

# WHAT YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW ABOUT JHĀNA & SAMĀDHI

**PUBLIC DRAFT**  
(10 FEB 2022)

*Do you wonder about the conflicting teachings on Buddhist meditation?*

*Are you uncertain if you should practice jhāna?*

*Have you tried to practice concentration and found it stressful?*

*Very readable, stimulating and supportive of practice.*

**Ajahn Sucitto**

*This is an invaluable contribution to the modern discussion among both practitioners and scholars concerning exactly what jhāna, samādhi and related terms mean. Confusion about these terms has been endemic in the Theravada tradition, probably for many centuries. Āyasmā Kumāra extracts the relevant passages of the earliest texts, the Buddha's discourses, and—with particular sensitivity to the semantics of the Pāli—argues that the original intent of these terms is quite different from how they came to be most widely understood in the Theravada tradition. The result is persuasive if not conclusive. This is a must-read for all practitioners and students of Buddhist meditation.*

**Bhikkhu Cintita Dinsmore**

*Deeply impressed, by the tone and quality of the analysis and encouragement to see for oneself. An important contribution to the discussion.*

**Ajahn Vajiro**

*An important piece of “Dhamma practice-based scholarship”, and a courageous one at that, given the current state of (mis)understanding and contestation among Theravādins.*

**Tan Thien Kittiko**

*I'm sure this book will help and influence many people's practice, especially monastics who feel compelled to develop jhāna. On the flip side, The ideas the writer is questioning are so entrenched in the Theravāda world-view that I have no doubt he will make more than a few enemies, be branded a heretic, tarred and feathered and chased out of town etc. etc.*

**B.Bhikkhu**

*I really like the book and find it highly important to get the message out to the public. Despite the somewhat technical topic, the style made it fun to read.*

**Ariyadhammika Bhikkhu**

*To me this is a 'God-sent' revelation. A 'thank you' is not enough. You have no idea how many books, articles and published and unpublished theses I ploughed through all these years, driven by this unsatisfied urge to get to the bottom of it all. Why? Because it affects my practice. Can you see and feel the sense of relief I have after reading the book?*

*I find this book an oasis of wisdom and inspiration for those of us trapped by the concepts of jhānas. I could hardly put it down, nodding my head and internally screaming out YES through practically every argument and suggestion put up.*

**Eugene Yong**

*This book has cleared up some things for me which I thought were strange, but didn't pursue them because I thought it was just me!*

**Low Mun-Syn**

*This wonderful work is a gem. It has helped to clear many of my doubts in meditation and has given me much confidence in the practice now. Inspiring!*

**Ng Lay Hoon**

*This book has clarified the practice by clarifying words that are used in different ways according to the context: the Suttas vs the Visuddhimagga. As the conclusions are backed by research with actual references to these texts and their translations, I feel more assured that it's not just an idea handed down culturally in the Burmese Buddhist environment.*

**Moushumi Ghosh**

**PUBLIC DRAFT**

**WHAT YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW ABOUT**

# **JHĀNA & SAMĀDHI**

*Kumāra Bhikkhu with Unseen Guidance*

DEDICATION

To my parents, teachers,  
and all who despite contradicting teachings  
have not given up striving for liberation.

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## Abbreviation and Referencing

- DN Dīgha Nikāya (Referencing follows *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications.)
- MN Majjhima Nikāya (Referencing follows MLDB.)
- SN Saṃyutta Nikāya (Referencing follows CDB.)
- AN Aṅguttara Nikāya (Referencing follows NDB.)
- Dhp Dhammapada
- Ud Udāna (Referencing follows Access to Insight ([www.accesstoinsight.org](http://www.accesstoinsight.org)))
- Iti Itivuttaka (Referencing follows Access to Insight ([www.accesstoinsight.org](http://www.accesstoinsight.org)))
- MLDB *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (an English translation of MN), trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications.
- CDB *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (an English translation of SN), trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications.
- NDB *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* (an English translation of AN), trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications.
- PED *Pāli-English Dictionary*, T. W. Rhys Davids & William Stede; Pāli Text Society
- CPED *Concise Pāli-English Dictionary (Second Edition, 1958)*, A. P. Buddhadatta Mahāthera
- Referencing for Visuddhimagga follows *The Path of Purification*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, Buddhist Publication Society.
- Note: If you use a scriptural reference different from those which the referencing follows in this book, you may not find the corresponding sutta using the referencing number provided. Nonetheless, it is probably just one or two suttas away.

# Preface

Can we cultivate towards liberation from dukkha<sup>1</sup> if we don't view samādhi correctly? I don't think so. Besides, as Micchatta Sutta (AN10.103) shows, **wrong view (micchā-diṭṭhi) leads to wrong liberation (micchā-vimutti)** and “Thus indeed owing to wrongness, there is failure, not success.”

In the world of spiritual cultivation, I've met many meditators who view *samādhi* in ways that don't lead to liberation and may even cause them suffering. Some of them have struggled with the practice and become frustrated. Some have even tensed up so badly that they simply have to quit. And some even worsened their psychological problems.

I feel the need to do something about the situation, more than just trying to highlight this matter to the relatively few who follow my teaching. So I started writing.

This book is meant for those who wish to clear up their doubts and confusion related to jhāna and samādhi. Specifically, they are those who

- want to practice meditation but are confused by conflicting views about jhāna and samādhi, and are looking for answers;
- have been practising meditation, but not “jhāna” as commonly understood now in orthodox Theravāda<sup>2</sup>, and so wonder if they may be missing something important or even necessary; and
- have been getting absorptions, yet find themselves not maturing spiritually, not freed from suffering, and have thus started to wonder.

Due to the nature of the subject, this book has some academic elements, and assumes that the reader is familiar with basic concepts and terms related to Buddhist meditation. Yet, it is not written for academics. It's written for Buddhist meditators in general—Theravādins in particular—who likely neither understand Pāli nor know the scriptures well.

Nonetheless, foreseeing that some readers may be familiar with Pāli and desire to see references in Pāli, I've sometimes included them. If you are unfamiliar with Pāli, you can ignore them and still be able to follow what I write.

This book is partly moved by an interest to compare my understanding and practice—primarily based on the teachings of Sayadaw U Tejaniya and, in some ways, Ajahn Chah—with the Suttas, being the set of texts containing the earliest Buddhist teaching in the Theravāda tradition. But eventually, this comparison extends to the teachings of other teachers: Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Ṭhānissaro, and others.

I make these comparisons with one fundamental assumption: **Accomplished Dhamma masters exist in the contemporary Buddhist world. Although they may not convey their teachings using the Suttas' terminology, they do teach the way to Awakening.** By clarifying seeming contradictions due to terminological differences, I connect their teachings with the Suttas.

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1 A difficult word to translate into English satisfactorily. Possible choices are unhappiness, stress, suffering, pain, dis-ease, unsatisfactoriness, oppressiveness.

2 By “orthodox Theravāda” I mean the form of Buddhism faithful to the post-canonical Theravādin texts, largely consisting of commentaries written in the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards. In this form of Buddhism, these texts are highly esteemed and regarded as providing correct interpretations of the Suttas. Please bear this in mind when you meet this term in this book.

In this book, I

1. differentiate two kinds of jhāna, only one of which is necessary for liberation.
2. review existing English translations of key Pāli terms related to samādhi, and propose words that agree better with the Suttas. In this part, you will also find many tips on the practice.

Having done that, I also

3. suggest how we—in facing contradictory teachings on Buddhist meditation—can look at the larger picture and decide for ourselves.

During this process, I've found some related matters that may interest the reader. These I've included as appendices to avoid burdening and cluttering the book's text proper. Bear in mind that they assume prior reading of the text proper. And as some of them may contain controversial personal opinions, do take them with a liberal pinch of salt!

In resolving seemingly contradictory teachings, this book often differs from orthodox views. So, I invite you to read critically and judge for yourself. It presents my current understanding on the subject, which may have some flaws. Nonetheless, readers of the drafts often say that the book contains information valuable to the Buddhist community and are eager for its publication.

Also, in resolving confusions, I sometimes need to prove that they are based on certain popular translations. This should not be taken to mean that I regard the translators poorly. On the contrary, I regard them as great contributors to the Buddhist world. I do however want to alert readers that they are reading *translations*, which must be influenced by the views of the translator.

I have tried to make the book accessible to a broad audience with varying degrees of prior knowledge on the subject. Therefore, please feel free to skip sections that are overly familiar to you. And if some content appears confusing to you, please continue reading. It should become clearer as you move along.

Should you come upon anything unseemly or faulty, I seek your understanding to forgive me, a work-in-progress in the Dhamma.

May you find this book helpful in your spiritual journey.

Āyasmā Kumāra

## ***How to Use This Book***

**Proper Use:** As a reference for one's own learning and practice, and for discussion with others. Good kamma.

**Improper Use:** As ammunition for disparagement and argument. Bad kamma.

**Note on Weblinks:** Webpages are impermanent. While all links to them in this book have been double-checked, they may no longer be valid by the time you click on them. Should that happen, copy and paste the link (not the shortcut) on The Wayback Machine ([web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org)), which hopefully will still exist.



# Introduction

*Ānanda, about the path or way of practice, should a dispute arise in the Saṅgha, this dispute would be for much detriment, much unhappiness of the many; for the disadvantage, the detriment, the suffering of gods and humans.*

Gotama Buddha in Sāmagāma Sutta (MN104.5)

Jhāna—and by extension samādhi—has long been a controversial subject in Theravāda Buddhism. It is a subject that Buddhists often disagree on or are confused about. Although the disagreement is complex, it is based on two basic, seemingly conflicting views.

One is that jhāna is unnecessary for liberation. This view can be perfectly fine for people who believe it, until they learn that the Suttas say otherwise: that the four jhānas are part of the Noble Eight-factored Path, and are encouraged by the Buddha repeatedly in the Suttas.

The conflict is disconcerting, leading communities of earnest practitioners to avoid discussing jhāna. For them, it has become almost a taboo subject. They also have to convince themselves that jhāna is *somehow* unnecessary. Some of them may be satisfied with their teachers' reassurance. But, in facing tremendous evidence contrary to this view, they may harbour doubts, leading them to vacillate or cling harder to their view.

The other view is that jhāna, as in mental absorption, is necessary. Meditators with this view will likely endeavour to achieve absorption; yet, even if they succeed, they may later realise that they haven't experienced real liberation from suffering. Old patterns of defilements and suffering return, and sometimes even worsen, and so they wonder what could be missing. Should they keep up the hope and persevere?

This state of affairs is unhealthy. It erodes faith in the Dhamma, while fostering 'faith' in sectarian views. Should we just ignore the issue and go along our own way?

We could do just that. To each his own, of course; but considering that the way leading to the cessation of dukkha revealed by the Buddha is now muddled with conflicting ideas and teachings, many Buddhist practitioners need convincing answers to clear up the matter for themselves. Besides, a dispute in the path as stated in Sāmagāma Sutta has indeed arisen, and has persisted for a long time, causing much detriment. So let's look into this controversy surrounding jhāna and samādhi.

# Part 1: The Jhāna Debate and Its Reconciliation

## *Is Jhāna Necessary for Liberation?*

In the world of Theravādin Buddhist meditation, we are likely to meet this age-old controversial question: *Is jhāna necessary for liberation?* Those who say yes may cite the Suttas. But they are contradicted by many highly respected meditation teachers, some of whom have even warned their students against jhāna, e.g. Ajahn Chah:

That which can be most harmful to the meditator is absorption samādhi (jhāna), the samādhi with deep, sustained calm. This samādhi brings great peace. Where there is peace, there is happiness. When there is happiness, attachment and clinging to that happiness arise. The meditator doesn't want to contemplate anything else, he just wants to indulge in that pleasant feeling. When we have been practising for a long time we may become adept at entering this samādhi very quickly. As soon as we start to note our meditation object, the mind enters calm, and we don't want to come out to investigate anything. We just get stuck on that happiness. This is a danger to one who is practising meditation. (*A Taste of Freedom*)

Although Sayadaw U Tejaniya doesn't discourage it, he says,

We don't need *jhānic samādhi*; you cannot use absorption concentration for *vipassanā*. Yogis who develop *jhāna* before they practise *vipassanā* need to get out of *jhāna* first. (*Awareness Alone Is Not Enough*)

Master Sheng Yen (聖嚴法師) of the Ch'an<sup>1</sup> tradition also disapproved of it:

禪的修行和一般修行不同，不是要入定，而是要在生活中能放下一切，身心自在，要修煉到這種程度。所以打坐坐得好，若一工作就會打擾你，這還是禪的訓練嗎？(From 《信心銘講錄》)<sup>2</sup>

*My translation:* The Ch'an practice is different from ordinary practice. It is not for you to enter samadhi<sup>3</sup>, but rather to be able to let go of everything and be at ease with your mind and body as you live your life. You have to practice to this extent. So if you can do well in sitting meditation, yet once you work you would be disturbed, is this still Ch'an training?

Encountering such statements, proponents of “jhāna is unnecessary” would of course agree, and the opponents wouldn't. The opponents may ignore such things, explain them away, or criticise

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1 The word *Ch'an* (禪) is derived from *jhāna/dhyān*. In Japanese, it is *Zen*.

2 The master was referring to a student who said he wanted to maintain some good experience that he had had and asked to be exempted from work, citing that work interferes with the practice.

3 入定(enter samādhi), a common phrase in Chinese Buddhism, means getting into an absorbed state. Interestingly, similar phrases are found in Ajahn Chah's quote above: “entering this samādhi” and “enters calm”. Note that while *jhāna* means an absorbed state in orthodox Theravāda, Master Sheng Yen of the tradition called *Ch'an*—a transliteration of *jhāna*—said, “The Ch'an practice... is not for you to enter samādhi,” i.e. to get into an absorbed state.

these masters, perhaps silently, for deviating from the Buddha’s teachings, for disregarding sammā-samādhi and therefore teaching only a seven-factored path. Many, however, deem these masters to be well-cultivated and have direct understanding of the Dhamma.

Can we reconcile this seemingly irreconcilable situation?

Some teachers try to do so by saying that jhāna is not the only kind of sammā-samādhi, thus implying a non-jhāna kind. For those who study the Suttas, this attempt is unconvincing. The elephant remains in the room. The debate is still on.

Fortunately though, we can now resolve it. This seemingly irreconcilable situation has been largely reconciled, because the core of the disagreement and confusion has been found by astute scholars (whom I’ll cite below), leading to a gradual clearing up of the issue. We no longer have to ignore the elephant, or try to walk around it, because the elephant is but an illusion. We can walk through it.

The clearing up, however, hasn’t reached far enough in the Buddhist world. It’s up against orthodoxy, which naturally resists change. I want to catalyse the process with this book. Furthermore, I want to straighten out some pertinent issues, so that those still in doubt may be satisfied. In endeavouring to do these, I will show how the teachings of the masters quoted above do actually correspond to the Buddha’s teachings as found in the Suttas.

## Basis of the Disagreement and Its Resolution

In the Suttas, there is the Noble Eight-factored Path, the way of practice leading to the cessation of dukkha (dukkha-nirodha-gāminī paṭipadā). The Path includes sammā-samādhi, repeatedly defined in the Suttas as the four jhānas.<sup>4</sup> In other words, **going by the Suttas, jhāna is necessary for the cessation of dukkha**. This alone is enough to counter all arguments that jhāna is unnecessary.

Where then does the contradicting idea “jhāna is unnecessary” come from? It stems from a post-canonical Theravādin text called the Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification)<sup>5</sup>. This and later post-canonical texts speak of the *sukkhā-vipassaka*<sup>6</sup>, one—including the arahant—who attains Awakening without previous experience of jhāna; thus implying that Awakening is possible without jhāna. In other words, **going by post-canonical texts, jhāna is unnecessary for the cessation of dukkha**. This also appears to be supported by suttas in which we find lay people awakening just by listening to the Buddha.

So here lies the basis for the undying debate and confusion.

We might explain this matter by saying that one of them must be wrong. If that is true, then post-canonical texts—being later—are probably wrong, and so jhāna is necessary. But then what about the masters quoted earlier who say jhāna is unnecessary? Are they wrong?

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4 For example, Vibhaṅga Sutta (SN45.8), SaccaVibhaṅga Sutta (MN141.31), and MahāSatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (DN22.21).

5 A highly regarded text in orthodox Theravāda written by Āyasmā Buddhaghosa in 5<sup>th</sup> century Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). It is a comprehensive manual condensing and systematizing the theoretical and practical teachings of the Buddhist path according to the Mahāvihāra elders. (Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visuddhimagga>) It has striking similarities with an earlier, non-Theravādin text: *Vimuttimagga* (Path of Liberation). (Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vimuttimagga>) For more, see *Vimuttimagga and Visuddhimagga: A Comparative Study* by P.V. Bapat.

6 Bhikkhu Bodhi translates this as “bare- (or dry-) insight worker”. It occurs more often than its equivalents: *vipassanā-yānika*, “one whose vehicle is insight”, and *suddha-vipassanā-yānika*, “one whose vehicle is purely insight”.

Not at all, in my opinion.

Do I then think the Suttas are wrong?

No.

How then do I regard this matter?

**Meanings of words, Pāli ones included, are subject to change. In the case of “jhāna”, although the two sets of scriptures mentioned above use the same word, they—being greatly separate in time and place of origin—are not speaking of the same thing, thus creating a seeming contradiction.<sup>7</sup>**

Let me explain this with an analogy.

These days, if we hear someone say he’s gay, we would most likely think he’s saying he is homosexual. We wouldn’t think he’s saying he is happy or cheerful, though that was what “gay” commonly meant not too many decades ago. It still does now, but these days if you want to tell people that you’re happy, you wouldn’t say, “I’m so gay!” (That’s unless you happen to be gay in both senses of the word, and want to be punny.)

Similarly, **these days, when we hear someone say “jhāna”, we are likely to think he is referring to an absorbed meditative state. We are not likely to think of it as meditation according to the Suttas.** This is because the idea of “jhāna” as an absorbed state has become highly ingrained in the Buddhist psyche.

Returning to the seeming contradiction between the two sets of scriptures, **when we recognise that they are using the word “jhāna” to mean different things, we get to understand that they aren’t contradicting each other after all. They are both right—going by their own terminology. In other words, the “jhāna” of the Suttas is necessary for the cessation of dukkha, while the “jhāna” of post-canonical texts is not.** In case you’re still wondering which is the kind now commonly called “jhāna” in Theravāda Buddhism, it’s the latter.

## ***Comparing the Two Kinds of Jhāna***

The table below, comparing the jhāna of the Pāli Suttas and that of the Visuddhimagga, is extracted from Richard Shankman’s *The Experience of Samādhi: An In-depth Exploration of Buddhist Meditation* (Chapter 4: Controversies Surrounding Samādhi; Shambhala, 2008).<sup>8 9</sup> The footnotes are mine though. Evidence for the points of comparison are in his book, and partially also in Part 2 of this book.

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7 Other Pāli words that have also changed in meaning include

- *peta*: from “departed one” to “hungry ghost”
- *vihāra*: from “abode, dwelling” to “monastery, temple”
- *nimitta* (which I will discuss in various places in this book)

8 Richard Shankman has been a meditator since 1970 and teaches at dharma centers in America, including Spirit Rock and IMS. He is a co-founder of both the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies and of Mindful Schools. (Source: <https://www.spiritrock.org/richard-shankman> and <https://www.dharma.org/teacher/richard-shankman>)

9 This book is a balanced work on the subject. The author also talks about it here: <https://radiopublic.com/buddhist-geeks-6po12m/ep/s1!8ba75> (Shortcut: [tiny.cc/shankman](https://tiny.cc/shankman)) and [www.audiodharma.org/series/135/talk/1854/](http://www.audiodharma.org/series/135/talk/1854/) (Shortcut: [tiny.cc/shankman2](https://tiny.cc/shankman2)). The talks include some candid comments absent in the book.

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### Comparison of Jhāna in the Pāli Suttas and the Visuddhimagga

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	SUTTAS	VISUDDHIMAGGA
The 4 absorptions <sup>10</sup>	Called the 4 jhānas	Called the rūpa jhānas
The 4 formless attainments	Called the āruppas <sup>11</sup>	Usually called the āruppas; in a few cases called arūpa jhānas
Type of concentration <sup>12</sup>	Unification of mind	One-pointed concentration fixed on a single object
Body awareness in jhāna	Seems to suggest heightened experience of and insight into the physical body and changing phenomena <sup>13</sup>	No experience of the physical body and changing phenomena
Insight meditation practice	Suggests that insight practice can occur within jhāna	Insight must come while not in jhāna
Nimitta	General term used in a variety of contexts for “sign,” “theme,” or “basis,” but not specifically as a visual concentration object to attain jhāna <sup>14</sup>	A visual image that arises in access concentration, used as the meditation object to attain jhāna <sup>15</sup>
Preparatory, access, and fixed concentration	Terms are not found	Terms are used

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In the same chapter, Shankman writes:

The suttas and the Visuddhimagga are in agreement that a state of strong concentration totally divorced from any awareness of the body is not necessary for Awakening. They differ simply in that the suttas do not define such a state as constituting the four jhānas, whereas the Visuddhimagga does.

This is echoed from a different angle by Ajahn Ṭhānissaro:

- 
- 10 I find “absorptions” completely unsuitable to speak of the jhānas of the Suttas. More on this in *Does Jhāna Mean Absorption?* (p53). It’s hard to find a suitable word to cover both types though.
- 11 My translation: formless states.
- 12 Note that “concentration” means very differently in these two cases. For the Visuddhimagga jhāna, it refers to concentrating on the object; while for the Sutta jhāna, it refers to concentrating the mind itself. More on this in Part 2 under *Samādhi* (p31).
- 13 “Insight into the physical body” does not necessarily occur during the jhānas. See Uddesavibhaṅga Sutta (MN138), where the mind is said to be “stuck internally” (trans. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (MLDB)) if it follows the most desirable element of the jhāna attained, is tied to enjoying that element, bound to the fetter of enjoying it. Insight cannot occur in this situation. Perhaps Shankman is influenced by the concept of vipassanā jhāna. (See *Appendix 8: Samatha Jhāna & Vipassanā Jhāna*.)
- 14 For example, in Cūḷavedalla Sutta (MN44.12), we find the statement *cattāro satipaṭṭhānā samādhi-nimittā*: The four establishments of mindfulness are the bases for samādhi.
- 15 Leigh Brasington uses this point to classify various modern interpretations of jhāna into “Sutta Style Jhānas” and “Visuddhimagga Style Jhānas”. (See <http://www.leighb.com/jhanantp.htm>.) However, the ‘nimitta’ of Visuddhimagga may not be a visual; it can be tactile. (See *Appendix 10: Visuddhimagga Nimittas Need Not Be Visual*.) If he considered this point, he may have to place some of what he categorized as “Sutta Style Jhānas” under “Visuddhimagga Style Jhānas” instead.

... what jhāna means in the commentaries is something quite different from what it means in the Canon. Because of this difference we can say that the commentaries are right in viewing their type of jhāna as unnecessary for Awakening, but Awakening cannot occur without the attainment of jhāna in the canonical sense. (*Wings to Awakening, Part III: The Basic Factors* (1996-2011), p219).

## Knowing the Difference

As shown above, Shankman is neither the only person nor the first to notice the difference and write about it. The controversy is addressed by Ajahn Ṭhānissaro in just five paragraphs. (Ibid.)<sup>16</sup> Articles on this issue have been written since 2003 by Leigh Brasington.<sup>17</sup>

Of all writers on this matter, the earliest one I know is Ayodhya Prasad Pradhan, who wrote in *The Buddha's System of Meditation* (Sterling Publishers, 1986):

In the Buddhist Canon itself the process of attaining (jhāna) is not given in a practical way, in spite of the frequent repetitions of the formula-like description of this 'Jhāna' throughout the Canon. The tradition preserved in commentaries, especially in Buddhaghosa's work entitled the 'Visuddhi-magga', or the Path of Purification, in Pāli, seems to have developed a system of its own.... After comparing the latter with the former, anyone who intends to devote or has already devoted, his time and energy in practising the meditation of early Buddhism and in unravelling its secrets, will not fail, I believe, to detect the contrast.<sup>18</sup>

This contrast is increasingly known, especially in the last decade, as more and more Buddhist scholars and practitioners discover it and talk about it. Knowing this contrast may make discussions on jhāna more fruitful, and less contentious too. **More importantly, for practitioners who have become confused by conflicting ideas about jhāna, being aware of this contrast helps to clear their path to liberation.**

## More Comparison

Shankman's comparison table (shown earlier) inspired me to compile more points of comparison. In case some of the points below seem unacceptable or puzzling even after having read the accompanying explanation, you might want to make a note of them, and return to them when you're done reading Part 2.

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16 See <http://tiny.cc/tbwings>, starting from the second paragraph: "The role of jhāna..."

17 Leigh Brasington has been practicing since 1985 and is the senior American student of the late Ven. Ayya Khema, who confirmed Brasington's practice and requested that he begin teaching. (From [www.audiodharma.org/teacher/24/](http://www.audiodharma.org/teacher/24/))

18 Ayodhya Prasad Pradhan (b. 1904) is a well known Nepalese Buddhist scholar of Pāli language, scripture, philosophy and literature.... A practitioner of Hatha Yoga in his younger days and later Laya Yoga, he came to discover the superiority of the Buddha's system of meditation over the other known systems and practised it. (From the book jacket)

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## More Comparison on the Two Kinds of Jhāna

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SUTTAS

VISUDDHIMAGGA

---

### Relation to the Path

Necessary

Optional<sup>19</sup>

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Besides being explicitly part of the Noble Eight-factored Path, the jhānas are implied to be necessary in Kīṭāgiri Sutta (MN70.14-18), where spiritual attainers are classified in a lesser known way. While some of them—such as a kind of arahant called paññā-vimutta (discernment-liberated) and a kind of sotāpanna called diṭṭhippatta (view-attained)—are said to not have attained the formless states (āruppā), none are said to not have attained the jhānas.

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### Jhāna is a kind of...

Mental action

Mental state

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I deem this point the most important distinction. See under *Meditation* (p66) for explanation.

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### Attainability

Attainable with the first seven path-factors as its requisites.<sup>20</sup>

Attainable without all the first seven path-factors as its requisites. Difficult to attain.

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While the Sutta jhāna requires all the first seven path-factors, the Visuddhimagga jhāna doesn't. Yet that doesn't mean the latter is easier to attain. In fact, according to the Visuddhimagga (XII.8), 'jhāna' is attainable by only one in 100 × 100 × 100, i.e., 1,000,000. That's the optimistic ratio. The pessimistic ratio is one in 1,000,000,000! So, do you feel lucky enough?

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### Effort required to attain the first jhāna

Practice cultivation after having set (paṇidhāya bhāvanā) or cultivation without having set (appaṇidhāya bhāvanā).<sup>21</sup>

Persistent focus on a single object to heighten concentration and produce a conceptual object to be concentrated on and absorbed in.

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### Relation to satipaṭṭhāna

This leads to the jhānas.

This and the jhānas are mutually exclusive practices.

---

In Cūḷavedalla Sutta (MN44.12), the four satipaṭṭhānas (establishments of mindfulness, lit. remembering) are said to be the bases for samādhi: *Cattāro satipaṭṭhānā samādhi-nimittā*. Furthermore, in Sūda Sutta (SN47.8), the Buddha says that while a certain wise bhikkhu abides observing the body, feelings, mind and phenomena (i.e. practising the four satipaṭṭhānas),

**the mind becomes composed** (cittam samādhiyati), **the obscurations are abandoned** (upakkilesā pahīyanti)... That wise, competent, skilful bhikkhu becomes **a gainer of happy abidings** (sukhavihārānam) **in this very life**, and also **a gainer of mindfulness and full awareness** (satisampajañña)...

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19 Implied by the Visuddhimagga's concept of sukka-vipassaka explained earlier under *Basis of the Disagreement and Its Resolution* (p11).

20 See AN7.45, AN10.103, SN45.28, MN117.3, DN18.27 and DN33.2.3(3).

21 Details in *Appendix 14: Two Ways to Sammā-samādhi*.

His gains imply the attainment of at least the third jhāna. See *Standard Description of the Four Jhānas* on page 71.

**Relation to sammā-sati**

This leads to the jhānas.

This is unrelated to the jhānas.

Although standard Buddhist doctrine defines sammā-sati as the four satipaṭṭhānas, some suttas imply that it should also include other forms of practices requiring sati (mindfulness). For example, at AN1.296-305 we find 10 ways to establish sati: recollection (*anusatti*) of the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha, (good) conduct, generosity, and devas; mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of death, mindfulness directed to the person, recollection of peace. Each of these “when developed and cultivated, leads exclusively to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna”. (*The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* (NDB), p116) As such practices of sati lead to Nibbāna, they should count as sammā-sati.

Sammā-sati leads to the jhānas. This point is probably the most directly and convincingly affirmed by Micchatta Sutta (AN10.103), which says, “From proper mindfulness, proper samādhi originates.” (sammāsatiṣṣa sammāsamādhi pahoti.) This sutta also disproves the idea that one should attain the jhānas before practising satipaṭṭhāna.

**Hindrances are...**

Abandoned (*pahīna*)

Suppressed (*vikkhambhita*)

**What is the most important?**

The act of meditation

The object of meditation

The Suttas always speak of the jhānas in terms of themselves, while mentioning the object of attention only occasionally, e.g. “these dhammas (phenomena)” in Dvedhāvitakka Sutta (MN19.12),<sup>22</sup> and “some [mind] brightening basis” in Bhikkhunupassaya Sutta (SN47.10). For the Sutta jhāna, object isn’t the most important thing. In fact, in the Suttas, changing one’s object is not only acceptable, it’s necessary as one progresses to more refined levels of cultivation.

By contrast, the Visuddhimagga spends numerous words to describe the object, thus suggesting its importance. In fact, in this practice, we are to focus on the object to build up concentration so as to enable absorption.

**Vitakka and vicāra means...<sup>23</sup>**

Thinking and considering

Initial application and sustained application (of attention on the object)

**Type of joy (pīti)**

Peaceful, delightful, nice, subtle yet profound; born of separation (from sensuality and unskillful

Thrilling, rapturous; elating;<sup>25</sup> “delight in the attaining of the desired object”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See Appendix 7: *The Buddha’s Practice of the Jhānas before Self-Awakening*.

<sup>23</sup> Details under *Vitakka & Vicāra* (p56).



	SUTTAS	VISUDDHIMAGGA
	qualities) <sup>24</sup> or of samādhi	
<b>Type of happiness (sukha)</b>	Contented, peaceful, easeful, light; born of separation (from sensuality and unskilful qualities) or of samādhi	Pleasurable, blissful; <sup>27</sup> “enjoyment of the taste of what is acquired” <sup>28</sup>
<b>Hearing suspended?</b>	No <sup>29</sup>	Yes.
<b>Possible while moving about</b>	Yes <sup>30</sup>	No
<b>Can it be used for ‘spiritual bypass’?</b>	No. When the mind is settled, awareness is heightened. Thus, defilements are easily seen.	Yes, due to the exclusive nature of concentration or absorption. <sup>31</sup>
<p>Spiritual bypass is a modern psychological term referring to a coping mechanism of escaping from unhappiness using ‘spiritual’ methods. See <a href="http://www.hazelden.org/store/item/79106?Recovering-Spirituality">www.hazelden.org/store/item/79106?Recovering-Spirituality</a> (Shortcut: bit.ly/s-bypass). Here’s an example using meditation: <a href="http://web.archive.org/web/20160606203150/http://blogs.psychcentral.com/mindfulness/2014/10/can-meditation-be-dangerous/">http://web.archive.org/web/20160606203150/http://blogs.psychcentral.com/mindfulness/2014/10/can-meditation-be-dangerous/</a> (Shortcut: bit.ly/meddanger). The term is a misnomer though, as it is merely an <i>effort</i> to bypass. It’s more precisely called “spiritual escapism”.</p>		
<b>Commentarial name<sup>32</sup></b>	Khaṇika samādhi <sup>33</sup> at a degree corresponding to upacāra samādhi (proximate concentration)	Appanā (fixed) samādhi
<b>Other names</b>	Flowing samādhi <sup>34</sup>	Absorption samādhi <sup>35</sup>

24 I render *viveka* as “separation” instead of “withdrawal” or “seclusion”. I will explain under *Vivicca & Viveka* (p64).

26 From Atthasālinī. See *Appendix 13: Atthasālinī’s Definition of Pīti and Sukha*.

25 *The Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga* (trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli) explains:

*Happiness and bliss: ... Its function is to refresh the body and the mind; or its function is to pervade (thrill with rapture). It is manifested as elation.*

(Note: Here, “happiness” is uncharacteristically translated from *pīti*; while “bliss” is from *sukha*, translated elsewhere in the book as “happy”, “pleasure”, “pleasant”, “bodily pleasure” and “blissful”).

27 Details under *Sukha* (p60).

28 From Atthasālinī. See *Appendix 13: Atthasālinī’s Definition of Pīti and Sukha*.

29 Details in *Appendix 6: Is Sound Heard When Engaging in the Jhānas?*

30 Details under *Does Jhāna Mean Absorption?* (p53).

31 Details under *Does Samādhi Mean Cutting Off Sensory Perceptions?* (p39).

32 This point is from Shankman’s book, although not in his table shown earlier.

33 This is commonly translated as “momentary concentration”, a strange term indeed; for if it’s momentary, how can we call that “concentration” as understood in normal English?

34 I coined this term inspired by Ajahn Chah’s description: “If your mind is peaceful, it’s kind of like still, flowing water. ... That’s where discernment can arise.” (*Still, Flowing Water*)

35 From the quote by Ajahn Chah on page 10.

## Deductions

In differentiating the two kinds of jhānas, we can deduce the following:

1. If we go by the Suttas only and say jhāna is necessary for Awakening, we are right, because that is true for the ‘Sutta jhāna’.
2. If we go by orthodox Theravāda and say jhāna is unnecessary for Awakening, citing the *sukkhavipassaka*<sup>36</sup>, we are also right, because that is true for the ‘Visuddhimagga jhāna’.
3. However, the *sukkhavipassaka* must have indeed practised jhāna—the sutta type of course, not the Visuddhimagga type now called “jhāna” in orthodox Theravāda.

**So the whole debate is based on a misunderstanding. The elephant in the room is just an illusion. With enough knowledge to differentiate the two different “jhānas”, the contradiction dissolves.**

## Awakening While Listening

Recognizing the above also solves the puzzle of why some people could awaken while listening to the Buddha or a disciple of his. Many of them were lay people who probably had never meditated before. Any experience of the absorption or Visuddhimagga jhāna is highly unlikely. All they seem to have done was to listen attentively and contemplate the Dhamma they were hearing. (I provide *Kuṭṭhi Sutta* (Ud5.3) as an example on page 54.) It seems to imply that some people don’t need the whole Noble Eight-factored Path to attain liberation, but that contradicts the evidence I’ve shown.

Some who regard the jhāna of the Noble Eight-factored Path as how the Visuddhimagga describes it try to explain the above with a new idea: Although these people had not meditated and attained jhāna in that life, they had done so in a previous life. This explanation is rather strained (though I used to accept it, with some doubt). If jhāna in a previous life could be counted, what about good conduct (*sīla*) in a previous life? Would that count too, so that we could awaken without *sīla* in this life? Probably not.

To solve this puzzle, we need not resort to such explanations; we can surmise that they must have practised jhāna—the Sutta variety—*while* listening to the Dhamma being spoken by a spiritually realised being. By admitting that the jhāna of the Suttas is possible while listening, the puzzle is solved.

## How Did the Meaning of Jhāna Change?

You may wonder how the meaning of “jhāna” changed between the time the Suttas were compiled and the time the Visuddhimagga was written. On this, I can only offer casual observations and speculations.

If we look into non-Buddhist Indian spiritual teachings, we can find a remarkable similarity between some of their meditative states and the Visuddhimagga jhāna. Here are two quotes from

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36 In case you have forgotten, I’ve explained this on page 11 under *Basis of the Disagreement and Its Resolution*.

*Ayurveda and the Mind: The Healing of Consciousness* (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1998) by Dr David Frawley<sup>37</sup>:

Samādhi is a state of absorption in which our consciousness becomes entirely concentrated in a single object or experience and we forget all other things. (p88)

Samādhi is the capacity of consciousness to become one with its object of perception, through which the nature of ultimate Reality is known. It can perhaps be best translated as “absorption”. (p291-292)

Somehow this absorption kind of samādhi, now called the Eighth Limb of Yoga, came to be called “jhāna” in Theravāda, thus displacing its original meaning used in the Suttas. This I believe happened with a gradual influence of non-Buddhist teachings, affecting the views and practices within the Buddhist tradition, part of which evolved into what we now call “Theravāda”. After all, orthodox Theravāda deems what it calls “jhāna” as not unique to the Buddhist tradition, and available elsewhere even before the Buddha’s time.

On the other hand, the *dhyān* or *dhyāna* (Sanskrit for *jhāna*), the Seventh Limb of Yoga, seems to correspond somewhat with the Sutta jhāna.<sup>38</sup> Interested readers can investigate further on their own.<sup>39</sup>

## Summary & Conclusion

In the beginning, I asked, “Is jhāna necessary for liberation?” As we have seen, it depends on what “jhāna” in that question means. If someone asks us this question, we should first seek his understanding of the word. This may then lead to discussing the two different “jhāna”s. When what he means by “jhāna” is clarified, *then* we can answer the question with satisfaction.

I have also quoted some meditation masters who downplay, discourage and even warn against practising “jhāna”. You might have been shocked to find a quote from Ajahn Chah saying jhāna is “most harmful to the meditator”. If you weren’t well-informed enough, you might have suspected me (the quoter), or the translation, if not Ajahn Chah himself as well as the other masters. Or, you might just follow what they say out of faith, but perhaps harbouring doubt due to an incomplete understanding of the scriptures.

However, by now you should know what they actually mean by “jhāna”. Did they mean the jhāna of the Suttas, or of the Visuddhimagga? In case you are still doubtful, you should probably find Part 2 quite helpful.

In any case, I regard these meditation masters as having understood the path. In saying those words, they caution us on what is not the path using orthodox terminology. They are not downplaying, discouraging and certainly not warning against practising the jhānas of the Suttas.

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37 David Frawley is an author on Hinduism, Yoga and Ayurveda.... As an American Hindu, Frawley is one of the few Westerners to be recognized by a major Hindu sect in India as a Vedacharya or teacher of the ancient wisdom. (Source: [www.gurusfeet.com/guru/david-frawley](http://www.gurusfeet.com/guru/david-frawley))

38 In this case of similarity, it may be due to influence from early Buddhism instead. We can read some scholars’ opinion on this here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoga\\_Sutras\\_of\\_Patanjali#Buddhism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoga_Sutras_of_Patanjali#Buddhism).

39 You can see how Indian terms related to meditation are used in such varied ways in [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dhyana\\_in\\_Hinduism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dhyana_in_Hinduism).

In fact, as I understand their teachings, the kind of practice they encourage, which they might call “vipassanā meditation”, does lead to the four jhānas of the Suttas.<sup>40</sup>

So, the Sutta jhāna, though presently not commonly called by its original name, is still actually being taught and practised—often by people who say ‘jhāna’ is not necessary!

As for the Visuddhimagga jhāna, we should simply refer to it as “absorption”, not “jhāna”, so that our audience will understand us correctly when we speak of states of absorption.

## The Confusion & De-confusion

Although the path is still being taught and practised, many people are still confused by the terms due to an unfortunate history. Let me explain this with an analogy.

We now have two maps: the original map (the Suttas) and a revised map (the Visuddhimagga), both referring to the same landscape of Buddhist spiritual cultivation, but using names differently.

For “jhāna”, the revised map uses it to label points along a relatively steep route absent in the original, and calls that route “samatha”, which means something else in the original. The revised map says indirectly that this route is optional. It also says the first station (first jhāna) is reachable by very few. Many path-goers using the revised map aren’t aware of this detail, and some have reached the station anyhow, but far more are still trying, believing that doing so is necessary to reach the goal.

