator is simply blissed out with the sweet duo of zest and joy (*pīti,-sukha*). Their combined effect is that of euphoria, more blissful than anything we have known. In due course, the dhyana attainer feels that there is a coarse or gross (*oḷarika*) aspect of this bliss, and that is zest. When the coarseness of zest is felt, it simply fades away, leaving only joy, which is much more refined and serene. This is **the third dhyana**.

In **the fourth dhyana**, feeling that joy (*sukha*) is coarse, the meditator simply lets it go. The mind is now enjoying a rock-like stillness. There is a complete lack of access to the world of the physical senses and the body itself. The physical body has totally shut down, as it were. The meditator in the fourth dhyana is effectively only a “mental being” so that “there is no part of his entire body that is not pervaded by pure, bright mind.”<sup>116</sup> The “entire body” clearly refers to *his mental body* because his physical body has completely shut down.<sup>117</sup>

**Brahmavamso**’s description on the mind in dhyana is helpful here:

Even though there is no comprehension within any jhāna, one is certainly not in a trance. One’s mindfulness is greatly increased to a level of sharpness that is truly incredible. One is immensely aware. Only mindfulness doesn’t move. It is frozen. And the stillness of the super-power mindfulness, the perfect one-pointedness of awareness, makes the jhāna experience completely different from anything one has known before. This is not unconsciousness. It is non-dual consciousness. All it can know is one thing, and that is timeless bliss that doesn’t move.

(2006:153) [6.4.4]

In short, we do know, or more correctly, feel, the bliss and clarity of the mind in dhyana, but it is well beyond our everyday knowing of feeling. It might be said to be a kind of transcendental awareness.

### **6.2.2 Dhyana is beyond words and thought.**

6.2.2.1 THE PRESENT TENSE IN PALI. Gunaratana (2007) holds the view that in a dhyana state, the meditator “sees and knows what is going on in his mind” (1). He quotes **the Mahā Sākul’udāyi Sutta** (M 77), saying,

The Mahāsakuludāyi Sutta clearly expresses that the meditator, even in very refined states of *Jhāna*, sees and knows what is going on in his mind. The verbs are used in the present tense not in the past tense... If he were to see and know these things after emerging from meditation the Sutta would have used the past tense. (Gunaratana 2007:1)

Firstly, let me address the issue of the present tense as used in the Pali suttas, which is entirely different from the way we use it in English (as in many other languages, too). **A K Warder**, in his *Introduction to Pali*, is instructive:

The present (*vattamāna*) tense (*lakāra*) is used to express present (*paccuppanna*) time (*kāla*), the limits of which are somewhat vague, or indefinite time (timeless statements such as “eternal truths”), sometimes the immediate future (which may include a shade of “imperative” sense; cf English “I’m going”) and sometimes the past (“historic present”). It is used to express the duration of an action “until,” a fixed future time (a vivid future visualized at present) “when,” and in certain other constructions. (1963; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 1974:12 f)

<sup>116</sup> See eg **Sāmañña,phala S** (D2.84/1:75) = SD 8.10.

<sup>117</sup> See Brahmavamso 2006:153-168.

Now, in the light of what Warder has clarified regarding the present tense in the Pali suttas, let us examine the passage that Gunaratana refers to. It is actually a four-dhyana stock passage, and is identical with the four passages quoted above [4.4.3]. We shall look only at the passage on the first dhyana, as it is sufficient for our present purposes:

STOCK PASSAGE ON THE 1ST DHYANA (From the Mahā Sakuludāyi Sutta, M 77)

Again, Udāyi, I have proclaimed to my disciples the way my disciples cultivate the four dhyanas.

Here, Udāyi, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome mental states, he attains and dwells in the **first dhyana**, accompanied by initial application and sustained application, and with zest and joy born of solitude. He permeates and pervades, floods and fills this very body with the zest and joy born of solitude.

*Puna ca'param, udāyi, akkhātā mayā sāvakānaṃ paṭipadā, yathā,paṭipannā me sāvakā cat-tāri jhānāni bhāventi.*

*Idh 'udāyi, bhikkhu vivicca kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi sa,vitakkaṃ sa,vicāraṃ viveka.jaṃ pīti,sukhaṃ paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati. So imam eva kāyaṃ viveka.jena pīti,sukhena abhisandeti parisandeti paripūreti parippharati, nāssa kiñci sabbāvato kāyassa viveka.jena pīti,sukhena apphuṭaṃ hoti.* (M 77.25/2:15) = SD 49.5

The **present-tense verbs** found in the above passage (other than the inherent verb, such as *hoti*,” it is”), are as follows: “(they) cultivate” (*bhāventi*), “he attains and dwells” (*upasampajja viharati*), and “(it) permeate and pervade, floods and fills” (*abhisandeti parisandeti paripūreti parippharati*). All we can rightly say here is that the Buddha is reporting how his earlier disciples have practised meditation to attain dhyana, and as such what his audience, the present disciples, should do, too. The present tense is simply to evoke *the historical or narrative present* to reflect the timeless efficacy and truth of these teachings. Let us examine a few more related passages.

6.2.2.2 THE FOURTH DHYANA AND THE THREE KNOWLEDGES. Gunaratana further holds that “we have no reason to believe that he came out of Jhāna to develop the three kinds of knowledge—knowledge of seeing the past, knowledge of seeing beings dying and taking rebirth, and knowledge of the destruction of defilements. The Buddha used the fourth Jhāna for Vipassanā” (2007:1). And he adds:

*It is virtually impossible to find evidence in the Suttas that one should come out of Jhāna to practice Vipassanā.* There are a number of passages repeated in many Suttas dealing with the four fine material Jhānas [*rūpa jhāna*]. Nowhere in any of these passages is it said that one should come out of Jhāna to gain the three kinds of knowledge—knowledge of seeing previous lives, knowledge of beings dying and taking rebirth according to their karmas, and knowledge of the destruction of defilements. (Gunaratana 2007:1 f; emphasis added)

Gunaratana refers to **the Mahā Sākul'udāyi Sutta** (M 77) but I could not find any such allusion in those passages relating to dhyana and the three knowledges, as in all such passages the Buddha begins by reporting, “Again, Udāyi, I have proclaimed to my disciples...” [6.2.2.1] followed by the eight kinds of superknowledges that, in the Sāmañña,phala Sutta (D 2) are designated as the higher fruits of recluseship.<sup>118</sup>

However, the following stock passage from **the Bhaya Bherava Sutta** (M 4) and **the Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36) would reflect Gunaratana’s view that “we have no reason to believe that he came out of Jhāna to develop the three kinds of knowledge.”

STOCK PASSAGE ON THE 1ST SUPERKNOWLEDGE

<sup>118</sup> See, respectively, **M 77.29-36/2:17-22** = SD 49.5 & **D 2.87-100/1:76-85** = SD 8.10.

**38** (1) When his [my] concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady and attained to unshakable steadiness, he [I] directed it to **the knowledge of the recollection of past lives**.<sup>119</sup> He recollects his [I recollect my] manifold past lives,...

