

THE EXPERIENCE OF

SAMĀDHI

An In-depth Exploration
of Buddhist Meditation

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Controversies Surrounding Samādhi

Having released knots, a sage here in the world does not follow any faction when disputes arise. Calmed among those who are not calm, equanimous, he does not take up opinions, saying "Let others take them up."

The Buddha, Surta Nipāta, 912

IT IS EASY TO SEE WHY THERE IS A RANGE OF VIEWS ABOUT SAMĀDHI and the nature of jhāna, and easy to understand why later commentators were eager to clarify the meaning of the Pāli suttas according to their own understandings. Many of the meditative states and techniques for attaining them are described very concisely in the suttas, using compressed formulas with little or incomplete explanatory detail, and so are only partially adequate as practical meditation guides. Surta passages often rely on standard prescribed phrases, which served to assist in memorization for their oral transmission in the early centuries before they were finally codified in written form. A few of them sketch out a full map for the practice, but none of them fill in all the details. Although perhaps the details would have been enough for a practitioner during the time when the suttas were composed, the original meanings of some words, as intended within a surta's context, may not be clearly understood by modern Pāli scholars (it is also quite possible that greater detail was provided orally, outside the formulaic pattern of the suttas). There is reason to suspect that certain passages were

inserted at later dates. Unless we want to pick and choose the portions of the suttas we are inclined to accept as original, leaving the rest, we must accept the suttas as they exist today. We can find either inconsistency or congruency among the wide range of practices in the canonical and commentarial texts, depending on our viewpoint.

There is disagreement about what *jhāna* is, and the term is used to describe a range of experiences by various teachers. *Jhāna* is always defined by the standard formula, in which the presence or absence of five *jhāna* factors and other supplemental elements characterize the various levels of *jhāna*. Because these factors are present, to varying degrees, throughout a wide range of levels and types of samādhi, various meditation teachers, each presenting a different idea of what *jhāna* is, can legitimately claim to be teaching the "real" *jhāna*. There is no consensus on whether or not *jhāna* is necessary to realize the deeper stages of insight, and scriptural evidence can be found to support either view.

The scriptural sources can be conflicting. The Buddha of the early Pāli suttas taught contextually, varying his advice depending on his audience and the immediate circumstances. The suttas, therefore, are not entirely consistent, presenting an array of styles and approaches to practice that vary to suit the range of human temperaments, and lending themselves to various interpretations regarding the path of meditation.

Now that we have examined the range of ways samādhi and *jhāna* are described in the suttas and the *Visuddhimagga*, some of the controversy and disagreement surrounding samādhi and how it is taught can be discussed. The approach taken here is to remain open and receptive to reconciling the suttas and the *Visuddhimagga*, without having to do so, recognizing that there may be points of tension and incompatibility between the two. If the beginning premise is that the *Visuddhimagga* is the authority for understanding the suttas correctly, then the two sources must agree, and one will be predisposed to interpret the suttas in light of the *Visuddhimagga*. One will be disposed to construe the words and phrases of the suttas in the light of the explanations given by the *Visuddhimagga*. In the preceding chapters each has been viewed on its own terms, and they can now be compared in order to highlight their similarities and differences, convergences and inconsistencies. Various teachers and methods can then be surveyed without passing judgment on their interpretations.

The debates surrounding samādhi can roughly be summarized by three broad questions: (1) What is *jhāna*? (2) Are concentration and insight two distinct paths of meditation practice or one? (3) Is *jhāna* necessary for insight? The answers to all of these questions depend upon whether the *Visuddhimagga* is taken to be the authoritative interpretation of the suttas, and upon which interpretation of the suttas one adopts.

What Is *Jhāna*?

Competing views about the nature of *jhāna* arise, in part, because the descriptions given in the standard sutta definition can reasonably be understood and interpreted in more than one way. The passages do not contain a lot of detail. If we define *jhāna* only in terms of the *jhāna* factors, we may be confused. Though *jhāna* is defined by the standard formula, elsewhere the suttas make it clear that other factors must be present and working together. In order to understand what the suttas are conveying, the definition must be viewed within the context of the suttas' entire range of teachings and descriptions of samādhi and *jhāna*, which depict a dynamic state of sharpened clarity and awareness. Even if the definition is viewed within the wider framework of all the suttas' various depictions of *jhāna*, we are liable to disagree since the experience of *jhāna* is hard to describe.