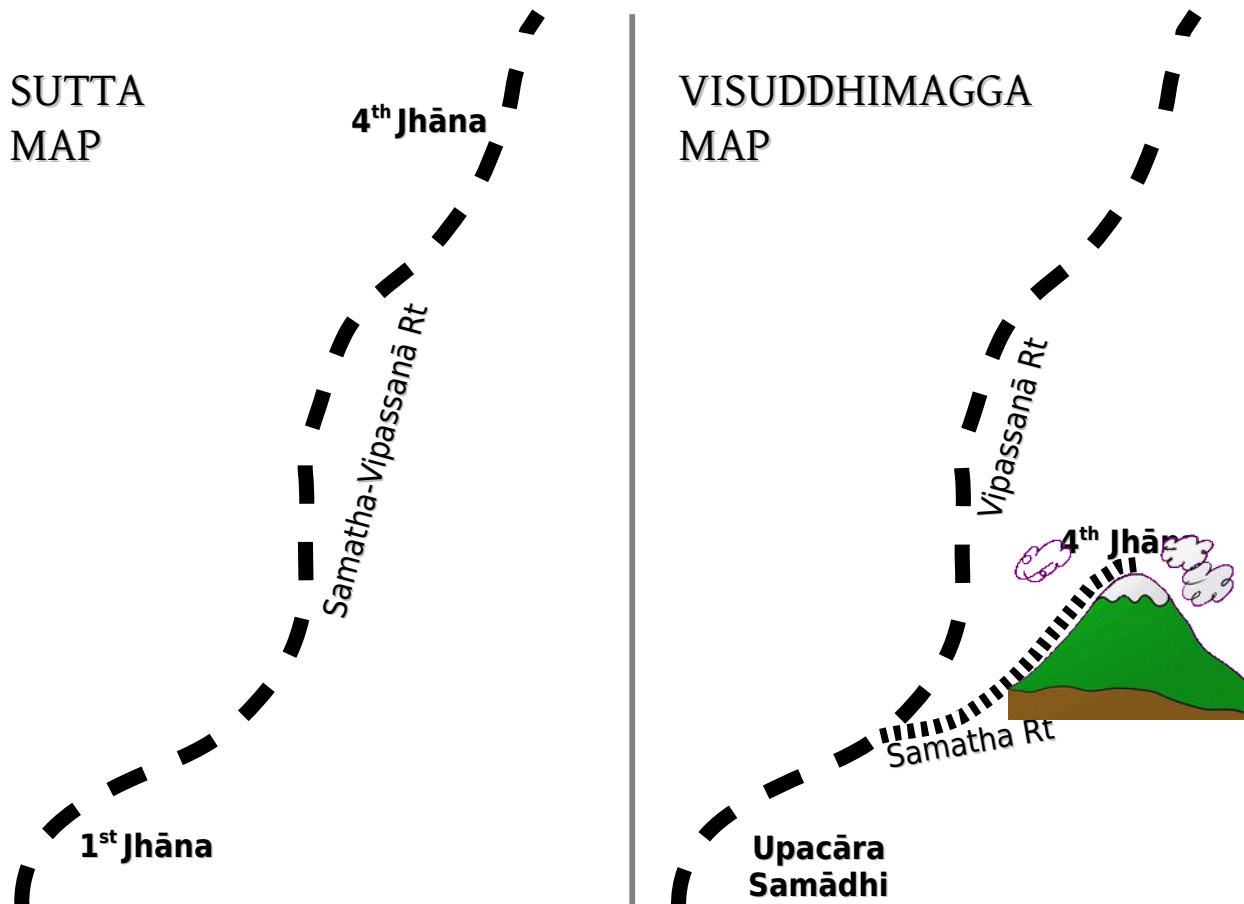
If you, following the revised map, take this optional route and manage the hike, you’ll be rewarded with a magnificent view and fresh air: Ah, the bliss! You might then think how much greater the goal, Nibbāna, must be. Or, you might even think that you *have* attained Nibbāna!

But if you’re clear-headed enough, you won’t be deceived by such thoughts. However wonderful it feels, you’ll know it’s just another temporary sensory experience, another fabrication unworthy of attachment; you’ll also know you must leave it for the actual destination. For the sake of true liberation from suffering, you must give it up. In fact, that’s what the revised map says.<sup>41</sup>

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40 Calling it “vipassanā meditation” aligns with orthodox Theravādin terminology, but disagrees with the way “vipassanā” is used in the Suttas. For more, see *Samatha & Vipassanā* (p25) in Part 2.

41 From that height, can one paraglide down to the actual route? This is not a joke; some people say they practise this way.



Therefore, following the revised map is actually okay. But, if you *also* refer to the original map *presuming* it uses names in the same way, then you'll find contradictions surrounding “jhāna”, along with “samatha” and more. The original map does not say “jhāna” is optional. Instead, it shows “jhāna” as an *essential part of the route*. The discrepancy is glaring.

Yet, not knowing better,

1. some people ignore both maps. *Just follow what our trekking guide (meditation teacher) says.* That's the most convenient choice, but what if the guide actually doesn't know the way?
2. some people ignore the revised map. *Just go by the original map.* This is neater and safer, right?
3. some people notice the discrepancy but choose to ignore it, pretending that the two maps actually use names in the same way. They may even mentally merge parts of the maps and conclude that the optional route is actually necessary!

Of the three responses, we might regard the 2<sup>nd</sup> response as the best: Go by the Suttas and ignore everything else. However, this may be tricky for long-time Buddhist meditators. The Visuddhimagga has long been deemed authoritative, thus its memes have become ingrained among Buddhists.<sup>42</sup> So, even if we respond in this way, how sure can we be that our idea of jhāna is not influenced by orthodoxy? Some longtime meditators I know say they don't follow the Visuddhimagga, yet they actually hold ideas of jhāna in line with that book.

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42 Meme: A cultural unit (an idea or value or pattern of behavior) that is passed from one person to another by non-genetic means (as by imitation). (WordNet 3.0 by Princeton University)

De-confusing ourselves on this matter is no easy task. We have to be vigilant to recognise the past conditionings that we, and perhaps our teachers too, are entangled in. We have to unlearn, relearn and reshape our ideas of jhāna and samādhi. In my experience, this is not overly difficult, but it does take time.

To facilitate the effort, we need to know where we tend to get caught up. I notice that a key area is the *words* we depend on to understand and explain the concepts surrounding jhāna and samādhi. We need to reconsider these words. When we use words that more accurately translate their Pāli origins as used in the Suttas, we fundamentally reshape our views to become more aligned with the Suttas. Thus our effort to de-confuse ourselves and others becomes easier. This is what we shall explore in Part 2.

# Part 2: Reviewing Translations of Samādhi-related Terms

Today we are fortunate to have the Suttas translated into English, Chinese and many other languages, making them accessible. However, due to linguistic limitations, translations cannot convey the original perfectly. Furthermore, translators are influenced by existing translations and interpretations—perhaps more than they are willing to admit.

**Sutta translators may recognise the limitations of their translations, but the readers often don't.** Most readers of sutta translations don't understand Pāli, and tend to forget that they are reading translations, making them vulnerable to the translators' influence.

## *The Need to Revise*

In the early days of translating Pāli texts to English, pioneers needed whatever help they could get. So, they had to rely on the existing mainstream interpretation: orthodox Theravāda, a Buddhist tradition faithful to the Pāli commentarial literature sanctioned by the Mahāvihāra sect of 5<sup>th</sup> century Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).<sup>1</sup> This reliance persisted even up to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, Bhikkhu Bodhi, a well-known translator, wrote,

For two and a half years (1972-75) I lived with Ven. Ānanda Maitreya at Sri Nandaramaya.... In this early stage of my monk's life I faced considerable confusion trying to find the proper key to understand the Dhamma correctly.... Without a reliable guide it is easy to get lost in the jungles of speculation and opinion, littered with the landmines of pride, contention, and conceit. During this period the Mahā Nāyaka Thera always reminded me of the importance of relying on the Theravāda commentarial tradition in order to understand the Pāli Dhamma correctly. He implanted in my mind a profound respect for the Atthakathās and Ṭīkās, the Commentaries and Subcommentaries, an attitude which inspired and guided my study of the Suttas and the Abhidhamma. Although I subsequently came to see the need to distinguish among the various strata in the evolution of Theravāda Buddhist thought, this early advice from my teacher helped to steer me away from

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1 Besides the Mahāvihāra, Ceylon had two other sects: Abhayagiri, a breakaway from Mahāvihāra; and Jetavana, a breakaway from Abhayagiri. These three disagree in some ways about the DhammaVinaya. Through a history of over a millennium, different sects became prominent depending on which the reigning king favoured. At times the rivalry led to burning of monasteries and books, and even murder.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, these two other sects were annihilated by King Parākramabāhu with a 'reconciliation'. The bhikkhus of these sects "were either compelled to leave the Order or were reduced to the state of sāmaṇeras (novices)." If they wanted to become bhikkhus again, they would have to join the Mahāvihāra saṅgha as juniors.

Later, the Mahāvihāra lineage also ended in Sri Lanka, but was restored by bhikkhus from Siam (now Thailand), where the Mahāvihāra lineage was established earlier. This sect, which lasts till today, was then named Syāmapālivamsika Mahāvihāra [now better known as Siam Nikāya]. (Source: Gunaratne Panabokke, *History of the Buddhist Saṅgha in India and Sri Lanka*)

Scriptures of the two annihilated sects cannot be found, probably because they were destroyed in the 'reconciliation' process. Their doctrines are now known only through their being denounced in the Mahāvihāra's records that Theravadins call "the commentaries".

fruitless interpretations often rooted in little more than the pride and cleverness of the expositor.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Pāli scholarship changed tremendously. With the wide availability of personal computers and the Internet, not only critical scholarship became more effective, scholarly discoveries reached the common Buddhists more easily. We now understand the Suttas better and are more confident in reading them without relying on the commentaries.

As a scholar, Bhikkhu Bodhi himself has also changed his position on relying on the commentaries. In the “Preface” (p16) of *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (CDB), he wrote,

I should state, as a precaution, that the commentaries explain the suttas as they were understood sometime around the first century C.E. at the latest, at which time the old commentaries drawn upon by Buddhaghosa were closed to further additions. The commentaries view the suttas through the lens of the complex exegetical method that had evolved within the Theravada school, built up from the interpretations of the ancient teachers welded to a framework constructed partly from the principles of the Abhidhamma system. This exegetical method does not necessarily correspond to the way the teachings were understood in the earliest period of Buddhist history...

Thus, as the endnotes in his more recent translations often show, he has permitted himself to “interpret a passage differently”. (Ibid.)

## Commentaries & Contradictions

**The commentaries can be useful, but making them the lens through which we read the Suttas colours our view.** When we presume they are correct, we limit our understanding of the Suttas within the views of *just one* of many Buddhist sects, most of which no longer exist. Doing so is actually against prescriptions in the Suttas and even in a Vinaya commentary, Samanta-pāsādika.<sup>3</sup>

Years ago, having associated with some scholarly Buddhists, I began to see contradictions between the Suttas and the commentaries. The “jhāna” issue is just one among many. The contradictions occur often enough for me to doubt the commentaries’ reliability. Moreover, different commentarial texts sometimes contradict each other too. Thus, even if we choose to follow them, we would at those times still have to decide among them.<sup>4</sup>

Contradictions exist within the Theravādin scriptures, and it is advantageous to acknowledge that.

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2 From Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya: *A Personal Appreciation* by Bhikkhu Bodhi ([www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bam.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bam.html))

3 For details, see Āyasmā Aggacitta’s *Awaken to Truth in Harmony* (pp33-36): <https://sasanarakkha.org/2010/05/01/awaken-to-truth-in-harmony-a-trilogy/> (Shortcut: tiny.cc/trilogy)

4 We would probably see more contradictions *and* have a better idea of how Theravāda evolved if the old Sinhalese commentaries by Āyasmā Mahinda were still available. They are traditionally regarded, based on a 15<sup>th</sup>-century Burmese composition, as having been burnt by Āyasmā Buddhaghosa (but the claim is disputed by modern scholars) and are now known only through references in the (official) commentaries.



## The Unhealthy Situation

For a long time since people began translating Pāli texts into English, contradictions between orthodoxy and the Suttas weren't widely discussed, if at all. Under such circumstances, the translators' choice of words naturally conformed to orthodox Theravāda. Therefore, in the English world of Theravāda Buddhist meditation, we commonly meet words that agree with the Visuddhimagga "jhāna", like "concentration", "meditative absorption" and "one-pointedness". These words, having been widely used and left largely unquestioned for decades, have gained almost universal acceptance. While their acceptance eases translation work, these words disagree with their Pāli origins as used in the Suttas. We need to do something about this.

## Proposed Revisions

In *Uncommon Wisdom: Life and Teachings of Ajaan Paṇṇāvaddho*, Ajaan Dick Silaratano writes: "Tan Paṇṇā... did not hold scholastic orthodoxy to be sacrosanct; traditional interpretations should always be examined in the light of direct experience."

I share this view, and bearing it I shall in the following subheadings explore key Pāli terms related to samādhi along with their common English translations, and propose translations that I deem more reflective of their original meanings in Pāli. The work involves reading afresh the early Buddhist texts and connecting them with teachings of contemporary meditation masters. (To decide on a translation, I try to go by principles presented in *Appendix 17: Translating Pāli Words*.) This necessarily also involves challenging some established views. So, if you have long held views surrounding these terms, I hope you can temporarily put them aside, so that you can read the following critically.

## Samatha

In orthodox Theravāda, "samatha" is a kind of meditation that leads to jhāna, and "vipassanā" is another that leads to ñāṇa or (insight) knowledge. They are deemed mutually exclusive, i.e. impossible to be practised together. Since jhāna is deemed optional for liberation, so is samatha; but vipassanā is deemed necessary. Also, in orthodox Theravāda, "samatha" means practising sammā-samādhi: the four jhānas; and "vipassanā" means practising sammā-sati: the four satipaṭṭhāna—a neat and tidy classification, isn't it? Nowadays, "samatha" is also commonly understood as 'concentration meditation'.<sup>5</sup>

These ideas have long been part of Theravāda, but do all these accord with the Suttas?

## Samatha & Vipassanā

When we read the Suttas, we find "samatha" used differently. For example, the Suttas don't speak of it as an optional practice. In fact, **when samatha and vipassanā are mentioned together in the Suttas, they are spoken of as essential qualities to be cultivated.**

For example, in Vijjā-bhāgiya Sutta (AN2.31): "These two qualities (dhammā) have a part in gnosis (vijjā). Which two? Samatha and vipassanā."<sup>6</sup> The same is implied in Āgantuka Sutta

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5 A more recent idea arose among some Buddhists: if you pay attention to the nose, it's ānāpānasati, therefore it's samatha; if you pay attention to the abdomen, then it's vipassanā!

6 *Dveme bhikkhave dhammā vijjābhāgiyā. Katame dve? Samatho ca vipassanā ca.*

(SN45.159) where it says cultivating the Noble Eight-factored Path means cultivating samatha and vipassanā:

(A) bhikkhu who cultivates the Noble Eight-factored Path... cultivates with direct knowledge (abhiññā) those qualities to be cultivated with direct knowledge.... And what, bhikkhus, are the things to be cultivated with direct knowledge? Samatha and vipassanā.<sup>7</sup>

**The Suttas also say they can be cultivated one preceded by the other, or together as a team. Thus, they are not mutually exclusive cultivations.** This is most clearly shown in Yuganaddha Sutta (AN4.170) attributed to Āyasmā Ānanda speaking on attaining arahantship:<sup>8</sup>

Here, friend, a bhikkhu cultivates samatha-preceded vipassanā.... Then another bhikkhu cultivates vipassanā-preceded samatha.... Then another bhikkhu cultivates samatha and vipassanā yoke-tied.<sup>9</sup>

Let's examine the third way: samatha and vipassanā yoke-tied.

As mentioned before, orthodox Theravāda, in keeping with its terminology, deems the practice of what it calls “samatha” and “vipassanā” as mutually exclusive. Therefore, its commentary to this sutta glosses cultivating “samatha and vipassanā yoke-tied” as alternating between jhāna and observing fabrications. This explanation, now commonly used in present-day Theravāda, ignores the meaning of “yoke-tied” (yuganaddha).

A yoke (yuga) is a “stable gear that joins two draft animals at the neck so they can work together as a team”. (WordNet 3.0 by Princeton University) Since two yoke-tied draft animals cannot move alternately, the commentary's glossing of “samatha and vipassanā yoke-tied” as alternating between jhāna and observing fabrications is hard to follow. Moreover, in Mahāsaḷāyatanika Sutta (MN149.9-26), “samatha and vipassanā yoke-tied” is already mentioned as to know and see phenomena related to the six sense doors according to reality.<sup>10 11</sup>

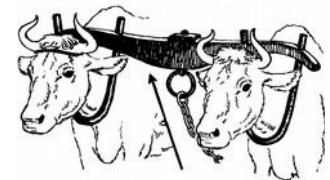
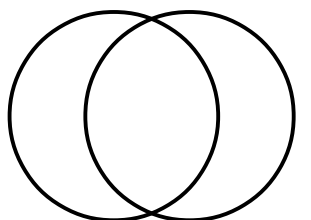


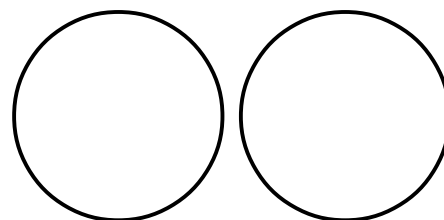
Image: shamelesspocrisy.com

### In the Suttas' terminology



cultivating samatha    cultivating vipassanā

### In Visuddhimagga's terminology



cultivating samatha    cultivating vipassanā

7 A similar passage is found in Mahāsaḷāyatanika Sutta (MN149.11).

8 Āyasmā = Venerable.

9 *Idha āvuso bhikkhu samathapubbaṅgamaṃ vipassanaṃ bhāveti.... Puna ca paraṃ āvuso bhikkhu vipassanā-pubbaṅgamaṃ samathaṃ bhāveti.... Puna ca paraṃ āvuso bhikkhu samathavipassanaṃ yuganaddhaṃ bhāveti.*

10 This in turn is part of dhammānupassanā (phenomenon-observation), which then means dhammānupassanā in the Suttas' terminology includes both samatha and vipassanā.

11 The description of this cultivation mode seems to match a shared salient teaching of Ajahn Chah, most of his disciples, and Sayadaw U Tejaniya.

Here’s an even more important point: The two earlier ways of cultivation—samatha-preceded vipassanā and vipassanā-preceded samatha—also don’t suggest samatha and vipassanā being mutually exclusive. “Preceded” is translated from *pubbaṅgama*, both literally meaning “before-going”. So, for these two ways of cultivation, one goes first, then the other *follows*; not one goes first, stops, then the other goes. We can think of it as two draft animals, not yoke-tied, but *one going before (or leading) the other*.

Samatha-preceded Vipassanā  
or Vice Versa



Samatha and Vipassanā Yoke-Tied

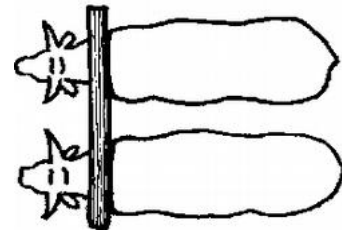


Image: nzdl.org

Thus, in all three combinations of cultivating samatha and vipassanā for attaining arahantship, the two are shown as not mutually exclusive. Also, the contradiction shown above between the Pāli Suttas and Theravādin commentaries exemplifies why we must recognise that the two sets of scriptures do not share the same terminology.

**Note:** An example of “samatha-preceded vipassanā” cultivation is in Jhāna Sutta (AN9.36), parallel to Mahāmālunkya Sutta (MN64.9-12). These suttas show that the jhānas do not mean being engrossed in an object. Instead, they show how, while engaging in the jhānas, one regards the true nature of phenomena connected with the five aggregates, which is an aspect of vipassanā. A similar passage is found in Dasama Sutta (AN11.16), where the expounder is Āyasmā Ānanda. As for “vipassanā-preceded samatha” cultivation, please see my answer to *Can you quote examples of vipassanā followed by samatha?* on page 127.

In summary, **while orthodox Theravāda uses “samatha” and “vipassanā” to denote two mutually exclusive types of meditation, the Suttas use them to mean two essential qualities of the path that can be cultivated together.**

This idea is echoed by Ajahn Chah when he said:

With right samādhi, no matter what level of calm is reached, there is awareness. There is full mindfulness and clear comprehension. This is the samādhi which can give rise to wisdom. (*The Path in Harmony*)

Now, I’m not saying that there are no mutually exclusive meditation systems in the *present* Buddhist world. In fact, *there are*, and in orthodox (i.e. classical Mahāvihāra) Theravādin terminology they are called “samatha” and “vipassanā”. I’m however saying (and showing) that in the

Suttas these two terms are used in a different way; they refer to two essential qualities of the path.<sup>12</sup>

### What “*Samatha*” Means in the Suttas

Let’s look at how “*samatha*” is used in the Suttas to gain a fresh idea of the word:

- Brahmāyācana Sutta (SN6.1): *sabba·saṅkhāra·samatha*, meaning “settling of all fabrications”, referring to Nibbāna.
- Vinaya Piṭaka: *adhikaraṇa·samatha*, meaning “case settlement”, referring to the Buddha’s prescription for settling disputes.

From these examples, we see that *samatha* is not used for meditation only. It has a general meaning of “settling” or “settlement”. In meditation, it of course then refers to settling the mind, as in *cetosamatha*, mental settling.

These translations tally with the traditional translations of *samatha* in other major schools of Buddhism. In Chinese Buddhism, *samatha* is often translated as simply 止(zhǐ), meaning “cease, stop, halt”, but a fuller translation is 止息(zhǐxī). 息 adds the meaning of “rest”. In Tibetan Buddhism, it is *shinay*, meaning “calm abiding”.<sup>13</sup> I shall show how the Suttas define *samatha* in meditation at the end of this discussion.

When some meditation teachers say something like “*samatha* (or *jhāna*) is unnecessary”, they are going by orthodox Theravādin terminology, where *samatha* means ‘concentration meditation’, possibly for getting into the absorption kind of *jhāna*. They do not mean the *samatha* of the Suttas. I don’t know of any meditation teacher who says mental settling (*cetosamatha*) is unnecessary.

In *No Ajahn Chah*, there’s a reference to the Suttas’ *samatha* without using the word: “Strengthening the mind is not done by making it move around as is done to strengthen the body, but by bringing the mind to a halt, bringing it to rest.” This quote agrees with this one from Vijjābhāgiya Sutta (AN2.31): “When settling is cultivated, what purpose does it serve? The mind is cultivated.”

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<i>samatha</i>	settling
• <i>cetosamatha</i>	• mental settling

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With this, you might like to reread the sutta passages on *samatha* under the above subheading *Samatha & Vipassanā* (p25) to have a better sense of its meaning.

### ‘Concentration Meditation’

If what we now call ‘*samatha* meditation’ or ‘concentration meditation’ is not the *samatha* of the Suttas, what then is it? Actually, they do have some things in common.

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12 In the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*, some people would incline more to *samatha*, while others *vipassanā*. See *Tatiya·samādhi Sutta* (AN4.94), where the Buddha advises the practitioner on how to make up for the lack.

13 I’m heartened to learn from Mingyur Rinpoche’s *Joyful Wisdom* (Three Rivers Press, 2009) that the Suttas’ usage of “*samatha*” and “*vipassanā*” is alive in a living Buddhist tradition. This has probably helped much in preserving the proper view of the practice, leading to his and his students’ success in ending suffering. The author is from the Karma Kagyu lineage rooted in the MūlaSarvāstivāda school, which originated from Sthaviravāda (上座部), the original Theravāda.

In ‘concentration meditation’ practice, one is to pay persistent attention to an object, such as the breathing sensation at the nose tip, ignoring everything else. When the attention is skilfully maintained, one gradually sinks into the object.

In the case of concentrating on breathing, the breathing gradually becomes regular, long and pleasant. It’s very likeable. Due to the lack of energy use, the breathing naturally becomes shorter and subtler, until it stops. If one doesn’t worry about that, it’s possible to stay with that subtle sensation of no breathing.

Some of the above can be connected to the Suttas: the attention to breathing and the no breathing: “For one engaged in the fourth jhāna, in-and-out breathing has ceased.” (Rahogata Sutta, SN36.11)

The following however finds no basis in the Suttas: With the lack of an object to concentrate on, the cognitive mind (*mano*) fabricates its own. The created object, called “*nimitta*” in orthodox Theravāda, can vary greatly. (For more, see *Appendix 10: Visuddhimagga Nimittas Need Not Be Visual*.)<sup>14</sup> If the concentration is strong, the object can be a bright circle of light. One’s attention is easily drawn to this spontaneous mental creation<sup>15</sup>—and if one can sustain attention to this new object, one eventually feels as if one sinks into and merges with it, resulting in an intense, concentrated exhilaration.

Throughout the whole process described above, one’s mind gradually disconnects from everything other than the object of attention. If one isn’t bothered by the lack of sensory impingement, one is likely to find the experience delightful.

This absorbed state is called “*jhāna*” in orthodox Theravāda. Together with its ‘*nimitta*’ prerequisite, it is nowhere to be found in the Suttas.<sup>16</sup> Instead, the Suttas say somewhat the opposite: “**When one lives with restraint over the faculty of the mind (*manindriyaṃ*), the mind (*cittaṃ*) is not soaked (*byāsiñcati*) in things cognizable by the mind (*manoviññeyyesu*).**” (PamādaVihārī Sutta, SN35.97)<sup>17</sup> So, while in orthodox Theravāda, one is taught to be absorbed in a ‘*nimitta*’, which is of course something cognizable by the cognitive mind (*mano*); the Suttas tells us not to be soaked in things cognizable by the cognitive mind. Bear in mind that this sutta speaks of the practice leading to *samādhi* and manifestation of the *dhammas*.

So, what then is this ‘concentration meditation’ now so commonly taught? **I now see it as a form of meditation foreign to the Noble Eight-factored Path.** By that I do not mean that it is

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14 This is similar to a known cause of hallucinations:

The most ironic cause of hallucinations has to be visual impairment, whether from glaucoma, cataracts, tumors or other ailments. According to Live Science, Charles Bonnet syndrome gives people “vivid, complex visual hallucinations,” commonly faces, cartoons and patterns. “It is thought the condition occurs **because the brain’s visual system is no longer receiving visual information from the eye or part of the retina, and begins making up its own images.**” (<https://www.ibtimes.com/brain-science-6-weird-things-can-cause-hallucinations-2604229>, shortcut: [bit.ly/halluc](https://bit.ly/halluc))

15 At this point of the practice, Āyasmā Aggacitta points out that it can no longer be rightly called *ānāpāna·sati*. It has become *ānāpāna·nimitta·sati*.

16 Something in Upakkilesa Sutta (MN128) may seem to suggest it, but is unsatisfactory. See <https://web.archive.org/web/20160306112732/http://measurelessmind.ca/nimitta.html> (Shortcut: [tiny.cc/nimitta](https://tiny.cc/nimitta))

17 Translated by Aggacitta Bhikkhu. The Pāli words in parentheses are added by me, so that the reader may not be confused by the two different “mind”s. For *mano*, I prefer to translate more specifically as “cognitive mind”.

useless or ‘bad’, but that **it is possible to achieve Awakening without it, a fact even the Visuddhimagga acknowledges**. It is also foreign in the way that it cannot be practised together with the rest of the Noble Eight-factored Path. For example, one cannot practise satipaṭṭhāna, much less cultivate vipassanā, in such an absorbed state. All these show that the concepts of “samatha” and “jhāna” in the Orthodox Theravāda are different from those in the Suttas.

**Caution:** Do not use this to belittle Visuddhimagga jhāna practitioners. To arrive at such states, one has to be fairly well-cultivated. Besides, with the support of their disciplined attitude, they are likely to do well and gain insights easily should they be open to the Sutta jhānas. Nevertheless, it’s beneficial to share information out of generosity.

### *The Suttas’ Meaning of Samatha in Meditation*

Probably the best description of “samatha” in meditation is found in Tatiya-samādhi Sutta (AN4.94). Here the Buddha speaks of the person who has gained distinct seeing of phenomena through heightened discernment (adhipaññā-dhamma-vipassanā), but has not gained **inner mental settling (ajjhataṃ cetosamatha)**.<sup>18</sup> This person is to approach a person who has gained inner mental settling and ask, “**How is the mind (citta) to be steadied (saṅṭhapetabbaṃ)... to be settled down (sannisādetabbaṃ)... to be poised (ekodi kātabbaṃ)... to be composed (samādahātabbaṃ)?**” This is what samatha is about according to the Suttas.

This quote is parallel to another found in Kāyagatāsati Sutta (MN119.21): “**internally the mind steadies (santiṭṭhati), settles down (sannisīdati), is poised (ekodi hoti), is composed (samādhiyati).**” Let me put them side by side for you:

<b>Tatiya-samādhi Sutta (AN4.94)</b>	<b>Kāyagatāsati Sutta (MN119.21)</b>
How is the mind (citta)	... internally the mind
to be steadied (saṅṭhapetabbaṃ)...	steadies (santiṭṭhati),
to be settled down (sannisādetabbaṃ)...	settles down (sannisīdati),
to be poised (ekodi kātabbaṃ)...	is poised (ekodi hoti),
to be composed (samādahātabbaṃ)?	is composed (samādhiyati).

In Kāyagatāsati Sutta, among the practices mentioned that lead to the above effects include discerning one’s posture and full awareness during daily activities. So, although these are now commonly labelled “vipassanā”, they are actually samatha practices, as how the word “samatha”

<sup>18</sup> I follow Āyasmā Aggacitta in translating vipassanā as “distinct seeing”. I find it literal and meaningfully conveying the Suttas’ vipassanā.

is used in the Suttas.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, this *samatha* differs greatly from the ‘concentration meditation’ *samatha*.

The same phrase occurs in Vitakka-sañṭhāna Sutta (MN20), which provides five ways to pacify “evil, unskillful thoughts—associated with desire, associated with aversion, associated with delusion”. The second way, for example, is to scrutinise the drawbacks of those thoughts: “So, these thoughts are unskillful; so, these thoughts are faulty; so, these thoughts result in stress.” For all the five ways, upon abandoning the evil, unskillful thoughts, “internally the mind steadies, settles down, is poised, and is composed.” As we can see, scrutinizing the drawbacks of unskillful thoughts is also *samatha* in the Suttas.

From these suttas, we can conclude that **any practice that settles the mind is *samatha***.

**Note:** Besides defining *samatha*, Tatiya-samādhī Sutta also defines *vipassanā* by saying that a person who hasn’t gained *vipassanā* is to approach a person who has and ask, “How are fabrications (*saṅkhārā*) to be viewed (*daṭṭhabbā*)... to be probed (*sammasitabbā*)... to be distinctly seen (*vipassitabbā*)?”

Here, “fabrications (*saṅkhārā*)” should refer to not just one of the five aggregates, but to a larger meaning inclusive of all aggregates, as the “*samatha*-preceded *vipassanā*” cultivation is described in suttas referenced in a note on page 27. With this sutta definition of *vipassanā*, we can evaluate if our practice includes it.

If in reading the above you feel confused about the terminology, I don’t blame you. What orthodox Theravāda now refers to as ‘*vipassanā*’, is actually called *satipaṭṭhāna* in the Suttas, which includes both *samatha* (settling), and *vipassanā* (distinct seeing).

## Samādhī

The last pair of Pāli words in the two parallel sets above, *samādahātabbām* and *samādhīyati*, are commonly translated as “to be concentrated” and “be concentrated” respectively. Why do I not translate them as such?

In the Theravādin world, *samādhī* is commonly translated as “concentration”, thus for consistency’s sake, *samādahātabbām* and *samādhīyati* are commonly translated as “to be concentrated” and “be concentrated”. “Concentration” is an acceptable translation, but *only if* understood correctly.

If you look it up in a dictionary, you’ll find that it has many meanings. Which one do you have in mind for meditation? Since meditation is mental work, an English user is likely to associate “concentration” with its mind-related meanings, such as

1. act or power of focusing one’s attention or mental ability<sup>20</sup>

19 Since orthodox Theravāda regards *samatha* as concentration practice, it has to classify these kāyagatāsati practices as *vipassanā*. While doing so aligns with orthodoxy, it creates an age-old confusion in people trying to understand the Suttas.

20 *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Ninth Edition), Oxford University Press 1995

2. act or process of concentrating, especially the fixing of close, undivided attention<sup>21</sup>
3. a process in which you put a lot of attention, energy etc into a particular activity<sup>22</sup>
4. great and constant diligence and attention<sup>23</sup>
5. (synonyms) absorption, engrossment, immersion<sup>24</sup>

In my observation, many Buddhist meditators regard “concentration” as described in the first and second definition, and failure in that means failure in meditation. Some hope that such effort to concentrate would result in states of the fifth, upon which the meditation is deemed successful. They may do as said in the third and fourth too, especially when they are eager to achieve the fifth.

In any case, the general idea among the above definitions seems to be “focused attention”. Can we rightly associate this idea with *samādhi*? If we go by later scriptures, yes. In fact, in the *Visuddhimagga* (III.3), *samādhi* is specifically about focusing one’s mind “on a single object” (*ekārammaṇe*).

From personal experience and reports from others, I know that meditating with such ideas can create problems such as tension, fatigue, sleeping disorders—stressful conditions that meditation should help to solve, not create. Even if this happens to only half of the practitioners, something is very wrong. Surely this is not what the Buddha intended. Therefore, I wanted to find a better translation, one that does not lead to stressful effort.

My meditation teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, prefers “stability (of mind)”. This translation would not create the problems mentioned above, and in practice I find it excellent. Taking this as the meaning of *samādhi* fundamentally changed my view of the practice, and thus my practice too. However, it is difficult to apply “stability” consistently to other parts of speech. For example, *asamāhita citta* would have to be translated as “un-stabled mind” or “unstabilized mind”. In addition to being somewhat un-English, both suggest too extreme a meaning.

So, I started to wonder if there might be a translation that could both convey the right meaning and be suitable for consistent translation. Such a translation is more likely to appeal to and be adopted by Dhamma teachers and sutta translators, which I hope for.

As I mentally searched for a suitable English word to convey *samādhi*, “composure” came to mind. I became excited and went on to analyse the word “*samādhi*”, and here’s what I found.

“*Samādhi*” is the noun for the verb “*samādhiyati*”, the passive form for the active verb “*samādahati*”.

*Samādahati* = *saṃ* + *ādahati*  
                   = together<sup>25</sup> + put, place  
                   = put together, place together  
                   = compose<sup>26</sup>, collect

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21 *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition Copyright © 2007, 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Updated in 2009.

22 *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, Pearson Education Limited 2003

23 WordNet 3.0 by Princeton University

24 *Ibid.*

25 The prefix *saṃ* can also mean “properly” or “evenly”, but “together” seems the more likely meaning here.

26 Elements of the Pāli word *samādahati* is strikingly similar to the English “compose”:

Etymologically, *compose* means simply ‘put together’; it comes, via Old French *composer*, from *compos-*, the perfect stem of Latin *compōnere*, a compound verb formed from the prefix *com-* ‘with’ and *pōnere* ‘place, put’, source of English *position*. (<https://www.quword.com/etym/s/>)



Besides the literal meaning above, “samādahati”, “collect” and “compose” all also share a figurative meaning: “to still or calm down (the mind)”. Furthermore,

Samāhita (*participle of samādahati*)  
= composed (*participle of compose*), collected (*participle of collect*)

All these describe a mind that is not scattered, not “all over the place”; but gathered, collected, composed. Interestingly, *samāhita* is already commonly defined in Pāli-English dictionaries as “composed” and “collected (of mind)”, besides “settled”, “firm” and “attentive”, and *never* as “concentrated”.

Extrapolating from the above,

Samādhi = composure, collectedness

These are the best English equivalents of *samādhi* I’ve found. They also agree with its Chinese translation: 定(dìng), which in relation to the mind (*citta* or 心 = (literally) heart), means “calm, stable”. In no way does 定 mean “concentration”—unless of course we read that meaning *into* the word due to our current orthodox Buddhist conditioning.<sup>27</sup>

In German, *samādhi* is commonly translated as *sammlung*, literally meaning “collection”, “collectedness” or “composure”. (Note that both *samādhi* and *sammlung* have the same prefix *sam*.) In fact, Āyasmā Anālayo, a German himself, quite naturally came to a similar conclusion in his book *Satipaṭṭhāna* (p72):

The noun *samādhi* is related to the verb *samādahati*, “to put together” or “to collect”, such as when one collects wood to kindle a fire (e.g. at Vin IV 115). *Samādhi* thus stands for “**collecting**” **oneself**, in the sense of **composure** or unification of the mind. [*Emphases added.*]

However, *right after* the above (and elsewhere in his book), he uses “concentration” for *samādhi*:

The discourses use the term “concentration” (*samādhi*) in a surprisingly broad manner, relating it to walking meditation, for example, or to observing the arising and passing away of feelings and cognitions, or to contemplating the arising and passing away of the five aggregates.

No explanation given.

In any case, what he finds surprising above actually isn’t surprising at all, once we understand *samādhi* not as concentration but as collectedness or composure, just as the venerable himself has concluded immediately before that. “Walking meditation..., observing the arising and passing away of feelings and cognitions..., contemplating the arising and passing away of the five aggregates” are all related to composure, to collectedness, to *samādhi*.

“Composure” fits nicely into the usage of *samādhi* in the Suttas. At the same time, it is similar to the original meaning of “concentration” (as I shall show under the next subheading), yet free from any stressful meaning of “concentration” listed earlier. This is why under the previous

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[compose](#))

27 Although the traditional Chinese translation for *samādhi* is 定, due to the influence of modern Theravādin English books, some people have now also begun to translated it as 专注(zhuān zhù), which means “concentrate one’s attention on, be absorbed in, devote one’s mind to” (Vicon Chinese(S)-English Dictionary). Thus the Visuddhimagga-influenced English translation has now affected the Chinese Buddhist world too.

subheading I translate *samādahātabbaram* as “to be composed” and *samādhiyati* as “be composed” (instead of “to be concentrated” and “be concentrated”).

“Collectedness” also shares the above advantages, but may be less suitable for a consistent translation to other parts of speech. For example, “compose your mind” is easily understood, while “collect your mind” may evoke a funny meaning for some people. Nonetheless, it is completely acceptable in modern English, and is actually used in the Buddhist meditation context. For example, “Place your attention on the breathing for a few minutes to collect and settle the mind.” (Ajahn Thiradhammo, *Working With The Five Hindrances*, p62.). Besides, for some people, “collectedness” may seem more elegant compared to “composure”.

Nearing the end of completing this book, I happened to see that “composure”, “composed”, etc, are also the choice for Upul Nishantha Gamage (successor of Godwin Samararatne as the teacher of Nilambe Buddhist Meditation Centre) in his book *Coming Alive with Mindfulness of Breathing*, while “collectedness” is Ajahn Amaro’s.<sup>28</sup> Ajahn Sucitto also uses “collectedness” in *Meditation – An Outline* (p25) and “composure” in *Meditation: A Way of Awakening* (p47-48). Although they are not specified as linked to *samādhi*, their contexts suggest they are.

So, clearly these two words have already gained traction in modern Buddhist usage. I hope to see more of this.

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samādhi ( <i>noun</i> )	composure, collectedness
• samādhiyati ( <i>passive of samādahati</i> )	• be composed, be collected
• samādahati ( <i>active verb</i> )	• ( <i>lit. ‘put-together’</i> ) compose, collect
• samāhita ( <i>participle of samādahati</i> )	• composed, collected
• samādahātabbaram ( <i>potential participle of samādahati</i> )	• to be composed, to be collected
• samādahanta ( <i>samādaham, samādharam</i> )	• composing, collecting
• sammā-samādhi	• proper composure, proper collectedness

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Assuming that you agree with my conclusions above, which set of words do you prefer: “composure” etc or “collectedness” etc? To decide for yourself, I suppose you would have to try using each of them for a suitable period, taking it as a quality to be cultivated. After a while, you should then see which works better for you.

**Significantly, when we read *sammā-samādhi* (正定) as “proper composure”, we can then relate the four jhānas with a progression of composure, not of concentration.** You can read more on this in *Appendix 2: More on Concentration, Composure & Samādhi*.

To conclude, when we come across “concentration” or “concentrated” in a Buddhist context, we should consider what it really means. If the context is orthodox Theravādin, it probably *really* means the same as how we normally understand the word. In sutta translations though, it’s

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28 See <https://www.amaravati.org/audio/meditation-primer-samadhi-collectedness/>, shortcut: tiny.cc/amaro.

probably translated from *samādhi* or *samāhita* etc, thus should actually be read as “composure/collectedness” or “composed/collected”.

### **Why Not Stick to “Concentration”?**

To be fair, there is one meaning of “concentration” close to the literal meaning of *samādhi*: “the act of gathering or bringing together” or “something so gathered”.<sup>29</sup> Taking this meaning when we read “concentrated mind” (*samāhita citta*), we may conceive a mind that is gathered, not in a mess.

See this sentence example from *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*: “Relaxing in a Jacuzzi concentrates the mind wonderfully.” It explains that “if something concentrates the mind, it makes you think very clearly”. This meaning of “concentrate” of course isn’t about focusing one’s attention “on a single object” as the *Visuddhimagga* describes. “Relaxing” can be connected to “the body calms down” (*kāyo passambhati*), which many suttas such as *PamādaVihārī Sutta* (SN35.97) says eventually leads to the mind being composed (*samādhīyati*).

If we take *this* idea when reading “concentrate”, “concentrated” or “concentration” in a sutta translation, then it works fine. In fact, some meditation teachers, e.g. Ajahn Ṭhānissaro, also seem to use “concentrate” etc this way. However, most meditators don’t. Thus, even if the teacher qualifies the word as above, his intended meaning is competing with a far more pervasive and ingrained meaning of focusing one’s attention on something.