*So evaṃ samāhite citte parisuddhe pariyodāte anaṅgaṇe vigatēpakkilese mudu, bhūte kamma-niye ṭhite āneṅja-p, patte pubbe, nivāsānussati, ñāṇāya cittam abhininnāmesim. So aneka, vihitam pubbe, nivāsam anussarāmi...* (M 4.27/1:22 = SD 44.3) = (M 36.38/1:248 f = SD 49.4)

Firstly, note that although the key verb *anussarāmi* (“I recollect”) is in the present tense, it would have just the same sense if it were rendered into the past tense as “I recollected”—as in all the major English translations we have.<sup>120</sup> In fact, it makes better sense to use *the past sense* for at least two important reasons: (1) the Buddha was *reporting* this past event but as an instruction; and (2) the verb *abhininnāmesim* (“he directed (it)”) is in the past tense.<sup>121</sup> The point here is that in the case of Dharma-teaching (especially instructions regarding meditation and practice), no matter what the tenses are, it should be generally understood in the historical or narrative present to reflect the timelessness of the Dharma.<sup>122</sup>

**6.2.3 The Anupada Sutta.** One of the major discourses that **Gunaratana** uses to support his notion that “there is no suggestion at all that the meditator should leave the fourth Jhāna [or any dhyana] to attain these understandings,” is **the Anupada Sutta** (M 111).<sup>123</sup> He quotes that

This is the state of mind the Buddha ascribes to Venerable Sāriputta in Anupada Sutta.

“And the states in the fourth Jhāna—the equanimity, the neither-painful-nor pleasant feeling, the mental unconcern due to tranquillity, the purity of mindfulness, and the unification of mind; the contact, feeling, perception, volition, and the mind; zeal, decision, energy, mindfulness, equanimity and attention—known to him those state arose, known they were present, known they disappeared.” [M 111.10/2:26] (2007:12)<sup>124</sup>

Elsewhere, Gunaratana notes, regarding the above passage, that “significantly, the name of this Sutta, **Anupada**, means *uninterrupted*. Ven Sāriputta not only saw the mental factors in each Jhāna by turn, he did it *without* leaving the Jhānic state. His Jhāna was *uninterrupted*.” (2007:17; highlights added). By “uninterrupted” here, Gunaratana clearly refers to *anupada*, following the Pali-English Dictionary (PED), where we find the explanation of the phrase, *anupada, dhamma, vipassanā* (Anupada Sutta, M 3:25, 11) as “uninterrupted contemplation.”

The Anupada Sutta Commentary explains the phrase, *anupada, dhamma, vipassanā*, as “he has insight into these states *in succession* [“immediately after,” *anupaṭṭipāṭiyā*] by virtue of an attainment or by

<sup>119</sup> This knowledge is detailed at Vism 13.13-71/411-423.

<sup>120</sup> IB Horner (1954) (M:H 28); Nyanamoli & Bodhi, 1995, 2001 (M:ÑB 105); Thanissaro (2009), online ed: <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.004.than.html>. Of the modern translations, apparently only Piya Tan has rendered *anussarāmi* (which follows) in the present tense, “I recollect,” following the Pali, to reflect the historical or narrative present or timelessness of a Dharma teaching: see SD 49.4 and elsewhere. We have no good reason to say that, on account of the present tense used in *some* of the dhyana and *abhiññā* pericopes, that the Buddha or meditator does not come out of dhyana to cultivate insight. See further below.

<sup>121</sup> Pres 3 sg *abhi-ninnāmeti*, caus of *abhi + nir* √NAM (to bend, bow), to bend or stretch out (acc), to direct (to-wards, dat, gen): CPD sv. Interestingly, the same passage in **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2) uses *abhininnāmeti* (“he directs (his mind)”) (D 2.95/1:81) = SD 8.10.

<sup>122</sup> In historical cases, such as the narrative of the two teachers, as given in **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26), the past tense used in reference to the late teacher Rāma (father of Uddaka) is very significant, as it states the fact he was already dead, while Āḷāra was still living: see M 26.15-17/1:163-167 & SD 1.11 Intro (4.2).

<sup>123</sup> M 111/3:25-29 = SD 56.4.

<sup>124</sup> Although Gunaratana rightly mentions the **Anupada S** (M 111) in his text, he cites this as “MN #52, Aṭṭhaka-nāgara Sutta” in his endnote. Surely just a insignificant typo.

virtue of a dhyana-factor; thus he [Sāriputta] attained arhathood in a fortnight.”<sup>125</sup> The translation “uninterruptedly” hardly fits the context here.

Furthermore, the Critical Pali Dictionary (CPD) defines *anupaṭipāṭi* as “regular order, succession.” So we can take *anupaṭipāṭiyā* as meaning, “in a regular order, successively, immediately after.” In fact, such an interpretation harmonizes with how the contemplative forest monks describe their own experiences of dhyana.<sup>126</sup>

Gunaratana, basing his arguments on the Pali texts, goes on to say of Sāriputta’s insight into the various progressive abodes (the dhyana and attainments) as follows:

Venerable Sāriputta knew them when they were present, when they arose and when they disappeared. He was fully mindful of it when any mental state was present. He was completely aware while he was going through these Jhānic states, even though he had not yet attained enlightenment. (Gunaratana 2007:12)

This is Gunaratana’s paraphrase of the Anupada Sutta passage which reads: *Tyāssa dhammā anupada,-vavatthitā honti. Tyāssa dhammā viditā uppajjanti, viditā upaṭṭhahanti, viditā abbhattham gacchanti*, which Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi translate as “These states [the dhyana and attainment factors]<sup>127</sup> were defined by him one by one (*anupada,vavatthitā*) as they occurred; known to him those states arose, known they were present, known they disappeared.” (M:ÑB 899; highlights added).

This translation seems to support Gunaratana’s view, but the translation is problematic, to say the least, due to the difficulty with the key phrase *anupada,vavatthitā*. CPD defines it as “individually set up or fixed” (alluding to the Commentary). We already have an idea of the meaning of *anupada* (see above). The word *vavatthita* means “fixed, arranged, appointed” (Childers’ DPL), or “entered on, arranged, fixed, determined, settled (M 3:25; DhSA 36)” (PED). From this, we can also safely accept the translation “defined,” as Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi have done. So far so good.

There is a problem, however, with the phrase “as they occurred,” which is Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi’s rendition of *anupada* in *anupada,vavatthitā honti*. This is reading too much into the Pali word or phrase, and this is not attested in any Commentarial gloss or any Pali dictionary. Most significantly, it can be safely said, this translation would not be accepted by the dhyana-attainers themselves. Let me propose a different translation of this key passage, from a more experiential angle, thus:

These states [the factors or nature of each dhyana and attainment] were established in him in succession (after they have occurred) (*anupada,vavatthitā*): it is known to him that those states arise; it is known to him that these states are present; it is known to him that these states disappear. (M 111.4/3:25) = SD 56.4

Notice what is not said here: it is *not* said that “he *knows* that those states arise; he *knows* that these states are present; he *knows* that these states disappear.” But it is in the present perfect, reflecting after the fact, outside of dhyana, “it is *known* to him...” There is a hint of a mystical experience here: the dhyana-attainer knows only through reviewing (*paccavekkhaṇa*) that these states arise, are present, and pass away. They are profoundly blissful, but they all change, too.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>125</sup> *Anupada,dhamma,vipassanan ti samāpatti,vasena vā jhān’āṅga,vasena vā anupaṭipāṭiyā dhamma,vipassanaṃ vipassati, evaṃ vipassanto addha,māsenā arahattaṃ patto* (MA 4:86).

