

THE EXPERIENCE OF

SAMĀDHI

An In-depth Exploration
of Buddhist Meditation

Richard Shankman



SHAMBHALA
Boston & London
2008

PART TWO

INTERVIEWS WITH
CONTEMPORARY
MEDITATION
TEACHERS

JK: Not absolutely, not at the level of *jhāna* I've practiced. It is not that there are never any thoughts, but for the most part it becomes really silent. It is like going from the windswept, weather-filled atmosphere, getting to the surface of the ocean, and then dropping down below the level of the water, like a scuba diver, into a completely silent and different dimension. While there are some reflections that might go by, it is a completely different state of consciousness.

One of the Spirit Rock/Insight Meditation Society teachers tells this wonderful story about when he was a young student in practice and first being taught *jhānas*. He worked with Joseph and Sharon in U Pandita's system, which included resolution practice. After his concentration had gotten strong, he was given a resolution for a *jhāna* factor like *pīti*. But he didn't know the Pāli and he had the meaning of the word confused in his mind. Then the most magical thing happened. He thought he was making a resolution for one kind of experience, and yet when he said, "*pīti*," his body became filled with joy and rapture. He didn't know this Pāli word given by his teacher, he thought it meant something else, but the real thing arose.

Whatever you call it, there is something in the psyche, in the greater consciousness, that knows these states and this terrain. And when the mind is deeply concentrated and open, and resolutions are made, magic happens. And of course, this can lead to the highest magic of all, as the Buddha said, the magic of the wisdom that liberates the heart.

JACK KORNFELD trained as a Buddhist monk in the monasteries of Thailand, India, and Burma. He has taught meditation internationally since 1974 and is one of the key teachers to introduce Buddhist mindfulness practice to the West. He began his training after graduating from Dartmouth College in Asian Studies in 1967. Then he joined the Peace Corps and was assigned to the Public Health Service in northeast Thailand, which is home to several of the world's oldest Buddhist forest monasteries. He met and studied under the Buddhist master Venerable Ajahn Chah, as well as the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma. After returning to the United States, Jack cofounded the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, with fellow meditation teachers Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein, and is a founding teacher of the Spirit Rock Center in Woodacre, California, where he currently lives and teaches.

Interview with Ajaan Tānissaro

Richard Shankman: Why do you think there's so much disagreement and controversy around *samādhi*?

Ajaan Tānissaro: There are two basic considerations. First, the tradition talks about *samādhi* in so many different ways—and particularly if you take the Canon on one side and the commentaries on the other, they are really talking about two very different things. When you read the descriptions of *nimitta* and of *jhāna* in the Canon, they're very different from the *nimitta* and the *jhāna* you find in the commentaries. The *Visuddhimagga* uses a very different paradigm for concentration from what you find in the Canon. That begs the question, why do the commentaries differ so radically? Nobody knows.

Second, there's a much larger issue, which is—given that we're talking about purely mental states—each person's sense of the map inside the mind is going to be different. When I use a term and you use a term, there's no guarantee that we're actually talking about the same thing.

Once, when I was camping in Utah, we went to Powell Point. We had a guidebook and thought we were following the road to Powell Point, but we made a wrong turn somewhere and came out at Henderson Canyon instead. We walked out to the end of the point there and tried to identify the landmarks the guidebook said you could see from the end of Powell Point: the Henry Mountains and so forth. The one problem was that there was a very large cliff off to the east, which wasn't mentioned in the book.

After about fifteen minutes we realized that the cliff was Powell Point; we had made a wrong turn. So the next day we went up to Powell Point, and the hills we had originally thought were the Henry Mountains were something else entirely. The Henry Mountains were much farther east. The problem was that we had been standing at the wrong place, so our sense of the landscape was all skewed. You've got the same issue with people meditating—or even worse. When you talk about meditative experiences, who knows if we're standing on the same point? There are so many different points you can stand on, and so many states that are radically different but fit the same verbal description. What makes it worse is that even if the Powell Point of the mind were right to your east, you wouldn't be able to see it.

RS: There are teachers who say the only way to correctly understand the suttas is as interpreted by the commentaries.

AT: Where do the commentaries get their seal of approval? They're just one scholastic tradition that you can take into consideration, but there's no guarantee that the scholars got it right. The only real authority you have in cases like this is the honesty of the individual practitioner. You have to be honest with yourself as to what results you're getting out of your practice, where there's still suffering, and what further work still needs to be done.

RS: Do you think you can find substantiation in the suttas for the commentarial interpretations?

AT: The main paradigm for concentration practice in the commentaries comes from *kasīna* practice. The Canon does contain references to *kasīna* practice—experiences of nonduality where everything is a oneness of blue or of awareness or whatever—but in the Canon these practices are marginal. They're in the corners of a few suttas, but they're not the main paradigm.

RS: What would you say right *samādhi* is in the context of the eightfold path?

AT: *Jhāna*. That begs the question, how do you define *jhāna*?