It’s a lost cause, in my opinion. When meditators think of practising “concentration”, they don’t want to “think very clearly”, they try to *not think*. They want something to focus on and ignore everything else. Therefore, although technically “concentration” can translate *samādhi*, in practice it’s a poor choice.

This is even truer when “concentration” is associated with “one-pointedness” (which, as I’ll show later, is a misleading translation). Reading “concentration” in this context, people are quite certain to conceive concentrating *the attention on an object* rather than concentrating *the mind itself*. (Note: Besides having different objects, the two “concentrating” here have different meanings.) And so their understanding of *samādhi* would follow that of later Theravādin texts, even if they are reading the Suttas.

I have observed one teacher using this word vaguely, shifting between the two meanings, perhaps in an effort to merge the different usages in the early and later texts. Such muddled use of the word is bound to condition muddled practice, and thus should be avoided.

As shown above, there are reasonable grounds to avoid using “concentration” for *samādhi*, but if you still prefer this presently common translation because it sounds more right, please refer to my response on page 129 in *Appendix 18: Questions & Answers*. (For the sake of ease and clarity, from here onwards I shall use “concentration” to mean only its common notion in meditation: “concentrating (or focusing) one’s attention”.)

To sum up, **the “samādhi” of the Suttas is about concentrating the mind itself, while the “samādhi” of the Visuddhimagga is about concentrating on an object.**

**Trivia:** The history of the word “concentration” resembles the history of Theravādin meditation practice. The verb “concentrate” originates from Latin: *com* (together) + *centrum* (centre), meaning “to bring or

29 *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Ninth Edition), Oxford University Press 1995

come to a common centre”; similar to the literal meaning of the verb for *samādhi*: *samādahati*, “put together”. “Concentration” in the sense of “mental focus” appeared only in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. (Reference: [www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=concentrate](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=concentrate)) Similarly, the idea of *samādhi* as one-pointedness also came about later in the Buddhist history.

### *When You Know for Yourself*

That *samādhi* shouldn’t mean concentration, but composure or collectedness, can be seen by relating the Suttas with our own experience. For example, examine this translation of Kimatthiya Sutta (AN10.1) and see if you notice anything odd about it. (Note the lines I’ve emphasised.)

[Ānanda:] “What, O Venerable One, is the reward and blessing of wholesome morality?”

[The Buddha:] “Freedom from remorse, Ānanda.”

“And of freedom from remorse?”

“Joy, Ānanda”

“And of joy?”

“Rapture, Ānanda”

“And of rapture?”

“Tranquillity, Ānanda.”

“And of tranquillity?”

“Happiness, Ānanda.”

**“And of happiness?”**

**“Concentration, Ānanda.”**

**“And of concentration?”**

**“Vision and knowledge according to reality.”**

“And of the vision and knowledge according to reality?”

“Turning away and detachment, Ānanda.”

“And of turning away and detachment?”

“The vision and knowledge with regard to Deliverance, Ānanda.”

— Nyanatiloka, trans.; *The Buddha’s Path to Deliverance* (pp64-65, BPS, 2000)

For many years I had difficulty understanding passages like this, which occur in AN6.50, AN10.2, SN12.23, SN35.97, etc. How are we to gain concentration as the reward of happiness (*sukha*) rooted in freedom from remorse? Has this ever happened to you? Not me. Neither do I recall ever gaining knowledge and vision according to reality (*yathābhūtañāṇa-dassana*) as the reward of concentration. I remember being rewarded with strange experiences though. Just experiences, not insights; for I learnt nothing that reduced suffering.

However, **what if we substitute “concentration” with “composure” or “collectedness”?** (Try that with the above.) **Suddenly, such passages begin to make sense.** When the mind is

happy, rooted in freedom from remorse, it becomes composed. With that composure, the mind becomes clear, thus enabling knowledge and vision according to reality.<sup>30</sup>

The above sutta is parallel to Indriya-saṁvara Sutta (AN6.50), in which *sīla* (translated above as “morality”) is said to be the proximate cause of *sammā-samādhi* (not just *samādhi*), which in turn is the proximate cause of *yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana* (translated above as “vision and knowledge according to reality”). This removes all doubts about whether the *samādhi* in this case refers to the four jhānas.

This above tallies with what Ajahn Chah said in *The Dhamma Goes Westward*: “If you start with *sīla*, this restraint will bring calm. That is *samādhi* and it becomes a cause for wisdom.”

Besides the issue on *samādhi*, the above translation also has another in translating *pīti* as “rapture” (a word of Christian origin). The English word refers to a state of elated bliss, synonymous with “ecstasy”. As such, some people even link it with the body vibrating, swaying, or some other movements. Can freedom from remorse lead to such things? (I’m referring to normal people.) “Rapture” may fit in the context of absorption jhāna, but in the above sutta, it makes no sense. I prefer “joy” (as in many dictionaries too). As for the “joy” in the above translation, it’s from *pāmojja* from the verb *pamodati*, which *Concise Pāli-English Dictionary* (CPED) defines as “rejoices; enjoys; is glad”. Based on that, I prefer “gladness”. Try replacing these words in the above sutta translation and see how much better the sutta flows.

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pīti	joy
pāmojja	gladness

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By relating such suttas with experience, we can see how “concentration” (besides some other translations) just doesn’t work. When we assume it is correct, we would be confused, or have to distort the meaning of the word, which would then contradict many other suttas.

### ***When Samādhi is Translated as “Concentration”***

The translator above might have regarded “concentration” in the right way, in the way that agrees with the *samādhi* of the Suttas, but because it’s most likely to be understood as focused attention, it confuses many of us. And we may wonder if we’re just not intelligent or knowledgeable enough to understand such passages.

With “concentration” as the translation for *samādhi*, how we understand many suttas in English translation is significantly affected. For example, compare these two:

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30 How *samādhi* enables discerning according to reality (*yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti*) is elaborated in *Samādhi Sutta* (SN35.99).

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It is, bhikkhus, when **concentration** by mindfulness of breathing has been developed and cultivated that no shaking or trembling occurs in the body, and no shaking or trembling occurs in the mind.<sup>31</sup>

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It is, bhikkhus, when **composure** by mindfulness of breathing has been developed and cultivated that no shaking or trembling occurs in the body, and no shaking or trembling occurs in the mind.

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How would you understand them differently?

If I go by the translation on the left, I will think no shaking or trembling occurs because of concentration, and will try to achieve the effect by *mindfully concentrating my attention on breathing*. If I go by the one on the right, I will think the effect is because of composure, and will try to achieve it by *composing my mind through mindfulness of breathing*. So, whether *samādhi* is translated as “concentration” or “composure” greatly affects how I understand the passage and how I practice. I believe this is also true for others. If you are still undecided which translation gives a more accurate understanding, I have more analysis in *Appendix 11: Ānāpānasati Revisited* for your reference.

“Concentration” is so much regarded as *the* translation for *samādhi* that it’s used even in English translations of Thai and Burmese Buddhist teachings. Consequently, we might assume that the teacher meant “concentration” in the way we think it means, but that assumption may be wrong.

The common Burmese translation for *samādhi* is “tī-kyī-gyin”, meaning ‘stable-clear-ness’. Perhaps based on this meaning Sayadaw U Tejaniya adopted “stability of mind”. In Thai, *samādhi* is usually left as it is, though pronounced as “samathi”; but sometimes it’s rendered as *khvam sa-ngop*, meaning “tranquillity, stillness”; and sometimes in the forest tradition as *jit tang man*, meaning “firmly established mind”; and *jit ruam*, meaning “collected mind”. (*Jit* comes from *citta*.)<sup>32</sup> All these point *samādhi* away from the idea of concentration as in focused attention; and the last one, *jit ruam*, is quite literally “samāhita citta”.

Although “concentration” poorly translates the *samādhi* of the Suttas, it fits that of orthodox Theravāda; hence pioneering Pāli-English translators understandably chose “concentration”—and it got stuck. So nowadays when a teacher says “samathi”, “jit ruam”, “khvam sa-ngop” or “tī-kyī-gyin”, the translator tends to render it as “concentration”, thus misleading the audience.

There is an example of this in a discussion between Āyasmā Aggacitta and Ajahn Dtun in 2011 on the practice and attainments. Although Āyasmā Aggacitta knew some Thai, he wasn’t fluent in it. So a student of Ajahn Dtun, an English-speaking monk, translated for them. Āyasmā Aggacitta noticed that whenever Ajahn Dtun said “khvam sa-ngop”, the student always translated it as “concentration”. This also often occurs in earlier translations of Ajahn Chah’s talks. So we need to bear this in mind when reading translations or listening through translators.

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31 From the translation of Mahākappina Sutta (SN54.7) in CDB (p1769).

32 Though I agree “jit tang man” is equivalent to *samādhi*, it translates another Pāli term better: *suppatitthita-citta*. Moreover, *suppatitthita* (well-established) here may well be translated simply as “stable”, which relates to Sayadaw U Tejaniya’s translation “stability of mind”.

**Note:** When Thai ajahns (teachers) say “samathi”, they sometimes mean “meditation”. This usage seems to have its roots in the Suttas. Consider that Cūḷavedalla Sutta (MN44.10) says, “Proper endeavour, proper mindfulness, and proper **samādhi**—these phenomena are grouped in the aggregate of **samādhi**.” It seems like the latter *samādhi* should mean “meditation”. This usage is also alive as “semadi” in Malay and Indonesian languages, both of which have the majority of their words derived from Sanskrit, which is similar to Pāli.

### ***Does Samādhi Mean Cutting Off Sensory Perceptions?***

For many people, “concentration” in meditation means “focused attention”, and doing this well means getting into deep concentration, usually meaning cutting off or not perceiving the five senses. Some call that “jhāna”.

With this idea of meditation, the mind naturally assumes the need for a silent environment. For Ajahn Chah, this isn’t the way:

Practising samādhi does not mean shutting oneself off completely. Some people think that they need to first find a very quiet place, where they don’t encounter any issues, where they can just sit in total stillness. But that is like being dead, not being alive.<sup>33</sup>

With this concentration idea, the meditator is unwilling to tolerate noise: *This noise is disturbing my meditation!* It also spurs the meditator to sit frequently, for long periods, and try to not move, not think, and ignore all sense objects other than the chosen one.

Sitting for a long time in a quiet place is fine in itself. The concern is why. Is it just because the conditions are such that it happen, or is it a deliberate effort towards prolonged sensory deprivation and concentration?

How long one can sit has also been used to measure how well one meditates, thus turning meditation into somewhat an endurance training. Some teachers actually insist on long sitting without allowing any movement, scaring many away from meditation. Some even enforce it, resulting in people being traumatized.

Of course we can’t find such ideas promoted in the Suttas. What’s the point of the practice anyway: to increase or decrease stress?

In the Suttas, we can find the Buddha’s teachings on setting the mind on specified bases, such as the six recollections and the four divine-abidings. However, these are not for concentration, nor are they for disconnection from everything else. Rather, they are for mental settling (cetosamatha).

**Settling the mind is not about cutting off sensory perceptions.** See what Sammāsamādhi Sutta (AN5.113) says:

“Bhikkhus, possessed of five things a bhikkhu is unable to abide engaging in proper composure (sammāsamādhiṃ upasampajja viharitum).<sup>34</sup> What five? Here, a

33 From a talk in Thai “Jit Kheu Arai?” (What is the Mind?), translated by Āyasmā Gavesako.

34 For my justification on translating *upasampajja* as “engaging in”, instead of the more common “enters (upon) and”, see *Appendix 15: ‘Entering’ Jhāna?*

bhikkhu is intolerant of [visual] forms, intolerant of sounds, intolerant of odours, intolerant of tastes, intolerant of physical sensations. Possessed with these five things a bhikkhu is unable to abide engaging in proper composure.”

“Bhikkhus, possessed of five things a bhikkhu is able to abide engaging in proper composure. What five? Here, a bhikkhu is tolerant of [visual] forms, tolerant of sounds, tolerant of odours, tolerant of tastes, tolerant of physical sensations. Possessed with these five things a bhikkhu is able to abide engaging in proper composure.”

**In other words, to abide engaging in proper composure, i.e. the four jhānas, we need to accept five-sense impingements.** After all, as Ajahn Chah and Sayadaw U Tejaniya both say, “Sound is just sound.” Such a right view allows one to be *tolerant*. Besides, the above sutta obviously presupposes that **one experiences the five senses in the jhānas. Otherwise, one wouldn’t have their objects to be tolerant of.**<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, if all we want is just to get concentrated on something and disconnect from everything else, then we can’t be *sato sampajāno* (mindful and fully aware). It is a phrase found in the description of the third jhāna, and defined in Sati Sutta (SN47.35) as to abide observing body, feelings, mind, or dhammas; and to know feelings, thoughts and perceptions as they arise, persist, and disappear.

On this matter, Ajahn Ṭhānissaro says,

If whole areas of your awareness are blocked off, how can you gain all-around insight? And as I’ve noticed in years since, people adept at blotting out large areas of awareness through powerful one-pointedness also tend to be psychologically adept at dissociation and denial.<sup>36</sup>

I believe these people have been psychologically dissociating and denying before learning to practice this way. Nonetheless, they’re probably attracted to such a practice, because it confirms their perception of how to deal with unhappiness, and even enhances their dissociating and denying skills. With that, they can be expected to cling tightly to this practice. This relates to the danger Ajahn Chah warned about (quoted early in Part 1), and to ‘spiritual bypass’ (mentioned in the table (p17) under *More Comparison* in Part 1.)

Having experienced a highly disconnected state, a misguided meditator may even be convinced that he’s liberated.<sup>37</sup> I believe this is—or at least a sort of—what the Buddha meant by wrong composure (*micchā-samādhi*), which leads to wrong knowledge (*micchā-ñāṇa*) and wrong liberation (*micchā-vimutti*), i.e. a false liberation, rooted in wrong view. Ajahn Chah seemed to think the same:

Wrong *samādhi* is where the mind enters calm and there’s no awareness at all. One could sit for two hours or even all day but the mind doesn’t know where it’s been or what’s happened. It doesn’t know anything. There is calm, but that’s all.... This is a deluded type of calm, because there is not much self-awareness. The meditator may

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35 More on this in *Appendix 6: Is Sound Heard When Engaging in the Jhānas?*

36 From “Jhāna Not by the Numbers” (<http://tiny.cc/jhanan>). Although Ajahn Ṭhānissaro translates *samādhi* as “concentration” here and most other places, this quote shows that he doesn’t mean exclusive one-pointed attention.

37 See story in *Appendix 2: More on Concentration, Composure & Samādhi*.



think he has reached the ultimate already, so he doesn't bother to look for anything else. ("The Path in Harmony" in *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*)

### ***When Samādhi is Interpreted as 'Penetrative Concentration'***

Earlier I mentioned that *samādhi* is commonly translated into Burmese as "tī-kyī-gyin", meaning 'stable-clear-ness'. However, some contemporary Burmese teachers prefer "su-saik-khyin", literally "needle-affixed-ness". With the image this translation evokes, these teachers often advocate effort to concentrate so that one can *penetrate* the object of attention to gain enlightenment. Even if not intended so by the teacher, this translation suggests effortful concentration.

Bearing this idea, if we can't penetrate the object even after much practice, what do we do? Put more effort. That's what I did around 20 years ago—repeatedly, till I doubted my ability to practise. Whenever I overexerted myself, I ended up tensed and tired; I became worse off than before I started. For details see *Appendix 5: My Effortful Meditation Experience*.

I'm far from being the only one who has experienced this. In meditation traditions that emphasize effort, this unhappy phenomenon is fairly common. One teacher named it "stone-in-the-head syndrome".

For me, now, **trying to penetrate the truth with effortful concentration is like trying to understand air by forcefully and continuously spearing it. How is that going to work?** Many suttas (e.g. SN12.41, SN48.50, MN70.23, AN4.113, AN5.26) state that **the truth is penetrated by discernment (paññā), not force or concentration**. Had I known this more than 20 years ago, I could have saved myself a big load of suffering.

This "needle-affixed-ness" translation also conflicts with the Suttas' description of a composed mind (*samāhita citta*), which includes *mudubhūta*, meaning "pliant, flexible, malleable", or literally "has become soft" or "softened". A malleable mind simply can't happen through effortful concentration.

### ***Samādhi Untranslated***

In some recent English works, the writer or translator leaves *samādhi* untranslated, likely having considered that "concentration" is unsuitable. Doing so is certainly better than using "concentration". It allows the audience to form their understanding based on the context. However, their understanding remains subject to influence by the usage and translation of *samādhi* elsewhere, which at the point of this writing is mostly still "concentration". So, if there isn't enough context for them to form a correct idea of the untranslated word, its meaning in their minds will likely still be "concentration". So, if one prefers to leave this word untranslated, I would suggest defining it on the spot.

### ***How Samādhi Relates to Ekaggatā***

If you've read much of the Suttas in English translation, this 'new' translation of *samādhi* (composure) may still seem wrong. You may challenge this translation with this statement from Cūlavēdalla Sutta (MN44.12): *cittassa ekaggatā ayam samādhi*, which typically translates to "one-pointedness of mind—this is concentration".<sup>38</sup> Now, if we translate *samādhi* as "composure" (or

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38 In the sutta, this statement is made by Dhammānā Bhikkhūnī in reply to a question by a layman, Visakha. He later reports the conversation to the Buddha, who then says,

“collectedness”), the statement would then read as “one-pointedness of mind—this is composure (or collectedness)”. This doesn’t make sense, does it?

The problem actually lies not with translating *samādhi* as “composure” (or “collectedness”) but with *ekaggatā* as “one-pointedness”. Let me explain below.

## Ekaggatā

For a long time in Theravāda Buddhism, *ekaggatā* has been commonly translated as “one-pointedness”. While the translation is now mostly taken for granted, how do people understand it?

The Pāli word has three parts: *eka* (one), *agga*, and *tā* (-ness). So clearly this common translation takes *agga* to mean “pointed”. For this word, Princeton University’s WordNet 3.0 provides two meanings:

1. Direct and obvious in meaning or reference; often unpleasant.
2. Having a point.

The first definition is completely out of place, so we’re left with “Having a point”.

“Point” has many meanings, but since “one-pointedness” often appears with “concentration”, we tend to presume one: “The precise location of something; a spatially limited location.” Or perhaps “A very small circular shape,” i.e. a dot. (WordNet 3.0, Princeton University)

Thus—if our idea of meditation involves paying attention to the body, i.e. a physical object—it’s easy to put “one-pointedness” and “concentration” together and assume the notion “fixing of close, undivided attention on a spatially limited location (or a dot)”. This notion also allows us to relate it somewhat with the Visuddhimagga’s *samādhi*, the placing of attention *on a single object*.

All this may seem valid and reasonable, except for one problem: **In the Suttas, *agga* does not mean “spatially limited location” or “dot”.**

### Trying to Fit “One-pointedness” into Ekaggatā

Before I explain the above statement, let me first show how people have coped with “one-pointedness”. “One-pointedness” has gained such wide acceptance as *the* translation for *ekaggatā* that most people don’t question it. So, people who assume it means “fixing of close, undivided attention on a spatially limited location”, and believe it’s necessary, will try to practice that.

For orthodox ānāpānasati practitioners, the *point* is at the nose. For those whose main object is the rising and falling of the abdomen, it’s less certain. Yet, when I was following this method, I managed to find a way anyhow. (More in *Appendix 4: My Search for ‘One-pointedness’*)

This translation is also used by some teachers who don’t subscribe to absorption *jhānas*, such as some notable senior western disciples of Ajahn Chah. However, they interpret it to mean something other than a spatially limited location. For example, Ajahn Sumedho says that

One-pointedness can be seen in terms of the one point that excludes everything [else], because that’s the logic of thought. Intuition, on the other hand, is nonverbal

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“Dhammānā the nun is wise, Visakha, a woman of great discernment. If you had asked me those things, I would have answered you in the same way she did. That is the meaning of those things. That is how you should remember it.” (trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu)

Equating *samādhi* with *cittassa ekaggatā* occurs in another form in SN48.9-11, where the Buddha describes the faculty of *samādhi* as “Here a noble disciple, having made the foundation for letting go, obtains *samādhi*, obtains *cittassa ekaggatā*.”

and non-thinking; so the point is everywhere and it includes everything. (*The Sound of Silence*, pp136-137)

He refers to this “point that includes, rather than excludes” many times in the book. In some places, he also relates it to words like “stillpoint” and “oneness”. It seems like he is trying to fit this awkward “one-pointedness” translation into his understanding, perhaps as a response to questions on “one-pointedness”.

Ajahn Sucitto once spoke of *ekagga* to mean this one point of time: now. Another prominent disciple, Ajahn Munindo, sometimes explains “one-pointedness” with “stillness”. So, they each interpret this presumed correct translation differently.

Other teachers who don’t teach absorptions may say “one-pointedness” is unnecessary, or simply avoid mentioning it. That’s convenient, but they still have to face questions about it, so long as it remains commonly spoken of in the orthodox Theravādin world.

**Actually, we need not avoid, brush off, or cope with this word, because it’s a wrong translation.**

### *Exploring “Agga” through “Ekaggacitta”*

To show how “one-pointedness” is a wrong translation for *ekaggatā*, let me use a related term: *ekaggacitta*. With this term, I shall show how *agga* here should not be translated as “point” or “pointed”, and therefore *ekaggatā* not as “one-pointedness”.

*Ekaggacitta* has three parts: *eka* (one) + *agga* + *citta* (mind). When a translator renders *ekaggatā* as “one-pointedness”, he would have to render *ekaggacitta* as “one-pointed mind”, which you may have seen. “One-pointed mind”—what does it mean? It is an odd expression, not understandable in normal English.

Now, let’s look into *agga*, commonly translated in this context as “point”, and understood as “spatially limited location”. According to *Pāli-English Dictionary* (PED), it has a few meanings, figurative and literal. For the figurative, we find meanings such as foremost, excellent, best, chief, ideal, etc. Since “point” as in “spatially limited location” does not agree with these meanings, we are left with the literal, and the closest one is “top or tip”.

PED gives these examples from the Pāli texts: *kusagga*—tip of a blade of grass, *dumagga*—top of a tree, *dhajagga*—top of a banner, *pabbatagga*—top of a mountain, *sākhagga*—tip of a branch. Extrapolating from this, *ekagga* would be translated as “top/tip of one”, or “one-top(ped)” or “one-tip(ped)”. Then *ekaggacitta* could be “top/tip of one mind”, “one-top(ped) mind” or “one-tip(ped) mind”. Do any of these make sense?

The translation has to do more than make sense actually. Just as *cittassa ekaggatā* is often linked with *samādhi* (composure) in the Suttas, *ekaggacitta* is often linked with *samāhita* (composed). So, besides making sense, the translation also needs to agree with *samāhita*, which means “composed” or “collected”.

To be fair, PED’s examples also include *āragga*—point of an awl.<sup>39</sup> However, “point” here also means “tip”, not “spatially limited location”. More specifically it means “sharp end”. If we take this as the meaning for *agga*, then *ekagga* would mean “one-sharp-end(ed)” or “sharp end of one”. Then *ekaggacitta* would have to mean “one-sharp-end(ed) mind”. Does this make sense?

I don’t think anybody translates these terms with such ideas in mind. Yet, top or tip or sharp end is the closest *agga* can be to its now widely accepted notion in *ekaggatā*. Do you see the

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39 A pointed tool for marking surfaces or for punching small holes. (WordNet 3.0 by Princeton University)

problem here? Although *ekaggacitta* is widely translated as “one-pointed mind”, and *ekaggatā* as “one-pointedness”, these translations don’t actually work with any possible meaning of *agga*.

**Attempts:** During a workshop I conducted on this subject, a participant asked why can’t we take the figurative meaning for *agga*, thus having “foremost mind”. We can’t, because that translates back to Pāli as *aggacitta*. (No pun intended, for those who know Āyasmā Aggacitta.) The Pāli word is *ekaggacitta*, not just *aggacitta*. When we include the *eka* (one) to this figurative translation, we get “one-foremost mind”, which is meaningless. Also, let’s not forget *ekaggatā*, which would then have to be “one-foremostness”, which is also meaningless.

In another workshop, a participant suggested “peak” for *agga*, so that we can have “peaked mind”. Again, this wouldn’t do because the Pāli word is *ekaggacitta*, not *aggacitta*. When we include *eka*, it becomes “one-peaked mind”. We would also have to deal with translating *ekaggatā* as “one-peakedness”.

One draft reader offered “mountain top” for *agga*. This too wouldn’t do. In the first place, “mountain top” isn’t just *agga*, but *pabbatagga*. Besides, adopting it would have *ekaggacitta* become “one-mountain-top mind”, and *ekaggatā* “one-mountain-topness”.

Although such attempts are in vain, they show how people have been grappling with these terms.

Now, let’s look into the *citta* in *ekaggacitta*. Translating *citta* as “mind” is quite fine actually. Just as “mind” is used variously in contemporary English, so is *citta* in the Suttas. However, in *ekaggacitta*, it cannot mean “attention”. Let me explain.

Remember the statement *cittassa ekaggatā ayam samādhi*? It basically says that *ekaggatā* of mind is *samādhi* (composure). Since *samādhi* refers to a *samāhita citta* (composed mind), we can conclude that the word *citta* in both cases must share the same meaning. That they share the same meaning is even clearer in a frequently occurring phrase *samāhitam cittam ekaggam*—“the mind is composed, *ekaggam*”. Both *samāhitam* and *ekaggam* are adjectives for *cittam*. So, the meaning of *citta* must be the same when it’s used in relation to *ekagga* or *ekaggatā* and *samāhita* or *samādhi*.

Now, *samāhita citta* is among the eight pairs of *cittas* in a stock phrase found in all Nikāyas, including *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (DN2), *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN10), *Susima Sutta* (SN12.70), and *Paṃsudhovaka Sutta* (AN3.102). By reading the context of these pairs—e.g. *samāhita citta* (composed mind) and *asamāhita citta* (uncomposed mind); *vimutta citta* (liberated mind) and *avimutta citta* (unliberated mind)—we can tell that these are referring to states of mind, not of attention. So, although the English word “mind” can mean “attention”, the Pāli word “*citta*” cannot (at least not in this context).

To sum up, **“one-pointed mind” as the translation for *ekaggacitta* fails in two ways:**

1. *Agga* cannot mean “point” as in “spatially limited location”.
2. *Citta* cannot mean “mind” as in “attention”.

Now, if *ekaggacitta* isn't "one-pointed mind", what then should it be? And what does the "agga" in *ekaggatā* mean in the Suttas?

### ***The Forgotten Meaning of "Agga"***

Actually, "agga" has another meaning, as a contracted form of "agāra". For example, "uposathāgāra" is the same as "uposathagga", meaning a hall for the fortnightly monastic observance. It occurs only in compounds: *dānagga*—a place where alms are given, *bhattagga*—a refectory (CPED), *vassagga*—a shelter from the rain, a shed (PED). Although this *agga* (or *agāra*) often means some sort of building, its meaning is wider: from a mansion to a cave. (See Paṭisambhidāmagga 1.176 (Pāli Text Society).) Going by the above, this *agga* seems to cover any sheltered place. But then there is *suññāgāra* (*suñña* + *agāra*). Although "solitude" (as provided in PED) may sometimes appropriately translate it, it's literally "empty place", with *agāra* being simply "place".

Could this other meaning of *agga*, i.e. "place", be the actual meaning in "ekaggatā"?

Let's join the parts: *ekaggatā* = *eka* (one) + *agga* (place) + *tā* (ness) = "one-place-ness" or "one-placedness" (modelling after "one-pointedness").

This phrase may at first sound odd to you, but consider that it refers to a mental state. When the mind is said to be "one-placed" (*ekaggaṃ*), it means the mind is not scattered, not messy, not "all over the place"; but gathered, collected, composed. Is it better now?

Besides, in the Chinese Āgamas, *cittassa ekaggatā* (or in Sanskrit *ekāgratā*) is rendered literally as 心一境性, with 境 (*jìng*) for *agga* or *agra*. In no way can 境 mean "point" or "pointed". *Soothill-Hodous Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms* defines it as "region, territory, environment, surroundings, area, field, sphere, e.g. the sphere of mind, the sphere of form for the eye, of sound for the ear, etc." I think "place" covers those words nicely.

### ***An Idiomatic Translation***

Although I consider "one-placedness" very accurate, it may sound clumsy in English. So, I propose an idiomatic translation: *stillness*. "Still" carries the literal meaning of not moving, therefore "one-placed". Since it's referring to a mental state, we would have to take its figurative meaning of quiet and calm, or tranquil.

Moreover, for *ekaggatā*, A. P. Buddhadatta Mahāthera's CPED, published in 1958, provides "tranquillity of mind" besides "onepointedness". I don't suppose he meant *ekaggatā* had two meanings, but that by "onepointedness"—which he probably picked up from elsewhere—he meant "tranquillity of mind".

That elsewhere is probably Pāli Text Society's PED, published in 1921. The dictionary provides "one-pointedness of mind" for *cittekaggatā*, found under *citta*. It is placed within quote marks to acknowledge its un-English-ness. That may be the first time the phrase appeared in print.

Interestingly, it does *not* have "one-pointedness" for *ekaggatā*, nor "one-pointed" for *ekagga*. For *ekaggatā* it provides "concentration; capacity to individualise; contemplation, tranquillity of mind" and, more interestingly, for *ekagga* "calm, tranquil, collected".

It's hard to say whether the compilers were undecided or took the various words or phrases to mean the same. In any case, the above translations in PED collectively suggest that the term "one-pointedness" was then quite unknown. More importantly, they also suggest that the compilers did not mean "one-pointedness of mind" as it is now commonly understood.

Curiously, in 1900, Caroline A. F. Rhys Davids (in her translation of *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, the first book of Abhidhamma Piṭaka) translated *cittassekaggatā* as “self-collectedness” (p3, 13, 14, 17, 19, etc). It’s a loose translation but we get the idea of how she understood the word.

**Remark:** Considering the above, it looks like the meaning of *ekaggatā* as “one-pointedness” gradually crept into Theravāda Buddhism only in the 20th century.

The above translations, such as “tranquillity of mind” and “self-collectedness”, are close to what I believe *ekaggatā* means, but I prefer “stillness” for its literality.<sup>40</sup> Besides, many English-speaking meditation teachers who don’t teach ‘one-pointedness’, such as those of the Ajahn Chah tradition, often use “stillness” (besides “composure” and “collectedness”) in teaching the practice. Apparently, they have intuitively arrived at the same word. When Ajahn Munindo connected “stillness” with *ekaggatā*, I wonder if he knew how well the two words actually match linguistically.

With *ekaggatā* translated as “stillness”, *cittekaggatā*—also occurring as *cittassa ekaggatā* and *cittassekaggatā*—would then be “stillness of mind”. Then *ekaggacitta* is “still mind”; or “still-minded” or “of still mind” when used as an adjective.

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<i>ekagga</i> ( <i>adjective</i> )	( <i>lit. ‘one-placed’</i> ) still
• <i>ekaggatā</i> ( <i>noun</i> )	• stillness
• <i>ekaggacitta</i>	• still mind, still-minded
• <i>cittekaggatā</i> ( <i>cittassa ekaggatā, cittassekaggatā</i> )	• stillness of mind

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### Reconciling with “Composure”

Now, let’s return to a phrase quoted earlier: *cittassa ekaggatā ayaṃ samādhi*. I mentioned that translating it as “one-pointedness of mind—this is composure” does not make sense. Now what if we replace “one-pointedness” with “stillness”: “stillness of mind—this is composure”? Sound good to you?

### A Feel Experiment

Now let’s go beyond the intellect; let’s do a ‘feel experiment’. Look at the two statements below. One by one, capture the meaning, and imagine yourself experiencing it.

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<b><i>one-pointedness</i></b> of mind— this is <b><i>concentration</i></b>	<b><i>stillness</i></b> of mind— this is <b><i>composure</i></b>
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40 In MLDB, *ekaggatā* is rendered as “unification”. However, in CDB, Bhikkhu Bodhi has it as “one-pointedness”, and uses “unification” for *ekodibhāva* instead.

Thānissaro Bhikkhu’s choice for *ekaggatā* is “singleness”, thus *ekagga* is “single”. However, these English words translate backwards accordingly as *ekatta* and *eka*. The *agga* is lost. Anyhow, he obviously avoids “one-pointedness” and “one-pointed”, which he speaks strongly against. (See page 40.)

How do they *feel* to you? Any difference?

Participants in my workshops on this subject say the left one feels *hard, forceful, congested, stressful, unrelaxed, tense*. One says *headache* comes to mind—perhaps based on personal experience. As for the other, they say it feels *firm yet relaxed*; some even say *spacious, open, calm, cool*.

Whatever way you feel about them, it's important to you. In our minds, words carry not just their basic meanings, but also a range of nuances and associations, often without our awareness of them. So, **the *feel* you get for your preferred translation depends on how you understand it, which surely conditions how you meditate, because in your mind that's how meditation is supposed to be.**

The translation on the right works well with the Thai equivalent of *samādhī*: *jīṭ ruam* (collected mind). In fact, all these words—*ekaggatā, stillness, khwam sa-ngop, tranquillity, tī-kyī-gyin, samādhī, jīṭ ruam, composure*—carry a similar meaning, different from *one-pointedness* and *concentration*.

If you like, you can do the same experiment with these two, translated from AN5.151:

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One listens to the  
Dhamma with an  
undistracted and **one-  
pointed mind**.<sup>41</sup>

One listens to the  
Dhamma with an  
undistracted and **still  
mind**.

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## How “*Ekagga*” is Used in the Suttas

In *Sampannasīla Sutta* (Iti111) and *Sīla Sutta* (AN4.12), we find this:

Bhikkhus, if **even when a bhikkhu is moving about (carato)** longing has ceased, enmity has ceased, dullness & drowsiness have ceased, restlessness & guilt have ceased, incertitude is abandoned; [his] energy is aroused, not sluggish; mindfulness established, not forgotten; body tranquil, unagitated; **mind composed, still (samāhitam cittam ekaggam)**; bhikkhus, even when moving about, the bhikkhu being thus, ardent and conscientious, is said to be one with continually and constantly aroused persistence and motivated self. [*Similarly for standing, sitting and lying down.*]

**Here, we see that an *ekagga* mind, with the five hindrances abandoned, is possible while moving about.** Even if we translate *carato* as “walking”, which isn't precise, it still involves a complex mind-eye-body coordination. So, if we have *ekaggam* translated as “one-pointed” here, what could “mind one-pointed” mean? Better still, let's assume *samāhitam cittam ekaggam* should be translated as “mind concentrated, one-pointed”. What would it mean? For me, it would mean being absorbed or “fixing close, *undivided* attention on a spatially limited location”. If that's the case, how are we to move about?

I was told that someone actually did that in her walking meditation. I believe she closed her eyes so that she could really concentrate on the moving foot. In any case, she was so concentrated that she bumped into a wall.

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41 Trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi in NDB (p765). This is said to be one among five qualities one has so that “while listening to the good Dhamma one is capable of entering upon the fixed course [consisting in] rightness in wholesome qualities.” (ibid.)

Whatever we think meditation should be, we will try to make it so. If we think it should be ‘one-pointed’, we will try to do that, keeping exclusive attention somewhere: be it on the nose tip, the abdomen, or the moving foot.

Furthermore, if we try to focus only on a limited physical area (assuming that’s what ‘one-pointed’ means) while moving about, the mind naturally senses other objects anyhow, and with these contacts defilements can still arise, but we may not notice them because of our effort to focus. Doing this may somehow be necessary as a starting point in certain situations, but taking it as *the whole* practice wouldn’t agree with the Suttas.

On the other hand, if we have *ekagga* as “still” (and *samāhita* as “composed”) instead, this passage would make sense, *and* wouldn’t promote accidents. It tells us that we can move about yet the mind is still. Imagine living just like that.

Another example is in *Sāla Sutta* (SN47.4), where the Buddha instructs his bhikkhus, “Abide in the body as body-observers, ardent, fully aware, poised, of radiant mind, composed, *ekaggacittā*, for the knowing of the body according to reality.”<sup>42 43</sup> The sutta says the same for feelings, mind and phenomena too. If we regard *ekaggacitta* as “one-pointed mind”, in the context of these four ways of observing, where is the mind to be “one-pointed” on? So, clearly this translation simply wouldn’t do.

Here’s another experiment: Try to suspend all preconceptions; then read the quote again, superimposing “with one-pointed mind” (as found in CDB) over *ekaggacittā*, besides having “concentrated” instead of “composed”. Then do the same with “composed, still-minded”. Let me make this easy for you:

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Abide in the body as body-observers, ardent, fully aware, poised, of radiant mind, <i>concentrated</i> , <b>with one-pointed mind</b> , for the knowing of the body according to reality.	Abide in the body as body-observers, ardent, fully aware, poised, of radiant mind, <i>composed</i> , <b>still-minded</b> , for the knowing of the body according to reality.
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Going by your own intellect and intuition, which one fits better? Remember: The same instruction applies to feelings, mind and phenomena.

### *Is there ‘One-pointedness’ in Jhāna?*

In the Suttas, *sammā·samādhi* (proper composure) is defined as the four jhānas. Therefore, an experience of the jhānas must be an experience of *samādhi*. And since “*ekaggatā* of mind... is *samādhi*”, it follows that an experience of the jhānas must also be an experience of *ekaggatā*. Right?

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42 *kāye kāyānupassino viharatha ātāpino sampajānā ekodibhūtā vipasannacittā samāhitā ekaggacittā, kāyassa yathābhūtam ñāṇāya.*

43 Although “abide in the body as body-observers” is unconventional, it’s a valid (in fact, literal) translation. I recommend trying it out, presupposing it rightly conveys the Buddha’s teaching. See if it works better in practice compared to other translations. You can also try out abiding among feelings as a feeling-observer, in the mind as a mind-observer, and among phenomena as a phenomenon-observer.



References of *ekaggatā* in the *jhānas* are found in various strata of scriptures: from the Suttas (e.g. Mahāvedalla Sutta, MN43.19; Anupada Sutta, MN111.4) to Abhidhamma Piṭaka (in *Jhāna-vibhaṅga*), and even to the Visuddhimagga. But does that mean there is ‘one-pointedness’ in the *jhānas*?

As I’ve shown above, no; firstly because “one-pointedness” cannot be rightly translated from *ekaggatā*, secondly because in the Suttas *samādhi*, being “*ekaggatā* of mind”, cannot bear that meaning, as shown under *Samādhi* (p31).

## Qualifications

I don’t deny the usefulness of setting the mind on a specific basis. In the Suttas, we find the Buddha praising a properly set mind (*sammāpaṇihita citta*). Besides, I’ve experienced its usefulness, such as setting the mind on a brightening basis when it cannot settle, as advised in *Bhikkhunupassaya Sutta* (SN47.10); or scrutinising the drawbacks of persistent unskillful thoughts, as advised in *Vitakka-sañṭhāna Sutta* (MN20.4). However, these are efforts to settle the mind (*samatha*), not efforts to focus our attention on a spatially limited location.

Also, it’s fine if the mind naturally pays special attention to an object because of interest to understand it. The ability to sustain attention is among the many natural results when the mind is composed (*samāhita*).

I also don’t deny the value of paying attention to breathing to establish awareness—especially when the mind is obsessed with thoughts, or is “all over the place”, such that one forgets more than remembers to observe. However, I do regard concentrating persistently on a spatially limited location, at the nose tip or elsewhere, to be alien to the Buddha’s teachings as found in the Suttas. But how can I say that? Is that not the *ānāpānasati* practice that the Buddha taught? Actually, no, if we go by the Suttas. To avoid burdening this part of the book with a digression, I’ve put this discussion in *Appendix 11: Ānāpānasati Revisited*.

Besides, you may be surprised that in the Suttas *ekagga*, *ekaggatā*, etc are never found connected with *ānāpānasati*. The earliest connection I’ve found is in *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, dated about 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE by A. K. Warder. Even then, it bears no idea of focusing on a spatially limited location. Such an idea of *ekaggatā* appears to be relatively recent, likely starting from its mistranslation as “one-pointedness”.

## Ekodibhāva

You may have seen “unification” as in “unification of mind” in English translations of suttas. It’s the usual translation for *ekodibhāva*, as in *cetaso ekodibhāva*, a phrase occurring in the standard description of the four *jhānas*. It comprises *ekodi* and *bhāva*, supposedly “unified state”.<sup>44</sup>

At first, I thought it was satisfactory enough. Later, however, something about it doesn’t feel right. Isn’t it odd to say “unification of mind”? We unify two or more things, not one. So, how can the mind (*citta*)—being one thing—be unified?

Granted that in English we do say “unified *something*”, e.g., a unified country, but that actually means “unified *people* of a country”. It’s still not *one thing* that is unified. If we try to apply this to the mind, what could the unified *stuff* of the mind (*citta*) be?