A basic dispute regarding *jhāna* is whether one is aware of the body while in *jhāna*. There is controversy as to whether the mind is unified and aware of changing experience or one-pointed, whether it is a state of mindfulness and clear connection with body awareness or a purely mental state of fixed concentration in which there is no awareness of the body at all.

No suttas state explicitly that there is sense experience, as we normally understand it, in the *jhānas*. However, the suttas put much emphasis on mindfulness of the body as a key feature of the *jhānas*, emphasizing the integration of breath and whole-body meditation. An intimate connection with body awareness that is maintained and refined throughout all four *jhānas* is an essential component comprising *jhāna* in the suttas. This important aspect of *jhāna* is highlighted in the expanded *jhāna* similes, which repeatedly refer to the body being filled with rapture, pleasure, or awareness.

Heightened awareness of and connection with the body is both a characteristic of jhāna and a practice leading to it, as emphasized in the Kāyagatāsati (Mindfulness of the Body) Sutta, which states unambiguously that through attaining jhāna one develops mindfulness of the body.¹ The sutta begins with the exact text of the six contemplations on mindfulness of the body from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: mindfulness of breathing, the four postures, full awareness of all activities, the constituent parts of the body, the four elements, and the nine contemplations of a decaying corpse. A new passage is added in this sutta at the end of each contemplation: "As he abides thus diligent, ardent, and resolute, his memories and intentions based on the household life are abandoned; with their abandoning his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness, and concentrated. That is how a monk develops mindfulness of the body."²

A seventh section is then added on jhāna, using the standard jhāna definition and similes, and concluding with the same phrase: "As he abides thus diligent... that too is how a monk develops mindfulness of the body." The sutta adds that one of the benefits of cultivating mindfulness of the body is the ability to obtain the four jhānas at will. Thus, the sutta states explicitly that body awareness is present in jhāna, which is the seventh in an ever subtler progression of practices and insights into the body. As the mind becomes tranquil and is brought to singleness, rather than losing awareness of the body in jhāna, mindfulness of the body is enhanced, as underscored by the jhāna similes.

In contrast to the suttas, the Visuddhimagga clearly describes jhāna as a state in which body awareness is lost as the mind absorbs into a nimitta, a mental image. Jhāna in the Visuddhimagga is a purely mental state characterized by fixed concentration in which no changing phenomena, including awareness of the physical body, can be experienced. All awareness of the body, and any changing experience, disappears as the mind absorbs into the nimitta and the jhāna factors, which is why one cannot do insight practice in Visuddhimagga jhāna. The Visuddhimagga reconciles this with the sutta descriptions, in which jhāna is a state of heightened body awareness, by stating that when the suttas refer to the body in conjunction with jhāna, they are referring to a metaphorical "mental" body:

"Now, as to the clause *he feels pleasure with his body* [from the definition of the third jhāna, the only place the body is mentioned in the

standard formula]: here although in one actually possessed of the third jhāna there is no concern about feeling pleasure, nevertheless he would feel the pleasure associated with his mental body, and after emerging from the jhāna he would also feel pleasure since his material body would have been affected by the exceedingly superior matter originated by that pleasure associated with the mental body."²

It is possible to interpret jhāna in the Kāyagatāsati Sutta in this way, as referring to the mental body, since the word *kāya* means "group," "aggregate," "collection," or "body," and so could be used to refer to any group or "body," either physical or mental. However, the Kāyagatāsati Sutta is clearly about mindfulness of the physical body, beginning with the entire first satipaṭṭhāna on mindfulness of the body—mindfulness of breathing, four postures, all activities, and so on. In the seventh section on jhāna, there is no mention that the term *body* is going to have a new meaning in the following discussion. It is hard to conceive that the entire sutta would focus on mindfulness of the physical body and then switch to mindfulness of the "mental body" just in this last section on jhāna. It is unlikely that the Buddha would switch meanings for the word *kāya* without signaling that he is doing so, especially if it is so essential to jhāna that *kāya* not mean "physical body." Adding jhāna in the Kāyagatāsati Sutta emphasizes the connection of jhāna with mindfulness of the physical body.