RS: What is it about *jhāna* that makes it right *samādhi*? Why are the *jhānas* called right concentration? What's their use? Why are they there?

AT: Why do you have right mindfulness or right effort? They're parts of the path because they work. In right concentration, the mind needs to be

clearly and strongly focused for two reasons. One is to see what's going on in the mind itself. If the mind is muddied or stirred up, it's like water in a puddle that's been stirred up. You can't see clearly what's there in the water. Second, when the mind is at ease around its object with a sense of equanimity, the mind is more malleable, more receptive to the insights that are needed to abandon its unskillful habits. You're more likely to be aware of—and to admit—what you've been doing that's been causing suffering.

RS: How much emphasis do you place on *samādhi* when you're teaching meditation?

AT: I make it the center of the practice. I don't see any clear distinction between mindfulness practice and concentration practice. When you look at the texts, there's no clear line drawn between them.

There are sutta passages that talk about the concentration that develops by following the four frames of reference (*satiipaṭṭhāna*), starting with the body in and of itself. You focus on that, with directed thought and evaluation, then with directed thought and a modicum of evaluation, and then with neither directed thought nor evaluation. These passages are talking about developing *jhāna* around that frame of reference, and then with the other three frames of reference.

RS: I noticed that you interpret *vitakka-vicāra* as directed thought and evaluation.

AT: It's an essential part of getting the mind to settle down, especially if you're trying to get a sense of ease around the object. You need to get a sense of how well you're relating to the object. Are there ways that the relationship could be more comfortable? Once you get a sense of comfort, how do you spread it around the body? This is how you embody the canonical analogies for *jhāna*, which refer to permeating the body with a sense of comfort and ease. A certain amount of evaluation is needed to do this well: Could you spread it more effectively? Are you pushing it too hard so that it's actually making it an unpleasant experience? You've got to learn how to adjust your relationship with the object, and that's why you start out with directed thought and evaluation as part of the first *jhāna*. Once you've got a good relationship going, then in the second *jhāna* there's the state of unification with the object, a sense of oneness, that you carry all the way through the higher *jhānas* up to the infinitude of consciousness. I usually don't like

to use sexual metaphors here, but you can't really unite into oneness until you're on good terms with each other.

RS: There are examples in the sutras of people attaining at least some level of deep insight or awakening apparently without jhāna or deep meditation practices.

AT: These are the cases where people gain awakening while listening to teachings. But we don't know what their minds were doing as they sat there listening. Usually the teaching was pointing directly to something going on in their minds, so they started observing their minds, entered concentration, and gained release.

RS: There are teachers who tend to shy you away from jhāna as being not necessary at all and even a potential trap.

AT: The Buddha wasn't one of them. There are some people who tend to be psychologically unstable and have to be very careful about how they handle states of concentration, but in general, if you have right view about jhāna, it's not dangerous at all.

Now there are some people who say jhāna isn't necessary, that it can be a hindrance because you can become attached to the experiences and mistake the āruppas for Nibbāna. But there are lots of things you can mistake for Nibbāna. If you're doing what you think is vipassanā and you hit, say, a state of nonperception—you may think that's cessation, the end of suffering. But the danger doesn't lie in the state. It's in how you interpret it. No matter what your technique, if you're the sort of person who tends to overinterpret your attainment, you're going to head in that direction no matter what. Some people tend to be very good at denial, they're good at not seeing their own defilements, and they can use the one-pointed kind of jhāna to exacerbate the problem. But they can also do that with any of the vipassanā techniques.

RS: How do you work with students when strong experiences come up, such as energies flowing in the body, seeing lights, and so on?

AT: It really depends on the individual. Some people can handle these things pretty maturely and others can't. When you see a light, try to make it disappear. If it does disappear, make it reappear. You want to learn to have control over these experiences before you really get involved with

them, so they don't take control over you. That's the important principle. As for excess energy in the body, have it flow out the hands, out the feet, so that it doesn't get too oppressive.

RS: You're describing two approaches. One is dissipating, letting the energy come out so that it brings the intensity down. And, secondly, not necessarily having to adjust the intensity but developing the ability not to get thrown off center by the experiences.

AT: Right. The best way not to get thrown off is to realize that you can exert some control over it, that when it comes on, you can turn it off, because for most people a sense of lack of control is the scariest part of the concentration practice.

RS: Could it be that someone might be in the first jhāna and have liberating insight there, but not identify for themselves that they're in the first jhāna?

AT: Jhāna doesn't come with signposts saying, "Now Entering the First Jhāna. Population: One. Elevation: Eight Miles High." You can enter jhāna without knowing it, especially if you're not expecting your meditation method to lead to jhāna. You can also overinterpret your attainment if that's what you're looking for. And you can overinterpret your insights. This is why I tell my students that if something interesting happens, you try to master it. Then you put a Post-it note on it. If something else happens, you put a Post-it note on that, too. After you get a better sense of the full terrain of your mind, you can rearrange the notes into a coherent map.