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44 I say “usual” because in MLDB “unification” is translated not from *ekodibhāva*, but from *ekaggatā*. Yes, I know it’s confusing.

Perhaps some people might be able to find something that somehow makes sense here, but bear in mind that, whatever way we take *ekodi* to mean, it has to fit into the various contexts this word is found in the Suttas, as I shall present below.

As mentioned above, *ekodibhāva* comprises *ekodi* and *bhāva*. That *bhāva* here means “state” seems obvious enough, and so let me leave it alone, and look into *ekodi*., usually translated as “unified”. The validity of my dissatisfaction with this translation is confirmed by *Sāriputta Sutta* (Suttanipāta 4:16). Here’s Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation in *The Suttanipāta* (p318):

“Having taken up what training,  
dwelling **unified (ekodi)**, judicious, mindful,  
should he blow away his own stains  
as a smith [removes the flaws] of silver?”<sup>45</sup>

At the end of the same sutta, we find

“A bhikkhu who is mindful, well liberated in mind,  
should remove desire for these things.  
At the proper time rightly investigating the Dhamma,  
**unified (ekodibhūto)**, he should destroy darkness”—  
so said the Blessed One.

In the above, it’s obvious that “unified” is describing a person. So, I’m thinking: How can a *person* be “unified”? Even if you can somehow make sense of a ‘unified mind’, I bet you’d have a harder time making sense of a ‘unified person’. This translation here (and elsewhere in the Suttas) is simply not understandable in normal English. We need to find another word.

Of all the words I reviewed in this book, this is the hardest one to nail, because the Suttas have very little clues to it, and its etymology seems hard to analyse. Anyway, let me break down *ekodi*.

The Pāli word has two parts: *eka*, supposedly meaning “one”, thus translated as “uni-”; and the other part, we are less certain of. PED says “most likely... odi for odhi”, which the dictionary says means “putting down, fixing, i.e. boundary, limit, extent”. If this is correct, *ekodi* would literally be “one-boundary”, “one-limit”, or “one-extent”, which PED says means “lit. of one attention, limited to one point”.

I’ve some issues with that. Firstly, unless I’m missing something, there’s actually no “attention” or “point” in *ekodi*. So this looks suspiciously like another case of orthodox influence. Secondly, and more importantly, none of these ideas make sense in the context quoted above. What could a person of “one-boundary”, “one-limit”, or “one-extent” mean? Or a person “of one attention, limited to one point”?

I should add that *Sāriputta Sutta* in *Suttanipāta* isn’t the only place we can find “*ekodi nipako sato*” (or “*ekodi nipakā satā*”), translated above as “unified, judicious, mindful”. The phrase is also found in *Sakkapañha Sutta* (DN21), *Iṇa Sutta* (AN6.45), *Candimasa Sutta* (SN2.11).

Although I’m dissatisfied with PED’s conclusion for *ekodi*, its analysis “odi for odhi” gives me a clue: Just as *samādhi* is derived from *samādahati*, *odhi* is probably from *odahati*.

The literal meaning of “dahati”, according to Vipassanā Research Institute’s Pāli Dictionary, includes “to put, to hold, to bear”. The *o* prefix carries a variety of nuances, one of which is

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45 The word “dwelling” before “unified” seems to have nothing in the Pāli text to justify it. I guess the venerable added it to make the passage more meaningful in English. Still, “dwelling unified” doesn’t make sense in English.

“inside”, as in the *o* in *okappati*: “feel confident, put (trust) in” and *okappanā*: “putting (trust) in, confidence” (PED).

So, putting *odi* (for *odhi*) together with *eka* (supposedly meaning “one”), we have *ekodi* as ‘one-inside-holding’. That still doesn’t sound right. But what if *eka* here does not mean “one”, as it’s commonly assumed. It can have other meanings, like “same” or “equal”. If you suspect a linguistic connection between *eka* and “equal”, you’re quite right.

In his blog post Uzunbacakadem mentions that in "Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der Indogermanischen Sprachen"<sup>46</sup> German author August Fick suggests that the indogerman word "aiko-s" means "the one" and "the same, the equal" and [is] derived from Sanskrit "eka", meaning "the one" and "the same, the equal", too.

**That's spot on! The Latin word "aequus" is related to Sanskrit "eka" which means "one".<sup>47</sup>**

So then, instead of ‘one-inside-holding’, we can actually have *ekodi*, an adjective, as ‘equal-inside-holding’. What does that mean?

It’s easier to see in the Suttas’ context. In *Tatiya-samādhī Sutta* (AN4.94) quoted earlier (p30), *Katham cittaṃ ekodi kātabbhaṃ?* would then be literally “How is the mind to be made ‘equal-inside-holding’?” In proper English, “How is the mind to be made *equipoised*?” (“Equipoised” is a contraction of “equal” + “poised”.) In *Kāyagatāsati Sutta* (MN119.21) also quoted earlier, *cittaṃ... ekodi hoti* would then be “the mind... is *equipoised*.”

However, the use of “equipoised” to carry this meaning has waned over time, and is now replaced with simply “poised”. The noun “equipoise” in modern English, nonetheless, fits well with *ekodibhāva*, literally “state of equal-inside-holding”. It can also be replaced with simply “poise”.

Let me summarise the above, showing how *ekodi*, an adjective, should be translated as “poised”:

Ekodi = eka + odi  
= eka + odhi  
= eka + o + dhi  
= equal + inside + holding  
= equal + poised  
= equipoised—or just “poised”

In case you need more information to see how “poise” fits well for *ekodibhāva*, here’s how Dictionary.com defines the noun (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/poise>):

1. a state of balance or equilibrium, as from equality or equal distribution of weight; equipoise.
2. a dignified, self-confident manner or bearing; composure; self-possession:  
*to show poise in company.*

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46 This is in German, meaning “Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-European Languages”. “Indogerman” is more commonly “Indo-Germanic”, but nowadays “Indo-European” is preferred.

47 Source: “Etymology of Latin *Aequus*, *Secundus* and Turkish *iki*, *ikindi* pre-Greek and Latin correspondences” by Mehmet Kurtkaya, Published on September 05, 2019; <http://www.sumerianturks.org/aequus-secundus.htm>

3. steadiness; stability:  
*intellectual poise.*
4. suspense or wavering, as between rest and motion or two phases of motion:  
*the poise of the tides.*
5. the way of being poised, held, or carried.
6. the state or position of hovering:  
*the poise of a bird in the air.*

I hope you see how much “poise” agrees with *ekodibhāva* literally and figuratively.

Let me return to the phrase from Sāriputta Sutta and others quoted earlier—“*ekodi nipako sato*” (or “*ekodi nipakā satā*”)—translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi as “unified, judicious, mindful”. I said that “unified” as a description of a person isn’t understandable in normal English. But what if we replace it with “poised”? “Poised, judicious, mindful”. Ah, now that’s understandable.

As for *cetaso ekodibhāva*, we can have it as “mental equipoise”, or simply “mental poise”.

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<p><i>ekodibhāva</i> (noun)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>ekodi</i> (adjective)</li> <li>• <i>ekodim karoti</i></li> <li>• <i>cetaso ekodibhāva</i></li> </ul>	<p>(lit. <i>equipoised state</i>) poise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (lit. <i>equipoised</i>) poised</li> <li>• (lit. <i>make equipoised</i>) poise</li> <li>• (lit. <i>mental equipoised state</i>) mental poise</li> </ul>
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## Jhāna

Since the beginning of Pāli-English translation work, people have used many words for *jhāna*. Among them are “absorption”, “mental (or meditative) absorption”, “meditation”, “illumination”, “musing”, “ecstasy”, and even “trance”.

Then, some people decided that it’s better left untranslated. Just as I’ve said for *samādhi*, this choice has an advantage but leaves the word wide open to interpretations. As the various translations above show, interpretations can vary greatly. So, if the word is untranslated, it’s important to qualify it.

Since I’ve translated *samatha*, *samādhi* and *ekaggatā* to English, I thought why not *jhāna* too? So, let me again turn to word analysis for inspiration.

*Jhāna* comes from the verb *jhāyati*, meaning “to meditate, contemplate, think upon, brood over” (PED). It’s very similar to the original meaning of “meditate”. Also, have you seen “Practise *jhāna*, bhikkhus,” or “Do *jhāna*, bhikkhus”? It’s translated from “*Jhāyatha*, bhikkhave.”<sup>48</sup> (*Jhāyatha* is a plural imperative form of *jhāyati*.) It’s more literally translated as “Meditate, bhikkhus,” as you may have seen too. Since *jhāyati* or *jhāyatha* can be translated as “meditate”, why shouldn’t *jhāna* be translated as “meditation”?

Now some may object to this, saying that in the Suttas *jhāna* has a special meaning, and shouldn’t be translated as just “meditation”. The objection may seem reasonable if we think of only the four *jhānas*, but “*jhāna*” on its own has a much wider meaning.

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48 “Practise *jhāna*” translates backwards to *jhānam ācaratha*, and “do *jhāna*” *jhānam karotha*. And, no, there aren’t such phrases in the Suttas.

## Usage of “Jhāna” in the Suttas

In AN1.394-574<sup>49</sup>, one is said to be “not devoid of jhāna (arittajjhāna) if for just the time of a finger snap” one

- cultivates any of the four jhānas,
- cultivates liberation of mind by any of the four brahma-vihāras (divine-abidings),
- abides as an observer of the body, feelings, mind, or phenomena—i.e. practises any of the four satipaṭṭhānas (establishments of mindfulness),
- generates any of the four sammappadhānas (proper diligence),
- cultivates any of the four iddhipādas (bases of accomplishment),
- cultivates any of the five indriyas (faculties), or
- does any of *many other things*, including cultivating asubha-saññā (recognition of unattractiveness), maraṇa-saññā (recognition of death), and anatta-saññā (recognition of not-self).

See how wide the meaning of “jhāna” is?

Besides, in Mahāsaccaka Sutta (MN36.21) the Buddha calls one of his pre-Awakening experiments “appāṇaka jhāna”. *Appāṇaka* means “non-breathing”. He said, “I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth and nose.” Doing so understandably resulted in exhaustion, and yet the Buddha called it “jhāna”. In Gopaka-Moggallāna Sutta (MN108.26), Āyasmā Ānanda says that the Buddha did not praise all jhānas. He did not praise the kind of jhāna of one who harbours the five hindrances. Still, it’s called “jhāna”.

If you’ve read the English translations of these suttas, you may wonder, “How come I’ve never noticed this?” That’s because in these instances “jhāna” is mostly translated as “meditation”—the most natural choice—and sometimes some other English words, but for the four jhānas the word is left untranslated. That’s why most people, not reading the Pāli, are likely to assume that the above instances of “meditation” are translated from another word. Had “jhāna” been presented consistently in popular translations—whether translated as “meditation” or left untranslated—readers would have raised an issue long ago. And that would have been great.

## Does Jhāna Mean Absorption?

Now let’s look at *jhāna* as in the four jhānas. This word is widely translated and described as “absorption”, which befits the Visuddhimagga jhāna, but unsuitable for the Sutta jhāna, as I’ve shown variously. Let me show more.

**Can we do the jhānas while walking?** Is that possible? If we regard the jhānas as states of complete absorption in a single object, the question itself is absurd. However, if we go by the Suttas, the answer is yes, because the jhānas aren’t states of absorption, but acts of composure. Venāgapura Sutta (AN3.63) shows this.

Here, to a brahmin the Buddha says,

... there are three kinds of high and luxurious beds that at present I gain at will, without trouble or difficulty. What three? The celestial high and luxurious bed, the divine high and luxurious bed, and the noble high and luxurious bed. (Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation in NDB, p274.)

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49 Although such long series of suttas differing only in a phrase does seem artificial, here I just want to point out a matter of word usage. Even if most of these suttas aren’t authentically the Buddha’s words, they show how “jhāna” was used in the early history of Buddhism.

When asked by the brahmin what he means by the “celestial high and luxurious bed”, the Buddha describes in **the usual formula how he abides engaging in the jhānas**, and then says,

Then, brahmin, **when I am in such a state (evaṃbhūto), if I walk back and forth (caṅkamāmi)**, on that occasion my walking back and forth is celestial.<sup>50</sup> If I am standing, on that occasion my standing is celestial. If I am sitting, on that occasion my sitting is celestial. If I lie down, on that occasion this is my celestial high and luxurious bed. (NDB, p275.) [*Emphasis and parentheses are added.*]

This sutta shows that it’s possible to be in any of the four postures while engaging in the jhānas.

It agrees with Abhidhamma Piṭaka’s definition of *viharati* in Jhāna-vibhaṅga: *iriyati vattati pāleti yapeti yāpeti carati viharati*. They all revolve around the same meanings: conduct (oneself), move about, behave, exist, be, survive, go on, go, live, abide, dwell, sojourn. The general idea of these words shows that the jhānas are done while living one’s life.<sup>51</sup>

Back to the sutta, consider how it relates to how Ajahn Chah taught:

Real samādhi can be practised with eyes open or eyes closed. You can be sitting, walking, standing or lying down. (“About Being Careful” in *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*)

Samādhi doesn’t mean only sitting. There can be samādhi in all postures. If we are really practising in all postures, we will enjoy samādhi thus. There won’t be anything that can interfere. (“Knowing the World” in *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*)

Actually standing, walking, sitting and lying down are all ways of practice to make samādhi arise at any moment. (From a talk in Thai “Jit Kheu Arai?” (What is the Mind?), translated by Āyasmā Gavesako)

So, according to Ajahn Chah, walking not only does not interfere with *real* samādhi, it’s a way of practice where samādhi can arise. Although he didn’t use the word “jhāna”, we may relate his words with the above sutta and assume that’s what he meant. Besides, I reckon his “real samādhi” is the Suttas’ “sammā-samādhi”.

If your mind still resists this idea, I can fully understand. It’s challenging to consider something so different from what we have been told repeatedly over a long, long time.<sup>52</sup>

Another piece of evidence of the jhānas not being states of absorption has already been referenced earlier in a note on “samatha-preceded vipassanā” cultivation on page 27. Indirect evidence of this is found in many places, an example being Kuṭṭhi Sutta (Ud5.3):

Then the Blessed One, having encompassed the awareness of the entire assembly with his awareness, asked himself, “Now who here is capable of understanding the Dhamma?” He saw Suppabuddha the leper sitting in the assembly, and on seeing him the thought occurred to him, “This person here is capable of understanding the Dhamma.” So, aiming at Suppabuddha the leper, he gave a step-by-step talk, i.e.

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50 *Evaṃbhūto* is literally “thus become”.

51 If you think I am saying that engaging in the four jhānas is ordinary or easily achieved, please read my answer to a question on page 129 of *Appendix 18: Questions & Answers*.

52 The challenge may be partly due to the common translation for “*upasampajja viharati*”, as “enters and dwells/remains in”. If this is so for you, see *Appendix 15: ‘Entering’ Jhāna?*

a talk on giving, a talk on virtue, a talk on heaven; **he declared the drawbacks, degradation, & corruption of sensual passions, and the rewards of renunciation.** Then when he saw that Suppabuddha the leper’s **mind was ready, malleable, free from hindrances, elated, & bright, he then gave the Dhamma-talk peculiar to Awakened Ones, i.e. stress, origination, cessation, & path.** And just as a clean cloth, free of stains, would properly absorb a dye, in the same way, as Suppabuddha the leper was sitting in that very seat, **the dustless, stainless Dhamma eye arose** within him, “Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation.”<sup>53</sup> [*Emphases added.*]

How come Suppabuddha the leper, who went to the assembly because he thought someone was distributing food there, and many others mentioned in the Suttas, could awaken while listening to the Dhamma? Here’s how:

When, monks, a disciple of the noble ones having made it a matter of personal concern, paid attention, and brought together his whole mind, listens to the Dhamma with ears cocked, on that occasion the five hindrances do not occur in him; on that occasion the seven factors of awakening go to the completion of development.<sup>54</sup> (*ĀvaraṇaNīvaraṇa Sutta*, SN46.38)

The factors of awakening include samādhi, and when samādhi goes to “the completion of development” (*bhāvanāpāripūriṃ*), isn’t that sammā-samādhi? With their own discernment to understand the teachings and reflect upon it, the mind became free from hindrances (as mentioned in the earlier sutta). **While listening to the teachings on the Four Noble Truths, they were cultivating the seven factors of awakening and practising the Noble Eight-factored Path, including the jhānas (of the Suttas).**

**If the jhānas were absorbed states, then these people couldn’t be listening; or, if they were, they couldn’t be engaging in the jhānas.** Looking at such evidence in the Suttas, it’s obvious that they *were* listening. Does that mean they were not engaging in the jhānas then? If that were true, then awakening would be possible without *fully* developing the seven factors of awakening or the Noble Eight-factored Path. If we accept that, then we’re implying that the Buddha included something unnecessary. Can we accept this implication?

If not, we’re left with just one possibility: The jhānas are not absorbed states; one can listen and engage in the jhānas at the same time, and even be awakened.

**Think:** Tying this with the earlier conclusion that the jhānas are possible in any posture, consider how Āyasmā Ānanda attained arahantship as he was inclining his body to lie down. (*Vinaya Piṭaka’s Cūlavagga XI.6*) Even more interesting is a case of a nun whose mind was liberated after falling on the ground. (*Therīgāthā I.17*)<sup>55</sup>

53 Trans. Ajahn Ṭhānissaro: [www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.5.03.than.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.5.03.than.html).

54 Trans. Aggacitta Bhikkhu in *Samatha & Vipassanā Sutta Study Coursebook*, p142.

55 See Ajahn Ṭhānissaro’s translation at <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thig/thig.01.00x.than.html#sutta-17> (Shortcut: [tiny.cc/nunsutta](http://tiny.cc/nunsutta))

## Vitakka & Vicāra

In discussing Sutta jhāna, we need to include a few terms in the standard description of the four jhānas. I'll start with *vitakka* and *vicāra*.

In Bhikkhu Bodhi's "Introduction" in CDB (p52), he writes

In MLDB<sup>56</sup> I rendered *vitakka* and *vicāra* respectively as "applied thought" and "sustained thought." In this translation they become "thought" and "**examination.**" The latter **is surely closer to the actual meaning of *vicāra***. When *vitakka* is translated as "thought," however, a word of caution is necessary. **In common usage, *vitakka* corresponds so closely to our "thought" that no other rendering seems feasible;** for example, in *kāma<sup>av</sup>itakka*, sensual thought, or its opposite, *nekkham<sup>av</sup>itakka*, thought of renunciation. When, however, *vitakka* and *vicāra* occur as constituents of the first jhāna, they do not exercise the function of discursive thinking characteristic of ordinary consciousness. Here, rather, *vitakka* is the mental factor with the function of applying the mind to the object, and *vicāra* the factor with the function of examining the object nondiscursively in order to anchor the mind in the object. [*Emphases added.*]

Basically, the above represents the orthodox Theravādin view of *vitakka* and *vicāra*. Despite deciding that *vitakka* is best rendered as "thought" and *vicāra* "examination", Āyasmā Bhikkhu Bodhi maintains the orthodox view that "as constituents of the first jhāna" *vitakka* and *vicāra* are different from the same words found elsewhere in the Suttas.

But why should they be so? To my knowledge, that is not what the Suttas say or even suggest. In fact, even suttas on meditation use them to refer to mentally verbalised cogitation, as I shall soon show.

The orthodox idea of *vitakka* and *vicāra* as "initial and sustained application"—or as described above "applying the mind to the object" and "examining the object nondiscursively in order to anchor the mind in the object"—arose only in later Theravādin (i.e. post-canonical) texts, such as the Visuddhimagga (IV.88). Its author, Āyasmā Buddhaghosa, had to define them as such to align with the Mahāvihāra elders' view of jhāna.

What then are *vitakka* and *vicāra* in the Suttas? I find them close to how Āyasmā Bhikkhu Bodhi translates them in CDB (as I've highlighted in the quote above), but I don't think they need qualifying to fit into the orthodox view of the first jhāna. You will see what I mean with the suttas below.

In Bhikkhunupassaya Sutta (SN47.10), where the Buddha says

Here, Ānanda, a bhikkhu abides in the body as a body-observer [*similarly for feelings, mind and phenomena*]*—ardent, fully aware, mindful—putting away longing & dejection in regard to the world. While he abides in the body as a body-observer [*similarly for feelings, mind and phenomena*], either a burning in the body—based on the body [*similarly for feelings, mind and phenomena*]*—or mental sluggishness arises, or the mind is scattered outwardly. Then, Ānanda, the mind is to be set (paṇidahitabbaṃ) on some [mind-]brightening basis (kismiñcīdeva pasādanīye nimitte).*<sup>57</sup> For one who sets his mind on some brightening basis, gladness (pāmojjaṃ) is born. For one who is gladdened, joy (pīti) is born. For one of*

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56 *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*



joyful mind, the body calms down (passambhati). One whose body has calmed down feels happy (sukhaṃ). Being happy, the mind is composed (samādhīyati).<sup>58</sup> He reflects (paṭisañcikkhati) thus, “The purpose for which I set the mind has been accomplished. So now I withdraw [it].” He withdraws (paṭisaṃharati) [it], and neither thinks nor considers (na ca vitakketi na ca vicāreti). He discerns (pañānāti), “Without thinking (avitakko), without considering (avicāro), I am internally mindful, I am happy.” Thus, Ānanda, is cultivation after having set (pañidhāya bhāvanā).

Although “jhāna” is not specified, the final lines above imply a transition from the first jhāna, which has vitakka and vicāra, to the second, in which vitakka and vicāra have quietened. In Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation of this sutta, he too notes that “the absence of *vitakka* and *vicāra* seems to imply he has reached the second jhāna”. (See CDB, p1922, n147.) Just as in Naḷakapāna Sutta and Kimatthiya Sutta referenced earlier, the jhānas are often implied without being mentioned in the Suttas. Omitting the j-word may be prudent too nowadays, as people tend to get excited and even be obsessed over it.

Now, reading the passage as a whole, the vitakka and vicāra here seem obviously linked to the mind-brightening basis, which the traditional commentary to this sutta glosses as the recollection on the Buddha, etc. (For other possible bases used to arrive at the first jhāna, see my commentary in *Appendix 14: Two Ways to Sammā·samādhī*, where I elaborate on the same sutta. There too you’ll find more reason to believe that the first and second jhānas are implied in this sutta.)

Below are my preferences as already integrated into the translation above:

vitakka ( <i>noun</i> )	thinking, thought
• vitakketi ( <i>verb</i> )	• think
vicāra ( <i>noun</i> )	considering
• vicāreti ( <i>verb</i> )	• consider <sup>59</sup>

Now if you think (vitakketi) this is wrong or even stupid, I can fully understand. Years ago I would have thought the same. Here I’m merely pointing out what is found in the Suttas. If you are still

57 Notice how *nimitta* is used here. Surely it doesn’t mean the way ‘nimitta’ is commonly used now, which began only in later texts. As I’ll point out later, even the commentary to this sutta glosses it otherwise.

Since *nimitta* has been ‘hijacked’, for its original meaning orthodox Theravāda has resorted to another word: *ṭhāna*, as in *kammaṭṭhāna*—work-basis (for meditation)—a new meaning for a word meaning “occupation” in the Suttas.

58 Here’s another instance where sukha (happiness or ease) makes the mind composed.

59 Meaning-wise, Nyanatiloka Thera’s choices seem acceptable: “thought-conception” for *vitakka* and “discursive thinking” for *vicāra*. I prefer “thinking” and “considering” though for brevity and ease of translating their verb forms consistently. *Vicāra* comes from the verb *vicāreti*, the causative form of *vicarati*, literally meaning “to wander”.

For *vicāra*, Ajahn Ṭhānissaro prefers “evaluation”, and Bhikkhu Bodhi “examination”. I think such finer English words better suit *upaparikkhā*, which Pāli-English dictionaries render as “investigation, examination”. In Uddesavibhaṅga Sutta (MN138), Āyasmā MahāKaccāna says (and the Buddha confirms that) one “should examine (*upaparikkheyya*)” when engaging in any of the four jhānas, so as not to be “stuck internally”. (trans. MLDB) Therefore, “examination” is unsuitable to translate *vicāra*, which is only for the first jhāna.

Apart from “considering” for *vicāra*, “deliberation” may be suitable too.

open, please read on and consider (vicāreti) the matter further, especially in the following subheading. You will see how “vitakka” and “vicāra” refer to mentally verbalised cogitation, commonly called “inner-/self-talk” or “mental voice”.

In *Food for the Heart*, Ajahn Chah was asked about vitakka and vicāra, and he answered:

You’re sitting and suddenly the thought of someone pops into your head—that’s vitakka, the initial thought. Then you take that idea of the person and start thinking about them in detail. **Vitakka picks up the idea, vicāra investigates it.** [Emphasis added.]

Later in the same discussion, he explained further:

If it’s a line of thinking that’s skilful and wholesome, it leads to ease of mind and **happiness**, and there is **rapture** with its attendant experiences. This rapture came from the **initial and discursive thinking** that took place in a state of calmness. **We don’t have to give it names such as first jhāna, second jhāna and so forth. We just call it tranquillity.** [Emphases added.]

It’s obvious the translator used English translations that were common then. If the terms were in Pāli, the passage would look like this:

If it’s a line of thinking that’s skilful and wholesome, it leads to **sukha**, and there is **pīti** with its attendant experiences. This pīti came from the **vitakka and vicāra** that took place in a state of santi/passaddhi. **We don’t have to give it names such as first jhāna, second jhāna and so forth. We just call it samādhi.** [Emphases added.]

In any case, can you see how the ajahn’s usage of “vitakka”, “vicāra” and “jhāna” (besides “samādhi”) in the above differs from orthodox Theravādin terminology?<sup>60</sup> Instead, it agrees closely with Bhikkhunupassaya Sutta quoted earlier, in which **thinking isn’t antithetic to the jhānas, but is used for the first jhāna.**<sup>61</sup>

Practically speaking, when the mind is uncollected, occupied by the hindrances, the mano (cognitive mind) is very much bound to think a lot, and we easily get lost in the thinking. So, instead of being tossed around by it, we use it properly to establish mindfulness and collectedness, i.e. we use *thinking (self-talk) to meditate*. For example, the Mahasi tradition uses labelling, the Zen tradition uses koans (e.g. “Who is walking?”), and the Thai forest tradition uses “Buddho”. (Repeating “Buddho” can lead to the Sutta jhānas if one does that to remind oneself to be awake or aware.) These are forms of yoniso manasikāra (wise cognition).

When collectedness is sufficiently established, the self-talk becomes less necessary, and one learns to adjust accordingly—just as a bicyclist uses less effort to pedal once the bicycle’s momentum is sufficiently established. Upon engaging in the first jhāna, it naturally becomes even less and subtle, but clearly still part of the meditation, just as the Suttas describes it: *savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ* (accompanied by thinking and considering).

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60 Here Ajahn Chah indirectly speaks of “jhāna” favourably, while early in the book I quoted him speaking of it unfavourably. Does this mean he changed his mind? From the context, we can tell that it’s not so. He was using the word differently, tailoring his choice of words to suit his audience.

61 From here, it seems Ajahn Chah knew that he was teaching the jhānas of the Suttas, but had chosen to just call it “samādhi” so that his audience in the Thai forest tradition understood him correctly, while normally using “jhāna” the orthodox way, i.e. meaning mental absorption.

## Vitakka, Vicāra & Noble Silence

“(Keep) Noble Silence”—have you seen such a sign at Buddhist meditation centres? It’s normally intended and interpreted as a request to *keep quiet*; but if that is so, why not just say “(Keep) Silence”? What’s the “Noble” for?

Although such signs have become common in meditation centres, many don’t know that “noble silence” comes from the Suttas, where it’s used a bit differently. In Kolita Sutta (SN21.1), Āyasmā MahāMoggallāna asks himself, “Noble silence, noble silence. What is noble silence (ariyo tuṅhibhāvo)?” It occurred to him that it’s the second jhāna. So, going by what the words mean in the Suttas, those signs are saying we should be in the second jhāna!<sup>62</sup>

Now why is the second jhāna “noble silence”, but not the first? No explanation found, but we can deduce an answer by putting a few suttas together.

In Rahogata Sutta (SN36.11), we find “For one engaged in the first jhāna, speech has ceased.”<sup>63</sup> So for the first jhāna, there’s *verbal* silence, but that doesn’t count as *noble* silence. What then counts as noble silence?

A clue is in Dutiyakāmbhu Sutta (SN41.6) and Cūḷavedalla Sutta (MN44.14-15), where vitakka and vicāra are provided as the definition for verbal fabrication (vacīsaṅkhāra). Both suttas elaborate thus: “First having thought, having considered (vitakketvā vicāretvā), one then breaks into speech; therefore thinking and considering (vitakkavicārā) are verbal fabrication.”<sup>64</sup> I hope you notice the connection between the Pāli verb and noun forms, which also occur in Bhikkhunupassaya Sutta quoted on page 56. These suttas show that vitakka and vicāra (in the Suttas) are not the subtle mental activities as taught in orthodox Theravāda.<sup>65</sup> What are they then?

A fairly good notion is found in Saṅgārava Sutta (AN3.60), where the Buddha explains about mind-reading. In one of the ways, the mind reader

... **hears the sound of the diffusion of thought (vitakkavipphārasaddam) as one is thinking and examining (vitakkayato vicārayato)** [some matter] and then declares: ‘Your thought is thus, such is what you are thinking, your mind is in such and such a state.’ And even if he makes many declarations, they are exactly so and not otherwise. (NDB, p264) [*Parentheses, emphasis and italics are added.*]

This shows that **vitakka creates mental sound** that such a mind-reader can apparently hear.

With the above sutta evidence, we can now answer why the second jhāna is “noble silence”, but not the first: For the first jhāna, although one is externally silent—i.e. not talking—internally one still ‘talks’. As the description goes, it is “accompanied by thinking and considering (savitakkam savicāram)”, i.e. verbal fabrication. Saṅgārava Sutta shows that this activity creates mental sound; thus this level of jhāna does not qualify as “noble silence”. The second jhāna however is without thinking and considering (avitakkam avicāram), thus qualifies as “noble silence”.

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62 It is found elsewhere in the Suttas: MN26, AN8.2, Ud2.2, Ud3.8, Ud3.9. These too don’t explain it, but may suggest that it’s silent meditation. In any case, it’s more than just keeping quiet.

63 Thus, indirectly, Mahasi Sayadaw was spot on in saying “Talking is the greatest hindrance to insight!” (Seen on a poster in a Mahasi-based meditation centre.)

64 *Pubbe kho... vitakketvā vicāretvā pacchā vācam bhindati, tasmā vitakkavicārā vacīsaṅkhāro.*

65 Ajahn Ṭhānissaro too has discovered the same: [www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.2.02.than.html#fnt-1](http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.2.02.than.html#fnt-1). (Shortcut: [tiny.cc/vv-vf](http://tiny.cc/vv-vf))

This conclusion is further supported by a stanza in Theragāthā 14.1:

Attaining no-thinking (avitakka),  
the disciple of the Rightly  
Self-awakened One  
is endowed with noble silence (ariyena tuṅhībhāvena)  
straightaway.<sup>66</sup> [Parentheses added.]

Convinced yet?

Let me summarise the above:

1. Although in orthodox Theravāda vitakka and vicāra means initial and sustained application (of attention on the object), in the Suttas they mean thinking and considering.
2. The first jhāna is “accompanied by thinking and considering (savitakkam savicāram)”. Being mentally verbalised cogitation, they create mental sound. So meditation here is not silent.
3. The second jhāna isn’t “accompanied by thinking and considering”. Without mentally verbalised cogitation, meditation from this level onwards is silent. Thus, by not speaking and not meditating with mentally verbalised cogitation, this level of jhāna is called “noble silence”.<sup>67</sup>

### ***More Between Jhāna and Vitakka & Vicāra***

Having thinking (vitakka) and considering (vicāra) of course doesn’t imply the first jhāna. In the same way, merely having a quiet mind—i.e. with settled vitakka and vicāra—doesn’t imply the second jhāna. To understand the jhānas better, you may refer to their descriptions in the *Standard Description of the Four Jhānas* (p71).

You may have heard of vitakka and vicāra as ‘jhāna factors’. Yet, when we read afresh the standard description of the four jhānas, we find not four lists of factors, but *descriptions of meditation* as one gradually progresses in samādhi. Personally, I find viewing the jhānas in terms of factors rather reductionistic. If we read the descriptions without this reductionist view, we can then appreciate its richness.

With better understanding of the first and second jhāna, meditators who supposedly don’t practise “jhāna” may suddenly realise that actually, going by the Suttas’ terminology, they’ve already done it, and that the jhānas aren’t as inaccessible as they were led to believe. With this realisation, they may also come to see from their own experience why the Sutta jhāna is necessary.

### ***Sukha***

In my extension to Shankman’s table of comparison in Part 1 (under *More Comparison* on page 16), I differentiated the types of pīti and sukha between the Sutta jhāna and the Visuddhimagga jhāna. Objections to this are understandable, as we are often given the impression that the jhānas are pleasurable, not just comfortable or pleasant.

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66 Trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu: [www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thag/thag.14.01.than.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thag/thag.14.01.than.html).

67 The cognitive mind (mano) continues to be fully functional. One can still reflect, as Tapussa Sutta (AN9.41) shows, and even receive telepathic messages as SN40.3-9 shows. Perhaps I should add that the second ability isn’t available to everybody. Those suttas are accounts of Āyasmā MahāMoggallāna’s practice.

For example, you may have seen the statement below by the Buddha, which follows a standard description of the four jhānas:

“This is called the **bliss** of renunciation, the **bliss** of seclusion, the **bliss** of peace, the **bliss** of enlightenment. I say of this kind of **pleasure** that it should be pursued, that it should be developed, that it should be cultivated, and that it should not be feared.” (*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha’s* translation of Laṭukikopama Sutta (MN66.21), p557; and Araṇa-vibhaṅga Sutta (MN139.9), p1083.) [*Emphases added.*]

This seems to show that the jhānas the Buddha taught are indeed pleasurable and blissful. However, it only seems so in the translation, not the source. Let me explain.

The above is translated by Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu and later revised by Bhikkhu Bodhi, who for the first sentence above notes,

Here I have departed from Ñm in rendering *sukha* as “bliss” rather than “pleasure” in order to avoid the awkward-sounding phrases that would result from strict consistency.

I agree that translating the phrase as “the *pleasure* of renunciation, the *pleasure* of seclusion, the *pleasure* of peace, the *pleasure* of enlightenment” does sound awkward. I too would avoid it. However, reading the translation as quoted above, you might think “bliss” and “pleasure” are translated from different Pāli words, when actually they are from the same: *sukha*.<sup>68</sup>

This is a relatively minor issue compared to the fact that these two English words “bliss” and “pleasure” connote some form of happy feeling—physical, mental, or both. Thus the reader understands “jhāna”. Yet logically, *sukha* in this context *cannot* mean happy feelings. Why do I say so?

The quote follows a standard description of the four jhānas. Thus, it’s speaking of *sukha* for *all the four jhānas*. Yet, *sukha*, along with *dukkha*, is abandoned according to the fourth jhāna description; it is *adukkhamasukham* (neither *dukkha* nor *sukha*), a jhāna of pure equanimity. (See *Standard Description of the Four Jhānas*, p71.) **Thus, *sukha* here logically cannot refer to happy feelings. It must have a larger meaning, one that covers even pure equanimity.**

**So what then does *sukha* mean in this context? The answer is plainly stated in the quote itself: It is “the *sukha* of renunciation, the *sukha* of seclusion, the *sukha* of peace”. *This sukha can be rightly said for all the four jhānas.***

**Thus the quote does not show the Buddha saying the jhānas are blissful or pleasurable. It only seems so in the translation, not the source.**

How then would I translate *sukha*? Literally, “happiness” or “happy”, which can consistently translate *all* kinds of *sukha*:

- sensual happiness: *kāmasukha*
- material/immaterial happiness: *sāmisam/nirāmisam sukham*
- bodily (physical) happiness: *kāyikam sukham*
- happiness of [being] blameless: *anavajjasukham*
- happy feeling: *sukhā vedanā*
- happiness of jhāna—even for the fourth jhāna when *sukha* is abandoned

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68 *Idam vuccati nekkhammasukham pavivekasukham upasamasukham sambodhasukham, āsevitabbari, bhāvetabbari, bahulikātabbari, na bhāyitabbari etassa sukhasāti vadāmi.*

- (and even) Nibbānic happiness—as in *nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ*, “Nibbāna is the highest happiness.”

As we can see, *sukha* has a very wide range of meaning. If we try to fit “pleasure” or “bliss” in all the above examples, some can accommodate them, and some can’t. Consider the translation “Nibbāna is the highest pleasure.” Isn’t that more than awkward? In explaining Nibbāna, Āyasmā Sariputta said, “Just that is the *sukha* here, my friend: where there is nothing felt.” (AN9.34)<sup>69</sup> When “there is nothing felt”, can we call that “pleasure”? As I understand the word, we can’t. Try “happiness” instead.

In the Chinese Buddhist texts, *sukha* is translated as 樂(乐; lè), also best translated into English as “happiness” or “happy” and works just as well in all the above cases.

sukha	happiness, happy
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What then should “pleasure” be in Pāli? The *English-Pali Dictionary* by Metta Net (Sri Lanka) provides “(m.) āmoda; pamoda; ānanda; santosa. (f.) tuṭṭhi; vitti; pīti; nandi; rati. (nt.) pāmojja.” So many words are provided for “pleasure”, yet no *sukha*.

As for “bliss”, it has a wider range of meanings, but not enough to cover *sukha*. The same dictionary provides “(nt.) paramasukha. (m.) paramānanda.” literally “highest happiness, highest delight”. It shows that “bliss” has a narrower meaning compared to *sukha*.

So which do you think *sukha* is better translated to: “pleasure”, “bliss” or “happiness”?

**Using “pleasure” or “bliss” to translate *sukha* is narrowing down its meaning, thus possibly misrepresenting its actual meaning in its context. A more prudent choice is “happiness” because just like *sukha* it covers a wide range of meanings, from the gross to the refined to the ultimate. With this translation, the audience has the space to construe it just as they would if they knew Pāli, the source language.**

Here’s the same quote with *sukha* literally and consistently translated as “happiness”:

“This is called the **happiness** of renunciation, the **happiness** of seclusion, the **happiness** of peace, the **happiness** of enlightenment.<sup>70</sup> I say of this kind of **happiness** that it should be pursued, that it should be developed, that it should be cultivated, and that it should not be feared.” [*Emphases added.*]

69 Trans. Ajahn Ṭhānissaro (<http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/an/an09/an09.034.than.html>), except that I replaced one word with the original: *sukha*. His choice is “pleasure”, consistent with his translations elsewhere. Original text: *etadeva khvettha, āvuso, sukhaṃ yadettha natthi vedayitam.*

70 Strange it may seem that the four jhānas are said to be “the happiness of enlightenment” when one engaging in the jhānas may not be “enlightened” yet in the common Buddhist understanding. Let me try to reconcile this.

“Enlightenment” here is translated from *sambodha*. According to PED, “sambodha=bodhi”. *Bodhi*, rendered by Ajahn Ṭhānissaro as “Awakening” (which I prefer), comes from the verb *bujjhati*, meaning “knows; understands; perceives; **is awake**” (CPED). Thus, it may not carry the ultimate sense as normally understood.

In any case, I believe it’s saying that one experiences the kind of happiness as enlightened or awakened ones do, as the hindrances are abandoned, though just temporarily unless one is already truly awakened.

Does this translation give you a different picture of the jhānas? With *sukha* literally and consistently translated, this quote does not show the jhānas as pleasurable.<sup>71</sup> As a whole, it reads as encouraging us to practise jhāna, because it is happiness of renunciation, etc.

Another sutta that seems to say that the jhānas are pleasurable is Mahāsaccaka Sutta (MN36.32). In MLDB’s translation (p340), the ascetic Gotama, after realising that jhāna is the path to awakening, thought:

‘Why am I afraid of that **pleasure** that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states? ... I am not afraid of that **pleasure** since it has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states.’ [Emphases added.]

The two instances of “pleasure” here are also translated from *sukha*.<sup>72</sup> Being that “pleasure” is a poor translation, this quote too does not actually show the jhānas as pleasurable. Below is the same quote with “pleasure” replaced with “happiness” (and “sensual pleasures” with “sensualities” for *kāmā*):

‘Why am I afraid of that **happiness** that has nothing to do with sensualities and unwholesome states? ... I am not afraid of that **happiness** since it has nothing to do with sensualities and unwholesome states.’

How does that change the way you understand the quote? Bear in mind that this event occurred after the ascetic Gotama’s many harsh experiments.

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71 (Read this only if you need more clarification.) *Sukha* is not necessarily *sukha* feeling (just as *dukkha* is not necessarily *dukkha* feeling). For example, the *Nibbāna sukha* (happiness of *Nibbāna*) cannot be *sukha* feeling; for all feelings are *saṅkhāras* (constructs, fabrications), which *Nibbāna* is not. All feelings are *dukkha*—in the largest sense of the word.