<sup>126</sup> See eg Brahmavamsa 2006:99, 154.

<sup>127</sup> That is, “the initial application, sustained application, zest, joy, and oneness of mind; the contact, feeling, perception, volition, and the mind; the zeal, decision, energy, mindfulness, equanimity, and attention” (*vitakko ca vicāro ca pīti ca sukhañ ca citt’ekaggatā ca, phasso vedanā saññā cetanā cittam chando adhimokkha vīriyam sati upekkhā manasikāro*). These factors lessen progressively through the dhyanas up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> formless base.

<sup>128</sup> See **Dhyana** = SD 8.4 (6.0); **Bhāvanā** = SD 15.1 (8.5). This special ability is known as “mastering review” (*paccavekkhaṇa,vasī*): discerning the dhyana factors after emerging from it: see (**Samādhy-aṅga**) **Pañc’āṅgika S** (A 5.28.10/3:27) & SD 33.13 Intro (3) & **Bhāvanā** = SD 15.1 (8.6.2).

It is like an existential love affair: we are lost in the midst of its bliss. It is like listening to a beautiful piece of symphony or music: we neither think nor speak; we only listen and *feel*, we simply enjoy. Indeed, we can only really and fully enjoy something when it is uninterrupted or adulterated by words or thoughts. Dhyana, in other words, is a deepening silent stillness that is blissful beyond words and ideas. Only after the fact, do we take stock of what really has happened. We neither count nor define the blissful moments: we simply enjoy them, and celebrate them thereafter.

Even on a mundane level of deep inspiration, such as immediately after a profoundly blissfully focused moment, we feel infused with a great desire and power to express ourselves in music, art, poetry or writing, or simply solve some problem. However, we try to paint or pen this inspiration, to express it, there is quite a lot to do, but it seemed only a mere moment in our inspiration. Dhyana is deeper than this.

**6.3 WHAT IS MEANT BY A MEDITATOR “BECOMING ONE WITH THE OBJECT.”** Gunaratana, following the commentarial tradition, especially the Visuddhi,magga, gives some very useful advice on how to focus on our meditation object.<sup>129</sup> He reminds us that “the meditator does not become one with the object,” adding that

When we attain any Jhāna, we don’t become one with the meditation object. Meditation objects are like launching pads. We use them to train the mind to gain right concentration, which, as we have seen already, is one-pointedness of mind, not one-pointedness of the meditation object. We use an object to start the meditation practice. Then, as the mind gets subtler and the mind becomes sharper, it leaves the meditation object behind and remembers the image of the object. We then focus the mind on the memorized image. As the hindrances are suppressed, the memorized image is replaced with a bright light. The mind shifts its focus to the bright light. From that point onward the object of the mind is this bright light. (Gunaratana 2007:8)

This is, in fact, a summary of excerpts from Buddhaghosa’s chapter 4 of his Visuddhi,magga (Vism 119-169). In other words, it is a scholastic note, which is understandable, as Gunaratana is an accomplished scholar of meditation, as attested by his PhD dissertation, *A Critical Analysis of the Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation* (Washington, DC: American University, 1980). His approach is theoretical, based mostly on the Visuddhi,magga. On a scholarly level, Gunaratana’s theories are perfectly acceptable, as they are his own interpretations of the texts. However, on an experiential level of meditation, the spiritual texts often take on a new dimension of meaning. It is like reading great poetry: we know syntactically (from the words and grammar) what the text says, but semantically and spiritually, we need some level of meditative stillness and clarity, as it were, to add the living flesh and blood to the dry bones of theory and textuality.

Let us return to our examination of the above passage. The state “to become one with the object” is a common expression that meditation teachers use as a figure for fully focussing on the meditation object, usually the breath. The way I teach breath meditation to beginners is to instruct them to first count their breaths, if it helps.<sup>130</sup> Beginners are often taught to start off with some sort of mental verbalization (like watching the breath as “in” and “out”). As we progress, we would naturally find the verbalization becoming a “distraction,” that is “gross” (*olarika*) [6.2.1]. This is when we simply watch the breath directly, *knowing* that it is coming in, *knowing* that it is going out, and so on. Often, it is this stage that is meant by “becoming one with the breath.”<sup>131</sup>

A rule of thumb in meditation is never to quarrel with a meditation teacher. He is like a cook who has his own way of cooking and specializes in a particular type of dish. At first, depending on our taste, we should faithfully follow the teacher’s meditation instructions, and questioning him as appropriate. If you

<sup>129</sup> See eg Vism ch 4/119-169, which elaborates on what is quoted here.

<sup>130</sup> Counting itself is not a meditation, but help to clear away initial distractions. Even then, it might not work for some people. See Vism 8.145-243/266-293. For a comprehensive contemporary exposition by Ven Nauyane Ariyadhamma Mahathera, see [http://www.vipassana.com/meditation/anapanasati\\_meditation\\_on\\_breathing.php](http://www.vipassana.com/meditation/anapanasati_meditation_on_breathing.php).

<sup>131</sup> See **Samadhi** (SD 33.1a) on “directed meditation,” SD 33.1a(2.1.2), and “undirected meditation,” SD 33.1a(2.1.3). See also §6.4.2-3.

feel a good sense of inner stillness in our meditation, it means that we are making some progress.<sup>132</sup> Then we should keep up our personal practice with ever-present joy.

#### 6.4 DO THE HINDRANCES RETURN IMMEDIATELY AFTER DHYANA?

**6.4.1 Coming out of dhyana.** Gunaratana often quotes the suttas to support his views and arguments regarding dhyana. These suttas make useful study for anyone interested in teachings related to meditation. However, it is possible that some of his views about dhyana are based on his personal meditation experiences rather than sutta teachings. For example, this is how he describes when we emerge from dhyana:

Coming out of Jhāna means that we are no longer in Jhāna. All the hindrances that we have overcome with great difficulty will rush back to the mind and the mind will once again be cluttered with hindrances. We will lose clarity, purity, concentration, light, and mindfulness. If you want to come out of Jhāna to practice Vipassanā, then you should not waste your valuable time to attain it at all. You should use that time to practice Vipassanā from the beginning.

(Gunaratana 2007:4; emphasis added)

Gunaratana then quotes **the Pothapāda Sutta** (D 9) passages on the “nine progressive abodes or abidings” (*nava anupubba, vihāra*),<sup>133</sup> of which I have quoted only the passage on **the first dhyana**, as it is representative of the rest:

“Quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome mental states, the monk enters and dwells in the **first dhyana**, accompanied by initial application and sustained application, accompanied by zest and joy, born of solitude.

And if he has any previous sense-desires, it disappears.

At that time there arises a subtle but true perception of zest and joy born of seclusion, and he becomes conscious of this zest and joy.

Thus it is through training that a state of consciousness<sup>134</sup> arises, and through training a state of consciousness passes away.