So, while some sort of connection with or awareness of the body seems to be indicated in the suttas, the nature of this body awareness is less clear. Perhaps the suttas are referring to a subtler type of body awareness, not accessible through the normal sense apparatus.

Revisiting the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta

One could argue that samādhi in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is meant to be a pre-jhāna level. We have seen that the Kāyagatāsati Sutta begins by presenting all six contemplations in the first foundation of mindfulness from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, adding at the end of each that "this is how one practices mindfulness of the body." The meditator is instructed in each of the six contemplations to bring the mind to singleness and concentration, further strengthening the argument that this sutta is talking about jhāna. But jhāna is then added to the Kāyagatāsati Sutta as a seventh contemplation,

implying that jhāna is an attainment separate from the satipaṭṭhāna practices and that the Saṅgāṭhāna Sutta is concerned with a level of concentration below jhāna. Otherwise, why add jhāna as an additional practice? One answer is that jhāna is added here to indicate that jhāna is an outcome of the first six practices, as well as to highlight body awareness as a crucial aspect of jhāna.

The Jhāna Factors Vitakka-Vicāra

As I mentioned in chapter 2, there are two ways of interpreting the jhāna factor citass' ekaggatā in relation to the practice of jhāna. The mind can become *one-pointed*—still and unmoving, intensely sustaining fixed concentration on a single object such that the experiences of change are lost. In another way of understanding ekaggatā, which we have called *unification of mind*, a broader awareness around the object is maintained. The mind itself becomes collected and unmoving, but not the objects of awareness, as mindfulness becomes lucid, effortless, and unbroken. In one case awareness of the flow of experience stops, while in the other case the mind itself stops, even while the ever-changing flow of experience continues.

The differences between these two views of ekaggatā are relevant to understanding the different ways in which vitakka and vicāra are understood to function in the first jhāna. If translated as “one-pointedness,” meaning concentration fixed on a single point, including it as a factor of the first jhāna presents some problems since, it seems, one-pointedness is incompatible with vitakka-vicāra.

If we assume that *ekaggatā* means total, unmoving, one-pointed focus on a single object, exclusive of all else, then *vitakka* and *vicāra* must have a very circumscribed meaning, as nothing more perhaps than an instability in one's single focus. During any moments of true one-pointedness the mind is completely focused and “locked” on a single object, so it seems that no other mental activity could arise, including vitakka-vicāra in any of its usual senses, whether thinking and pondering, or connecting and sustaining the mind on an object. If a defining factor of the first jhāna is discursive thought, some sort of volitional activity, or other mental activity such as applying and sustaining the attention on a meditation subject, then by definition, it cannot be singly fixed in one-pointed concentration.

The mind cannot be simultaneously fixed in one-pointed concentration and engaged in some sort of activity.

Perhaps the list of five jhāna factors was a later addition to the Surta Piṭaka, shifting the definition of *jhāna* away from the original meaning and adding a degree of inconsistency. Since the five-factor list is in the suttas, though, we must either accept this as an inconsistency or find an interpretation of the meanings of *vitakka-vicāra* and *ekaggatā* in which they can coexist.

Proponents of the Visuddhimagga approach to jhāna say that, in fact, vitakka and vicāra have functions other than those evident to us in normal sensory consciousness and that they perform these functions in the jhāna. Thus, vitakka and vicāra can be present in one-pointed concentration while one is engaged in activity, such as connecting and sustaining. In this understanding, a contradiction appears only if we limit vitakka and vicāra to active discursive functions.

The sutta simile for the first jhāna indicates a certain amount of purposeful movement within the context of the jhāna, engaged in spreading the sense of rapture and pleasure throughout the body. This would seem to indicate that vitakka and vicāra are more than a mere unstability or directing and sustaining the attention on an object, and instead that a certain amount of mental activity is a useful and essential part of the first jhāna. In this case, the second interpretation of “one-pointedness” as unification of mind may correspond better to the canonical descriptions of jhāna. If interpreted in this way, we can have a unified mind present along with the mental activity of vitakka-vicāra.