In the same way, the fourth jhāna is a kind of *sukha* (happiness) too, as the quote above makes clear, but not the kind mentioned in the first three jhānas. It is described as “purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither suffering nor happy”. Thus, it can’t possibly be an experience of pleasure (in the way the word normally means in English).

So, since *sukha* has a much wider meaning, and “pleasure” makes a poor translation, we cannot use that quote to substantiate the claim that the four jhānas in the Suttas are pleasurable.

How then do I understand *sukha* in the first three jhānas? As already mentioned under *More Comparison*, “Contented, peaceful, easeful, light; born of separation (from sensuality and unskilful qualities) or of *samādhi*” (p17).

72 Yes, only two, not four. What we see as “with sensual pleasures” in the quote is translated from *kāmehi*, which means the translator is rendering *kāma* as “sensual pleasure”. In that case, with *sukha* as “pleasure”, *kāmasukha* would then have to be “sensual pleasure pleasure”.

In MLDB, this awkward translation is evaded by rendering both *kāmasukha* and *kāma* as “sensual pleasure”. However, this leads to a puzzling translation: “Now the pleasure and joy that arise dependent on these five cords of sensual pleasure are called sensual pleasure.” (p503) The first “sensual pleasure” is from *kāma* and the second from *kāmasukha*. (Original text: *yaṃ kho, ānanda, ime pañca kāmaguṇe paṭicca uppajjati sukhaṃ somanassaṃ idaṃ vuccati kāmasukharāṇi.*)

This problem is avoided in Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu’s choice for *kāma*: “sensuality”, or “sensual” when it’s an adjective. Then he can have *kāmasukha* as “sensual pleasure”, which he does.

I’m very satisfied with “sensuality” for *kāma*, but not with “sensual pleasure” for *kāmasukha*, because in today’s English this phrase tends to mean only the grosser forms of *kāmasukha*, e.g. those connected to sex and exciting food. “Sensual happiness” however paints a larger and truer picture including milder enjoyments—e.g. bird-watching or a motherly hug—which aren’t commonly deemed “sensual pleasure”. And it allows for consistent translation of *sukha* as shown earlier. (Happily, Bhikkhu Bodhi has also decided on “sensual happiness” for *kāmasukha* in NDB.)

I would translate the quote above as “Now the happiness and delight that arise dependent on these five sensual cords are called sensual happiness.”

Consider another quote from the same translation of Araṇa-vibhaṅga Sutta, which comes right after the earlier quote: “So it was with reference to this that it was said: ‘One should know how to define *pleasure*, and knowing that, one should pursue *pleasure* within oneself.’”

Now you may have a different response, but for me it is odd to read the Buddha saying “one should pursue pleasure”, be it within oneself or elsewhere. Besides, “pursue pleasure within oneself” might suggest not-so-spiritual hobbies.

As earlier, “pleasure” here is translated from *sukha*. On top of that, “within oneself” is translated from *ajjhataṃ*, more literally translated as “internal” or “inner”, or just “within”. So, a closer and more literal translation would be “One should know how to define *happiness*, and knowing that, one should pursue inner *happiness*.”<sup>73</sup>

This translation makes better sense to me, besides being less likely to evoke any funny ideas. To me, it’s saying one should know that happiness is of all sorts (such as the examples listed earlier) and, knowing so, one is better off pursuing inner happiness, not sensual happiness. On the other hand, the “pleasure within oneself” translation conforms to Atthasālinī, a commentary. (See Appendix 13: *Atthasālinī’s Definition of Pīti and Sukha*.)

To sum up, yes, the Buddha said the *jhānas* are to be pursued, to be developed, to be cultivated, and not to be feared; and that they are *happiness* (*sukha*)—all four levels of them. However, as I’ve shown variously, we cannot rightly quote him as describing them as “pleasure”.

## ***Vivicca & Viveka***

Before I return to *jhāna*, let me address two more related words crucial for understanding the four *jhānas* properly.

In the beginning of the *Standard Description of the Four Jhānas* (p71) we find the phrase “***vivicceva*** *kāmehi* ***vivicca*** *akusalehi dhammehi*”. It has been translated as follows:

- ***secluded*** from sensual pleasures, ***secluded*** from unwholesome states (Bhikkhu Bodhi)
- quite ***withdrawn*** from sensuality, ***withdrawn*** from unskillful qualities (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu)

A little further down, the standard description says the first *jhāna* is “***vivekajaṃ*** *pītisukhaṃ*”, commonly translated as “rapture and pleasure born of ***seclusion*** (or ***withdrawal***)”.

The above translations have a few differences, but here let me address only the words I’ve emphasised: “secluded” and “withdrawn” translated from *vivicca*, and in extension “seclusion” and “withdrawal” translated from *viveka*.

Although “secluded” has become widely used for *vivicca*, it actually doesn’t fit well, as it basically means “cut off from other people”.<sup>74</sup> Obviously, sensuality (or sensual pleasures) and unskillful qualities (or unwholesome states) are not people. Moreover, even if we stretch the usage of the word that way, “cut off” still isn’t correct considering these:

1. Although the hindrances—being grosser forms of unskillful qualities—are abandoned, at least temporarily, subtler ones such as own-self view (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*), ego (*māna*), and some other fetters (*saṃyojanas*) must remain, unless they are already abandoned through awakening.

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73 ‘*sukhavinicchayaṃ jaññā; sukhavinicchayaṃ ñatvā ajjhataṃ sukhamanuyuñjeyyā’ti*

74 This meaning is expressed by other Pāli words, such as *paṭisallīna* and *rahogata*, which are being widely (and aptly) translated as “secluded”.



2. In Uddesavibhaṅga Sutta (MN138), the mind is said to be “stuck internally” (trans. MLDB) if it follows the most desirable element of the jhāna attained, is *tied to enjoying* the element, *bound to the fetter of enjoying* it. How can this be when one is supposedly cut off from unskillful qualities? (In the proper practice, one is to examine in a way that the mind is neither confused and diffused externally nor stuck internally.)
3. AN4.123 says both the instructed noble disciple and the uninstructed worldling *enjoy* (*assādeti*) and *desire* (*nikāmeti*) the jhāna attained.<sup>75 76</sup>
4. As Jhāna Sutta (AN9.36) and Mahāmālunkya Sutta (MN64.9-12) show, while engaging in the jhānas, one is to *further* regard whatever phenomena there that are connected with the five aggregates as anicca, dukkha, anatta; so that he turns his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness. This means that one engaging in the jhānas still *clings* to the five aggregates—unless one is an arahant.

Clearly, one engaging in the jhānas isn’t “cut off” from all unskillful qualities. Some may remain. So, despite being widely used for *vivicca*, “secluded” doesn’t fit well.

As for “withdrawn”, the word has such a diverse application that I’m not sure how the translator intends it here. It seems unhelpful in this context. In any case, I use “withdraw” to translate *paṭisamharati*, as I’ve done for Bhikkhunupassaya Sutta on page 56.

Summing up the above, certain unskillful qualities can still occur to one engaging in the jhānas, yet one is supposed to be joyful and happy for being *vivicca* from them, as the phrase “*vivekajaṃ pītisukhaṃ*” says. How are we to resolve this *seeming* conflict between the scriptures and the practice?

Again, this is partly a translation issue. Having reviewed the word *vivicca*, I believe the best English translation is “having separated”. It’s actually not novel. For its base form *viviccati*, PED provides “to separate oneself, to depart from, to be alone, **to separate (intrs.)**”. (I include “having” because *vivicca* is an absolute, not a (past) participle, which should be *vivitta*. I’m not sure why this fact has eluded the dictionaries and many translators.)

This translation reconciles the seeming conflict: When engaging in the first jhāna, **one observes with a distinct sense of separation (viveka) from sensualities and unskillful qualities** (subtler than the hindrances). In this way, **sensualities and unskillful qualities can still occur while the observer feels separate from them, thus not dis-eased by them**, making it easy to examine them objectively.<sup>77</sup> **This situation allows one to meditate joyfully and with ease, thus the first jhāna is said to be “joy & happiness born of separation (vivekajaṃ pītisukhaṃ)” from sensualities and unskillful qualities.**

It’s like holding a big umbrella to protect yourself from the rain. Just because you don’t get wet doesn’t mean there’s no rain. Also, being sheltered, the mind is joyful and happy for that!

Experienced meditators should be able to identify and confirm this experience. Those new to it are likely to be perplexed by the joy & happiness, not understanding why they suddenly feel happy.

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75 See Ajahn Ṭhānissaro’s translation at <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/an/an04/an04.123.than.html> (Shortcut: [tiny.cc/an4-123](http://tiny.cc/an4-123))

76 From the sutta’s context, it’s obvious that the “instructed noble disciple” does not refer to an arahant.

77 Subtler unskillful qualities include all forms of desire, aversion and delusion weaker than the five hindrances. They are not gross enough to hinder true meditation, i.e. the four jhānas.

I believe the following description by Ashin Tejaniya (in *Don't Look Down on the Defilements*) points to the same:

Once your practice has momentum, you will remain aware naturally. This natural awareness has an almost tangible feel to it and gives you **a sense of freedom you have never experienced before....** While all this is happening you might also be **aware of any liking or disliking.** (p69-71)

**The mind** also becomes sharper, more content, more simple and honest, more flexible, and more sensitive. It **can usually spot the subtle defilements quite easily** and yet still remain aware of other objects. Natural mindfulness not only enables you to be aware of many different objects, it also enables you to understand cause and effect, to observe details and to deal effectively with more subtle defilements. (p75)

So does this one by Mahasi Sayadaw (in *Manual of Insight*):<sup>78</sup>

When concentration is good, defilements cannot enter the noting mind, so **the meditating mind does not mingle with** any companions—that is to say **the defilements.**” (p89) [*Emphases added.*]

Notice that in the quotes above the emphasised words show the separation between the observing or meditating mind and the defilements or unskillful qualities.

With *vivicca* as “having separated”, I translate “*vivicca kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi*” as “having separated from sensualities, having separated from unskillful qualities”. See for yourself if this translation works well both theoretically and practically.<sup>79</sup>

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viveka ( <i>noun</i> )	separation
• vivicca ( <i>absolute of viviccati</i> )	• having separated

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Nonetheless, if we're speaking of the Visuddhimagga *jhāna*, we can *sort of* figuratively use “secluded”. When one is so engrossed in the ‘*nimitta*’, one can be said to be “cut off” from the five-sense objects, but not from sensualities and unskillful qualities. At the same time, being engrossed also prevents one from noticing the accompanying unskillful qualities, making them seem absent. Perhaps these are the bases for how this word came to be preferred.

## Meditation

Returning to the choices of English words for *jhāna*, I see that I.B. Horner was justified in using “meditation” in her translation of Majjhima Nikāya: *The Middle Length Sayings*. Moreover, for “meditation” in general, including the four *jhānas*, the Chinese Buddhist world has long been

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78 As a former practitioner of the Mahasi method, I was delighted when I found this by chance. However, as I eagerly read further, I was a bit disappointed to find the same issue found in other English translations of meditation books of its time: a lot of English renderings of Pāli terms, such as “concentration” and “one-pointedness”, that are bound to mislead many readers.

79 Although sensualities (or sensual pleasures) are experienced as separate while one engages in the *jhānas*, one is not necessarily immune to their influence (*āsava*). More on this in my answer to *Can defilements arise during jhāna?* on page 125.

using 禪/禪 (chán), transliterated from *jhāna*. The Ch’an or Zen tradition, 禪宗, is literally the “Meditation Tradition”, not the “Absorption Tradition”.

Unknown to most people, this translation fits well with how “*jhāna*” is used in the Suttas in the many, diverse ways, as illustrated under *Usage of “Jhāna” in the Suttas* (p53), including

- arittajjhāna: not devoid of meditation
- appāṇaka jhāna: non-breathing meditation
- the kind of *jhāna* (meditation) that the Buddha did not praise

Considering this general usage of the word *jhāna* in the Suttas, what better word to translate its verb form *jhāyati* but “meditate”? Some translate it as “practice *jhāna*”, which is acceptable *if* the audience understands *jhāna* as “meditation”; but why use two words to do the work of one?

And, yes, we would then have “first meditation”, “second meditation” and so forth, just as it has been throughout all the centuries in the Chinese Buddhist world. I am partial to this plain translation for *jhāna*. Some might not like the plainness, yet it is precisely its plainness that does not encourage exotic perceptions that some people get excited or obsess over.

Another related word is *jhāyī*, commonly translated (e.g. by Bhikkhu Bodhi) as “meditator”, and not as “*jhāna* practitioner”. CPED has it as “one who meditates”, which means “meditator”.

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<i>jhāna</i> (noun)	meditation
• <i>jhāyati</i> (verb)	• meditate
• <i>jhāyī</i> (noun)	• meditator

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I’d like to emphasise an obvious point: **Jhāna is called “jhāna” as in “meditation” because that is what it is—meditation—the act of meditating, the action one engages in. It is not a mental state, even in the context of the four jhānas.** This point is essential in understanding the Sutta *jhāna*.

We’ve been so conditioned by orthodoxy to think of the *jhānas* as mental states that it’s a challenge to regard them otherwise. We’ve even gotten used to phrases like ‘*jhānic state*’. Yet, having revisited the many different usages of “*jhāna*” in the Suttas, I don’t find any evidence of it being a mental state, while having seen enough examples of it (as shown earlier) being a mental action.

Viewing *jhāna* as a mental state creates problems for us in trying to understand the scriptures, but more crucially it creates problems in our practice. These problems are solved by consistently translating and regarding *jhāna* as “meditation”. I’ll address this issue more fully in *Appendix 16: Jhāna Means “Meditation”—Literally*.

## Summary of Translations

For easy reference, I put together (samādahāmi) here all my proposed translations, followed by a comparison with the choices of two best known contemporary Pāli-English translators.

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samatha	settling
• cetosamatha	• mental settling
samādhi (noun)	composure, collectedness

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• samādhīyati ( <i>passive of samādahati</i> )	• be composed, be collected
• samādahati ( <i>active verb</i> )	• ( <i>lit. 'put-together'</i> ) compose, collect
• samāhita ( <i>participle of samādahati</i> )	• composed, collected
• samādahātabbhaṃ ( <i>potential participle of samādahati</i> )	• to be composed, to be collected
• samādahanta ( <i>samādahaṃ, samādhaṃ</i> )	• composing, collecting
• sammā-samādhi	• proper composure, proper collectedness
ekagga ( <i>adjective</i> )	( <i>lit. 'one-placed'</i> ) still
• ekaggatā ( <i>noun</i> )	• stillness
• ekaggacitta	• still mind, still-minded
• cittakaggatā ( <i>cittassa ekaggatā, cittassekaggatā</i> )	• stillness of mind
ekodibhāva ( <i>noun</i> )	( <i>lit. equipoised state</i> ) poise
• ekodi ( <i>adjective</i> )	• ( <i>lit. equipoised</i> ) poised
• ekodim karoti	• ( <i>lit. make equipoised</i> ) poise
• cetaso ekodibhāva	• ( <i>lit. mental equipoised state</i> ) mental poise
jhāna ( <i>noun</i> )	meditation
• jhāyati ( <i>verb</i> )	• meditate
• jhāyī ( <i>noun</i> )	• meditator
vitakka ( <i>noun</i> )	thinking, thought
• vitakketi ( <i>verb</i> )	• think
vicāra ( <i>noun</i> )	considering
• vicāreti ( <i>verb</i> )	• consider
sukha	happiness, happy
pīti	joy
pāmojja	gladness
viveka ( <i>noun</i> )	separation
• vivicca ( <i>absolutive of viviccati</i> )	• having separated
nimitta	basis, object

## Comparison of English Translations of Terms Related to Samādhi

	<i>Access to Insight</i> <sup>80</sup> (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu)	<i>Connected Discourses of the Buddha</i> (Bhikkhu Bodhi)	This Book
<b>samatha</b>	tranquility, settling <sup>81</sup>	serenity	settling
• <b>cetosamatha</b>	• tranquillity of awareness	• (none) <sup>82</sup>	• mental settling
<b>samādhi</b>	concentration, composure <sup>83</sup>	concentration	composure, collectedness
• <b>samādhiyati</b>	• be concentrated	• be concentrated	• be composed, be collected
• <b>samādahati</b>	• concentrate	• concentrate	• compose, collect
• <b>samāhita</b>	• concentrated, centered <sup>84</sup> , centered in concentration <sup>85</sup>	• concentrated <sup>86</sup>	• composed, collected
• <b>samādahātabbani</b>	• to be concentrated	• to be concentrated	• to be composed, to be collected
• <b>samādahanta</b> (samādahani, samādham)	• steadying <sup>87</sup>	• concentrating	• composing, collecting
• <b>sammā-samādhi</b>	• right concentration	• right concentration	• proper composure, proper collectedness
<b>ekagga</b>	single	one-pointed	still
• <b>ekaggatā</b>	• singleness	• one-pointedness	• stillness
• <b>ekaggacitta</b>	• single-minded, mind unified <sup>88</sup> , mind at singleness <sup>89</sup>	• one-pointed mind	• still mind, still-minded
• <b>cittekaggatā</b> (cittassa ekaggatā, cittassekaggatā)	• singleness of mind	• one-pointedness of mind	• stillness of mind

80 This website is no longer updated. Some translations listed here may have been updated in Ajahn Ṭhānissaro's new website: [dhammatalks.org](http://dhammatalks.org).

81 For the vinaya term *adhikaraṇa-samatha*, translated as “settling of issues”. (<http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/vin/sv/bhikkhu-pati-intro.html#penalties>)

82 MLDB and NDB both have “serenity of mind”.

83 Only for *samādhijam*, “born of composure”, as found in his translation for the second jhāna description.

84 In Dh110, from *asamāhito*, translated as “uncentered”.

85 In AN11.12 and AN11.13.

86 In NDB (published later), it is “composed”.

87 In *Ānāpānassati Sutta* (MN118).

88 In *Upasena (Vaṅgantaputta) Sutta* (Ud4.9).

89 In *MahāSāropama Sutta* (MN29) and *CūḷaSāropama Sutta* (MN30). In Ajahn Ṭhānissaro's own (new) website, he has it as “a mind gathered into one”. (<https://www.dhammatalks.org/books/OnThePath/Section0014.html>)

## Comparison of English Translations of Terms Related to Samādhi

	<i>Access to Insight</i> (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu)	<i>Connected Discourses of the Buddha</i> (Bhikkhu Bodhi)	This Book
<b>ekodibhāva</b>	unification	unification	poise
• ekodi	• unified <sup>90</sup>	• unified	• poised
• ekodim karoti	• get unified	• unify	• poise
• cetaso ekodibhāva	• unification of awareness	• unification of mind	• mental poise
<b>jhāna</b>	jhāna, mental absorption <sup>91</sup> , trance <sup>92</sup>	jhāna, meditation <sup>93</sup>	meditation
• jhāyati	• practice jhāna <sup>94</sup> , be absorbed in jhāna <sup>95</sup> , be absorbed with the thought <sup>96</sup>	• meditate, brood <sup>97</sup>	• meditate
• jhāyī	• (one) absorbed in jhāna <sup>98</sup> , (one) in jhāna <sup>99</sup>	• meditator	• meditator
<b>vitakka</b>	directed thought, thinking <sup>100</sup> , thought <sup>101</sup>	thought	thinking, thought <sup>102</sup>
• vitakketi	• think	• think	• think
<b>vicāra</b>	evaluation	examination	considering
• vicāreti	• evaluate, ponder <sup>103</sup>	• examine	• consider
<b>sukha</b>	pleasure, ease <sup>104</sup>	(1) happiness; (2) pleasure, pleasant (feeling)	happiness, happy
<b>pīti</b>	rapture	rapture	joy

90 In his new website, he has this as “one-pointed” in Sakka-pañha Sutta (DN21). (<https://www.dhammadownload.com/suttas/DN/DN21.html>)

91 In Gopaka-Moggallāna Sutta (MN108), although *jhāna* untranslated is also found there.

92 In Mahāsaccaka Sutta (MN36.21) for *appāṇaka jhāna*, translated as “the trance of non-breathing”.

93 In Mahāsaccaka Sutta (MN36.21) for *appāṇaka jhāna*, and also in Gopaka-Moggallāna Sutta (MN108), although *jhāna* untranslated is also found there.

94 In Nālaka Sutta (Sutta Nipāta 3.11).

95 In Theragāthā 1.41.

96 In Sandha/Saddha Sutta (AN11.9).

97 In Khema Sutta (SN2.22).

98 In Adhipateyya Sutta (AN3.40).

99 In Udaya Sutta (Sutta Nipāta 5.13).

100 From *avitakka* translated in Theragāthā 14.1 as “no-thinking”.

101 In Vitakka-saññhāna Sutta (MN20).

102 In Sati Sutta (SN47.35).

103 In Dvedhāvitakka Sutta (MN19).

104 In Dhpa290, AN11.12, AN11.13, etc.

## Comparison of English Translations of Terms Related to Samādhi

	<i>Access to Insight</i> (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu)	<i>Connected Discourses of the Buddha</i> (Bhikkhu Bodhi)	This Book
<b>pāmojja</b>	joy	gladness	gladness
<b>viveka</b>	seclusion <sup>105</sup>	seclusion	separation
• <b>vivicca</b>	• secluded <sup>106</sup>	• secluded	• having separated
<b>nimitta</b>	theme	(1) sign; (2) basis <sup>107</sup>	basis, object

## Standard Description of the Four Jhānas

Below is the standard description of the four jhānas in Pāli and my English translation. The sentence structure is similar to Ajahn Ṭhānissaro’s, which I’ve adopted because I find it grammatically most accurate. Words, however, may differ.

idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu  
vivicceva kāmehi vivicca  
akusalehi dhammehi  
savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ  
vivekajaṃ pītisukhaṃ  
**paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ**  
upasampajja viharati.

Here, bhikkhus, having  
separated from sensualities,  
having separated from  
unskillful qualities, the  
bhikkhu abides engaging in  
**the first meditation:** joy &  
happiness born of separation,  
accompanied by thinking and  
considering.

vitakkavicārānaṃ vūpasamā  
ajjhattaṃ sampasādanaṃ  
cetaso ekodibhāvaṃ  
avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ  
samādhijaṃ pītisukhaṃ  
**duṭṭiyaṃ jhānaṃ**  
upasampajja viharati.

With the quiescence of  
thinking & considering, he  
abides engaging in **the**  
**second meditation:** internal  
illumination, mental poise,  
joy & happiness born of  
composure, without thinking  
and considering.

pītiyā ca virāgā upekkhako ca  
viharati sato ca sampajāno,  
sukhañca kāyena  
paṭisaṃvedeti, yaṃ taṃ ariyā  
ācikkhanti – ‘upekkhako  
satimā sukhavihārī’ti **tatiyaṃ**  
**jhānaṃ** upasampajja viharati.

Then with the dispassion for  
joy, he abides equanimously,  
is mindful and fully aware,  
and experiences happiness  
with the body. He abides  
engaging in **the third**  
**meditation:** that which the  
noble ones declare, ‘He is  
equanimous, mindful, and  
abides happily.’

105 Earlier, it was “withdrawal”.

106 It was “withdrawn” earlier.

107 In NDB, it is “mark, object”.

sukhassa ca pahānā dukkhassa ca pahānā pubbeva somanassadomanassānaṃ atthaṅgamā adukkham- asukhaṃ upekkhāsati- pārisuddhiṃ <b>catuttham</b> <b>jhānaṃ</b> upasampajja viharati	With the abandoning of happiness and the abandoning of suffering, just as with the earlier disappearance of delight & dejection, he abides engaging in <b>the fourth meditation</b> : purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither suffering nor happy.
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## Summary

At the end of Part 1, I talked about how it is not easy to de-confuse ourselves out of this complex obfuscation surrounding the concepts of *jhāna* and *samādhi*. A major difficulty lies in the words commonly used to translate the related Pāli terms. Since using these words is confusing, yet we can't do without words, we should reconsider the words.

I hope I've helped you to do that with this Part 2 of the book. You might now like to return to the two tables in Part 1 (under *Comparing the Two Kinds of Jhāna*, page 12) to review the points that were unclear or unacceptable to you. I hope you will now have no difficulty with them.

Despite doing much to propose new translations, I maintain that ultimately what's important for each of us is still our proper understanding of the practice itself for the sake of true liberation. This is what I'll address in Part 3. But before that, let me offer some reminders and concluding words for Part 2:

- If we have to make a translation make sense to us, we have a problem, and the problem may lie in the translation itself.
- If you have been practising meditation, but not “*jhāna*” as commonly understood now in orthodox Theravāda, you might like to read the Suttas afresh, bearing in mind the proposed translations. You may find, as I did, that some suttas now make better sense to you, and you can connect them better with your practice and experience. In any case, it is good to see how far your practice tallies with the Suttas, so that you may adjust as you deem fit.
- When encountering others using Pāli words like *jhāna*, *samādhi*, *samatha*, *ekodibhāva* and *ekaggatā*, remember that they may not use these words in the same way as you do. Do consider how they are using them, so that you may know what they mean to say. If you're not sure, you can ask. Many teachers use these words according to their traditional learning or even idiosyncrasies. We can't change them, but we can change how we understand them. If we assume they use those words in the same way as others do, or as the Suttas do, we may misunderstand and become confused.
- Also, in reading or hearing a translated teaching, remember that our understanding of it may or may not be what the teacher means. Some translations—such as “concentration” and “one-pointedness”—have become so widespread that translators and English-speaking teachers are likely to just use them, not realising how that might affect their audiences. Recognising that, we can mentally replace them with the ones proposed above, like “composure” and “stillness”, and see if the message makes better sense. In my exper-



ience, doing so gradually clarifies the whole confusion around this subject. (To test your discriminative power, see *Appendix 1: Exercises on Reading Terms.*)

Yet, all these may not be enough, especially in facing today's many mutually contradictory teachings. And this is what we shall deal with in Part 3.

# Part 3: Traversing the Jungle of Contradictory Teachings

Many of us come to Buddhism, especially Buddhist meditation, probably because we believe it shows us the way out of suffering, even if only at a gross level. Yet, as we learn more, we realise that it has many teachings, including those on meditation, that mutually contradict and are often seemingly irreconcilable.

For “jhāna”, meditation teacher Leigh Brasington has tried to clarify the matter by placing many contemporary meditation teachers under two categories according to what they teach: “Visuddhimagga Style Jhāna” and “Sutta Style Jhāna” ([www.leighb.com/jhanantp.htm](http://www.leighb.com/jhanantp.htm)).<sup>1</sup> Although those placed under “Sutta Style Jhāna” share important elements that distinguish them from the Visuddhimagga variety, even among them differences are found. He writes:

Interestingly, most teachers of Jhāna tend to regard all Jhāna methods with concentration levels weaker than their own as “not authentic, not real Jhānas”, and they tend to regard all methods with concentration levels stronger than their own as “indulging, not useful.”<sup>2</sup>

Note that concentration level is but one among the points of disagreement. Moreover, besides disagreements based on personal experience, there are also disagreements based on scriptural finding. When some people draw seemingly conclusive conclusions from the Suttas, others may also find means to refute those conclusions and justify their own. So, when it comes to what is right or wrong meditation, we can debate endlessly. So, what shall we do?

1. Shall we cling to our own view: *Only this is true; anything otherwise is hollow?*<sup>3</sup> This is a well-known phrase in the Suttas, which the Buddha deems unfitting to declare for one who has not known and seen the truth. Unfortunately, this is the stance widely held these days by many Buddhist meditators.
2. Shall we conclude that the Buddhist path has become obscured, thus awakening is no longer possible, and so we have to wait for the next Buddha? This is a stance of resignation and even an excuse to be lazy.
3. Shall we hope for or do more scholarly research to ascertain the earliest teaching? This is more positive, and valuable too. However, it’s important to remind ourselves that scholarly conclusions are necessarily based on assumptions, which we may not be aware of. And even if such a conclusion can be reached, it’s hard to say when it would achieve scholarly “general acceptance”. Besides, I have my doubts about this, because in the first place scholars can’t even agree on the *basis* to determine which texts are earlier. Moreover, scholarly research can only convince those who trust the texts the research is based on, or the researchers themselves.

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1 While I agree with the “Visuddhimagga Style Jhāna” list, I think some teachers (including Brasington) listed under “Sutta Style Jhāna” belong to neither list.

2 I attempt to reconcile this seeming conflict in *Appendix 2: More on Concentration, Composure & Samādhi*.

3 *Idameva saccaṃ, moghamaññaṃ*. Learn more on why we should avoid making such unreserved conclusion in Āyasmā Aggacitta’s *Awaken to Truth in Harmony*.

For me, being a pragmatist, I would ask: *How shall we decide for ourselves which teaching to follow?* To answer this question, I would go back to our Teacher, the Buddha. Granted, he is not around for us to consult directly, but we can refer to the closest source we have to what he taught: the Suttas.

You may have read Kālāma (or Kesamutti) Sutta (AN3.65). What we face now is similar to what the Kālāmas in the sutta did. Having heard from various priests and contemplatives expounding mutually contradictory teachings, they became doubtful and uncertain. **The Buddha’s advice to them is the solution for us: To decide whether to follow a certain teaching, we examine the result it yields when put into practice.**

So, now what are the results for which we practise meditation? **What is the purpose of the Buddha’s teachings?** In the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN56.11), we find the Buddha’s first Dhamma instruction, “This noble truth of dukkha should be *fully known*.” So, here’s the question: Does our understanding and practice of “jhāna”—together with the rest of the Noble Eight-factored Path—allow us to fully know or comprehend dukkha? The dukkha we are to know is not the ‘dukkha’ in the books, from talks or of our intellectual understanding, but the dukkha that we can know directly for ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

We should also compare our practice with the Buddha’s instructions for the second and third noble truths. Does it bring about *abandonment* of craving for sensuality, for being and for non-being? Does it lead to *witnessing* the cessation of dukkha: the “remainderless fading & cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, & letting go of that very craving.”<sup>5</sup> This is the purpose for which we practice. And so we ask: Has this been the result of our jhāna (meditation) practice?

This way of evaluating tallies with this passage from Satthusāsana Sutta (AN7.83):

“... those things which you might know thus: ‘These things lead exclusively to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna,’ you should definitely recognize: ‘This is the Dhamma; this is the discipline; this is the teaching of the Teacher.’” (NDB, p1100)

As it speaks of Nibbāna, the ultimate liberation, it can seem like a criterion too demanding to go by, but it’s not really so. We just need to understand what Nibbāna is. “The evaporation of passion, the evaporation of aversion, the evaporation of delusion—this, friend, is called Nibbāna.” (Nibbānapañhā Sutta, SN38.1)

And so we should check: With my present way of practice, have I become *freer* from mental defilements: passion, aversion and delusion? This, for me, is the litmus test of spiritual progress. Through our practice, has desire lessened in us? In meeting undesirable situations similar as before, are we less angry, less afraid, less hurt? Have we become less jealous, less conceited, less stubborn, less vain, less muddled, less attached (e.g. to views)? To evaluate the trueness of our way of practice, we need to answer these questions honestly.

In addition, bear in mind that all our problems—worldly and spiritual—consist of mental defilements. Our practice should bring about their evaporation at all levels and in all aspects of our lives, not only when we’re on the meditation cushion or in a retreat.

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4 Some people meditate for different agendas: to *shut off* from the world, thus *avoiding* the dukkha of facing the world; or to *become* a spiritual attainer, thus *fighting off* the dukkha of feeling inferior. The latter reminds me of what Chögyam Trungpa calls “spiritual materialism”. Some meditators are blind to the ego-upgrading agenda underlying a seemingly noble endeavour.

5 Trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu: [www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.than.html](http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.than.html).

Considering that the strength of noticeable defilements fluctuates, one teacher suggests comparing between the recent period and five years ago. If that's too long for you, how about three years? If, after more than that, nothing has changed for the better, then something is wrong somewhere, and it's good to step back and re-evaluate our way of practice, and make the necessary changes. If defilements have grown instead, then surely we should do something immediately!

There's another list of criteria in Saṅkhitta Sutta (AN8.53). You may find the following advice from the Buddha to his step-mother more concrete and immediately experiential:

“As for the qualities of which you may know, ‘These qualities lead

- to dispassion, not to passion;
- to being unfettered, not to being fettered;
- to shedding, not to accumulating;
- to modesty, not to self-aggrandizement;
- to contentment, not to discontent;
- to seclusion, not to entanglement;
- to aroused persistence, not to laziness;
- to being unburdensome, not to being burdensome’:

You may categorically hold, ‘This is the Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher’s instruction.’”<sup>6</sup>

So, we can also compare our practice with these eight points, and see if it is the Dhamma, the Vinaya, the Teacher’s instruction.

Back to the cessation of dukkha due to the relinquishment of craving, we needn’t limit our thinking to *en bloc* cessation. As the Buddha said in Uposatha Sutta (Ud5.5 & AN8.20),

Just as, bhikkhus, the great ocean is gradually sloped, gradually slanted, gradually inclined, with no abrupt drop-off; even so, bhikkhus, in this Dhamma-Discipline, there is gradual training, gradual practice, gradual progress, with no abrupt gnosis-penetration.

Therefore, if our way of practising the Dhamma is indeed correct and suitable for us, it should cause us to gradually know and see things as they are, and witness the gradual letting go of craving and clinging and the corresponding gradual release from dukkha.

Some people might tell us sincerely that they teach or practice according to the Suttas or the Buddha’s teaching, and that by following their way we’ll get to see this or experience that. In following it, we might see or experience what they say; but if we don’t get to achieve the purpose for which we’re practising—the liberation from dukkha—then should we continue?

Continual lack of progress in our practice of course does not necessarily mean that the teaching is wrong. The fault may lie in our way of practice. If this is the case, then for the sake of our own liberation, it is proper for us to step back, reflect on the situation and decide on what’s right to do.

Conversely, if others tell us our way is wrong, not according to the Buddha’s teaching, we’ve no way of theoretically reaching any unreserved conclusion whether that’s true or not. Yet if our

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6 Trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu: [www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/an/an08/an08.053.than.html](http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/an/an08/an08.053.than.html).

practice—whether we call it “jhāna” or otherwise—does bring about cessation of dukkha, then it does. We should let *that truth* we personally experience inform us of the way.

So, to decide what and how to practise, let us not blindly go by reports, legends, traditions, scripture, logical conjecture, inference, analogies, agreement through pondering views, probability, or the thought, ‘This contemplative is our teacher.’<sup>7</sup> These are listed in the Kālāma Sutta as non-criteria for acceptance. Instead, let our own progress—or non-progress—inform us whether our understanding and practice is yielding the liberation we seek.

## Summary

Although we need to learn from external sources and use our intellect, they are insufficient bases for deciding whether to follow a certain teaching. We need to know for ourselves if a practice leads us out of suffering. I see this self-verification as the best way to determine *for ourselves* what is right or wrong meditation, to guide us through the jungle of contradictory teachings.

Perhaps we may say we are now blessed with various living meditation traditions and their methods to choose from. However, method is ultimately not the important point. The important point is still the result: Does the practice free us? If anything we learn (such as in this book) does not bring about proper results when put into practice, then we should go by our own integrity and reject it for our own good. If however it does bring about proper results, then we should engage in it.

**Tip:** If you can’t judge whether your practice is yielding proper results, whether you’ve progressed in self-cultivation, then you could ask your close relatives and friends. *They* know the truth. If they choose not to say, then *you* know the truth.

Let me end with a quote by Ajahn Dune Atulo:

All the truths of the Dhamma are already present in the world. When the Buddha awakened to those truths, he brought them out to teach to the beings of the world. Now, because those beings had different propensities—coarse or refined—he had to use up a lot of words: 84,000 sections of Dhamma in all. When wise people try to select the words best suited to explain the truth to those who aim at the truth, they have to use the methods of the truth that, on reflection, are the most correct and complete, without worrying about the words or getting fixated on the letters of the texts in the least way at all.

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7 Trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu: [www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html](http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html).

# Conclusion

As I've said in the beginning, *jhāna* is a controversial subject that shouldn't be ignored. It seriously needs clear, convincing answers. Therefore we need to think about it, talk about it, research into it to arrive at conclusions, and make them known.

The passage is bound to be rough. As a German proverb goes, “**An old error is always more popular than a new truth.**” In this case, however, the new truth is not really new. It only seems so because it has been obscured by centuries of misinterpretations. Now the misinterpretations have become so ingrained among Buddhists that any attempt to clear them up is potentially hazardous.

I foresee this book triggering disapproval from some Theravāda Buddhist groups for different reasons. That is to be expected. I'm prepared to face it—at least I think so. Besides, I prefer people to debate afresh over this important controversial topic than not discuss it at all. Let the boats be rocked, and feathers ruffled. We need to talk about this—as civil Buddhists.

I also foresee this book being highly welcome by some others. If you belong to this group, I hope you've been critical enough in reading it, instead of just 'liking' the book because it confirms your preconceptions. Anyhow, with better knowledge about *jhāna*, you should feel freer to discuss it among your fellow practitioners.

In this book, I've attempted to extend the clearing up of the long-standing controversy: *Is jhāna necessary for liberation?* In doing so, I've shown the many differences between the Sutta *jhāna* and the Visuddhimagga *jhāna*. Then, I posited the importance of reviewing English words used to represent their Pāli counterparts, and proposed their revisions, supported by reasoning and evidence from the Suttas. I believe that with these understandings we can avoid perpetuating wrong ideas and confusion, and help to set earnest practitioners like ourselves on the right course.

If you still doubt the propositions in this book, I can fully understand. Years ago, I would have dismissed many things I've written here. It's difficult to consider an idea that conflicts with what people we trust have been saying repeatedly for years. But these days, I would try to consider it anyway, and that's what I hope you would do too. For this purpose, please consider using the Buddha's advice in Kālāma Sutta to arrive at a personal conclusion.

May you be guided by the Dhamma, the Truth, gain the happiness of meditation (*jhāna*), and find your path to liberation.

## What You Can Do

**Try Out the Proposed Translations.** Even if you disagree with the translations I've proposed, no harm trying them out, right? When reading an English sutta translation, you can mentally replace the relevant words to see how you might understand it differently. In your practice, see how thinking in those words might influence your practice. For example, instead of asking how you can cultivate concentration, ask how you can cultivate composure or collectedness. If you find that beneficial to your practice, you may want to use them in your Dhamma conversations so that others may learn of them.

**Consider Using Them in Your Works.** If your works involve this subject, see if using the proposed translations (e.g. “composure” or “collectedness” for *samādhi*) suits better than the currently more common translations.

**Talk About It.** Whether or not you agree with the various points discussed here, I encourage you to talk about them with interested parties, especially on the two kinds of *jhāna*. But do be careful about trying to make others agree with you. Quarrelling over the matter misses the point of discussing the Dhamma. If you run into a disagreement, try to understand the other’s viewpoint first to see where you agree; not just where you don’t.

**Re-read Some Suttas.** You may have read suttas on meditation that seem difficult to understand or strange to you. With the new knowledge, try reading them afresh and see if you can now understand them better. Among those you shouldn’t miss are Tapussa Sutta (AN9.41) and Kolita Sutta (SN21.1), which provide an understanding of the *jhānas* quite contrary to the view prevalent now. Also consider reading those in *Saḷāyatana-saṃyutta* (SN35).

# Epilogue

This book began in 2009 as a somewhat self-righteous effort to right the wrong. Later, this attitude gradually gave way to a more wholesome one. I've tried to remove the egoic tone, but if elements of that remain, I humbly seek the reader's forgiveness.

For the most part, I enjoyed writing this book, playing lawyer and detective. However, there were times I got tired of it. During one particularly challenging part of the writing process, I was so burnt out I was ready to quit, despite having done the greater portion of the work.

I remember lamenting, "Oh, gosh! This is so difficult." I really wanted to give up.

I told my teacher, Āyasmā Aggacitta, "I don't need this for my practice." He said, "Yes, that's true; but you're doing this out of compassion for others, right?"

I sighed, reflected on that, and eventually the energy to carry on returned.

You must forgive me for wanting to abandon this project, because I wasn't 'supposed' to write a book. All I intended at first was a few short essays to inform others on issues that I deemed central to the widespread confusion. But after completing them, I realised that they wouldn't stand well individually in facing the complex orthodoxy over the subject. The pieces of evidence and lines of reasoning in those essays needed to be put together (*samādahati*) cohesively so that they support each other and make a convincing whole. So I thought, *Maybe I ought to have them as a booklet*. I did just that, without knowing what I was getting myself into. The booklet grew... and grew... and grew... into a book. Had I known *that* at the beginning, I'm sorry, you wouldn't be reading this book.

This thing went *way, way, way* beyond my original intention. I had trouble keeping the book short as ideas and pieces of evidence to support my propositions kept popping up, mostly when I was just sitting quietly and observing, sometimes while walking downhill for alms, sometimes even upon falling asleep or waking up. They also appear while just casually flipping through a book, and when communicating with others. I found support even in arguments against my propositions. *They are everywhere!*

Sometimes I wondered: *Why is it so easy to find all these gems? Am I getting unseen help?* I was also sometimes tempted to stuff all of them into the book, but that's not a good idea. So, I have left some unpicked, and have sometimes merely provided leads for your own exploration.