This is the training,” said the Blessed One. (D 9.10c/1:182 = D 2:73) = SD 7.14

What does this passage really say? It defines the first dhyana, adding that all sense-desires have disappeared. We are conscious of the attending joy (a merely passive but profoundly blissful awareness). It also says that our states of consciousness arise and fall dependent on conditions. Implicitly, it is saying that the dhyanas is a great way to purify our consciousness. There is *no* mention of cultivating insight while we are *in* dhyana. There is also *no* mention that the hindrances “flooding” the mind immediately after emerging from dhyana—this is surely *not* dhyana.

The suttas, in fact, speak of dhyana as a profoundly blissful state of calm and clarity, both during and after the state, that is, the mental focus does *not* disappear so quickly, that the hindrances do not come “flooding” back once we emerge from dhyana. Indeed, **the Pabbateyya Gavī Sutta** (A 9.35) clearly states this: “Whenever a monk attains to such an attainment [a form dhyana or a formless attainment], or emerges (*vuṭṭhāti*) from it, his mind is pliable and malleable.”<sup>135</sup> So, we can safely say that the mind that has just emerged from dhyana is still very calm and blissfully focussed with a potential for great good.

<sup>132</sup> A good meditation teacher is our “spiritual friend” (*kalyāṇa mitta*). On the qualities desirable in a spiritual friend, see **Spiritual friendship** = SD 8.1. On the parable of the cook, see **Sūda S** (S47.8/5:149-152) = SD 28.15.

<sup>133</sup> Sometimes loosely called “the 9 dhyanas,” ie the 4 form dhyanas (*rūpa jhāna*), the 4 formless dhyanas (*arūpa jhāna*), and the cessation of perception and feeling (*saññā, vedayita, nirodha* or *nirodha, samāpatti*) (D 3:265, 290; A 9.33/4:410-414). See **Tevijja S** (D 13) @ SD 1.8 Intro (2.2) (3) n; also **Raho, gata S** (S 36.11/4:216-218) = SD 33.6.

<sup>134</sup> “A state of consciousness,” *ekā sannā*, lit “one perception.” TW Rhys Davids: “*Saññā* which is used in a sense covering both ‘idea’ and ‘consciousness.’” (D:RD 1:248). This applies to §§10-16. Comy glosses *ekā saññā* as “a certain perception” (*ekaccā saññā*, DA 2:371). Subcomy: “This is to show that *saññā* arises and passes with a cause” (*saññāya sa, hetukaṃ uppāda, nirodham dīpetun ti*, DA 1:478).

<sup>135</sup> *Yato kho bhikkhave bhikkhu taṃ tad eva samāpattiṃ samāpajjati’pi vuṭṭhāti pi.*

Furthermore, Buddhaghosa, explaining the third dhyana in his **Visuddhi,magga**, sums up:

Now, regarding (the phrase), “he feels joy with the body”: here, although in one who is engrossed in the third dhyana, there is no concern for feeling joy (*sukha*), nevertheless he would feel the joy associated with his mental body (*nāma,kāya*). After emerging from the dhyana, he would also feel joy, since his physical body (*rūpa,kāya*) would have been touched [affected] by the profoundly subtle matter arising from that joy associated with the mental body.<sup>136</sup> As such, it is to point this out that the words “he feels joy with the body” are said. (Vism 4.175/163)

**6.4.2 Directing the mind to cultivate insight. The Pabbateyya Gāvī Sutta** (A 9.35) speaks of two kinds of meditation: a “directed” meditation (*paṇidhāya bhāvanā*) and an “undirected” meditation (*apaṇidhāya bhāvanā*),<sup>137</sup> that is, knowing when to direct the mind to a suitable object, or to simply leave it to uninterruptedly build itself up into focus.<sup>138</sup> When the mind is badly distracted, we should *direct* it to some “inspiring sign,” usually one of the six recollections<sup>139</sup> or loving kindness meditation.<sup>140</sup>

When the mind is quite stable, we should leave it as it is to build uninterruptedly into samadhi and dhyana—and it is useful to know when and how to do this.<sup>141</sup> The Pabbateyya Gāvī Sutta (A 9.35) describes an undirected cultivation of dhyana in these words: “He enjoys<sup>142</sup> the sign, cultivates it, continuously works on it, focusses on it, so that it is well focussed.”<sup>143</sup> This is a subtle mental effort of non-effort.

There are discourses that show how dhyana can lead to liberating insight. The method comprises two stages: first, one gets into dhyana; then, one emerges from it and reflects on the three characteristics—that the state is impermanent, suffering and not-self—or something similar. Of these two stages, **the Atthaka-nāgara Sutta** (M 52) says:

Here, householder, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a monk attains to and dwells in **the first dhyana** that is accompanied by initial application and sustained application, with zest and joy born of solitude.

He considers and understands thus: “This first dhyana is conditioned and volitionally formed.<sup>144</sup> *Whatever is conditioned and volitionally formed is impermanent, subject to ending.*”

If he is steady in that, he reaches the destruction of the influxes.<sup>145</sup> If he does not reach the destruction of influxes because of the desire in dharmas [states], the delight in dharmas,<sup>146</sup> then with

<sup>136</sup> For consciousness-born materiality, see Vism 20.30-34/615 f.

<sup>137</sup> A 9.35/4:418-422 = SD 24.3. See also **Samadhi** = SD 33.1a (2.1).

<sup>138</sup> On directed cultivation, see further **Bhikkhuṇī Vāsaka S** (S 47.10/5:154-157) = SD 24.2 Intro (1.2). On satipatthana with dhyana, see **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10) = SD 13.1 (4.3b).

<sup>139</sup> **Bhikkhuṇī Vāsaka Sutta** (S 47.10), advises that when “there arises in him, based on the body, either a fever in the body or sluggishness in the mind, or the mind is distracted outwardly,” is instructed on how to *direct the mind* to an inspiring meditation, such as one of the 6 recollections (S 47.10/5:154-156) = SD 24.2, also called 6 bases of recollection (*cha anussati-t,thāna*), ie, on (1) the Buddha, (2) the Dharma, (3) the Sangha, (4) moral virtue, (5) charity, and (6) the devas. See **Sambādh’okāsa S** (A 6.26/3:314 f) = SD 15.6.

<sup>140</sup> On the cultivation of lovingkindness (*mettā bhāvanā*), see **Karaṇīya Metta S** (Khp 9 = Sn 1.8) = SD 38.3.

<sup>141</sup> See **Pabbateyya Gāvī S** (A 9.35/4:418-422) = SD 24.3.

<sup>142</sup> *Āsevati*, which has a broad sense of “associating,” thus “to visit, frequent; practise; follow (eg *maggam*); repeat, develop; cultivate; enjoy; often used with *bhaveti* and *bahulī, karoti* (CPD). I render *asevati* here as “he enjoys” as it vitally involves *joy* for the meditation to succeed.

<sup>143</sup> *So taṃ nimittaṃ āsevati bhāveti bahulī, karoti svādhiṭṭhitam adhiṭṭhāti.*

<sup>144</sup> *Abhisankhatam abhisāñcetiyaṃ*. These two terms are stock indicating a conditioned state in which volition (*cetanā*) is the most important conditioning factor.

<sup>145</sup> The term *āsava* (lit “inflow, outflow”) comes from *ā-savati* “flows towards” (i.e. either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as “taints” (“deadly taints,” RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists four *āsava*: the influx of (1) sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) wrong views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*) (D 16.2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These four are also known as “floods”

the destruction of the five lower fetters,<sup>147</sup> he becomes one who would reappear spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes) and there attain final nirvana without ever returning from that world.