Are Samādhi and Insight Two Distinct Paths of Practice or One?

Interpretations vary regarding whether the cultivation of samādhi is an endeavor separate from the development of insight or whether samādhi and insight are two aspects of the same practice. Some say tranquility and insight are two distinct practices, and that you must first develop jhāna and later switch to separate insight practices. Others disregard jhāna

entirely and begin directly with insight practice, allowing concentration to strengthen naturally to the degree necessary through the application of mindfulness. Still others teach meditation in which concentration and insight are both emphasized and strengthened together. People have found evidence in the suttas to support all of these approaches.

The Visuddhimagga unambiguously separates meditation practice into two distinct types or paths of development, tranquillity and insight. The path of tranquillity focuses exclusively on the attainment of jhāna, defined as one-pointed concentration. The path of insight can be pursued either after attaining jhāna or directly, as the path of "dry" insight, in which case samādhi develops in conjunction with the contemplations leading to insight but does not reach the level of jhāna. The path of insight must be a separate endeavor from that of concentration in Visuddhimagga jhāna because sense contact is lost as the mind absorbs into fixed concentration, and insight cannot develop until emerging from jhāna and reflecting back on what has happened, considering the defects in the state and the desirability of not clinging to it. As the Visuddhimagga understands it, the mind can take only one fixed object, and this precludes the investigation of multiple, changing objects characteristic of vipassana.

Though many of the suttas teach that liberating understanding arises through insight practice, supported by some degree of concentration, the suttas also place much emphasis on samādhi's important role in the development of insight:

Bhikkhus, develop concentration. A bhikkhu who is concentrated understands things as they really are. And what does he understand as it really is? He understands as it really is: "This is suffering." He understands as it really is: "This is the origin of suffering." He understands as it really is: "This is the cessation of suffering." He understands as it really is: "This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering."³

If read without imposing any interpretation on them, the suttas seem to be saying that insight can occur within a jhāna. In the Anupada Sutta, Sāriputta is able to discern and analyze all the various qualities associated with each jhāna:

And the states in the first jhāna: the thought, the examination, the rapture, the pleasure, and the unification of mind; the sense contact, the feeling, the perception, the volition, the mind, the intention, the determination, the energy, the mindfulness, the equanimity, and the attention, each of these states were continuously determined by him; those states were known to him as they arose, as they were present, and as they disappeared. He understood: "Truly, these states, not having existed, come into existence; having existed, they disappear." Regarding those states, he remained unattached, unrepelled, free, detached . . . in the second jhāna . . . in the third jhāna . . . and the states in the fourth jhāna . . . each of these states were continuously determined by him; those states were known to him as they arose, as they were present, and as they disappeared.⁴

In this way, it seems, Sāriputta was able to recognize, investigate, and develop insight into each of the jhānas and the first three āruppas while still in the particular meditative state. Only upon reaching the final āruppa, the state of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, and the state of cessation, could the attendant qualities be known only upon emerging from the state and reflecting back on what had just occurred.

Similarly, in another sutta, "The destruction of the taints occurs in dependence on the first jhāna . . . a monk enters and dwells in the first jhāna . . . whatever states are included there comprised by form, feeling, perception, volitional formations or consciousness (the five aggregates): he views those states as impermanent, as suffering . . . as empty, as non-self."⁵

There are suttas that could be interpreted to suggest that meditation should be practiced sequentially, developing samādhi until jhāna has been achieved and then switching to insight as a separate practice, just as presented in the Visuddhimagga. On the night of his enlightenment the Buddha practiced jhāna meditation before attaining numerous supernormal powers and then directing his mind toward insight into the Four Noble Truths to gain his final great breakthrough into full realization and ultimate liberation:

I entered upon and abided in the first jhāna . . . in the second jhāna . . . in the third jhāna . . . in the fourth jhāna . . . When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection,

malleable, wild, steady, and attained to imperturbability . . . I directed it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints. I directly knew as it actually is: "This is suffering"; . . . "This is the origin of suffering"; . . . "This is the cessation of suffering"; . . . "This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering"; . . . "These are the taints"; . . . "This is the origin of the taints"; . . . "This is the cessation of the taints"; . . . "This is the way leading to the cessation of the taints" . . . thus my mind was liberated.⁶

This is sometimes cited as evidence in the *suttas* that, although *jhāna* is a necessary prerequisite for insight, insight meditation is something distinct from, and practiced after, *jhāna* meditation.