If I were to prolong this work, I may find further—maybe ever more convincing—supporting arguments to add. But I must stop; otherwise the final work would become so long that most people would rather not read it. Besides, I don't want to spend so much time in academia. So I must stop.

As I was almost done with this long quasi-academic piece of writing, it occurred to me: I've neither passion nor talent for academic research; I just happen to be in the middle of circumstances, making me *just good enough* to write this book. Indeed, every necessary factor for its production is there. It is as if the universe has conspired to use me to get this book out. It gave me everything I needed and pushed me right to the end.

By the end of writing this book, I have enough reasons to believe that I *have* been getting unseen help. In fact, in the ending period of writing, to speed up the process, many decisions were made through consulting that help. Thus I feel compelled to add to the byline "with Unseen Guidance". Having just my name is disturbing to my conscience.



This work has been a rewarding journey. It has led to many unexpected discoveries, resolving long-time puzzles as I connect the dots between the scriptures and experience. Many of these I've placed in the appendices, which I hope you'll enjoy too. My understanding of the Suttas and the practice grew along with writing this book. For that, I'm grateful.

It also made me realise there's much more that I don't know. I *don't* fancy connecting all the dots. No, thank you. I'm satisfied enough with this book, and I hope you are too.

# Appendix 1: Exercises on Reading Terms

In the text proper, I've shown variously that **a word or phrase can differ in meaning in different historical and traditional contexts**. Let's use the following example as an exercise.

What you'll gain as a result in that moment is the refinement of the mind that is simply aware, all by itself – simply aware of itself at that moment, not involved with any preoccupations at all. This is called 'one-pointedness of mind.' (*A Life of Inner Quality* (Chapter: Tranquillity and Insight) by Ajaan Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno, trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu)

Questions:

1. Does 'one-pointedness of mind' here refer to concentrating at the nose tip, or any other point of the body, or any mind-made object?
2. Did the ajahn say "one-pointedness" in English?
3. If not, what word do you think he actually used?

My answers:

1. Clearly no.
2. Most unlikely.
3. Most likely *ekaggatā*.

Another question: What do you think he meant by *ekaggatā*? To me, it does seem like he meant "stillness" (or "one-placedness"), but at a higher end of its spectrum.

When I shared this quote with my teacher, Āyasmā Aggacitta Mahāthera, he said, "I'm very wary about how Thai (forest) masters use Pāli terms." I agree. We notice that they—as well as many non-Thai teachers of that tradition—tend to define and use terms according to individual preferences.

Therefore, **how a teacher defines and uses a certain term can differ from how the Suttas and other teachers do. If we assume that they all use terms in the same way, we are bound to be confused. Thus we need to be mindful not to assume so and learn to see what the teacher actually means.**

Now take a look at this example:

In vipassanā the object serves as a means to help us develop right awareness, concentration and wisdom. If the mind reacts with any kind of defilement (*lobha*, *dosa*, or *moha*) you have wrong awareness and so concentration and wisdom cannot arise. (*Don't Look Down on the Defilements* (p64) by Ashin Tejaniya)

You probably have noticed "concentration" and may have tried to replace it with "composure" or "collectedness". But did you also notice that "vipassanā" isn't used in the way the Suttas do? What would be the right term according to the Suttas? Try to think about it before looking for the answer on page 96.

**Reading terms in sutta translations can be tricky too.** Look at this translation of AN3.19: "Here, a bhikkhu diligently applies himself to an object of concentration in the morning, in the middle of the day, and in the evening." (NDB, p214)

How do you understand this sentence as it is? Specifically, what does “object of concentration” mean? Does the original sentence in the sutta mean focusing on a certain object all day long?

I will not answer here, but here’s a tip: “Object of concentration” is originally *samādhi-nimitta*, a term explained many times in this book in its plural form.

Last one:

Better than a hundred years  
lived without virtue, **uncentered**, is  
one day  
lived by a virtuous **person**  
**absorbed in jhāna.**

(Ajahn Thanissaro’s translation of Dhp110, <https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/KN/Dhp/Ch08.html>)

Here’s the Pāli source with two emphases corresponding to the emphases above:

yo ca vassasataṃ jīve  
dussīlo **asamāhito**  
ekāhaṃ jīvitaṃ seyyo  
sīlavantassa **jhāyino**

Tip: Refer to *Summary of Translations* (p67).

## Appendix 2: More on Concentration, Composure & Samādhi

Early in *Part 3: Traversing the Jungle of Contradictory Teachings* (p74), I quoted Leigh Brasington’s observation on how jhāna teachers disagree on concentration level. This observation is based on the assumption that the jhānas are about concentration: no concentration, no jhāna; higher concentration, higher jhāna.

However, if we agree that the *samādhi* of the Suttas does not mean “concentration”, then we would also have to agree that, in regard to the jhānas of the Suttas, the above assumption is false (i.e. in the Suttas’ context, concentration does not matter after all).

Furthermore, if we agree that the *samādhi* of the Suttas means “composure (or collectedness)”, instead of “concentration”, then we would also have to agree that **the four jhānas, being sammā-samādhi, relate to progressive levels of composure, not concentration.** (As shown under *Does Jhāna Mean Absorption?* (p53), engaging in them is not limited to static postures.) **The greater the composure (samādhi), the higher level of meditation (jhāna) we can engage in.**

Bearing this in mind, disagreements based on concentration level—e.g., whether sound is heard in which jhāna, or whether the body is felt—become irrelevant. While some people give these phenomena much attention, the Suttas don’t define the jhānas in such ways. Instead they speak of progressive levels of composure through letting go. (See *Tapussa Sutta*, AN9.41.) Therefore, if two people disagree on the concentration level based on personal experience, they could try to compare the composure level instead, according to the descriptions of the jhānas in the Suttas.

While *samādhi* or composure is a spiritual faculty, the mind’s ability to sustain fixed attention, i.e. concentration, is not. One can be completely concentrated or focused on an exciting movie, an attractive image, a hated person, a computer game, eating, work, music, reading, running, or high-speed driving. Anything one intensely likes or dislikes, one can easily concentrate on. I agree that such kind of concentration is different from the orthodox idea of meditative concentration, but it’s *concentration* nonetheless—a mundane mental ability.

Lest you think that I’m mistaken, that the above are examples of wrong concentration (supposedly the correct translation for *micchā-samādhi*), let me explain why they are not. According to *Micchatta Sutta* (AN10.103), *micchā-samādhi* leads to wrong knowledge (*micchā-ñāṇa*), which leads to wrong liberation (*micchā-vimutti*). So, if the above are examples of wrong concentration, we would have to wonder what ‘wrong knowledge’ and ‘wrong liberation’ (due to ‘wrong knowledge’) can concentrating on eating and so on lead to.

So, what then is *micchā-samādhi* in the Suttas? I believe it covers a wide range of absorbed states, including the *Visuddhimagga* jhāna, that can be mistaken as liberation. For example: A man I met described to me his meditative experience where his body “disappeared”. Upon my questioning if that simply meant he didn’t feel the body, he reluctantly admitted so, but quickly went on to insist anyway that it meant the body disappeared and so he had experienced “emptiness” and therefore was “enlightened”. He wanted me to confirm it. I tried to convince him that it was just an experience; since no understanding occurred, it couldn’t be enlightenment. He didn’t agree and continued to insist on his view. Recognizing there was no way I could change his mind, I gave up.

Ajahn Chah defined micchā-samādhi in a similar but more specific way, as I've quoted on page 40.

With micchā-samādhi (wrong composure) well-practised, one can have very good composure in doing even very unwholesome things. An often cited example is sniping. Snipers practise meditation too, a kind that enables them to hyperfocused on only one task: to shoot someone from afar. Sociopaths also have amazing composure, such that they can lie and fake emotions convincingly. It's made possible by their ability of "blotting out large areas of awareness", including their emotions.

# Appendix 3: Should We Develop Concentration?

In the text proper, I made the case for “concentration” being not the right translation for *samādhi*. To this, one might ask, *Even so, we still need to develop concentration for liberation, don't we?* I find no evidence for that in the Suttas, and elsewhere I find much to discourage it.

Below is a footnote in Āyasmā Anālayo's *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization* (p85, BPS, 2003) on Naḷakapāna Sutta:

M I 463<sup>1</sup> explains that the mind of one who has had *jhānic* experiences will no longer be overwhelmed by the hindrances. On the other hand, it needs to be pointed out that **if sensual desire or aversion should nevertheless manage to invade the mind, they can manifest with surprising vehemence, owing to the increased ability of the mind to remain undistractedly with a single object, even an unwholesome one.** Examples of this can be found in several Jātaka tales (e.g. no. 66 at Ja I 305, no. 251 at Ja II 271, and no. 431 at Ja III 496), which report previous lives of the *bodhisatta* as an ascetic.<sup>2</sup> In spite of being able to attain deep levels of concentration and possessed of supernormal powers, in each case this ascetic was nevertheless completely overwhelmed by sensual desire on unexpectedly seeing a sparsely-dressed woman. [*Emphasis and footnotes are added.*]

I quote the above to highlight a noteworthy observation. However, I need to first point out an error. The wording of the first sentence seems to imply a permanent effect of *jhāna*, but the author has clarified with me that he didn't mean that. In a subsequent email to me, he says he's “saying that when one has been in *jhāna* and comes out of it and into the world, there is a sort of buffer effect, things that earlier would have caused reaction do no longer impinge with such strength on the mind, it is more easy to remain balanced”.

I understand his clarification, but it doesn't tally with the sutta. The sutta doesn't speak of an after-effect at all; it speaks of an instant effect. It says that for a person who does not reach (*nādhigacchati*) at least the first *jhāna*; longing, enmity, dullness & drowsiness, restlessness & guilt, incertitude, discontent and weariness seize the mind and stay there (*cittaṃ pariyādāya tiṭṭhati*); but for a person who does reach (*adhigacchati*), all that does not happen. The verbs in the Pāli text— *adhigacchati* (reach) and *tiṭṭhati* (stay)—are all in simple present tense.<sup>3</sup> In no way can they support Āyasmā Anālayo's interpretation with the perfect tense of “has had” or “has been”. His interpretation seems to be based on the idea of “*jhāna*” as absorption.

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1 Reference to a page of Majjhima Nikāya in Pāli as published by Pāli Text Society. It points to the page where Naḷakapāna Sutta occurs. For MLDB, it's MN68.6.

2 Jātaka tales are part of the Theravādin post-canonical texts.

3 “... *vivekaṃ, anuruddhā, kāmehi vivekaṃ akusalehi dhammehi pīṭisukhaṃ nādhigacchati aññaṃ vā tato santataraṃ, tassa abhijjhāpi cittaṃ pariyādāya tiṭṭhati, byāpādopi... thīnamiddhampi... uddhaccakukkucampi... vicikicchāpi... aratīpi... tandīpi cittaṃ pariyādāya tiṭṭhati. vivekaṃ, anuruddhā, kāmehi vivekaṃ akusalehi dhammehi pīṭisukhaṃ nādhigacchati aññaṃ vā tato santataraṃ.*  
“*vivekaṃ, anuruddhā, kāmehi vivekaṃ akusalehi dhammehi pīṭisukhaṃ adhigacchati aññaṃ vā tato santataraṃ, tassa abhijjhāpi cittaṃ na pariyādāya tiṭṭhati, byāpādopi... thīnamiddhampi... uddhaccakukkucampi... vicikicchāpi... aratīpi... tandīpi cittaṃ na pariyādāya tiṭṭhati. vivekaṃ, anuruddhā, kāmehi vivekaṃ akusalehi dhammehi pīṭisukhaṃ adhigacchati aññaṃ vā tato santataraṃ.*”

Now, let me get to his subsequent, noteworthy observation, which I've emphasized in the above quote. Can you read that part again?

As he noted, concentration, the basis of absorption jhānas, is potentially harmful. Such a potential is never said about the jhānas in the Suttas. Instead, as the above sutta says, one with proper samādhi does *not* get overwhelmed by those grosser defilements. Neither this sutta nor any other suggests that when one is freshly out of the state “sensual desire or aversion... can manifest with surprising vehemence”.

If indeed the samādhi the Buddha taught has such a potential harm, it would be very odd that he was silent about it, or that the compilers of the Suttas did not include it. As I see it, this potential harm isn't found in the Suttas simply because—as far as the Sutta jhānas are concerned—there is none.

So, does that mean Āyasmā Anālayo's personal observation and the Jātaka tales he referenced are wrong? Not at all. Again, the conflict is merely seeming. It dissolves when we recognise that his observation and the tales he referenced are not related to the jhānas of the Suttas. **The Sutta jhāna is about heightened composure, while the Visuddhimagga jhāna is about heightened concentration.**

**Side note:** Naḷakapāna Sutta says that longing (abhijjhā) does not seize the mind and stay there for the first or higher jhāna. Why not say sensual desire (kāmacchanda) instead, which is more consistent, since the other four of the five hindrances are listed too?<sup>4</sup> As SN40.1 shows, “perception-cognitions associated with sensuality” (kāmasahagatā saññāmanasikārā) indeed can beset a person who has reached the first jhāna. That's another way of saying that sensual desire can overwhelm his mind, which causes him to disengage from the first jhāna. “Perception-cognitions associated with sensuality” is the only thing mentioned in the Suttas that can do that. In summary, the first jhāna can prevent longing but not sensual desire, a subtler defilement.

When I was a new monk staying in a Buddhist centre, a lady came regularly to practice meditation. She could get into absorbed states easily and liked it so much she sat daily at home to enjoy the bliss. (Is that jhāna?) One day, while enjoying her nice, quiet bliss, BAM! She was shocked out of it. *Who slammed the door?* She was furious and immediately got up to find out. As soon as she found the culprit, i.e. her daughter, she flew into a rage. Her daughter was horrified. When she ‘woke up’ from the rage, she was shocked over what happened to her.

While telling me the story, she looked worried. Then with a constrained voice of anger, she asked me why meditation caused her to become like that. (What do you think?) As I lacked experience then, the only thing that came to mind was attachment. So I told her it's because she was attached to that state. Upon hearing that, she seemed confused or perhaps unconvinced. Anyway, I could do nothing more, partly because I perceived her as blaming my teacher and me for it. After she left, I never saw her again.

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4 A few suttas have “longing (abhijjhā)” where we would expect “sensual desire (kāmacchanda)”, which seems to suggest that they are synonymous; however, that is insufficient to assume that they are.

In retrospect, I think attachment was the lesser part of the issue. For it to condition such an intense anger, it would have to be accompanied by an intense concentration.

Under normal circumstances, the concentration practitioner freshly emerged from absorption is likely to be in a super good mood. However, as Āyasmā Anālayo notes in his book, the lingering heightened concentration poses a danger. It's a powerful form of what *The American Heritage® Dictionary* defines as “fixing of close, undivided attention”: a mental action probably related to what the Suttas call *nimittaggāhī*, object-grasper—be it an object of attraction (subha-nimitta) or an object of repulsion (paṭigha-nimitta). This strong grasping predisposes people having emerged from absorption to exaggerate the object of attention, and be overwhelmed by either sensual desire or enmity accordingly.

With practice, the concentration practitioner forms a habit of grasping objects strongly—be they concepts, feelings, etc—a tendency observed by my teacher, Āyasmā Aggacitta. After all, that's what they have trained themselves to do. In that lady's case, the grasping simply switched from an enjoyable state of bliss (an object of attraction) to the bliss-ruining daughter (an object of repulsion).

A similar case is of a woman who was well-known for her ability to ‘enter jhāna’. The people who told me the story couldn't tell what sparked her fury, but seeing her intensely red eyes they initially thought she was possessed by some malevolent spirit. They later referred to the incident as “the volcano”.

Though attachment may play a lesser role in such blowups, it's significant too, as Ajahn Sumedho explains:

We can get very angry if we become attached to silence and stillness and sensory deprivation; it is so pleasant not to have things impinging on the senses once we get used to it. And if we attach to the silence out of ignorance, out of greed, then when it is disrupted we can feel very angry; we may even feel like murdering someone. So that can't be the kind of still silence the Buddha was talking about!<sup>5</sup>

I can relate to that ‘murderous’ thought. Here's my story from 1995: I was on the verge of getting into another round of absorption high, and I thought, “It's coming... It's coming...” Then, wanting oh-so very badly not to lose my oh-so carefully developed state, I recalled an earlier sitting when I felt a sprinkle of coolness on my head. Wondering what it was, I came to realise that someone was watering the plants nearby with a leaky hose. Recalling that episode and absolutely not wanting anything like that to happen again, a thought arose: “If anyone disturbs my meditation now, I'll kill him!”

Oh, yes, it was that bad....

And, yes, I can certainly relate to what Ajahn Sumedho said, except that my meditation wasn't even disrupted then. The ‘murderous’ thought arose by merely *anticipating* it being disrupted.

I was addicted, you see? Had I been actually disrupted while having the high, I wonder what I might have done.

Although not all the above cases qualify as “full absorption”, they are to some extent “absorptions”, in that they are about concentrating on a certain object exclusively, resulting in non-awareness of everything else. They also involve *desire* for such a state and the ensuing pleasure.

Some questions to ponder on regarding that lady's case:

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5 From *The Still Silence* (<http://buddhismnow.com/2011/12/18/the-still-silence-by-ajahn-sumedho/>, shortcut: [tiny.cc/ssas](http://tiny.cc/ssas))



- *Did her practice lead to spiritual progression or regression?*
- *Can this kind of practice agree with the Buddha's teaching? Can it be proper samādhi?*
- *Is longing abandoned in this kind of practice?* Remember: Naḷakapāna Sutta says that, for one who reaches the jhānas, longing (abhijjhā) does not seize the mind and stay there. Yet, she obviously desired to prolong the nice feeling, which was why she got so angry when her daughter ruined it—or so she perceived. She probably wasn't aware of that gross desire though, while being engrossed in the pleasurable experience.

I've also heard 'horror stories' of people who have developed such strong tendencies to be absorbed that they can't resist its force. One told me she repeatedly and involuntarily got absorbed in visual forms during daily activities. Understandably, she got scared, which worsened the matter. Fortunately her teacher (well-known and experienced in teaching absorption jhānas) asked her to stop meditating and occupy herself with physical work, and she gradually recovered. Then again, he's also the one who taught her the practice.

As such unpleasant experiences are expectably under-reported by the affected meditators and their teachers, they are probably far more common than we know. Unfortunately, despite the harmful and sometimes even dreadful effects of such kind of practice, some of them still assume they are practising correctly, and some have even become meditation teachers!

Having said all that, is it *necessarily* harmful to practise concentration? Someone said to Ajahn Chah, "I have been meditating many years now. My mind is open and peaceful in almost all circumstances. Now I would like to try to backtrack and practise high states of concentration or mind absorption." He responded,

This is fine. It is beneficial mental exercise. If you have wisdom, you will not get hung up on concentrated states of mind. It is the same as wanting to sit for long periods. This is fine for training, but really, practice is separate from any posture. It is a matter of directly looking at the mind. This is wisdom. When you have examined and understood the mind, then you have the wisdom to know the limitations of concentration.... If you have practised and understand not-clinging, you can then... go back to practise absorption. You have the wisdom to know not to hold on to anything. ("Questions and Answers" in *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah or Bodhinyana*)

## Appendix 4: My Search for ‘One-pointedness’

While following a Burmese vipassanā system, I was taught that one of the faculties to be developed was concentration, though a different kind from that of ‘samatha meditation’. I also learnt a more definitive description of it called ‘one-pointedness’. So, with this idea in mind, I would from time to time try to narrow my scope of attention to a small—preferably minute—area, so that I could develop greater concentration. The better the concentration, the better the chance of enlightenment, right? Well, at least that’s what I believed.

Once, I noticed tension on my head. Following the general idea of what I was taught then, I watched it. After some time, it became interesting: a constant tapping over an area the size of a palm. As I watched further, the tapping began to appear like really fast, uncountable, fine ticking sensations all over that area. Later on, since it didn’t seem like I was getting anything out of it, I thought, “This isn’t good enough.” It wasn’t *one-pointed* yet, you see?

So I gradually narrowed the attention, until it was just *one point*—at least I considered it so. It was interesting to see one continuous ‘ticking’ at a tiny spot. But soon I became dissatisfied with that too. So I watched even more intently at that continuous ticking sensation, and noticed that each ticking seemed like a pulling. So, instead of tick-tick-tick-tick-tick, it seemed more like pull-pull-pull-pull-pull.

Concentrating even further into each ‘pulling’, I noticed that it was actually a series of minute vibrations. Then, I extrapolated that if I could be fast enough to focus on just *one* instance of the minute vibrations, one wave of it, *that* would be seen as consisting of even more minute vibrations. I tried, but couldn’t go any further. I realised that I was too tired by then, and so I gave up.

But what if I did have the energy to carry on? What if I saw what I predicted? What if I could continue till I directly knew and saw the wave function of quantum physics? *Ahaa....*

Okay, maybe not. (Just maybe.)

Anyway, even if that’s possible, so what? I would still be just seeing form (*rūpa*)—of a teeny-weeny proportion. How’s that going to bring about full understanding of suffering and abandonment of craving? Practically, it’s a waste of time and energy.

Still, it was a very interesting waste of time and energy.

# Appendix 5: My Effortful Meditation Experience

In discussing *When Samādhi is Interpreted as 'Penetrative Concentration'* (p41), I briefly mentioned my meditation attempts that led to tension and exhaustion. Here, I'll give you the juicy details.

In the first occasion, I was young and had a lot of energy—besides a lot of faith without enough discernment. As I persistently pushed myself to focus at the retreat, I began to feel strange. Actually, that was due to a growing tension, but I thought my meditation was getting somewhere, and so I kept pushing.

I didn't see a problem until the tension became overwhelming. Muscles around the body pulled involuntarily. I couldn't walk normally and would have random, sudden pain in the eyeballs because all muscles attached to them pulled at the same time. If that happened to you, would you be scared? I was.

One afternoon, I felt exhausted, so I decided to take a nap. Despite the exhaustion, the tension made it difficult to fall asleep, but somehow I managed. But after a while, I awoke, and was unable to move the body. No matter what I did, I just couldn't move. It was an experience I'd never had. I panicked.

After some time, I vaguely saw, through my half-open eyes, a fellow yogi walking into the room. I tried to call for his help, but all I managed was to move my mouth a little. No voice came out. When he left the room, I was in despair. I didn't know what else I could do.

Just then, I found myself slowly floating out of the body (or so it seemed). Light was shining through the window across the room, and I seemed to be floating towards it. That reminded me of stories about the light at the end of the tunnel, and so I thought, "Oh, no.... This is it."

With that thought, I surrendered to the situation. Then suddenly, I found myself back in my body on the mattress. I quickly touched the ground to make sure it was real. And it was! *Hhhhhh.... Thank goodness....*

Was the floating of the body real or just my imagination? I've no way of finding out.

The tension problem went on, and I wanted to give up practising, but I couldn't just stop. Whenever I gave up the practice, the tension would gradually worsen. I needed to be aware so that I could try to relax. I wasn't sure how, but not trying was worse.

Back at home, within five minutes of any activity requiring concentration such as reading, muscles around my head including the eyes would tense up. As a varsity student back then, it was a worrying disability. Fortunately, the problem gradually dissipated in a few months.

In the final occasion, I was in a meditation centre in Myanmar. By then, I knew enough not to push myself like in the past. However, I craved to attain *sotāpatti* (stream-entry), and although I no longer deliberately practised any 'pin-point' concentration, the mind maintained some fuzzy idea of concentration to 'penetrate' the truth. With these in place, I slowly but surely pushed myself to 'attain' the old problem.

With enough practice, I also attained a sleeping disorder. I was disappointed with myself. I thought, "What's wrong with me? Why can't I do it right?" After days of not getting enough sleep, I realised I needed help. I consulted the in-house volunteer doctor, and he gave me some anti-anxiety pills to induce drowsiness. I had never taken such pills in my whole life. What a joke! People meditate to reduce anxiety, and I successfully did the opposite! I had long prided myself as someone mentally strong and stable, and there I was, needing pills to sleep.

Still, I really wanted to have proper sleep. So I swallowed my pride and half a pill, and it worked like magic: I slept all the way through. Next morning, I was profoundly settled, and happier too. Samatha by psychotropic drug. Cool. I thought, “I should’ve done this earlier. Hmm, now how can I get more of these pills?”

Although the drug helped me and I *liked* it a lot, I knew I mustn’t become dependent on it. Anyway, I got only a few days’ supply of the prescription drug, and later learnt not to recreate the problem.

I wasn’t the only one there with such a problem. At the end of the first month into the vassa (rains-residence), a senior Thai monk told me he couldn’t take the tension in the head anymore, and left. Near the end of the vassa, a local monk was often seen nodding his head vigorously during sittings—an obvious sign of tension. (I had previously seen a friend doing the same at a Malaysian meditation centre of the same meditation tradition.) As the three-month vassa was ending, many monks who came to practice were obviously eager to gain liberation from the place.

I can understand why some people abandon meditation after such unpleasant experiences. I was stubborn enough not to, and eventually had the sense to look elsewhere, and am grateful that I did.

## Appendix 6: Is Sound Heard When Engaging in the Jhānas?

Some meditators, by conviction of their own experience, say we can't hear sound when engaging in the jhānas, not even the first one. I agree; it's true for the complete absorption, Visuddhimagga jhāna.

However, some among them claim they are going by the Suttas, citing a statement in Kaṇṭaka Sutta (AN10.72): **“Sound is a thorn (kaṇṭaka) to the first jhāna.”**<sup>1</sup> (Both “thorn” and “kaṇṭaka” carry the figurative meaning of “source of discomfort” or “bother”.) They seem to interpret the statement as “Sound hinders one from attaining the first jhāna”. Then upon attaining the first jhāna (and by logic the rest too), one isn't supposed to hear any sound. But is this view supported by that sutta statement?

Firstly, if it is speaking of sound hindering one's attaining of the first jhāna, that means there's no jhāna yet. If there's no jhāna, then what is there for sound to be a thorn to? Besides, if that interpretation is correct, sound wouldn't be a thorn; it would be a hindrance.

Secondly, if it *does* mean one can't hear any sound upon attaining the first jhāna, then sound wouldn't be a thorn or bother at all. How can sound bother one who can't hear it?

**So, actually, saying that sound is a thorn or bother to the first jhāna doesn't mean one can't hear sound in the first jhāna; it means one can!**

To be sure that this understanding is correct, we can refer to other ‘thorny’ statements in the sutta. For example, just before the statement quoted above, we find “Proximity with womenfolk (mātugāmūpacāra) is a thorn to the divine-practice (brahmacariya).” (The Buddha must be speaking to monks only then.) Does that mean men of divine-practice, such as Buddhist monks, are disabled from noticing women near them? Hasn't happened to me yet.

So the sutta statement “Sound is a thorn to the first jhāna” does not support the idea that we can't hear sounds in the Sutta jhāna. Instead, it supports the opposite. Nonetheless, one can rightly say sound can't be heard in the absorption jhāna.

In the same sutta, we find that sound is not a thorn to the second jhāna or higher. Does that mean sound can't be heard in those jhānas? Not so. It just means that to higher jhānas, sound is not a thorn, not a source of discomfort, not a bother.<sup>2</sup>

**By the way:** Some people take pride in not hearing sound during meditation. But just as Ajahn Chah and Sayadaw U Tejaniya both say, “Sound is just sound,” in the same way, no sound is just no sound. The deaf don't hear sounds all the time. So, what is there to take pride in?

1 *paṭhamassa jhānassa saddo kaṇṭako*. Although *sadda* generally means “sound”, it can also specifically mean “noise”. In fact, this may be the actual meaning here going by the context in the sutta, in which the Buddha spoke in response to an occasion where many well-known Licchavis who arrived to see him were *uccāsaddā mahāsaddā*, literally “of high sound, of great sound”. In other words, they were very noisy. In NDB, *sadda* is translated as “noise”.

2 For a more thorough analysis of this subject, read “Silence Isn't Mandatory” in a collection titled *Noble & True* by Ajahn Ṭhānissaro: [http://www.dhammadtalks.org/ebook\\_index.html#NobleAndTrue](http://www.dhammadtalks.org/ebook_index.html#NobleAndTrue). Interestingly, we've separately arrived at many similar arguments.

# Appendix 7: The Buddha’s Practice of the Jhānas before Self-Awakening

Extract of Dvedhāvitakka Sutta (MN19) translated:

“Bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu frequently thinks about and considers anything, the mind becomes inclined in that way. If a bhikkhu frequently thinks about and considers thoughts of renunciation—having abandoned thoughts of sensuality, he makes frequent thoughts of renunciation—that mind of his bows to thoughts of renunciation. If a bhikkhu frequently thinks about and considers thoughts of non-enmity—having abandoned thoughts of enmity, he makes frequent thoughts of non-enmity—that mind of his bows to thoughts of non-enmity. If a bhikkhu frequently thinks about and considers thoughts of harmless—having abandoned thoughts of harmfulness, he makes frequent thoughts of harmless—that mind of his bows to thoughts of harmless.

“Bhikkhus, just as in the last month of the hot season, when all the crops have been gathered at the village fringe, a cowherd would guard the cows. While having gone to the root of a tree or out in the open, he just has to be mindful of ‘those cows’. In the same way, bhikkhus, **I just had to be mindful of ‘these dhammas’.**

**“Then, bhikkhus, my energy was aroused, not sluggish; mindfulness established, not forgotten; body tranquil, unagitated; mind composed, still.** Then I, bhikkhus, having separated from sensualities, having separated from unskillful qualities, abided engaging in the first meditation: joy & happiness born of separation, accompanied by thinking and considering. With the quiescence of thinking & considering, I abided engaging in the second meditation: internal illumination, mental poise, without thinking and considering, joy & happiness born of composure. Then with the dispassion for joy, I abided equanimously, was mindful and fully aware, and experienced happiness with the body. I abided engaging in the third meditation: that which the noble ones declare, ‘He is equanimous, mindful, and abides happily.’ With the abandoning of happiness and the abandoning of suffering, just as with the earlier disappearance of delight & dejection, I abided engaging in the fourth meditation: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither suffering nor happy.”

By just being mindful of “these dhammas (phenomena)”—i.e. thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of enmity, thoughts of harmfulness, their abandonment, thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of non-enmity, thoughts of harmless, their being made frequent, and having the mind bow to them as a result—the Buddha cultivated the good mental qualities that enabled him to abide engaging in the jhānas.

# Appendix 8: Samatha Jhāna & Vipassanā Jhāna

**Advice:** If you don't know these terms, good, you can happily skip to the last heading of this appendix: *Are 'Vipassanā' Meditators Practising the Sutta Jhāna?*

These days, if you tell Theravādin meditators there are two kinds of “jhāna”, they would likely assume you're speaking of *samatha jhāna* and *vipassanā jhāna*. These terms are made popular by Mahasi Sayadaw and commonly used in the Mahasi tradition, but criticised by some as modern inventions.

Although they are indeed absent in the Suttas, “vipassanā jhāna” does appear in a few post-canonical Theravādin texts. Thus, it is not as new as some believe, but originated no later than the 5<sup>th</sup> century. “Samatha jhāna” however cannot be found in any officially sanctioned Theravādin text. So, whether or not it was coined by Mahasi Sayadaw, it's relatively modern.

Why create these terms? Here's what I think: The disagreement between the Suttas and the later Theravādin texts (such as the *Visuddhimagga*) on ‘jhāna’ is glaring to a discerning reader. However, these texts—being sanctioned by ancient elders—are highly regarded by traditional Theravādin monks, such as Mahasi Sayadaw. It would be almost unimaginable for them to contradict those texts. Should any of them do so publicly, they would likely have to face undesirable actions by their community. Yet, the disagreement remains. So, in an effort to reconcile the matter, these terms were created.

Besides reconciling the disagreement, with these terms, Theravādins get to say that ‘vipassanā’ meditators, who supposedly don't do jhāna, actually do: They do ‘vipassanā jhāna’. The jhāna they don't do is the ‘samatha jhāna’, the jhāna of the *Visuddhimagga*.

Although this explanation satisfies some people, it adds confusion for sutta readers: *Which “jhāna” are the Suttas referring to?* Whichever one we say it is, the answer is bound to elicit more questions. (See *Appendix 9: Supramundane Jhāna*)

## A Tantalizing Question

**Is “vipassanā jhāna” the same as “Sutta jhāna”, and “samatha jhāna” as “Visuddhimagga jhāna”?** This neat equation is tempting, especially for ‘vipassanā’ meditators. (When I asked this question in one of my workshops, a lady said with excitement and all certainty, *Yes!*)

Let's look at “vipassanā jhāna” first. It's traditionally deemed the same as “lakkhaṇūpanij-jhāna”, which appears far more often in the Pāli commentaries. It literally means “close and firm jhāna on the characteristics” of fabrications (*saṅkhārā*): *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*. However, the standard description of the jhānas says nothing of that sort. So we cannot equate the “vipassanā jhāna” with “Sutta jhāna”.

Nonetheless, some suttas—such as *Jhāna Sutta* (AN9.36) and *Mahāmālunkya Sutta* (MN64.9-12), noted on page 27—show distinct seeing (*vipassanā*) during the *Sutta jhāna*. So, the “vipassanā jhāna” in orthodox Theravādin terminology may be “Sutta jhāna with vipassanā” in the Suttas' terminology.

Is Mahasi Sayadaw’s “vipassanā jhāna” the same as that of the post-canonical texts? I can’t ascertain that. Explanations of the term found in English translations of Mahasi Sayadaw’s books seem somewhat inconsistent. At best I can say the two are similar.

As for his “samatha jhāna”, it clearly corresponds with the Visuddhimagga jhāna.

## ***Are ‘Vipassanā’ Meditators Practising the Sutta Jhāna?***

Does the above perspective mean if you practice what we now commonly call “vipassanā meditation”, you are then rightly practising the Sutta jhāna? Not necessarily.

In the first place, this term is a misnomer, not found in the Suttas. Although the Suttas do speak of cultivating vipassanā, it’s different from the currently prevalent meaning of “vipassanā meditation”. (See *Samatha & Vipassanā* (p25) and footnote 1 (p7).)

For at least a few decades, “vipassanā” has become a popular label for a variety of meditation practices. Some of them are actually “samatha” in the Suttas’ terminology. Some are concentration practices, in that all the practitioner does is to persistently place the attention on a certain object or set of objects within the body, and try to ignore everything else. The label is used even for pure visualisation practices, besides concentration practices leading to pre-suggested mental images.

The same label is also used for practices which are combinations of samatha and vipassanā, as the terms are used in the Suttas. Going by the Suttas’ terminology, such practices are more rightly termed “satipaṭṭhāna”, which leads to the four jhānas (sammā-samādhi) of the Suttas. Thus, to be more aligned with the Suttas, these ‘vipassanā’ meditators should say they practise “satipaṭṭhāna”.



## Appendix 9: Supramundane Jhāna

**Advice:** If you don't know this term *supramundane jhāna* (lokuttara-jjhāna), good; you can happily ignore this appendix. In fact, I heartily advise that you do.

With its concept of *sukkha-vipassaka* (bare-insight worker), orthodox Theravāda maintains that one can awaken without *jhāna*.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the four *jhānas* are stated in the Suttas as part of the path. So how can Theravāda ignore this jarring internal contradiction?

It doesn't. In fact, it has *sort of* reconciled the contradiction by creating a new concept: *supramundane jhāna* (*lokuttara jhāna* or *lokuttarajjhāna*).

In case you're supposed to ignore this appendix, here's a concise presentation of the orthodox Theravādin *jhāna* framework:

The mundane *jhānas* are exalted states of consciousness (*mahaggata-citta*) developed in the preliminary path, as a preparation for reaching the *supramundane* path; technically, they are “form-sphere” states of consciousness (*rūpāvacara-citta*), that is, types of consciousness typical of the “form realm” and tending to rebirth in the form realm. The *supramundane jhānas* are *supramundane* states of consciousness (*lokuttara-citta*) identical with the *supramundane* paths or fruits themselves. (Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Jhānas and the Lay Disciple According to the Pāli Suttas*<sup>2</sup>)

If that's too concise for you, this explanation may help:

The four *jhānas* and the four immaterial attainments appear initially as mundane states of deep serenity pertaining to the preliminary stage of the Buddhist path, and on this level they help provide the base of concentration needed for wisdom to arise. But the four *jhānas* again reappear in a later stage in the development of the path, in direct association with liberating wisdom, and they are then designated the *supramundane* (*lokuttara*) *jhānas*. These *supramundane jhānas* are the levels of concentration pertaining to the four degrees of enlightenment experience called the *supramundane* paths (*magga*) and the stages of liberation resulting from them, the four fruits (*phala*). (Āyasmā Henepola Gunaratana, *The Jhānas in Theravāda Buddhist Meditation*<sup>3</sup>)

Framing the matter thus, orthodox Theravāda gets to say that the *sukkha-vipassaka*, i.e. one who attains enlightenment or awakening without using (absorption) *jhāna*, still attains (absorption) *jhāna*—though only upon attaining any of the four stages of awakening, presumably states of absorption. It also gets to assert that the four *jhānas* mentioned in the Suttas are mundane or worldly (*lokiya*), and are the same as the (absorption) *jhānas* of the *Visuddhimagga*.

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1 I've explained the concept of *sukkha-vipassaka* under *Basis of the Disagreement and Its Resolution* (p11).

2 [www.budsas.org/ebud/ebdha267.htm](http://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebdha267.htm)

3 [www.budsas.org/ebud/jhanas/jhanas01.htm](http://www.budsas.org/ebud/jhanas/jhanas01.htm)

Thus, with this explanation, Theravāda reconciles the internal contradiction. However, it also raises some serious questions:

- Why don't the Suttas say so? It does seem rather important.
- If an awakening experience is necessarily a state of absorption, whereby one is oblivious to the external world, why isn't this mentioned or implied in accounts of awakening in the Suttas—including those where the person awakens *while* listening to the Dhamma?
- If 'mundane jhānas' are optional, and 'supramundane jhānas' necessary only as awakening experiences, i.e. *results* of the practice; why then are "jhānas" included in the Noble Eight-factored *Path*, the way of practice *leading* to the cessation of dukkha (dukkha-nirodha-gāminī paṭipadā)?

Thus, although this "supramundane jhāna" explanation reconciles a contradiction within orthodox Theravada, it implicates the Buddha, or the compilers of the Suttas, in providing wrong, confusing teaching, and thus laying the foundation for disputes regarding the way of practice, declared in Sāmagāma Sutta (MN104.5) as "for much detriment, much unhappiness of the many". These are serious implications.

Actually, this patchy, problematic reconciliation attempt is unnecessary. **Instead of trying to reconcile the internal contradiction with a new concept, it's better for us to admit plainly: that the "jhāna" of the Visuddhimagga—an absorbed state, mundane and optional—is different from that of the Suttas.** The supposed sukka-vipassaka does not attain the Visuddhimagga jhāna, but must have done the Sutta jhāna. Once we accept this, the contradiction evaporates.

# Appendix 10: Visuddhimagga Nimittas Need Not Be Visual

The Visuddhimagga jhāna is attained by being absorbed in a mental object commonly called *nimitta*. This object is often assumed to be an image of a bright disk, and indeed this is commonly stressed by contemporary Visuddhimagga jhāna teachers. However, **the nimitta in the Visuddhimagga need not be a bright disk. In fact, it need not even be visual—it can be tactile:**

... it is not the same for all; on the contrary, some say that when it appears it does so to certain people producing a **light touch like cotton or silk cotton or a draught.**

215. But this is the exposition given in the commentaries: It appears to some like a star or a cluster of gems or a cluster of pearls, to others with **a rough touch like that of silk-cotton seeds or a peg made of heartwood**, to others like a long braid string or a wreath of flowers or a puff of smoke, to others like a stretched-out cobweb or a film of cloud or a lotus flower or a chariot wheel or the moon’s disk or the sun’s disk. (Vism VIII: 214-215. Trans. Nāṇamoli Bhikkhu) [*Emphases added.*]

This quote shows that calling *nimitta* “visual image”, “mental image” or “vision” is incorrect even in the Visuddhimagga context, where it means “sign”; specifically sign of concentration.

It also shows that even visual signs vary greatly; only the last two—the moon’s disk or the sun’s disk—can be recognized in the common notion of *nimitta*. And remember, these are just examples. A concentrated mind can create a wide range of highly vivid phenomena. Even frightful ones are possible, though not the kind people would get absorbed in and experience bliss.

Recognizing that a sign of concentration can be tactile is important. Some people have had blissful absorptions without having seen any mental image—bright disk or otherwise. In this situation, if they have some but little Buddhist knowledge, they may mistake the experience as the Sutta jhāna. If they have learnt of the two kinds of jhāna, but not that *nimittas* can be tactile, they may also mistake it as the Sutta jhāna. What probably happened was that they got absorbed in a tactile *nimitta*, perhaps one among those quoted above.