(M 52.4/1:351) = SD 41.2<sup>148</sup>

The phrase, “He considers this and understands it” (*so iti paṭisañcikkhati...pajānāti*) is crucial and should be properly understood in its context here. These are *discursive thoughts* (thinking and reasoning), and certainly uncharacteristic of a dhyana. As such, *it goes without saying* that this is an extra-dhyana process. Such mentation is done outside of dhyana.

**The Mahā Māluṅkya Sutta** (M 64), using almost the same words as the Aṭṭhaka, nāgara Sutta, shows a slightly different manner of self-liberation (in this case, leading directly to non-return, even arhathood):

Whatever exists by way of form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness, he sees those states as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour, as a barb, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien, as disintegrating, as void, as not self.<sup>149</sup> He turns his mind away from those states<sup>150</sup> and directs it to the deathless element [nirvana], thus:

“This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, the stilling of all formations, the letting go of all acquisitions [attachments], the destruction of craving, dispassion [letting go of craving], cessation (of suffering), nirvana.”<sup>151</sup>

(M 64.9/1:435 f)

**The Dīgha, jānu Sutta** (A 8.54) even encourages the laity to practise direct cultivation for the arising of wisdom, thus:

What is the accomplishment of wisdom (*paññā, sampadā*)?

Here, Vyagghapajja, the son of family is wise, possesses wisdom directed to [noting] the rising and falling away (of phenomena) that is noble and penetrative, leading to the complete destruction of suffering.

This, Vyagghapajja, is called the accomplishment of wisdom. (A 8.54.15/4:285) = SD 5.10

(*ogha*) and “yokes” (*yoga*). The list of three influxes (omitting the influx of views) is probably older and is found more frequently in the Suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these *āsavas* is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict: āsava.

<sup>146</sup> “Desire...delight in dharmas” (*dhamma, rāga dhamma, nandī*), as at **Aṭṭhaka, nāgara S** (M 52.4/1:350), where Comy explains that these 2 terms refer to the desire and lust (*chanda-rāga*), here meaning simply “attachment,” with respect to calm and insight. If one is able to let go of all attachment to calm and insight, one becomes an arhat. If one cannot discard them then one becomes a non-returner and is reborn in the Pure Abodes (MA 3:14). *Dhamma* here clearly does not mean “teaching” or “Teaching,” but meditative states; as such, it is best rendered as “dharma.”

<sup>147</sup> **The 10 fetters** are: (1) Personality view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), (2) persistent doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rules and rites (*sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma, rāga*), (5) repulsion (*paṭigha*), (6) greed for form existence (*rūpa, rāga*), (7) greed for formless existence (*arūpa, rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61, A 10.13/5:17; Vbh 377). In some places, no 5 (*paṭigha*) is replaced by illwill (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are **the lower fetters** (*oram, bhāgiya*), and the rest, **the higher fetters** (*uddham, bhāgiya*). They are called “fetters” (*samyojana*) because they shackle one to the samsaric world of negative habits and suffering.

<sup>148</sup> See **Bhāvanā** = SD 15.1 (10.3), “Applying insight to dhyana.”

<sup>149</sup> Like the prec **Aṭṭhaka, nāgara S** passage, this passage shows the cultivation of insight (*vipassanā*) on the basis of calm (*samatha*), using dhyana on which the insight-practice is based as the object of insight. The terms “impermanent” (*aniccato*) and “disintegrating” (*palokato*) here show the characteristic of impermanence; three terms—“alien” (*parato*), “void” (*suññato*), and “not self” (*anattato*)—show the characteristic of not-self; the remaining 6 terms—*dukkhato, rogato, gaṇḍato, sallato, aghato, ābādhato*—show the characteristic of suffering (MA 3:146).

<sup>150</sup> Comy: “He turns his mind away from those states” (*so tehi dhammehi cittaṃ paṭivāpeti*) from the 5 aggregates included in the dhyana, which he has seen to be marked with the 3 characteristics” (MA 3:146).

<sup>151</sup> The “deathless element” (*nibbāna, dhātu*) is nirvana. First, “he directs his mind to” it with the insight consciousness, having heard it praised and described as being “peaceful, sublime,” etc. Then, with the supramundane path, “he directs his mind to it” by making it an object and penetrating it as the peaceful, the sublime, etc. (MA 3:146)

**6.4.3 Directing the mind to cultivate superknowledge.** Now, the suttas do have passages on how we should direct our minds so that we can cultivate the various superpowers. This passage on the superknowledges taken from **the Pabbateyya Gavī Sutta** (A 9.35), a key discourse on dhyana training, is instructive:

Whenever a monk attains to such an attainment [a form dhyana or formless attainment], or emerges from it, his mind is pliable and malleable.

With a mind that is pliable and malleable, boundless samadhi is well developed.

With a well-developed boundless samadhi, whatever higher knowledge that should be realized that he directs his mind to, he realizes it.<sup>152</sup>

—He gains the ability to witness [to personally experience] any aspect therein, *whenever the conditions are right* [whenever the occasion arises].<sup>153</sup> (A 9.35.3/4:421) = SD 24.3

Note that the sutta says that it is “with a well-developed boundless samadhi” (*appamāṇo samādhi hoti subhāvito*) that we “direct the mind to, realizes” a superknowledge. The phrase, “whenever the conditions are right” (*tatra tatr’eva...sati sati āyatane*) is significant in telling us that we have to be very mindful. Obviously, this refers to our mental state *after* dhyana rather than within dhyana (when the mind is fully focussed). This whole stock phrase often introduces the attainment of the superknowledges (*abhiññā*). The above passage (and similar passages elsewhere) clearly show that we emerge from dhyana to cultivate the superknowledges.

**6.4.4 Our minds are still clear on emerging from dhyana.** Unlike Gunaratana, who says that we can and must work on insight while *in* dhyana, **Brahmavamso** explains how we *emerge* from dhyana in a very different manner:

Even though there is no comprehension within any jhāna, one is certainly not in a trance. One’s mindfulness is greatly increased to a level of sharpness that is truly incredible. One is immensely aware. Only mindfulness doesn’t move. It is frozen. And the stillness of the superpower mindfulness, the perfect one-pointedness of awareness, makes the jhāna experience completely different from anything one has known before. This is not unconsciousness. It is non-dual consciousness. All it can know is one thing, and that is timeless bliss that doesn’t move.

Afterward, when one has emerged from the jhāna, such consummate one-pointedness of consciousness falls apart. With the weakening of one-pointedness, perspective reemerges, and the mind has the ability to move again. The mind has regained the space needed to compare and comprehend. Ordinary consciousness has returned.