A further example that could be interpreted as a sequential style of development is found in a stock passage recurring numerous times throughout the *suttas*, where a standard gradual path of practice proceeds progressively through the threefold division of the eightfold path: morality, concentration, and wisdom.⁷ Beginning with morality, the seeker enters the homeless life and proceeds to live by the monastic rules of restraint and guarding the sense doors. He then finds a suitable place to begin formal sitting meditation practice, keeping mindfulness established and abandoning the hindrances. The disappearance of the hindrances leads to gladness, which leads to delight, leading in turn to tranquilizing the body, to joy, and finally to concentration. At this point, with the strengthening of concentration, the meditator develops the four *jhānas*. Only after mastering *jhāna* does he turn his attention to insight practices as he "inclines his mind towards knowing and seeing."

This is considered the complete model for graduated spiritual development, and is used to support the notion of two distinct types of meditative development as presented in the *Visuddhimagga*, where you must first develop *jhāna* and then switch to a separate style of insight practice. But this is not a generic instruction that one should first attain *jhāna* and then begin insight practice. Upon realization of the *jhānas* the mind is directed toward knowing and seeing, first that "the body is material, made up from the four great elements, born of mother and father, fed on rice and gruel, impermanent, liable to be injured and abraded, broken and destroyed, and this is my consciousness which is bound to it and dependent on it." He then creates a

fully formed mind-made body and develops the *iddhis*, supernormal powers, and the *abhiññās* (see chapter 2). Finally, the meditator applies his mind to the knowledge of the destruction of the corruptions, culminating with insight into the Four Noble Truths and final enlightenment.

Neither the above passage from the night of the Buddha's enlightenment nor the standard graduated path of spiritual cultivation say that the meditator comes out of *jhāna* into a lower level of *samādhi* to practice insight as a distinct form of meditation, but only that insight practice begins after the attainment of *jhāna* and the *iddhis* (it also does not say that one has to go through the *iddhis* before gaining insight into the Four Noble Truths). We could interpret these formulations either to indicate that insight meditation is begun as a separate practice after leaving *jhāna* or that it is begun based upon and while still in *jhāna*, all depending on how *jhāna* is interpreted and defined. In the *Visuddhimagga* you cannot do insight practice while in *jhāna*, so we could construe this passage as meaning that this progressive path unfolds first through *jhāna*, and then leaves *jhāna* and shifts to insight meditation as a distinct practice. In the *suttas*, since insight can be interpreted to occur at any level of *samādhi*, including, as we have seen above, *jhāna*, insight is a progression and natural outcome of *jhāna*.

In the *Sammādiṭṭhi* (Right View) *Sutta*, *Sāriputta* delivers a discourse on sixteen dharma subjects and ways of understanding them, through which a person is endowed with right view and, thus, arrives at the true Dharma.⁸ When any one of these truths has been realized, the Dharma practitioner attains final knowledge and deliverance by eradicating sensual desire, aversion, and ignorance, the root causes of suffering.

The first way a person possesses right view is through the understanding of what is wholesome and unwholesome conduct, and the root causes of each. The remainder of the *sutta* deals with fifteen additional dharma themes: nutriment, the Four Noble Truths, aging and death, birth, being, clinging, craving, feeling, contact, the six sense bases, mentality and materiality, consciousness, formations, ignorance, and the taints. Starting with aging and death, this list follows the steps of dependent origination in reverse order. The understandings associated with right view are insights into the cause, cessation, and way leading to the cessation of each of these fifteen dharma subjects. In each case, a person with right view understands