Also, note that the Visuddhimagga jhāna is not limited to getting absorbed in a *nimitta* induced by concentrating on the breathing sensation at the nose. *Nimittas* can come about by concentrating on other objects, such as colours. The key here is picking an object in which the mind is interested enough to stay with continuously, to produce a *nimitta* for absorption. Therefore, if one can concentrate on the breathing sensation outside the prescribed (nose) area to bring about a *nimitta*—visual or tactile—to be absorbed in, the resultant absorbed state should also be recognized as the Visuddhimagga jhāna.

## A Little Hypothesis

I mentioned above that a concentrated mind can create a wide range of phenomena. It occurred to me that this experience, called *upacāra samādhi* (proximate concentration) whereby the *nimitta* appears, is like lucid dreaming. The lucid dreamer experiences various types of imaginary sense

impressions, knowing they are not real. The difference is that the upacāra samādhi attainer focuses on only one object of one type of imaginary sense impressions. This is due to having conditioned the mind to focus on only one object.

# Appendix 11: Ānāpānasati Revisited

Nowadays, when Buddhists speak of ānāpānasati (mindfulness of breathing), they often mean concentrating on the *breathing sensation* around the nose tip exclusively. That’s how ‘ānāpānasati’ is traditionally taught in orthodox Theravāda.

A less traditional way is to imagine a body of air moving up and down the nostril. It has to be an imagination because what one actually knows is just the sensation as the air passes. Even less traditional is to imagine the air entering the nose, through the nostril, then the throat, then (somehow) down into the stomach, and then back out. This too must be an imagination because we don’t actually breathe into the stomach. These ideas may have arisen from translating ānāpānasati as “mindfulness of the *breath*” or “*breath*-meditation”. Or, perhaps such translations arose due to this kind of practice.

When we read afresh the standard sutta description of basic ānāpānasati, we find that it’s not about the breathing sensation. Instead, it’s about the *act* of breathing.

Below is Ajahn Ṭhānissaro’s translation, which I’ve broken down and inserted some Pāli in parentheses:

... setting mindfulness to the fore (*parimukhaṃ*). Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.

{1} Breathing in long, he discerns (*pajānāti*), ‘I am breathing in long’; or breathing out long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out long.’

{2} Or breathing in short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in short’; or breathing out short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out short.’

{3} He trains (*sikkhati*) himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body (*sabba-kāyapaṭisaṃvedī*).’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.’<sup>1</sup>

{4} He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication (*kāyasaṅkhāra*).’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming the bodily fabrication.’<sup>2</sup>

In the above, the translator renders *parimukhaṃ* as “to the fore”. However, in orthodox Theravāda, going by the Vibhaṅga of Abhidhamma Piṭaka, it means “at the nose tip (*nāsikagge*) or at the sign/object of the face/mouth (*mukhanimitte*)”.<sup>3</sup> The first suggestion is clear enough, while the second, though etymologically sounder, is hard to understand. Perhaps that’s why the first has become commonly adopted in orthodox practice.<sup>4</sup>

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1 “Sensitive to” is translated from *paṭisaṃvedī*, more commonly translated as “experiencing”.

2 [www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn54/sn54.008.than.html](http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn54/sn54.008.than.html)

3 Abhidhamma students should know the origin of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. Although we don’t have a clear consensus on its dating, modern scholars of Buddhism agree that the collection represents the works of scholar disciples, that have come about in stages beginning at least 100 years after the Buddha’s passing away. (For more, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abhidhamma\\_Pitaka#Origins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abhidhamma_Pitaka#Origins).) The lateness of the collection doesn’t imply wrongness or unworthiness, but at the same time we shouldn’t expect it to fully agree with the Suttas. The Vibhaṅga, the second book, provides expositions of 18 topics. For an overview, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vibhanga>. Among the 18 is Jhāna-vibhaṅga, where we find the quoted interpretation.

Actually, *mukha* (in *parimukham*) need not mean face or mouth. It has other meanings: entrance, opening, mouth (of a river), ahead, front. It can also have abstract meanings: the best part, foremost. So Ajahn Ṭhānissaro’s rendering of *parimukham satim upatthapetvā* as “setting mindfulness to the fore” is reasonable.

I think *mukha* here does mean “front”, though not in the spatial sense; while the prefix *pari* bears its figurative meaning of “completely”. Thus I think *parimukham* means “completely in front”. Also, I would translate *upatthapetvā* literally as “establishing” (compared to Ajahn Ṭhānissaro’s “setting”). Thus, for *parimukham satim upatthapetvā*, I prefer “establishing mindfulness completely in front”, i.e. *sati* is made *top priority*. I think practitioners should find this meaningful practically. Besides, this translation aligns with the term *satipaṭṭhāna* (establishment of mindfulness), most likely derived from *satim upatthapetvā* (establishing mindfulness).

The instruction continues with “Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.” Reading it as it is, we find a simple instruction of **having presence of mind while breathing. The important point is not the breathing, much less the breath (as in the inhaled or exhaled body of air), but being mindful.** This is more obvious in the original Pāli text: *So satova assasati, satova passasati*. My literal translation: “He just being mindful breathes in, just being mindful breathes out.”<sup>5</sup> In any case, the instruction here also doesn’t specify any body part.

Furthermore, although the lines marked “{1}” and “{2}” above do specify discerning whether one is breathing in and out long or short, it still doesn’t specify where.<sup>6</sup> The length can be discerned simply by being interested in the *act* of breathing; no need to limit one’s scope of attention to the sensation anywhere. Moreover, you probably know that breathing involves far more than mere sensation at some point around the nose.<sup>7</sup> It involves relatively subtle mental impetuses, without which breathing cannot happen.

Besides, trying to pay special attention to a restricted location makes the practice more difficult than what the Suttas prescribe. In doing so, many have suffered from tension at the ‘third eye’ or *ajna* chakra (located at the indent just above the midpoint between the two eyebrows). The chakra is over-activated due to an egoic effort to control the mind, which isn’t ours to control.

By the way, the lines “{1}” and “{2}” aren’t actually two steps, but just marked by the translator that way. Nothing there suggests one should breathe long first, then short. Together, the instruction is to discern the length of breathing as it is.

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4 *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, one of Khuddaka Nikāya’s later additions, has a completely different interpretation: *pari* means *pariggaha* (taking up, grasping) and *mukha* means *niyyāna* (going out, departure, release, deliverance). I’ve no idea what it’s trying to say, and perhaps precisely because of its vagueness, this interpretation is ignored in orthodox Theravāda. As we can see, there are multiple interpretations within orthodox Theravāda itself, and presently it has picked only one of them.

5 I think “just” translates *va* (shortened *eva*) more suitably. “Always” might be justifiable, but seems too demanding here.

6 The instruction to discern the relative length of the breathing implies that one is to be conscious of the concept of time, thus disproving an idea common among ‘vipassanā’ meditators that one should ignore concepts during meditation. Besides, how are we to understand concepts as concepts if we ignore them?

7 When relaxed and without preconceptions, people are likely to experience the sensation of breathing at the abdomen. So, the Mahasi way of observing the sensation of the abdomen rising and falling actually qualifies as “ānāpānasati”, though not called so in the tradition due to orthodox restrictions. In my experience, this way is more conducive to collectedness, while focusing on sensation at the nose tip is more conducive to concentration.

Now, let's look at the line marked "{3}". Here we can see why *parimukhaṃ*, at least in this context, cannot mean what the Vibhaṅga says. You may have seen "sensitive to" translated as "experiencing" instead. Either way, the instruction says that the practitioner is to learn (*sikkhati*) or train himself to feel the whole body *while* breathing. It doesn't tell us to attend exclusively to the breathing, much less just the sensation at the nose tip. Experiencing the breathing is nonetheless part of experiencing the whole body.<sup>8</sup> This clearly differentiates the Suttas' *ānāpānasati* from the orthodox version.

For this line, you may have come across translations with "breath" added to "the whole body", thus "the whole *breath* body". This conforms to the Visuddhimagga glossing "the whole body" as "the beginning, middle and end of the whole in-*breath* body... (and) of the whole out-*breath* body". To this, Bhikkhu Bodhi notes in the 2015 version of MLDB (p1191):

In the first edition I followed this explanation and added in brackets 'of breath' after 'the whole body.' In retrospect, however, this interpretation seems forced, and I now prefer to take the phrase quite literally.

If we don't take it literally and instead follow the Visuddhimagga in adding "breath" to "the whole body", issues arise, such as this one pointed out by Āyasmā Anālayo:

... the cultivation of full awareness of the length of the breath was the task of the previous two steps, knowing a long or a short breath, which already required the meditator to be aware of each breath from beginning to end. One would therefore expect this next step in the progression to introduce a distinctly new feature for contemplation....<sup>9</sup>

Glossing the phrase with the "breath" idea was probably done to agree with the official doctrine of the author's sponsor, the Mahāvihāra saṅgha; otherwise the work wouldn't be approved and sanctioned. If the translation is unaffected by the gloss, then we can read the instruction as it is, and understand that the attention is on the whole body. Practising thus we wouldn't get into the Visuddhimagga kind of *jhāna*.

Next, "bodily fabrication" at "{4}" is glossed by the commentary as in-and-out breathing. Although some suttas (e.g. Cūḷavedalla Sutta (MN44.14)) also define it the same way, I doubt that it applies in the context of the Suttas' *ānāpānasati* instruction. Here are my reasons:

1. "Bodily fabrication" (*kāyasaṅkhāra*) is just a general term used diversely in the Suttas. In some suttas, such as Bhūmija Sutta (SN12.25)<sup>10</sup> and Saṅkhāra Sutta (AN3.23), the contexts show that it cannot refer to breathing. Please read the suttas and see for yourself. The variety of usages show that this term can mean other than in-and-out breathing.
2. The phrase *passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ* (calming down the bodily fabrication) in the basic *ānāpānasati* instruction is similar to *kāyo passambhati* (the body calms down) in

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8 For the benefit of literalists, I don't think the Buddha meant we have to feel every cell in our body. Just the whole body in general will do.

9 *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*. Windhorse/BPS version p131-132; BWC version p127. The same argument is also presented by Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh in *Transformation And Healing: The Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness*, and in *Awakening of the Heart: Essential Buddhist Sutras and Commentaries* (p124-125)

10 See Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu's translation here: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.025.than.html> (Shortcut: bit.ly/bhumija)

Bhikkhunupassaya Sutta (as quoted on page 56), yet it's clear that that sutta isn't speaking of breathing. Note that both are referring to the same process: samatha (settling).

3. Most importantly, if indeed by “bodily fabrication” the Buddha meant “breathing”, why didn't he simply say, ‘I will breathe in (and out) calming the *breathing*,’ and save us the possible misunderstanding? (I trust the Buddha to be a competent teacher.) Since he said “bodily fabrication” instead, we should take it that he didn't mean breathing.

Anyway, let's assume for a while that the commentarial interpretation is correct, that by “bodily fabrication” the Buddha *did* mean “breathing”. In this case, the instruction would then be “He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in (and out) calming the breathing.’” Still, it doesn't mean or imply paying exclusive attention to the breathing sensation at the nose tip or elsewhere.

Returning to my earlier argument, what then could be the actual meaning for “bodily fabrication” here? I've not found any definite answer from the Suttas. So, I can only narrow down its possible meanings through a combination of contexts of the term in the Suttas and personal experience.

Bear in mind that the actual term in Pāli is *kāyasaṅkhāra*, literally “body-fabrication”. It can be read variously, and I think the right reading is “fabrication by the body”. *saṅkhāra* itself is also used variously in the Suttas. While we're more familiar with it as one of the four aggregates or “fabrication” in general, it

... also means sometimes ‘volitional effort’, e.g. in the formula of the roads to power (*iddhipāda*, q.v.); in *sasaṅkhāra*- and *asaṅkhāra-parinibbāyī* (s. *anāgāmi*, q.v.); and in the Abhidhamma terms *asaṅkhārika*- (q.v.) and *sasaṅkhārika-citta*, i.e. without effort = spontaneously, and with effort = prompted. (*Buddhist Dictionary* by Nyanatiloka Thera)

The same dictionary renders *saṅkhāra* (in the context of *sasaṅkhāra* and *asaṅkhāra* referenced above) as “exertion”. So does CDB (e.g. p1573) and NDB (e.g. p319). “Exertion” is synonymous with “effort”, though the former may seem more strenuous. Ajahn Ṭhānissaro, in an effort to be consistent, has it as “fabrication [of exertion]”.<sup>11</sup>

So, considering that *saṅkhāra* sometimes mean “(volitional) effort”, the *kāyasaṅkhāra* in the instruction may mean “(volitional) effort by the body”. It includes breathing, setting the body upright and other muscle contractions, including unconscious tensing up of muscles. While I'm leaving *saṅkhāra* here as “fabrication”, please understand it to mean “(volitional) effort”, “effort-making”, “*efforting*”, or (copying Ajahn Ṭhānissaro's style) “fabrication [of effort]”. Thus I understand *kāyasaṅkhāra* here to mean “fabrication [of effort] by the body”.

In training ourselves to experience or be sensitive to the body in general, we get to become increasingly conscious of the bodily effort-making or bodily *efforting*. Through that, we can let go of unnecessary bodily *efforting*. Thus, we calm down the bodily *efforting* or fabrication of effort by the body. In plain English, we relax the body.

To sum up, **in reading the basic ānāpānasati instruction in the Suttas as it is, we find that it speaks of first being conscious of breathing in general. Then it proceeds to training oneself in experiencing the whole body, and in calming down the body-fabrication, while breathing. Doing so brings about composure, not concentration.**

As a comparison, a commentary-based instruction typically speaks of becoming concentrated on a spatially limited location where the breathing sensation occurs, leading one in a different

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11 See <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.086.than.html> (Shortcut: tiny.cc/exertion).



direction: the Visuddhimagga jhāna, which the Visuddhimagga itself regards as optional to liberation.

## ***The Complete Ānāpānasati & Its Purpose***

You may have noticed that I kept qualifying the ānāpānasati instruction quoted above with “basic”. It’s necessary because the ānāpānasati “as taught by the Buddha” (yathā buddhena desitā) is more than that—far more. The Buddha’s *complete* ānāpānasati is vastly different from the commentary-based one.

Let me show you this with Ariṭṭha Sutta (SN54.6). In this sutta, Āyasmā Ariṭṭha describes *his own version* of ānāpānasati cultivation thus:

“I have abandoned sensual desire for past sensual pleasures, venerable sir, I have gotten rid of sensual desire for future sensual pleasures, and I have thoroughly dispelled perceptions of aversion towards things internally and externally. Just mindful I breathe in, mindful I breathe out. It is in this way, venerable sir, that I develop mindfulness of breathing.” (CDB, p1768)

Saying that he has abandoned this and dispelled that doesn’t mean he actually has.

In Alagaddūpama Sutta (MN22), Āyasmā Ariṭṭha is admonished by the Buddha for having “a pernicious view” that “those things called obstructions by the Blessed One are not able to obstruct one who engages in them.” (MLDB, p224-225) Putting this and the quote above together, it seems Āyasmā Ariṭṭha was practising wrong samādhi, “blotting out large areas of awareness” (as Ajahn Ṭhānissaro puts it) to be absorbed in the breathing, leading him to believe that he has “abandoned sensual desire” and “dispelled perceptions of aversion”. This allows him to be so convinced of his pernicious view.

Anyway, in Ariṭṭha Sutta, the Buddha did not contradict him. Instead he tactfully replied, “That is ānāpānasati, Ariṭṭha, I do not say it is not,” and went on to describe “how ānāpānasati is fulfilled *in detail*”.<sup>12</sup> He starts off with the usual “having gone to the forest...” to the basic ānāpānasati as quoted earlier, then continues with training oneself in many other things: experiencing joy and happiness; experiencing and tranquillizing mental fabrication; experiencing, gladdening, composing and liberating the mind (*citta*, sometimes translated as “awareness”); contemplating impermanence, dispassion, cessation and relinquishment—all these *while breathing*.

As the description shows, **the ānāpānasati of the Suttas is not about persistent focusing on breathing, much less on a certain point of the breathing sensation, leading to absorption.** It also shows that one does not bring the breathing to a stop.

That may have been the “ānāpānasati” of another teaching during the Buddha’s time though, but going by the Suttas, it isn’t the Buddha’s “ānāpānasati”. (The Buddha often used pre-existing terms but redefined them. As shown above, Āyasmā Ariṭṭha had a different idea of “ānāpānasati”.) In fact, if we translate it literally as “breathing-mindfulness” instead of “mindfulness of breathing”, it’s less likely to give us the wrong impression that it’s all about focusing on breathing (much less the breath), and more relatable to the Suttas’ instruction.

We may link this complete ānāpānasati instruction with the “samatha-preceded vipassanā” cultivation as mentioned in Yoganaddha Sutta (AN4.170). When the body-fabrication is suffi-

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12 yathā ānāpānasati vitthārena paripuṇṇā hoti

ciently calm or tranquil, one is to move on to settling other fabrications, and gradually include vipassanā.

Thus, the basic ānāpānasati practice is firstly about anchoring the mind to the breathing, then to the whole body with its fabrication. Then, the body-fabrication naturally calms down. In doing the above, one establishes a basic strength of attentiveness, thus steadying and settling down the mind too, making it ready for finer training. In the finer training, one continues the training, *while breathing*, for greater mental settling (cetosamatha) besides distinct seeing (vipassanā). It's like starting a car engine and having ensured that it's running smoothly, we engage the first gear and get the car moving.

The purpose of the Suttas' ānāpānasati is reflected in the Buddha's words in the next sutta in Ānāpāna-samyutta, Mahākappina Sutta (SN54.7): "Bhikkhus, when composure by breathing-mindfulness has been developed thus, made much of thus, there is neither wavering or shaking of the body, nor wavering or shaking of the mind."

## ***What the Suttas Also Don't Say***

In guided meditation sessions nowadays, we're often told to sit down, cross the legs, set the body upright, close (or half-close) the eyes and concentrate on a specific area related to the breathing. The first three points are found before the ānāpānasati instruction proper in the Suttas, but not the latter two. Also not found is how we should place our hands and tongue.

On closing the eyes, I'm not implying that we shouldn't do it, but that we needn't assume that we should. After all, we can find many suttas specifying or implying the need to discern phenomena connected with the eye and the forms cognizable via the eye, besides phenomena connected with other sense bases.

**The Suttas of course also don't say anything about practising ānāpānasati to produce a sign—visual or tactile—of concentration (now commonly called "nimitta") for the sake of absorption.**

**Lastly—and this is important—they don't say ānāpānasati is the only or best way to practice.** According to MahāNiddesa, a Khuddaka Nikāya text, the Buddha recommended it only to those of thinking-temperament (vitakka-carita), probably because it calms down body-fabrication (or relaxes the body), which causes the cognitive mind (mano) to calm down too. Others are better off with other ways of cultivation, for which I've provided the relevant passage on page 111.

# Appendix 12: The Samādhi that Has Final Knowledge as Its Fruit

Have you read this before?

“Once, friend, I was dwelling at Sāketa in the deer park at Añjana Grove. Then the bhikkhunī Jaṭilagāhiyā approached me, paid homage to me, stood to one side, and said: ‘Bhante Ānanda, the concentration that does not lean forward and does not bend back and that is not reined in and checked by forcefully suppressing [the defilements]—by being liberated, it is steady; by being steady, it is content; by being content, one is not agitated. Bhante Ānanda, what did the Blessed One say this concentration has as its fruit?’<sup>1</sup>

“When she asked me this, I replied: ‘Sister, the concentration that does not lean forward... it is content; by being content, one is not agitated. The Blessed One said that this concentration has final knowledge as its fruit.’”<sup>2,3</sup> (NDB, p1302; translation of Ānanda Sutta (AN9.37))

This passage deserves far more attention than it has got. To follow the explanation below, it’s easier if you have a copy of NDB to refer to.

Before the above passage, the sutta speaks of the first three formless states (ārūppas); and after the above passage, the sutta continues with “When one is thus percipient too, friend, one does not experience that base,” which is also said previously for the formless states. Therefore, reading the whole sutta, we get the impression that the above passage also refers to a formless state, though a mysterious one. For most people, the ‘standard’ formless states are already mysterious enough, besides being inessential to awakening. (The formless states are not included in the Noble Eight-factored Path.) So, on reading seemingly another one, people are likely to disregard it, thus making this passage obscure.

Actually, the passage may not be about a formless state after all. More likely, it was originally a separate, independent sutta that somehow got embedded in another on the formless states. Here are some facts to support this conviction:

1. A passage very similar to the above Pāli version, only slightly more elaborate, is found in the Chinese Āgamas. The sutra in which that parallel passage is found does not contain anything about formless states as found in the Pāli version.
2. The Pāli version is a conversation between Āyasmā Ānanda and Āyasmā Udāyī, at the end of which Āyasmā Ānanda recounts a conversation with the bhikkhunī Jaṭilagāhiyā (as quoted above). The Chinese parallel however is purely a conversation between Āyasmā Ānanda and the bhikkhunī Jaṭilagāhiyā; there’s no Āyasmā Udāyī.

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1 The phrase “reined in and checked by forcefully suppressing [the defilements]” is translated from *sasañkhāra-niggayha-vārita-vato*. The translation may be overdone. My preference (based on the Burmese script, with *gato* instead of *vato* at the end): “attained through [having defilements] prevented by effortfully restraining [them]”.

2 *Yāyaṃ, bhagini, samādhi na cābhinato na cāpanato na ca sasañkhāraniggayhavāritagato, vimuttattā ṭhito, ṭhitattā santusito, santusitattā no paritassati. Ayaṃ, bhagini, samādhi aññāphalo vutto bhagavatā’ti.*

3 I leave Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation of samādhi as “concentration”. It’s up to you, the reader, to know that it is *samādhi* in Pāli and, if you like, mentally replace it with “composure” or “collectedness”.

3. While the Pāli sutta suggests that this samādhi is some sort of formless state, the Āgama parallel does not. More importantly, **nowhere else can we find such kind of samādhi represented as a formless state.**
4. The Pāli version has an anomaly noted by Bhikkhu Bodhi in NDB (p1828, n1925): The Sinhala and Burmese scripts “both have *ti* here [i.e. at the end of the speech by Ānanda on the formless states], indicating the end of a quotation, ... [which] suggests that the speaker of the next paragraph should be Udāyī. Yet it is clear that Ānanda himself is still speaking,” as quoted above.

On the last point, Āyasmā Bodhi adds that “the *ti* is an error and should be deleted” (and it is so in the Pāli Text Society’s edition). I beg to differ.

His opinion presumes that the Pāli sutta did not suffer a transmission error, other than the supposedly wrongly added *ti*. However, putting together the above pieces of evidence, I think the *ti* is not an error at all, but a genuine element inherited from a more original script. The Pāli sutta seems to be originally two suttas that somehow got mixed, making the quoted passage above appear like an explanation on some obscure sort of formless state.

In any case, this kind of samādhi is said to have “final knowledge as its fruit”. So, it must be sammā-samādhi. Furthermore, its description reminds me of paṇidhāya bhāvanā (Cultivation Without Having Set, p112) mentioned in *Appendix 14: Two Ways to Sammā-samādhi*. It seems like this kind of samādhi is the result of such cultivation.

**Compare:** Rochester Meditation Center <doug@mcgillreport.org> posted this quote from Sayadaw U Tejaniya on The Daily Tejaniya, Nov. 9, 2018. I can’t help noticing the striking similarities with the quoted passage above. Compare for yourself:

*In order to develop vipassanā samādhi, you need to have wisdom. This can be right information and/or what you have understood through your own reflection and experience. Because of this wisdom, **the mind neither wants nor pushes away anything**. Because of this wisdom, **the mind feels stable; there is no reaction in the mind**. This is vipassanā samādhi and **it is only from this kind of samādhi that wisdom can arise**. [Emphases mind]*

(Note: By vipassanā samādhi, sayadaw is referring to mental stability or composure cultivated through mindfulness and wisdom.)

# Appendix 13: Atthasālinī’s Definition of Pīti and Sukha

Atthasālinī (Āyasmā Buddhaghosa’s commentary on Dhammasaṅgaṇī of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka), in elaborating on the first jhāna, defines *pīti* as “delight in the *attaining* of the desired object”, and *sukha* as “enjoyment of the taste of what is *acquired*.” (*The Expositor*, translation of Atthasālinī by Pe Maung Tin, p155.) **So the pīti and sukha of the post-canonical (Visuddhimagga) jhāna seem to be born of getting something**, presumably the experience, **rather than of separation** (from sensuality and unskillful qualities) **or of samādhi, as the Suttas describe the first and second jhāna accordingly.**

The happiness of separation from sensualities and unskillful qualities persists so long as the separation persists. However, the happiness of getting what we like or want is unsustainable, even while we still have the object, as we may have noticed in our lives.

## The Experience

What is this “experience” mentioned above?

When we persistently focus on a persistent mental object to the gradual exclusion of other things, the mind eventually gets absorbed in it and is cut off from the five-sense impingements. If we like this lack of sensory impingement, we will enjoy the experience. Thus rapture and pleasure naturally arise; in common parlance, you feel high.

As Atthasālinī graphically describes, “When all-pervading rapture arises, the whole body is completely surcharged, blown like a full bladder or like a mountain cavern pouring forth a mighty flood of water.” (*The Expositor*, p154.) Sounds like quite a high, doesn’t it?<sup>1</sup>

Such an intense high doesn’t occur with separation from sensuality and unskillful qualities. Being undisturbed by them, the mind is peacefully joyful and happy. The difference is vast.

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1 Some people, perhaps through personal ventures, equate the pleasure of absorption with taking certain recreational drugs—a claim I cannot confirm by experience.

# Appendix 14: Two Ways to Sammā·samādhi

Many say that in the Suttas we can't find practical instructions to cultivate the four jhānas, i.e. sammā·samādhi, and that only in later texts, e.g. the Visuddhimagga, such instructions are found. I used to think so too. However, after a shift of understanding, I found two ways in the Suttas. They are summed up in Bhikkhunupassaya Sutta (SN47.10), where the Buddha describes them as *paṇidhāya bhāvanā*, cultivation after having set; and *appaṇidhāya bhāvanā*, cultivation without having set.<sup>1 2</sup>

## Cultivation After Having Set

The part on *paṇidhāya bhāvanā* is already quoted on page 56. Please read it again, plus the paragraph following it.

In this case, as the practitioner tries to cultivate the four satipaṭṭhāna, he meets with one or more of three conditions that make the cultivation difficult: “either a burning in the body—based on the body [*similarly for feelings, mind and phenomena*—or mental sluggishness arises, or the mind is scattered outwardly”. In this situation the Buddha recommends setting the mind “on some [mind-]brightening basis” (kismiñcīdeva pasādaniye nimitte).

This is similar to the first way mentioned in Vitakka·saṅṭhāna Sutta (MN20), where “evil, unskillful thoughts — imbued with desire, aversion, or delusion — arise in a monk while he is referring to and attending to a particular theme. He should attend to another theme, apart from that one, connected with what is skillful.”<sup>3</sup> Should the method prove ineffective, he should attempt the other ways mentioned in that sutta.

Back to Bhikkhunupassaya Sutta, no explanation or example is given for the “brightening basis”, but I suppose it can be any basis that, upon setting the mind on, brightens the mind. The commentary suggests the six recollections (anussati) mentioned in AN11.12: the Tathāgata, the Dhamma, the Saṅgha, one's own (good) conduct, one's own generosity, and the devas.<sup>4</sup> Although this sutta itself (besides AN11.13) does not specifically speak of these six bases as “brightening”, it does say something similar in more elaborate terms, after which it shows the same effect as found in Bhikkhunupassaya Sutta, i.e. from “gladness is born” up to “the mind is composed”. According to MahāNiddeśa, these recollections are suited to those of faith-temperament (saddhā·carita).

I don't know if Ajahn Chah read this sutta, but he advised almost the same:

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- 1 See an English translation in CDB, p1638; but note that Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *paṇidhāya bhāvanā* as “development by direction” and *appaṇidhāya bhāvanā* as “development without direction”. I'm not following his renderings mainly because I find them grammatically deviating from their Pāli origins. The latter also invokes in my mind a confused meditator.
  - 2 Although “having set” may at first seem odd, it's more suitable for *paṇidhāya* than the more common “having directed”. *Paṇidhāya* is also found in the phrase *ujum kāyam paṇidhāya*—having set the body upright—found in the beginning of the standard ānāpānasati instruction. Here's another example but in simple present tense *paṇidahati: appaṭiladdhassa paṭilābhāya cittam paṇidahati*—sets the mind on obtaining of the unobtained (MN133).
  - 3 Trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu: <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.020.than.html>. He uses “theme” for *nimitta*, while I prefer “basis” to cover a fuller range of meaning of the word.
  - 4 See Ajahn Ṭhānissaro's translation: <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/an/an11/an11.012.than.html> (Shortcut: bit.ly/an11-12)

When (the mind is) in a turmoil, jumping all around, give it a meditation topic to play with. What kind of topic? Recollection of the Buddha, recollection of the Dhamma, recollection of the Saṅgha, recollection of virtue, recollection of generosity, recollection of death: Let it contemplate death. (*It's Like This: 108 Dhamma Similes*)

Contemplation of death is not suggested in the commentary, but by experience I know it does settle my mind—though only sometimes, thus not the best way for me. What would work for you? Here are some suggestions from Tuvattakasuttaniddesa in MahāNiddesa:

To the person of **passion-temperament**, the Bhagavā gives a talk on unattractiveness.<sup>5</sup> To the person of **aversion-temperament**, the Bhagavā speaks on the friendliness-cultivation. For the person of **delusion-temperament**, the Bhagavā settles [him] in a programme, quizzing, timely dhamma-listening, timely dhamma-discussion and co-residence with a teacher.<sup>6</sup> To the person of **thinking-temperament**, the Bhagavā speaks on mindfulness of breathing. To the person of **faith-temperament**, the Bhagavā speaks of a [mind-]brightening basis: the Buddha's utter awakening, the Dhamma's utter 'Dhamma-ness', the Saṅgha's good practice, and precepts. To the person of **own-knowledge-temperament**, the Bhagavā speaks on the basis of distinct seeing: the impermanence-condition, the suffering-condition, the not-self condition.

The above is not exhaustive though, as the Suttas also speak of other ways. In any case, it's good for us to find a basis that suits us individually, to be used when the need arises.<sup>7</sup> It should be such that, when the mind is set on it, it brightens the mind, bringing about gladness, leading to joy, then calming down of the body, thus one feels happy and so the mind is composed (*samādhīyati*). Having accomplished that, he is to withdraw. Then he discerns, "Without thinking (*avitakko*), without considering (*avicāro*), I am internally mindful, I am happy." Although the word "jhāna" is not used here, elements of the description suggest the first jhāna and a transition to the second.

As we can see, the Sutta jhānas aren't as exotic or mystical or difficult or dramatic as absorption 'jhānas', although neither are they ordinary, being that the hindrances are abandoned and one is separated from sensualities and unskillful qualities. **Remember: Jhāna simply means "meditation", and the four jhānas are different levels of meditation made possible by the**

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5 "Unattractiveness" is translated from *asubha*, sometimes translated as "loathsomeness", as descriptions in the *Visuddhimagga* suggests. Here, however, it simply means contemplation on body parts, of which the Suttas' description suggests that the practice is meant to arouse not disgust or loathing, but detachment. Thus, it can result in peace and happiness.

6 Elsewhere in the text, it says "he taught such meditation subjects as mindfulness of death".

7 Here's a simple, universal way to relieve a negative mind (though insufficient for *sammā-samādhi*):

"TAKE A MOMENT to look around. Where is the good in this moment? Look inside and out. What's the good within you, what's the good outside of you? The gifts of life are truly here; we just need to come to our senses from time to time to notice them." ~ *Mindfulness Meditations for the Anxious Traveler: Quick Exercises to Calm Your Mind* by Elisha Goldstein Ph.D.

The good you find can be as simple as "I'm alive," which was the first response from a young lady who came to me for help. It was significant to her as she had earlier contemplated suicide. After a few minutes of directing her mind to acknowledge and contemplate on other seemingly mundane good things, she began to feel happy and smiled. We just need to contemplate on the truth of whatever good we find, and let that clear up the negativity naturally. I should add that we must first be *willing* to change our mindset.

**well-cultivated composure, not dramatic states of concentration. As the mind shifts into jhāna proper, it becomes more composed, not more excited.**

Even if we don't accept this conclusion, we can read the standard description of the first jhāna as it is and see that it's actually not dramatic. Also, from this sutta, we can see that setting the mind "on some [mind] brightening basis" is not for any form of absorption. Rather, it is a purely samatha (settling) kind of practice, necessary when we meet with some mental or physical difficulties.

The sutta doesn't say what that person is supposed to do next. However, since it is part of the Satipaṭṭhāna-saṃyutta, and the sutta's main subject is satipaṭṭhāna, we can assume that the bhikkhu returns to that. This is parallel to the instruction by some 'vipassanā' teachers to do mettā before 'vipassanā' (called *satipaṭṭhāna* in the Suttas).

## **Cultivation Without Having Set**

The other way, **appaṇidhāya bhāvanā**, is described thus:

Without having set the mind outwardly, a bhikkhu discerns: 'My mind is unset outwardly.' Then he discerns: 'It is consistently unconstricted, liberated, unset (pacchāpure 'asaṅkhittam vimuttam appaṇihitam'ti).' And then he also discerns: 'I abide in the body as a body-observer [*similarly for feelings, mind and phenomena*], ardent, fully aware, mindful; I am happy.'

So, appaṇidhāya bhāvanā (cultivation without having set) is about the four establishments of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna), i.e. the bases for samādhi (samādhi-nimittā) according to Cūḷavedalla Sutta (MN44.12). This description seems related to what is found in Ānanda Sutta (AN9.37) quoted in *Appendix 12: The Samādhi that Has Final Knowledge as Its Fruit*. It's probably the same as what some now call "open awareness". It also reminds me of what is sometimes called "choiceless awareness", but now most commonly called "vipassanā" in orthodox Theravāda, to differentiate it from its "samatha" (concentration meditation). In the Suttas' terminology though, it includes both samatha and vipassanā. The cultivation also seems to fit into what a Norwegian research calls "nondirective meditation".<sup>8</sup>

**Note:** Words like "unset", "choiceless", and "nondirective" can seem to suggest that one is completely passive, doing nothing at all; but that's not the case. They simply mean one is not fixing one's attention. Cultivation without having set is *still* a cultivation: establishing mindfulness.

In the first and second sentence, the quote above describes the mental state the practitioner discerns when he is without the three conditions mentioned earlier that make the cultivation difficult. The subsequent sentence shows he also discerns as in the usual satipaṭṭhāna formula. An important point here is that he should already have the suitable mental state.

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8 See <http://gemini.no/en/2014/05/how-your-brain-works-during-meditation/> (Shortcut: tiny.cc/brainmed)



One may ask: *In observing the body, feelings, mind or phenomena—isn't that setting the mind too?* It can be, but at the same time the description says one's mind is "consistently unconstricted, liberated, unset". In short, one's mind isn't set on any particular object. Thus, as a whole, the passage suggests that one is to intuitively observe the object most suited to one's situation, just as an experienced, skilled driver intuitively engages the gear most suited to his situation. In practice, that object needs to be obvious and easy for one to cultivate the good mental qualities.

Although not specified here, persisting in this cultivation should naturally result in the four jhānas, a point well-supported in various suttas. (I've explained this in Part 1's *More Comparison*, table item: *Relation to satipaṭṭhāna* (p15).) After all, as the sutta states earlier, "anyone... who abides with a mind well-established in the four establishments of mindfulness... will perceive successively loftier stages of distinction." I think it's safe to assume that "loftier stages of distinction" refers to the four stages of awakening. So, since sammā-samādhi, i.e. the four jhānas, is part of the Noble Eight-factored Path, we can't expect "loftier stages of distinction" without it, can we?

Interestingly, the final words in the above passage "fully aware, mindful; I am happy" (*sampajāno satimā sukhamasmi*) suggests that this cultivation leads one to engage in the third jhāna. There's no reason to assume it stops there.

## Summary

There are two ways to sammā-samādhi:

- Cultivation after having set (*paṇidhāya bhāvanā*), using a mind-brightening basis, *pasādanīya nimitta*. This is only applicable as far as the first meditation.
- Cultivation without having set (*appaṇidhāya bhāvanā*), using the four establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), i.e. the bases for samādhi, *samādhi-nimittā*.

## Appendix 15: ‘Entering’ Jhāna?

**Note:** A small part of this requires a *little* knowledge of Pāli grammar. Don’t let that stop you.

You may have heard people saying something like “enter jhāna”. It befits the Visuddhimagga’s idea of jhāna, as one is supposed to get absorbed *in* one’s own mental creation. The expression also *somewhat* matches the translations below, usually followed by “the x jhāna”:

- “enters upon and abides in” (in MLDB)
- “enters and dwells upon” (in CDB)
- “enters and dwells in” (in NDB)
- “enters & remains in” (by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu)

The above translations (translated from *upasampajja viharati*) generally portray jhāna as something one *enters* and *stays in*, thus alluding to and seemingly confirming the Visuddhimagga’s absorption jhāna. But the truth may be the other way round: that the Visuddhimagga’s idea of jhāna has somehow influenced these translations.

Actually, they can’t be properly translated backwards to the original Pāli phrase:

- “Enters upon and abides in” can *almost* be translated back to *upasampajja viharati*. By using “enters upon”, meaning “takes on a job or duty”, this is the only one of the four that does not portray jhāna as something one *enters*. The only issue is the “in”. *Viharati* can only be translated to “abides”. For the “in”, the object would have to be in the locative form, e.g. *paṭhame jhāne*, which it is not.
- “Enters and dwells upon” and “enters and dwells in” basically translates backward to *pavisitvā viharati* or *okkamitvā viharati*, both departing significantly from the original. I say “basically” because, as above, *viharati* translates to “dwells” only. For the “upon” and “in”, the object, as above, would also have to be in the locative.
- “Enters & remains in” translates perfectly to *pavisitvā tiṭṭhati*, departing the furthest.

Seeking a more satisfactory translation, I’ve arrived at “abides engaging in”. In case you misunderstand:

1. The “in” here is for *upasampajja*, not *viharati*. I’m translating *upasampajja* as “engaging in”.
2. I reckon *upasampajja* as an absolute functioning as a present participle, a fairly common occurrence in the Suttas. (You’ll see some convincing examples below.)
3. I arrived at “engaging in” based on one meaning of *upasampajjati* provided by PED: “take upon oneself”. It also seems to agree with other contexts in which the phrase occurs (as you’ll see later).

This translation is more literal and aligns with the kind of jhāna that one can *engage in* (*upasampajjati*) in any posture, as shown under *Does Jhāna Mean Absorption?* (p53).

It also agrees with how *viharati* is defined in Jhāna-vibhaṅga of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka: *iriyati vattati pāleti yapeti yāpeti carati viharati*. In that context, they all revolve around the same

meanings: conduct (oneself), move about, behave, exist, be, survive, go on, go, live, **abide**, dwell, sojourn. These words generally refer to living one's life, not being mentally absorbed.

**Note:** Translating *viharati* literally as “abide” does not in any way suggest that engaging in the *jhānas* all day long is easy. In Ashin Tejaniya's words (in *Don't Look Down on the Defilements*),

*It is not easy to get this kind of momentum. You cannot make it happen. You need to be patient. It is possible to experience momentum after meditating full time for only a few weeks but it will not last very long. Maintaining momentum takes skill and practice. When you first get it you are likely to lose it again within hours or minutes even. Never try to get it back; this can only happen naturally, simply through persistent practice. Most people will take many months or years to acquire the necessary skills and understanding to have natural awareness throughout the day.*

Now let's include the *jhāna* into the phrase: *jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati*. The verb necessarily acting on *jhānaṃ* is only *upasampajja*. The phrase is structurally similar to

- *rājagahaṃ upanissāya viharanti* (DN16), commonly translated as “abide/dwell depending on Rājagaha”.
- *mettāsahagatena cetasā ekaṃ disaṃ pharivā viharatha* (SN42.13), translated in CDB (p1367) as “dwells pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with lovingkindness”.

Notice the absolutes *upanissāya* and *pharivā* translated as “depending on” and “pervading” accordingly, in the same way as I translated *upasampajja* as “engaging in”.

If we want to say “dwell in” or “abide in” something, that “in” will have to be reflected in the locative form of that something, like *rājagahe viharanti* (e.g. in SN21.3), not *rājagahaṃ viharanti* (not found in the Suttas).