Having just emerged from a jhāna, it is the usual practice to look back at what has happened and review the jhāna experience. The jhānas are such powerful events that they leave an indelible record in one’s memory store. In fact, one will never forget them as long as one lives. They are easy to recall with perfect retention. One comprehends the details of what happened in the jhāna,

<sup>152</sup> A 9.35.2bc/4:419-421 = SD 24.3. *So appamāṇena samādhinā subhāvitena, yassa yassa abhiññā, sacchikaraṇīyassa, dhammassa cittaṃ abhininnāmeti, abhiññā, sacchikiriyāya.*

<sup>153</sup> *Tatra tatr’eva sakkhi, bhābataṃ pāpuṇāti sati sati āyatane.* This is a common stock phrase that introduces the attainment of the superknowledges (*abhiññā*): **Mahā Vaccha, gotta S** (M 73.19/1:494 = SD 27.4); **Kāya, gata, sati S** (M 119.29 f/3:96 f = SD 12.21); **Paṇsu, dhovaka S** (A 3.100a.4/1:255 = SD 19.11a); **Upakkilesa S** (A 5.23/3:16-19); **Dutiya Iddhi, pāda S** (A 5.68/3:82 f); **Sakkhi, bhābba S** (A 6.71/3:426 f); **Gāvī Upamā S** (A 9.35/4:421 f). It refers to the preliminary conditions (*āyatana*) for the 6 superknowledges (*abhiññā*) which follow later. The preliminary condition for the first 5 knowledges (the mundane ones) is the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana; for the 5<sup>th</sup> (the only supramundane one), it is insight. See SD 12.21 Intro (6).

and one knows which of the jhānas it was. Moreover, *data obtained from reviewing a jhāna form the basis of the insight that leads to enlightenment.* (2006:153 f)<sup>154</sup>

It's hard to imagine how when a dhyana experience ends, as Gunaratana says, we find ourselves falling off a precipice right into the maws of mental fetters. It is difficult to envision how a profoundly focused mind could immediately, as it were, become unfocussed. Imagine we have just spent some blissful time in samadhi in a beautiful remote mountain retreat. We emerge from it into the natural peace of the cool grass, swaying trees, bubbling stream, calm rocks, living mosses, and nipping breeze. We are still in a profoundly still and blissful state of mind, capable of clear focus. This is the time when we effectively cultivate insight: to know that even the solid rock will crumble, even the lively flower will fade away, the skies will be no more, and our consciousness recycles itself closer to liberation.

All this is of course utterly experiential, and discussing an experiential issue such as this is like a leisurely chat amongst regular tea-drinkers. Each of them likes a certain blend of tea, brewed in a certain way. It is difficult to say whose tea tastes better. It is not helpful at all to argue or debate over such preferences. Instead, we should taste the tea for ourselves. When we have taken enough tea over time, we would have a good idea which tea we love best.

## 6.5 WHAT HAPPENS DURING DHYANA?

**6.5.1 The natural progress of the spiritual life.** Gunaratana, having stated and reiterated that, in a dhyana state, the meditator “sees and knows what is going on in his mind,” and “it is virtually impossible to find evidence in the Suttas that one should come out of Jhāna to practice Vipassanā” (2007:1), then quotes the first part of **the Cetanākaraṇīya Sutta** (A 11.2) (2007:6 f). The Sutta quoted is abridged here:

For the morally virtuous, there is no need of the intention [an act of will],  
“May *freedom from remorse* arise in me!” (*avippaṭisāro me uppajjatū ti*).

It is the nature of things that this will happen.

For the one free of remorse, there is no need of the intention,  
“May *gladness* arise in me!” (*pāmojjaṃ me uppajjatū ti*)...

For the one with gladness, there is no need of the intention,  
“May *zest* arise in me!” (*pīti me uppajjatū ti*)...

For the zestful, there is no need of the intention,  
“May my body be *tranquil*!” (*kāyo me passambhatū ti*)...

For the one tranquil in body, there is no need of the intention,  
“May I feel *joy*!” (*sukhaṃ vediyāmi ti*)

For the happy, there is no need of the intention,  
“May my mind *concentrate*!” (*cittaṃ me samādhiyatū ti*)

For the concentrated, there is no need of the intention,  
“May I *know and see according to reality*!” (*yathā, bhūtaṃ jānāmi passāmi ti*)

For the one who knows and sees according to reality, there is no need of the intention,  
“May I feel *revulsion*!” (*nibbindāmi ti*)

For the revulsed, there is no need of the intention,  
“May I *let go (of defilements)* [be free from passions]!” (*virajjāmi ti*)

For the one who has let go (of defilements) [the dispassionate], there is no need of the intention,  
“May I realize *the knowledge and vision of liberation*!”

It is the nature of things that this will happen. (A 11.2/5:312 f) = SD 33.3b (abridged)

This teaching is what might be called **the “full nibbidā (revulsion) formula,”** so called because “revulsion” (*nibbidā*) is the high-point reached by the cultivation of moral virtue, and also the turning-point towards sainthood and awakening. *Nibbidā* is the first term in the better-known shorter “*nibbidā* formula,”

<sup>154</sup> See also Richard Shankman, *The Experience of Samadhi: An in-depth exploration of Buddhist meditation*, Shambhala, 2008.

which describes the spiritual turning-point to sainthood: *nibbidā* (revulsion), *virāga* (dispassion), *vimutti* (liberation) and *nibbāna* (nirvana), as in this stock passage:

...it leads to utter revulsion, to dispassion, to ending (of suffering), to peace [stilling], to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to nirvana.

*etaṃ ekanta,nibbidāya virāgāya nirodhāya upasamāya abhismāya abhiññāya sambodhāya nibbānāya samvattanti.* (D 1:189; S 5:82, 179, 255, 361; A 3:83, 4:143, 5:216)<sup>155</sup>

Teachings like this remind us that meditation progress cannot be planned or forced. We can only create the right conditions for our practice, such as living a morally virtuous life, and letting the mind naturally focus. It is like archery: we must properly hold the bow and carefully aim the arrow at the target, judging its distance, wind direction and strength, etc, and then let the arrow go. The arrow then finds its own way to the target or bull's eye.<sup>156</sup>

**6.5.2 The ineffability of dhyana.** From a close study of sutta passages on dhyana and the teachings of those familiar with dhyana, we know that dhyana is a state free of any thought-process or word-based activity, a state so profoundly blissful that it would naturally preclude even knowing. In other words, it is not an intellectual process, but an utterly *affektive* state. We cannot *know* dhyana; we can only *feel* it.

This vital point is highlighted in **the Cetanā'karaṇīya Sutta** (A 11.2) [6.5.1]. After quoting this Sutta, Gunaratana makes this important note:

It is stated here in unambiguous terms that the concentrated mind sees things as they really are without any thinking. It says specifically, "For one who knows and sees things as they really are there is no need for thought."

Thinking is the work of logic, reason, and philosophy with words, ideas and concepts. Long before he attains samādhi the meditator has already left behind all discursive thought with its logic, reasoning, investigation and philosophizing with words concepts and ideas. (2007:7)

**Brahmavamso** summarizes the characteristics or landmarks of all dhyanas as follows:

- (1) There is no possibility of thought.
- (2) No decision-making process is available.
- (3) There is no perception of time.
- (4) Consciousness is non-dual, making comprehension inaccessible.
- (5) Yet one is very, very aware, but only of bliss that doesn't move.
- (6) The five senses are fully shut off, and only the sixth sense, mind, is in operation. (2006:155)

From all these characteristics, it is clear that a dhyana is utterly *affektive* in nature: we only *feel* it without knowing it, that is, without thought or words. This is not difficult to imagine even if we have never tasted dhyana before. Recall a time when you were truly happy, such as winning a special prize, or a extraordinarily joyful event. If you were asked, "How do you feel?" you can only perhaps say, "I don't know... it's just wonderful!"

## 7 Significance of dhyana

**7.1 THE ROLE OF DHYANA.**<sup>157</sup> Not all scholars agree on the connection between dhyana and early Buddhism. Some scholars have argued that dhyanas are a brahminical or yogic technique which was adopted by the Buddhists, and therefore, cannot be considered as a practice leading to liberation. Others

<sup>155</sup> This is also known as the 7 criteris of the true Dharma-Vinaya. See *Nibbidā* = SD 20.1. For other connections, see PED: *nibbidā*.

<sup>156</sup> See the archer simile which recurs 8 times in (*Āsava-k,khaya*) *Jhāna S* (A 9.36.2/4:423) = SD 33.8.

<sup>157</sup> This section is mainly inspired by Keren Arbel's conference paper, "Buddhist or Not? Thinking Anew the Role of the Jhānas in the Path of Awakening" (2008).

have argued that even though the Buddha's own awakening story includes dhyanas—and, as such, they are Buddhist—still, it is possible to reach liberation without attaining them.

Either way—whether scholars agree that dhyana is Buddhist or not—they tend to agree that dhyana is not liberative in itself, but is merely a concentration exercise (*samādhi*) or a mental absorption in a specific object (*samatha*), a meditation practice which is diametrically opposed to the practice of *vipassanā*, which is uniquely “Buddhist.”

**Keren Arbel**, in her paper, “Buddhist or Not? Thinking anew the role of the *jhānas* in the path of awakening” (2008) [4], argues against these assumptions, asserting that dhyana was only a borrowed *term*, not a borrowed meditation technique that was integrated into Buddhism. She further suggests that dhyana is “a description of a mind in the process of awakening; the fruit and a further foundation for the practice, and not a meditative technique” (2008:1).

According to Arbel, dhyanas are uniquely Buddhist, “since they embody a distinct Buddhist view on the path of awakening; a view that opposed and rejected a common perception in the various *śramaṇa* traditions that liberation is gained through pain, not pleasure” (id). She points to important passages in the *Nikāyas* that, firstly, emphasize the pivotal role of the first dhyana in the Buddha's own awakening story, and secondly, debunking the notion that the dhyanas are mere concentration exercises. In fact, **Arbel** hypothesizes that

only by entering the first *jhāna*, one actualizes internally the “middle path.” The first *jhāna* is a mental actualization of a midpoint between asceticism and indulgence, between sensual pleasure and bodily pain. It seems that only when experiencing pleasure and rapture apart from sensual pleasures and unwholesome states, one can abandon internally, the desire for this coarse pleasure. ... However, this is only an initial state; a state where a very coarse attachment is abandoned. For attaining awakening, one has to abandon any attachment, even to these refined and wholesome states. (2008:13)

Even though the term *jhāna* (Skt *dhyāna*) has been adopted from a common religious vocabulary, it was, nevertheless, redefined by the Buddha to refer to the Buddhist understanding of the spiritual path and the awakening process. In other words, the Buddha is the first person to experience dhyana *with right view*, and so to awaken himself [5]. In this sense, the Buddha is the first to discover dhyana. Out of the dhyanic calm and clarity, the Buddha is able to directly see the true nature of reality, and confirm this as the same wisdom of past Buddhas. As such, our Buddha is the first to discover dhyana in his own dispensation, in which we are very fortunate to live and is still able to learn from and practice to gain the same liberation as the Buddha himself has done.

**7.2 WRITING ABOUT A SUNSET.** The subject of meditation can have strange effects on people who do not meditate, or do not meditate enough, or are not Buddhist, but write about it. The more academically qualified they are, especially when they are published, the more people are likely to read and believe them, rightly or wrongly, or at least are inclined to discuss such views. Of course, anyone can write about meditation or Buddhism, but the Buddhists (both as academics and as practitioners) have to industriously and intuitively respond to any wrong notion or misrepresentation about them.

**Paul Griffiths**,<sup>158</sup> the Warren professor of Catholic Thought at Duke University, USA, for example, is one of those who work with the notion that *samatha* and *vipassanā* are actually forms of meditation,

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<sup>158</sup> **Paul J Griffiths** (b 1955) received a doctoral degree in Buddhist Studies in 1983 from the Univ of Wisconsin-Madison, and his early works established him as one of the most incisive interpreters of *Yogācāra* Buddhist philosophy. His works on Buddhism incl *On Being Mindless* (Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 1991) and *On Being Buddha* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994). After converting from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism, and accepting the Schmitt Chair of Catholic Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, he largely gave up his work in Buddhist Studies. Another conversion was that of well known scholar of Mahayana Buddhism, **Paul Williams** (b 1950), Professor in Indian Religions at the University of Bristol, England, and director for the University's Centre for Buddhist Studies. He received his DPhil in Buddhist Philosophy at Wadham College, Univ of Oxford, 1978. His main research interests

rather than regarding them as integral aspects of the same practice. He claims that “*samatha* meditation” has a different aim from that of “*vipassanā* meditation.”<sup>159</sup> He thinks that the attempt to reconcile the two” methods” of meditation and to integrate them into a single process of liberation is especially difficult.<sup>160</sup> **Edward Crangle**, too, mentions that *vipassanā* is “the Buddha’s exclusive and original discovery.” He further asserts that it is what distinguishes the Buddha’s course of practice from those of other meditative schools.<sup>161</sup>

All this becomes more complicated when the Buddhists themselves try to keep up with the academics.<sup>162</sup> Two good examples of this are found in the writings of such Sinhalese scholar-monks, representative of the Theravāda tradition, that is, Ven Dr Walpola Rāhula and Ven Dr Henepola Gunaratna.<sup>163</sup> Rāhula, for example, clearly states that “all these mystic states, according to the Buddha have nothing to do with Reality, Truth, Nirvana. This form of meditation existed before the Buddha. Hence it is not purely Buddhist...”!<sup>164</sup> Most modern scholars and informed Buddhists would beg to differ as Buddhism did not arise in a social vacuum. [4.1; 4.4.1]

One of the real and inherent problems of writing about meditation from an academic viewpoint is that we are trying to describe what is experiential in discursive terms. A safe way to write about meditation would be to do so *descriptively* with generous imageries. Even then, if we have not tasted the bliss and calm of dhyana, but at least some level of inner stillness (or even an *emic*<sup>165</sup> understanding of Buddhism

were Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy, Prasangika Madhyamaka and virtue ethics. Williams was a Buddhist himself for many years but had since converted to Roman Catholicism. In his book, *The Unexpected Way: On converting from Buddhism to Catholicism* (London: T & T Clark), Williams challenges Mahayana Buddhism with the question, “Why there is something rather than nothing?” (2002:28). Apparently, being a professional scholar of Mahayana could be a factor, even a bridge, in his conversion to Catholicism (unlike if say he were a serious Buddhist meditator, and all this worth investigating. Of course, we cannot rule out one’s apprehension with a not-so-lucrative specialist field (like Buddhist studies) and the pecuniary and social advantages of turning to an affluent and dominant religion with its well-established educational institutions. Then, there is the spectre of family pressure should not be left out, too. All said, one might add that learning Christianity or Catholicism from a Buddhist specialist on the Bible is much rarer than learning Buddhism from a non-Buddhist. Could a Bodhi tree grow on barren ground?