Now, let's survey similar phrases in other contexts in the Suttas and see if “abides engaging in” fit in those better than existing common translations. Here's a passage from Ajahn Ṭhānissaro's translation of the famous Kālāma (or Kesamutti) Sutta (AN3.66):

When you know for yourselves that, ‘These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness’ — then you **should enter & remain in (upasampajja vihareyyātha)** them. [*Emphasis and parenthesis are added.*]

Isn't it odd to say we “enter & remain in” skilful qualities? Before we brush off this question by saying it's just a Pāli idiom, let's first have the faith to doubt this assumption. How can we enter skilful qualities? It's the same problem as: How can we enter meditation? We can however engage in skilful qualities and engage in meditation. Consider these translations:

1. You should abide engaging in skilful qualities.
2. He abides engaging in the first *jhāna*.

Wouldn't these be more meaningful?

Another example is in *Sammā-samādhi Sutta* (AN5.113), already provided in the text proper: “Bhikkhus, possessed of five things a bhikkhu is unable **to abide engaging in proper composure (sammā-samādhim upasampajja viharitum).**”

I hope the above is convincing enough for you to reconsider the presently common translations, which seem to be influenced by orthodoxy and then seemingly confirmed by orthodoxy.

## ***A Request***

If you agree that meditation (jhāna) isn't something we *enter* (*upon*), you can help by not speaking of it that way. I hope you could try using “engage in” instead. But if you disagree with it, please consider using “attain”, “reach”, “arrive”, or “get to”. These aren't possible translations of *upasampajjati*, but of *adhigacchati* used in Naḷakapāna Sutta (MN68.6) with allusion to the jhānas. Using these words avoids suggesting the “entering” idea. I nonetheless still recommend saying “engage in” as it rightly implies that jhāna is an action.

# Appendix 16: *Jhāna* Means “Meditation”— Literally

**Note:** I deem this appendix the most important in this book, and the most difficult to write. To follow this, readers may need to suspend disbelief, so that they may objectively evaluate it with their own practice.

In the text proper, I’ve mentioned variously that the Suttas don’t mean “*jhāna*” in the same way as orthodox Theravāda does. I’ve also briefly mentioned that, while orthodox Theravāda presents the *jhānas* as mental states, the Suttas don’t. In the Suttas, the *jhānas* aren’t “states of meditation” because *jhāna* simply and literally means “meditation”.

The view of the *jhānas* being mental states is so widespread and entrenched that even people who know about the two kinds of “*jhāna*” may still view the Sutta *jhānas* as mental states. This view has engendered phrases like ‘*jhānic* mental state’, ‘third *jhānic* state’, ‘states of deep mental unification’, ‘profound states of concentration’, which all have no equivalents in the Suttas.

This view has even affected translations, such as “the four *jhānas* that are heightened mental states”.<sup>1</sup> The “heightened mental states” here is translated from *ābhicetasikā* [*abhi + ceto + ika*]. This translation is unjustifiable and misleading, as the Pāli word is quite literally “of a heightened mind”.<sup>2</sup> Thus, a literal translation would be “the four meditations that are of a heightened mind”.<sup>3</sup> Here they are again for easier comparison:

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the four **jhānas** that are  
**heightened mental states**

the four **meditations** that are  
**of a heightened mind**

---

The first translation tells us the four *jhānas* are mental states, while the second, *literal* translation describes them as *acts* of a heightened mind. This example shows how far the view of the *jhānas* being mental states has affected explanations and translations, which then proliferate and strengthen the view.

The widespread view of the *jhānas* being mental states may be partly why virtually all modern sutta translators leave *jhāna* untranslated when it comes to the four *jhānas*, while elsewhere they translate it variously. (See translations for *jhāna* on page 70.) They choose not to translate it—in the context of the four *jhānas*—because, to them, it refers to a special mental state that has no English equivalent.

Please take a look again at the examples shown under *Usage of “Jhāna” in the Suttas* (p53)—in the bulleted list and the subsequent two. Notice that they all show that ***jhāna* in the Suttas**,

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1 From <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an04/an04.035.than.html>, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an10/an10.071.than.html>, and <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.108.than.html>.

2 *Ābhiceta* itself seems to be another way of saying *adhicitta*.

3 The suffix “*ika*” can more specifically mean “belonging to”, e.g. *saṅghika* means “belonging to the saṅgha”. Taking this more specific meaning, the phrase becomes “the four meditations belonging to a heightened mind”.

including the four jhānas, really does mean “meditation”, an action, a mental work that one engages in, not a mental state. (Reading Appendix 15: ‘Entering’ Jhāna? may also give you a sense of this.)

This assertion is also supported by Ariyamagga Sutta (AN4.235), in which the Buddha asks “What is action (*kamma*) that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the ending of action (*kamma*)?” He gives the answer as the Noble Eight-factored Path, which includes *sammā·samādhi*, i.e. the four jhānas (meditations). Thus, the jhānas are actually actions.

## The Implication

Bearing in mind that meditation (jhāna) is an action, please read the four jhānas formula again. Notice that the emphasized words below describe not the mental state, but the meditation (jhāna)—or we might say the “meditating mind”—itself.

idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu  
vivicceva kāmehi vivicca  
akusalehi dhammehi  
**savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ**  
**vivekajaṃ pītisukhaṃ**  
*paṭhamāṃ jhānaṃ* upasampajja  
viharati.

Here, bhikkhus, having separated from sensualities, having separated from unskillful qualities, the bhikkhu abides engaging in *the first meditation: joy & happiness born of separation, accompanied by thinking and considering.*

vitakkavicārānaṃ vūpasamā  
**ajjhattaṃ sampasādanaṃ**  
**cetaso ekodibhāvaṃ**  
**avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ**  
**samādhijaṃ pītisukhaṃ**  
*dutiyāṃ jhānaṃ* upasampajja  
viharati.

With the quiescence of thinking & considering, he abides engaging in *the second meditation: internal illumination, mental poise, joy & happiness born of composure, without thinking and considering.*

pītiyā ca virāgā upekkhako ca  
viharati sato ca sampajāno,  
sukhañca kāyena  
paṭisaṃvedeti, **yaṃ taṃ**  
**ariyā ācikkhanti –**  
**‘upekkhako satimā**  
**sukhavihārī’**ti *tatiyaṃ*  
*jhānaṃ* upasampajja viharati.

Then with the dispassion for joy, he abides equanimously, is mindful and fully aware, and experiences happiness with the body. He abides engaging in *the third meditation: that which the noble ones declare, ‘He is equanimous, mindful, and abides happily.’*

sukhassa ca pahānā  
dukkhassa ca pahānā pubbeva  
somanassadomanassānaṃ  
atthaṅgamā **adukkham-**  
**asukhaṃ upekkhāsati-**  
**pārisuddhiṃ catuttham**  
**jhānaṃ** upasampajja viharati

With the abandoning of  
happiness and the  
abandoning of suffering, just  
as with the earlier  
disappearance of delight &  
dejection, he abides engaging  
in *the fourth meditation*: **purity**  
**of equanimity &**  
**mindfulness, neither**  
**suffering nor happy.**

If you know basic Pāli, you should be able to appreciate better what I'm trying to point out, besides why Ajahn Ṭhānissaro's sentence structure, which I've adopted, is more accurate. Also note that the regular-styled words mostly describe the transition to a higher meditation.

The only part with something extra is in the third row: “that which the noble ones declare, ‘He is equanimous, mindful, and abides happily.’” Here, a seeming conflict occurs: While engaging in the third meditation, one is supposed to be *sampajāno* (fully aware), which Sati Sutta (SN47.35) says is to know feelings, thoughts (*vitakkā*) and perceptions as they arise, persist, and disappear. But how could that be when the four *jhānas* formula says there is no thinking and considering when one engages in the second or higher meditation?

Actually, the formula doesn't say that. Rather, it says that “With the *quiescence* of thinking & considering, he abides engaging in the second meditation”. **Here, the mind is quiet, but that does not mean the thinking function of the cognitive mind has been disabled. Thoughts can still occur.** This is implied in Kaṅṭhaka Sutta (AN10.72) where it says “Thinking & considering are thorns to the second meditation.”<sup>4</sup> It means thinking & considering can still occur while one engages in that meditation, though they are a bother to it.

But the formula does say “**without thinking and considering (*avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ*)**”, doesn't it? Yes, it does, but note carefully that it **refers to the meditation (*jhāna*) itself only**. That means one meditates silently in the mind. It does not mean thinking and considering don't happen at all. Compare it with the first meditation, accompanied by thinking and considering (*savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ*)—**here, thinking and considering not only wouldn't seem like thorns, they are used for the meditation** (as shown under *Vitakka, Vicāra & Noble Silence* (p59)). But for the second meditation, thinking and considering are no longer used, but they *can* still occur and are thorns to it.

## Viewing the Jhānas as Mental States Versus Actions

I highlight this distinction not for mere scholarly interest, but for an important practical purpose. **The view of the *jhānas* as mental states engenders a common wrong attitude in meditation: Trying to create and maintain a desired mental state, rather than to focus on the job: meditate (*jhāyati*).**

In focusing on the mental state, we focus on the result. That is being goal-orientated, which is why many meditators get into trouble. Even if that doesn't happen, when we are being goal-

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4 See Ajahn Ṭhānissaro's translation: [https://www.dhammadata.org/suttas/AN/AN10\\_72.html](https://www.dhammadata.org/suttas/AN/AN10_72.html) (Shortcut: [tiny.cc/thorny](https://tiny.cc/thorny))

orientated, we try to manipulate the mind or induce the desired state, thus creating an artificial condition. When our experience is artificial, how are we to know reality? However, if we focus on meditating, we focus on cultivating the necessary qualities for liberation: settling and distinct seeing. When these qualities are sufficiently cultivated, the result happens naturally.

Furthermore, when we view jhāna as a mental state, we may also view it as unchanging, fixed. When we view it as literally meditation, an action, we can more easily view it as having flow while the mind is still; we can better appreciate what Ajahn Chah said in *Still, Flowing Water*:

If you can sense things in this way, you'll be at peace. At peace. Wherever you go, your mind will be at peace. But to say it's at peace is not quite right.

Have you ever seen flowing water? Flowing water: Have you ever seen it? Have you ever seen still water? If your mind is peaceful, it's kind of like still, flowing water. Have you ever seen still, flowing water? [Laughs] There! You've only seen still water and flowing water. You've never seen still, flowing water. Right there, right where your thinking can't take you: where the mind is still but can develop discernment. When you look at your mind, it'll be kind of like flowing water, and yet it's still. It looks like it's still, it looks like it's flowing, so it's called still, flowing water. That's what it's like. That's where discernment can arise.



# Appendix 17: Translating Pāli Words

**Note:** For people interested in Pāli-English translation work.

In Part 2, I proposed English words I deemed better fit the meaning and usage of some Pāli words. They may not suit you, and that’s okay, because from a practical viewpoint, the question for each of us as spiritual practitioners is this: *Do the words I depend on to understand the practice work for me?* In other words, do they help me to practise in a way that leads to ending suffering? If so, then let me use them. If not, then let me avoid them. **Personal pragmatism is sufficient for personal use.**

However, to communicate with others, more is needed. **To communicate, how we normally use words is not as important as how the audience understands them.** While we know what we mean, others may not. This matter is particularly pertinent when we translate for others. Since in this case one is not translating for oneself, **using words that merely satisfy oneself is inadequate. So is merely going by popular translations. When the audience misunderstands, the translation has failed.** For example, in translating *samādhi*, if one intends to mean “collectedness”, yet translates it as “concentration”, and the reader takes it to mean “focused attention”—the translation has failed. **In translating, we need to put our audience first.**

## Choose Only the Best One

Although translations cannot be perfect, we should try our best. When translating a word, we should **try to choose from the vast supply in the target language the one word that our audience is most likely to understand correctly.** To this end, we need to consider how the majority is most likely to perceive a considered word within the context. By all means, we should be finicky. For example, Āyasmā Anālayo and Ajahn Ṭhānissaro both use “absorption” for *jhāna*, yet they widely disagree on what it means. I think for most people “absorption” aligns better with Āyasmā Anālayo’s idea of *jhāna*. They are likely to think of it like “absorbed in thought”, meaning being so occupied with thinking that one is not conscious of anything else. This isn’t like what Ajahn Ṭhānissaro means by the same word, as we can see in the instances quoted in this book. To convey his idea of *jhāna*, perhaps he could find a more suitable English word.

To achieve this goal of choosing the best word, we should **choose the word most semantically congruent to the source.** For example, if a Pāli word can mean x, y and z, we should try to choose a word in the target language that can also mean x, y and z. If that word is available, yet we choose two words instead—say, one that can mean only x and another only y and z—and decide for ourselves which to use where, we have overstepped the translator’s job: We have added interpretations, narrowing down the meaning in each case.

Thus, using multiple words when we have the option to use one makes it too easy for us to be influenced by our biases. In doing so, we may convey meanings unintended in the original. A case in point is switching between “pleasure” and “bliss” for *sukha* as one deems fit. The risk is unnecessary because we can choose just one word: “happiness”. Moreover, when readers find different English words, especially within the same piece of translation, they will likely assume

the words are translated from different Pāli words, thus possibly misconstrue what they read. Such problems can be avoided simply by choosing only *one* most semantically congruent word.

Another aspect to consider is metaphor. A spiritual teacher is likely to understand the power of metaphor in conveying spiritual teachings, and therefore try to use it effectively. Thus **the translator should also aim for metaphoric congruence**. Combined with the earlier principle, this means choosing the best word to deliver both literal and figurative meanings of the original, e.g. translating *kaṇṭaka* as “thorn”. Doing so has an added advantage: As the Pāli word shifts between the literal and figurative within a text, we can then translate consistently, and even translate puns.

Admittedly, limiting ourselves to only one choice for each Pāli word is sometimes unworkable. Sometimes, we just have to use more than one. If the case is merely a matter of usage, not meaning, then perhaps there’s no reason to object; e.g. using “inner” and “internal” for *ajjhataṃ*, or “thought” and “thinking” for *vitakka*.

However, if it’s not merely a matter of usage, I would try to reduce the number of translations. I would avail to myself the least possible options. For instance, a word is being translated in four different ways. Perhaps two of them can be replaced with another that covers both meanings, and of the remaining two, one can actually cover the meaning of the other. Thus, only two remain. Or perhaps—in the context of translating the Suttas—one of them should actually be discarded because it is there only to convey a commentarial meaning not supported by the Suttas.

In any case, we should not assume we need to use multiple options whenever we find it unworkable to stick to just one. We should ask if it only *seems* unworkable because we are going by certain possibly incorrect interpretations—traditional, popular, idiosyncratic or otherwise. To sidestep that possibility, we experiment with various translations, picking one of them each time and using it consistently, even when it is inflected to different parts of speech. (There’s a good chance this is possible in translating Pāli to English as both belong to the same language group: Indo-European.) **We exhaust all possible translations to try to find one that fits consistently.**

Some noteworthy attempts are Ajahn Ṭhānissaro’s consistent rendering of *saṅkhāra* as “fabrication” and *saṅkhata* as “fabricated”, and *pajānāti* as “discern” and *paññā* as “discernment” (instead of “know” or “understand” and “wisdom”).<sup>1</sup> I’ve also attempted at the same in this book, compiled in *Summary of Translations* (p67).

Adhering to this principle forces the translator to consider from more angles, thus limiting the possibility of translating according to mistaken interpretations. If we find consistency possible yet resist it, perhaps it would be good to ask why.

**Caveat:** Consistency should be applied judiciously within the same textual stratum, but not across different textual strata. If one believes that the meaning of a word has changed, one *should* use a different translation (perhaps with an explanation) to avoid misleading the reader. For example, I would translate *jhāna* in the Suttas as “medit-

1 “Discernment” succinctly conveys what Sayadaw U Tejaniya calls “awareness+wisdom”, and what the Thai forest tradition calls “sati-paññā”. In my opinion, *paññā* itself covers both elements. The sayadaw says that when he practices “awareness”, it always has some level of wisdom. But since he learnt that many people don’t regard “awareness” as carrying this notion, he began to emphasise “awareness+wisdom”.

These compounds seem to be created to cope with the traditional use of *sati* to mean “awareness”, when it actually means “remembering” or “remembrance”. Thus, with the “awareness” part of *paññā* ‘hijacked’, teachers have to create new expressions to convey the original full meaning of *paññā*.

ation” and *samādhi* as “collectedness”, while in the *Visuddhimagga* I will have them as “absorption” and “concentration” accordingly. Imposing consistency in translating words across different textual strata is unnecessary and potentially misleading.

To sum up, here are my principles of translation in order of importance:

1. Pragmatic, fulfilling the purpose of the audience
2. Most likely for the audience to understand correctly
3. Most semantically congruent to the source
4. Most metaphorically congruent to the source
5. Most possible to translate consistently

For my translations in this book, I have tried my best to go by all the above. If you find any failure in that, please tell me.

## ***An Exercise***

See if you can translate *jināti* here consistently, besides meeting all the other principles above:

Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti  
Sabbāṃ rasaṃ dhammaraso jināti  
Sabbāṃ ratim dhammaratī jināti  
Taṇhakkhayo sabbadukkhaṃ jināti  
(Dhp354)

# Appendix 18: Questions & Answers

While writing this book, people asked me many interesting questions, mostly during workshops on the subject. Most of the questions are already addressed in the text proper and other appendices. Here I address some more.

## ***Do we need to know all these things?***

If we're following a teacher who has all the right ideas, like the Buddha, then of course not. We can depend solely on our teacher for knowledge and guidance to freedom.

However, we're not in such an ideal situation. We are now exposed to various teachings that contradict each other and even the Suttas—sometimes only seemingly, other times actually. Worse than that is when a teaching appears to agree with the Suttas but actually doesn't, such as when it uses "jhāna" differently.

We can't erase this conflict. We can try to ignore it though, but that may mean we will never know the truth behind it. Still, we can choose to do that, and just stick to what our teacher says. But that's blind faith, isn't it? More precisely, it's choosing to be blind.

Considering our present situation, it is better to try to understand the conflict. Once we do, we won't be confused by it. We also won't have to ignore it and follow a possibly misguided teaching, or follow a right teaching with limited conviction.

This book is meant to clarify the conflict. With the necessary information, we are then equipped to re-evaluate our views and possibly straighten some mistaken ones that we've accumulated.

## ***Which kind of jhāna should we practice?***

That's for you to decide for yourself. What do you want?

If you want the strangely exciting pleasure of freedom from five-sense impingement and gross mental activity, then go for the Visuddhimagga jhāna. It doesn't take too long if you know how and are committed to the practice. Just don't expect insights. If you want to settle the mind, to see more clearly the true nature of things, so that ignorance of reality can be dispelled and craving abandoned, thus ending suffering, then go for the Sutta jhāna. Just don't expect ecstasy. So, just be clear about what you want.

You could, as some say, practise the Visuddhimagga jhāna, then abandon it and use its residual effect to see the true nature of things. I can't recommend it though, as that's not how I practice. Besides, it entails the potential danger of heightened concentration as highlighted in *Appendix 3: Should We Develop Concentration?* In any case, if you have the time *and* the wisdom not to cling to it, you can try, then decide for yourself.

## ***Can we practise both kinds?***

Of course we can—if we can.

It's like this. Say you are in Kuala Lumpur wanting to do something in Penang. You would go northwards to Penang. But, can you *also* go to Genting Highlands?<sup>1</sup> Of course you can, if you can,

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1 A popular tourist attraction in Malaysia, featuring theme parks and casinos.

though not at the same time. Although you may start off using the same road, the routes will diverge. The same applies to the two kinds of jhāna.

Also, there are a few things to consider: Do you know the way to Genting Highlands? Do you have enough time and other resources? Will you spend too much of your resources just trying to get there? Will you even reach there? If you do, will you like the place so much that you forget about your task in Penang? These questions also apply to striving for the Visuddhimagga jhāna.

Here's another thing to consider: How about going to Penang to finish your task first? After that, if you wish to, you can go to Genting Highlands and stay there for as long as you like. The same applies to mastering the Sutta jhānas for your awakening and freedom first. On this matter, Ajahn Chah has given a very good advice, as I've quoted on page 89.

In my teaching experience, I've met people who have done much concentration practice. While most haven't been successful, the few who have may crave for more. This tendency has also been observed by some meditation teachers like Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Ṭhānissaro, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, and Master Sheng Yen; as quoted earlier under *Is Jhāna Necessary for Liberation?* (p10) and in *Appendix 3: Should We Develop Concentration?*

In any case, if you want to do both, it's your choice. No one else can decide for you.

### **Do we need to know which jhāna we are in?**

If you mean whether it's called "first jhāna" or "second jhāna", etc, for practical purposes, no. They're just labels.

It's necessary though to recognise what is proper samādhi as opposed to wrong samādhi, which leads to wrong liberation. It's also useful to know how it is like when engaging in the jhānas. For example, one yogi from China said she suddenly felt happy while meditating. Being uninformed, she began to wonder about her practice and asked me if she had practised wrongly!

As momentum in the practice increases, so does stillness of mind, regardless of your posture. Then, the mind can become happy and quiet, freed from worldly longing and dejection, at least temporarily. When this happens, what do we do? Maybe we start to wonder if something has gone wrong, like the yogi above.

However, that's not very likely for longtime Buddhists. More likely, we think, "Hmm... nice," or "Ah, this is easy," and become over-confident and lax. With that, mindfulness begins to decline and defilements begin to creep back, disintegrating the composure, and soon we'll find ourselves back in the sensual world. I believe this is what is meant in some suttas by "perception-cognitions associated with sensuality beset [him]" (kāmasahagatā saññāmanasikārā samudācaranti), causing one to disengage from the first jhāna.

Instead of doing such unhelpful things, we can check our view and attitude towards what's happening. We can also discern what's present and what's not, and why.<sup>2</sup>

### **Can defilements arise during jhāna?**

That depends on what you mean by "defilements", "jhāna" and "arise".

Firstly, let's agree that we're speaking of the four jhānas of the Suttas, not the Visuddhimagga jhāna, and also not just jhāna, which simply means "meditation". Now, you're asking this probably because of a common belief that "When one is in jhāna, all defilements are suppressed

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2 For more, read Ajahn Ṭhānissaro's "Jhana Not by the Numbers" (<http://tiny.cc/jhanan>)

temporarily.” I’ve heard and read this many times since I was new to meditation, but have never seen it mentioned in any scripture, not even in the Visuddhimagga.

Next, what is “defilement” in the Pāli Suttas? We’re used to *kilesa*, but this word is rare in the earlier texts, i.e. in the first four Nikāyas; and became extensively used only in the later texts of Khuddaka Nikāya. In the first four Nikāyas, far more common is *upakkilesa*, followed by *samkilesa*. In orthodox Theravāda, they are often assumed as simply “defilement”, but my initial research into this shows that this translation is too simplistic. It also suggests that the matter is far more complex than I initially thought, more than I’m willing to fully research into.

But let me say what I’ve come to know, using the English word “defilement” to mean any form of unskillful qualities (akusala dhammas) in general: mental blemish, corruption, pollutant, imperfection, fetter, influence, hindrance, obscuration—from the gross to the subtle.

As shown under *Vivicca & Viveka* (p64), when one engages in the jhānas, defilements subtler than the hindrances can still happen simultaneously, though seen as separate from the meditating mind. These include all subtle desire, aversion and delusion, which can’t be abandoned by samatha—of any kind. Whether they occur depends not on one’s level of composure (or concentration), but of awakening or realization.

In Naḷakapāna Sutta (MN68.6), the Buddha says that for one who reaches the first jhāna (the Sutta variety, of course) or something more peaceful; longing, enmity, dullness & drowsiness, restlessness & guilt, incertitude, discontent and weariness do not seize the mind and stay there. It implies that defilements subtler than these seven may still arise or occur and even seize the mind.

The hindrances aren’t just grosser forms of defilements; they are called *hindrances* in the meditation context because they do indeed *hinder* proper meditation: the jhānas. Defilements subtler than them aren’t strong enough to hinder the jhānas. Thus they can occur while one engages in the jhānas. One can see some of them arising. Others, however, e.g. sense of self or ego, one may not see them “arising”. Rather, one discovers that they have been around all along, and aren’t leaving any time soon! (At a higher level of practice, one sees them being constantly re-created instead.)

While the meditation, the jhāna, is certain to affect the mental state, it may or may not be affected in return, depending on one’s level of discernment. I’ve shown some examples of being affected while engaging in the jhānas due to the lack of discernment under the same subheading (p64). Below is another.

Although sensuality (or sensual pleasure) is experienced as separate while one engages in the first jhāna, one is not immune to its influence (āśava). Such an experience is recounted by Āyasmā MahāMoggallāna in SN40.1. *While* he abided engaging in the first jhāna, “perception-cognitions associated with sensuality” beset him. Accordingly, the Buddha then came by psychic power to tell him to compose his mind in the first jhāna. Then, at a later time (aparena samayena) he re-engaged in the first jhāna. This implies that being beset by perception-cognitions associated with sensuality caused him to fall away from the first jhāna, prompting his guru to come and help him. So, here’s another evidence of defilement arising during the jhānas, and even beset the meditator to the point of disengagement from the jhāna.

Even while engaging in the jhānas, our minds are subject to influences (āśavas) greater than our current wisdom, and they can erode our samādhi. The influences include that of sensuality, becoming, view, and ignorance. For example, as an unawakened person attains the second jhāna, he may view it as his, and desire to keep it (preferably forever!) Or he may assume he has become special, a spiritual ‘somebody’. Such influences pull him away from the true purpose of Buddhist

meditation. In fact, he's no longer meditating. This seems to be the case for Āyasmā Citta Hatthisāriputta, told in AN6.60.

### **Where do the jhānas lie in the practice of open awareness meditation?**

“Open awareness” is a relatively new term that is used variously. Assuming you're referring to how Āyasmā Aggacitta uses it, let me answer according to that context.

In this practice, one is to be open to all sense impressions, as opposed to deliberately limiting one's field of awareness. Thus, it's a form of dhammānupassanā. On its own, “bare open awareness” (as Āyasmā Aggacitta calls it) is a cultivation of samatha (settling), which leads to the jhānas (the non-absorbed, Sutta type).

### **Can you quote examples of vipassanā followed by samatha?**

Yes. In Sīlavanta Sutta (SN22.122), we find Āyasmā Sariputta replying to Āyasmā MahāKotṭhita,

“An arahant should attend in an appropriate way to these five clinging-aggregates as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a dissolution, an emptiness, not-self. Although, for an arahant, there is nothing further to do, and nothing to add to what has been done, still **these things — when developed & pursued — lead both to a pleasant abiding in the here-&-now and to mindfulness & alertness.**”<sup>3</sup> [Emphasis added.]

Note that while the practice is vipassanā, the result shows a partial description of the third jhāna. This shows that Āyasmā Sariputta is speaking of cultivating “vipassanā-preceded samatha”.

I should add that the above practice and its result apply not only to Arahants. Earlier in the sutta, Āyasmā Sariputta says a bhikkhu who has good conduct, who has attained stream-entry, who has attained once-returning, or who has attained non-returning, should do the same practice, and thus possibly realize the next stage of awakening. Since samatha is an essential quality for awakening (as shown under *Samatha & Vipassanā*, p25), samatha is already implied.

There's also Khemaka Sutta (SN22.89), in which Āyasmā Khemaka explains to a group of bhikkhus how he doesn't regard any of the five clinging-aggregates as “This I am,” yet the ‘I am’ in relation to them hasn't vanished in him. During the explanation, the minds of the bhikkhus, including Āyasmā Khemaka's, became fully liberated. What seems to have happened was that they were cultivating vipassanā along the way, and samatha followed, just as Āyasmā Sariputta says in the above sutta.

I've also in mind some contemporary examples, though only on *anatta* (not-self). Here's something from Paul Breiter's *Venerable Father*, referring to Ajahn Chah:

He ended our discussion by saying, ‘Don't be an arahant. Don't be a Buddha. Don't be anything at all. Being something makes problems. So don't be anything. You don't have to be something, he doesn't have to be something, I don't have to be something ...’ He paused, and then said, ‘Sometimes when I think about it, I don't want to say anything.’

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3 Trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.122.than.html>. “Alertness” is translated from *sampajañña*, which I translate as “full awareness”.

Before I explain the above, let me recount this case of a lady from China. I translated for her when we were practising with Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Myanmar in 2009. Before I arrived, she was frustrated by the difficulty in communicating with the teacher, but once she began to understand the practice, her progress was amazing. At one point, she slept only two hours a day, ate only a few spoonfuls each meal, yet she was energetic and radiant all day long.

Once, while describing her perception of anatta, she paused. As she tried to speak again, she paused again, as if something held her back. Sayadaw extended his palm towards her, signalling her to stop trying, and said, “I understand.”

When thinking and considering (i.e. verbal fabrication) are properly seen as not-self, they subside; and this can happen very quickly, depending on the quality of that distinct seeing. The mind can become extremely equanimous, mindful and fully aware; and tends to stay that way for a while, though not for long if samatha is not well-established. As the discernment is strong then, it governs the cognitive mind. Seeing no need for verbal fabrication, the discernment causes the cognitive mind to simply stop fabricating it.

The experience is strangely peaceful. One may find it so attractive that one desires to stay there. In that situation, should one begin to fabricate thinking, it's easy to see that as not-self again; and again the mind returns to the equanimous state. So, if the desire for that state is stronger than the desire to speak, one simply can't speak, not even mentally. This seems to have happened for this lady. As for Ajahn Chah in the prior story, he paused, but was able to resume speaking to explain why.

I link all these examples with the “vipassanā-preceded samatha” cultivation.

By the way, take note that Yuganaddha Sutta (AN4.170), where we find four ways people attain arahanthood (including the above), does not say they have done so by only one of the ways. It says, “they all [do so] by these four ways, or by any one of them.”

### ***Do you think the Mahasi way of practice leads to (Sutta) jhāna?***

Yes, I think it does, if done correctly, i.e. wisely—equipped with proper view and attitude, besides other requisite factors in the Noble Eight-factored Path for sammā-samādhi.

If done obsessively, then it can't, which is true for any kind of practice. For example, if one is obsessed with the mental labelling or moving slowly, then one tends to neglect the actual purpose: cultivating awareness. If, instead, one practises in an unobsessive but interested way, then only can the mind settle and the jhānas be possible. Also remember that the labelling, being a form of vitakka, limits you to the first jhāna. (Both “label” and “note” are translated from the same Burmese verb, *mhat*. To avoid confusion, you may need to clarify with the teacher or translator when they use these words.)

I believe some people (e.g. Dīpa Mā) have attained awakening through Mahasi Sayadaw's teaching. Bear in mind that the jhānas are included in the Noble Eight-factored Path, the way of practice leading to the cessation of dukkha (*dukkha-nirodha-gāminī paṭipadā*). So, assuming they indeed attained awakening, surely they must have done the jhānas too—the sutta variety of course.



***I'm not satisfied with both composure and collectedness as the translation for samādhi. It sounds peculiar to say, "He entered a deep level of composure." Wouldn't concentration still work better?***

Yes, saying that does sound peculiar. We are more likely to hear, "He entered a deep level of concentration." What I notice is that when people say it this way, they are not referring to Sutta jhānas. The Suttas don't speak of the jhānas or samādhi in that way.

Instead of samādhi becoming deeper, we find the Suttas speaking of samādhi becoming *higher*, e.g. higher levels of sammā-samādhi, as in the third and fourth jhāna. I suppose we can agree that using higher ordinals suggests higher levels. This 'higher' idea is also suggested in the term *adhicitta* (heightened mind), a term related to samādhi.

Why then do we still tend to say "entering deep levels of samādhi"? Perhaps it's because we are still influenced by orthodoxy, where "samādhi" carries the meaning of concentration or absorption. Thus, we think of greater samādhi or jhāna as something we "enter" and go "deep" into. Speaking in this way suggests that we still regard samādhi in this way, and possibly also try to cultivate it as such, perhaps unknowingly.

For me, Buddhist meditation as taught in the Suttas should be seen as a cultivation of ascension rather than descension. Great samādhi should be expressed in a way that suggests an *uplifted* or *heightened* mind. So, returning to the peculiar phrase, I would instead say something like "He *reached a high* level of composure (or collectedness)." I think this is more appropriate.

***Don't you think you're making jhāna seem too ordinary? For example, you said jhāna is possible while walking. It's as if jhāna is easy to get.***

In pointing out that the jhānas are possible while walking (on page 53, based on Venāgapura Sutta), I don't mean they are ordinary or easy to attain. My purpose was to show that the jhānas are not states of absorption into a single conceptual object.

Nonetheless, I do think the jhānas *are* easy for those who are well-cultivated (just as what that sutta says). As for others, the jhānas should be easily attained too if they are well-established in its requisites, i.e. the first seven factors of the Noble Eight-factored Path. (See references on Attainability on page 15 under *More Comparison*.) Also, the jhānas should of course seem ordinary too for anyone who frequently abides engaging in them. However, for most people, doing that is certainly neither ordinary nor easy—not because it's complicated, but because the defilements hindering it are.

In fact, I think most people would have difficulty engaging in sammā-samādhi while moving around. A yogi once reported to my teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, his experience of becoming mentally still and equanimous during a sitting, and that experience stayed even after he got up to walk. However, after walking about 20 metres down the road, the stillness began to wane. He asked my teacher why, and was asked in return, "Ah, yes, why?" (Sayadaw does that sometimes to some people.) The yogi then paused to recall the experience, and said, "Because the mind got involved with concepts." The teacher then said, "Right."

What happened was he gradually got interested in the human forms the eyes saw, i.e. the people walking around in the evening, and started to have perceptions of them. I believe his experience is similar to Āyasmā MahāMoggallāna's as mentioned in SN40.1-4, where perception-cognitions beset him. The yogi forgot to have proper view (sammā-diṭṭhi) in regards to the forms he saw. Thus, having lost the first requisite for sammā-samādhi, it is to be expected that he lost sammā-samādhi as a result.

Anyway, back to the question, let me repeat that my purpose is to highlight that the jhānas are not states of absorption. I don't mean to say they're easy or ordinary.

# Appendix 19: Relevant Readings

Below are some readings for you to further your knowledge and explorations on the subject. Although I cannot agree with everything in them, I do find them containing enough valuable information to make them worth reading.

Shankman, Richard. *The Experience of Samādhi: An In-depth Exploration of Buddhist Meditation*. Shambhala, 2008.

*From the back cover:* Dharma practice comprises a wide range of wise instructions and skillful means. As a result, meditators may be exposed to a diversity of approaches to the core teachings and the meditative path—and that can be confusing at times. In this clear and accessible exploration, Dharma teacher and longtime meditator Richard Shankman unravels the mix of differing, sometimes conflicting, views and traditional teachings on how samādhi (concentration) is understood and taught.

Brasington, Leigh. *Interpretations of the Jhānas*. <http://www.leighb.com/jhanantp.htm>

*Introductory passage:* Although the jhānas appear very frequently in the discourses of the Buddha (suttas), now two and a half millennia later there is no generally agreed upon interpretation of what exactly these states of concentration are. This paper is a highly subjective attempt by one Jhāna practitioner to simply list and categorize the various interpretations I have heard of here at the beginning of the 21st century.

Shatz, Geoffrey (Ñāṇa). *Jhāna According to the Pāli Nikāyas*. <http://www.dhammadownload.com/viewtopic.php?f=33&t=5761> (Shortcut: [tiny.cc/gshatz](http://tiny.cc/gshatz))

Some years ago, Shatz was probably the most vocal on the Internet among people knowledgeable on the different “jhānas”. Reading his writings on this web forum should be more than enough to be informed about it. If you’d rather not spend money on the above books, this is a cheaper option. If you are in a hurry, here’s his conclusion: <http://www.dhammadownload.com/viewtopic.php?f=33&t=5761&start=20#p90141> (Shortcut: [tiny.cc/gscon](http://tiny.cc/gscon))

For a more complete work by him, see this excellent resource: <http://web.archive.org/web/20161104092651/http://measurelessmind.ca/samadhi.html> (Shortcut: [tiny.cc/msamadhi](http://tiny.cc/msamadhi))

Thānissaro Bhikkhu. *Concentration & Discernment* (in *Wings to Awakening, Part III: The Basic Factors* (2011)). <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/wings/part3.html#part3-f> (Shortcut: [tiny.cc/tbwings](http://tiny.cc/tbwings))

This writing skilfully summarizes the jhāna controversy in the Theravāda tradition in five paragraphs. The relevant part starts from the second paragraph: “The role of jhāna....” Note that by “concentration”, the writer means *samādhi* as used in the Suttas.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. ***Jhāna Not by the Numbers***. <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/jhananumbers.html> (Shortcut: tiny.cc/jhanan)

The writer recalls how Ajaan Fuang taught meditation to his students: motivating them to develop self-reliance and recommending approaches to jhāna that worked better than others, while rarely mentioning that j-word. He also tells us his experiences of wrong samādhi.

Keren Arbel, ***Early Buddhist Meditation: The Four Jhānas as the Actualization of Insight***. Routledge, 2016.

This new (and pricey) book came to my attention only in 2017. Though having scanned only parts of it, I'm convinced of its value on this subject. Highly recommended for scholars of Buddhist studies and Buddhist practitioners inclined to scriptural studies.

*From the back cover:* This book offers a new interpretation of the relationship between 'insight practice' (satipaṭṭhāna) and the attainment of the four jhānas (i.e. right samādhi), a key problem in the study of Buddhist meditation... It proposes that the four jhānas and what we call 'vipassanā' are integral dimensions of a single process that leads to awakening.

Aggacitta Bhikkhu. ***Awaken to Truth in Harmony: A Trilogy***. <https://sasanarakkha.org/2010/05/01/awaken-to-truth-in-harmony-a-trilogy/> (Shortcut: tiny.cc/trilogy)

This is not on samādhi or jhāna per se, but promotes a non-clinging attitude essential to our spiritual journey, and presents criteria to evaluate claims of different meditation traditions. (The book consists of three pieces of writing. The relevant one is the second.)

*These below are less important to read. I list them only for those interested to investigate further into this obfuscation within orthodox Theravāda. Besides, they only make sense to those familiar with Theravādin meditation terminology and concepts.*

Sona Bhikkhu. ***The Case of the Missing Simile: An essay on aspects of the practice of breath meditation***. <http://www.arrowriver.ca/dhamma/nimitta.html>

*Introductory passage:* As the title suggests, there is a significant puzzle to be solved by any meditator or scholar who tries to clearly understand the qualities of experience, which accompany the transition from mere attention to respiration to full immersion in jhānic consciousness. I will attempt to show that there are good grounds for confusion on this matter as one traces the historical progression of the commentarial accounts from the Paṭisambhidāmagga through the Vimuttimagma to the (later) Visuddhimagma.

Bhikkhu Cintita Dinsmore. ***Theravāda Meditation: Vipassanā Jhānas***. <https://bhikkhucintita.wordpress.com/2012/03/15/buddhas-meditation-and-its-variants-18/> (Shortcut: tiny.cc/vjhana)

*Extract:* The Visuddhimagma does not contradict the Buddha's method once the terminological correspondences are understood. However it does fail grievously to

highlight and extol the relevant sense of jhāna or samādhi the way the Buddha does; in fact it marginalizes it.

[Note: His other posts in the Buddhas Meditation and Its Variants series (<https://bhikkhucintita.wordpress.com/home/topics-in-the-dharma/buddhas-meditation-and-its-variants/>, shortcut: [tiny.cc/budmedvar](https://tiny.cc/budmedvar)) may interest those wanting to reconcile the different usage of meditation terms between the Suttas and post-canonical texts.]

“Meditate, bhikkhus. Don’t be heedless. Don’t fall into regret later.”  
The Buddha

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1 This website is no longer updated. Some sutta translations there by Ajahn Ṭhānissaro quoted in this book may have been revised in a new website: [dhammatalks.org/suttas](http://dhammatalks.org/suttas).



# Author's Profile



Āyasmā Kumāra ([bit.ly/kumbhi](https://bit.ly/kumbhi)) was ordained a Buddhist monk in 1999 at the age of 27 by Sayadaw U Revata.

He has been guided by

- Bhaddanta Aggacitta Mahāthera in the Vinaya, the Suttas and Pāli language, while living with him in Sāsanārakkha Buddhist Sanctuary ([www.sasanarakkha.org](http://www.sasanarakkha.org)). The mahāthera also inspired him to be open to Dhamma teachings beyond orthodoxy and tradition, so long as they lead to the ending of suffering.
- Sayadaw U Tejaniya ([www.ashintejaniya.org](http://www.ashintejaniya.org)) in the right view and attitude of spiritual cultivation leading to the ending of suffering.
- Luang Por Ganha to always be interested to improve himself as a practising monk.

With his previous training in education, he has been sharing the Dhamma, especially on meditation (using English, Mandarin and Hokkien) with Buddhists and non-Buddhists too.

Besides aiming to be a better person and inspiring others in the same, he also aims to be free from himself.

## Contacting the Author

- If you find any **mistakes** in this book—factual errors, poor arguments, offensive tones, typos, whatever—please email the author: [jhanabook@gmail.com](mailto:jhanabook@gmail.com).
- If you **disagree** with anything presented here, you're also most welcome to point out with support from the Suttas, so that we may further our understanding.
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- If you have **something to ask** the author, you may contact him too, but do consider if it's necessary and suitable first.

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Kumāra Bhikkhu

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