<sup>159</sup> Quoted by Keren Arbel 2008:2.

<sup>160</sup> Paul Griffiths, *On Being Mindless*, Albany, NY: State Univ of New York Press, 1994:19.

<sup>161</sup> **Edward Fitzpatrick Crangle**, *The Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices*, Wiesbaden, 1994:272; however, he also notes that “[r]ather than two distinct styles of meditation, the *suttas* suggest two aspects of a single contemplative practice” (260) & “Nonetheless, the distinction between the practice of calm (*samatha*) and the practice of insight (*vipassanā*) is not explicit in the *Pāli Suttas*” (264). Crangle, in his email dated 10 June 2010, explains: “...I believe that a rational understanding of the Buddhist metaphysic provides essential programming of one’s dhyana to produce a degree of intuitive insight. Having gained a measure of intuitive insight, the meditator is able to revise his/her rational understanding, to some degree. This revision, in turn, reprogrammes one’s subsequent dhyana to produce deeper degrees of intuitive insight... until understanding, intuitive insight and release are all perfected. | In this ‘indirect’ way, insight is applied in dhyana due to earlier programming of the mind. At the same time, discursion is absent in dhyana itself.” See also L Schmithausen, “On some aspects of descriptions or theories of ‘Liberating insight’ and enlightenment in early Buddhism,” Wiesbaden, 1981.

<sup>162</sup> Eg Winston L King, *Theravāda Meditation: the Buddhist transformation of yoga*, University Park, 1980:viii.

<sup>163</sup> See H Gunaratana, *The Jhānas in Theravāda Buddhist Meditation*, Kandy, 1988:25.

<sup>164</sup> Walpola Rāhula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Chester Springs, PA, 1967:68 f. See further **Alagaddûpama S** (M 22) = SD 3.13 Intro (1.3).

<sup>165</sup> The terms **etic** and **emic** were originally coined by linguist Kenneth Pike (*Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Nature*, The Hague, 1967), and derived from the terms “phonetic” and “phonemic.” *Phonetic* accounts of language are based on the observer’s measurement of physical sound differences, while *phonemic* accounts are those based on speakers’ conscious or unconscious models of sound difference (*Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology*, 1986:92). In short, in translation work and academic studies, there should be a good balance between ‘**emic**’ meaning and ‘**etic**’ interpretation. **Niels Nielsen** makes this useful distinction: “The *emic* (inside) meaning of a religious tradition is a description of that tradition by its adherents using their own language and their own categories and systems of organization.... In practice, most investigators use *etic* (outside) interpretive categories devised within their scholarly disciplines in addition to emic categories.... Emic and etic approaches can be comple-

and meditation), how can its beauty flow from our finger-tips? Or worse, as Griffiths (while still a PhD candidate in Buddhist studies) points out, even a well known Buddhist scholar-monk could contradict himself when writing on meditation.<sup>166</sup>

## 8 Conclusion

Dhyana entails a profound state of mental concentration, which in turn forms the basis for wisdom. As such, the Buddha exhorts his followers, as recorded in the following texts, all called **Samādhi Sutta**, thus:<sup>167</sup>

Cultivate mental concentration, bhikkhus. A monk who has mental concentration understands things as they really are.<sup>168</sup> (S 22.5/3:13 f; 35.99/4:80; 56.1/5:414; cf A 5.27/3:24)

The same Sutta explains the expression “understands things as they really are” (*yathā, bhūtaṃ pajānāti*) as referring to the five aggregates, thus: “Such is form...feeling...perception...formations...consciousness; such is its passing away.”<sup>169</sup>

A clear mind can see forever, as it were. This eternal truth is the essence of our being, and reflects our spiritual potential for liberation. There is nothing we can really *talk* or *write* about a sunset or a clear moonless starry night sky: it is more rewarding for us to immerse ourselves in their profoundly blissful presence.

Even the best book or encyclopaedia on meditation is merely *about* meditation, maybe *about* dhyana; but it is never *meditation* itself. Meditation is an activity; it is about how we breathe, how we feel, how we are truly free. It is the most spiritual of human activities. It is to be done in the true spirit of being human, whose ability to know suffering spurs him on to seek its stilling. Meditation may be read, but never argued about; above all, it is to be done, and to be felt as the most intimate and revealing experience we can ever have. For, it is about what we really are, and what we can truly be—liberated beings.

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## Bibliography

Please see under **Samadhi** = SD 33.1a

## Reading

(1) Analayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The direct path to realization*, 2003: 74 f.

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mentary and mutually corrective.” (With John Y Fenton, in N Nielsen et al (eds), *Religions of the World*, NY, 1983:6; qu at Hoffman 1987:2)

<sup>166</sup> Griffiths, in his article “Concentration or insight: The problematic of Theravāda Buddhist meditation-theory,” notes: “Paravahera Vajirañāna Mahathera, in his exposition of the Visuddhimagga, reflects the confusion of his sources when he implicitly contradicts himself, saying at one point that samādhi-bhavanā is a necessary condition for attaining nibbāna, and denying this in another place (1962)” (1981:617): see P Vajirañāna, *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice*, Colombo, 1962:8, 343.

<sup>167</sup> S 22.5, 35.99, 56.1.

<sup>168</sup> *Samādhim bhikkhave bhāvētha. Samāhito bhikkhave bhikkhu yathā, bhūtaṃ pajānāti*. See DhsA 162.

<sup>169</sup> See **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22.14/2:301 f), **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10.38/1:61), (**Pañca-k, khandha**) **Samādhi S** (S 22.5/3:13f), (**Saḷāyatana**) **Samādhi S** (S 35.99/4:80). See also **Dasa, bala S 1** (S 12.21/2:27 f), **Dasa, bala S 2** (S 12.23/2:29-32), **Sīha S** (S 22.78/3:84-86), **Khemaka S** (S 22.89/ 3:126-132) and **Nāva S** (S 22.101/3:152-155). The origin and passing away of the aggregates are explained in **Paṭisallāna S** (S 22.6/3:15) by way of diachronic conditionality, and in **Upādāna Parivaṭṭa S** (S 22.56/3:58-61 = SD 3.7) & **Satta-ṭ, ṭhāna S** (S 22.57/3:61-65) by way of synchronic conditionality. See S:B 743 n58. [“Diachronic” here “across time,” ie over many, usu 3, lives; “synchronic means within one life-time itself.]

- (2) Keren Arbel. "Buddhist or Not?" Tel Aviv University, 8 April 2008. [Unpublished.] Conference paper:  
<http://www.tau.ac.il/humanities/eastasia/events.eng.html>,  
<http://kerenarbel.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/buddhist-or-not1.pdf>.
- (2) Brahmavamso, *The Jhānas*, 2003: 53 ff (ch 13).
- (3) Brahmavamso, "Bāhiya's Teaching: In the seen is just the seen." 2005a:5-7.
- (4) Brahmavamso, *Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond*, 2006:103 ff (ch 8), 127-130.
- (5) Rupert Gethin, *The Path to Awakening*, 2001:180-183.

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