RS: You seem to have a very open-minded view of all the different ways and things that can be defined as jhāna, recognizing that there is a range of intensity, but that some forms are useful and some are not. For example, some people would feel that when you block out sensations or experience, it's not actually useful. And some people say if you don't block these out, it's not real jhāna.

AT: There are some states of concentration where you can block out all sensory input. You can sit for a couple hours and it feels like a minute. There's just enough awareness to know when to come out when you want to stop. You weren't unconscious, but the mind otherwise had no awareness of what was going on. There are also intense states of concentration,

lors of light, lots of bliss, lots of joy, but no input from outside. The only way you're going to gain any insight from these states is when you come out of them and reflect on where you were and how you got where you are now.

There are also states of *jhāna* where sensory input is not totally cut off, but it doesn't intrude on the mind. With these states there's more of an ability to observe what's going on in the *jhāna* while you're still in it. It's a little like the first *jhāna* piggybacking on the other *jhānas*, because you can evaluate what's going on and you can see where there's stress, what you're doing that's causing the stress, and you can see how you can drop that particular activity.

When you're fully into even this sort of *jhāna*, particularly from the second one up, you're not going to be doing any thinking or evaluating at all, but you can pull back a little bit without destroying that state, because it's not totally dependent on blocking off all outside input. The *jhāna* actually creates physiological changes in the body—changes in the breath, changes in the blood flow—and those remain even as you pull the mind slightly up from its object. You can then apply the Four Noble Truths to your experience of the *jhāna*—comprehending even the most subtle levels of stress and abandoning their cause. This is how you get from one *jhāna* to the next, but there will also come a point where you finally drop the last remaining bit of intention in the *jhāna*. When it's not replaced by any new intention, that's when the mind opens up into the deathless.

RS: The way you're describing it, insight arises while in *jhāna*, rather than the *Visuddhimagga* style, where you have to come out of the *jhāna* in order to reflect back on its inherently unsatisfying qualities.

AT: The Canon contains lots of passages describing people who can analyze a particular state of *jhāna* while they're in it. A couple of these include *Āṅguttara* 4:12-6 and 9:36, along with *Majjhima* 52 and 121. The most explicit example is *Majjhima* 111, which describes how *Sāriputta* analyzed the many mental factors present in *jhāna* while he was experiencing each level. Only when he reached the *āruppas* of nothingness and neither-perception-nor-nonperception did he have to withdraw from those states before reflecting on them.

You can use any of the *jhānas* as a basis for awakening, from the first one up. In each case you analyze the *jhāna* in terms of the five aggregates, which you come to see as stressful, not-self, impermanent, a dart, a cancer, an emptiness, and on down the line. In this way you develop a sense of dispassion and disenchantment for even the ease of *jhāna*. That's how you let go.

For the purpose of getting into *jhāna*, though, the most interesting passages in the Canon about *jhāna* are the analogies: the bath man, the lotuses in the lake, the man covered with white cloth.

RS: They're very beautiful.

AT: And very precise. Kneading the moisture through the bath powder is like working comfort and rapture through the body in the first *jhāna*. In the second, you don't have to work things through anymore; they spread automatically, like the spring water in the lake. In the third *jhāna*, the movement stops as the rapture gives way simply to a fully saturated sense of stillness and pleasure. And then in the fourth, even the coolness of the water subsides, and you're left with the brightness of your awareness. The Buddha chose his analogies well.

RS: It seems clear that you don't separate the path of practice into two paths of samatha and vipassanā.

AT: The Buddha never told people to "do" vipassanā. He said do *jhāna*, and he described vipassanā and samatha not as two separate techniques but as two qualities of mind that you bring to the practice so you can get into *jhāna*. Once you've mastered *jhāna*, the *jhāna* will make your samatha and vipassanā stronger, more precise. There's no clear line between a mindfulness practice, a concentration practice, and an insight practice. Some people go more naturally toward samatha or vipassanā, but you need both.

RS: In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, and the *Kāyagatāsati Sutta*, one is instructed to breathe in and out, experiencing the whole body. Some interpret that it is talking about experiencing the whole physical body breathing, while others say it means staying with the whole duration of the breath but the focus can be at one point.

AT: It's the whole body.

RS: Does it matter?

AT: One of the drawbacks of concentration that's too one-pointed is that you're blocking out many areas of your experience, which means that a lot of things can hide away in the areas you're blocking out. If, however, you develop more of a 360-degree awareness of the body, you're more likely to be conscious of the more peripheral events in the mind. Also, if the awareness is a whole-body awareness, it's a lot easier to maintain the state of concentration as you open your eyes and move around. Whether the concentration while moving around would be termed *jhāna*, I really don't know, but there's a continuity of mindfulness. If you have only one point that you're totally focused on, then as soon as you move from that one point, your concentration is destroyed. But if you've got the whole body as your framework and you're constantly mindful of this framework, events can come through and go out, leaving the framework undisturbed.

RS: In the opening paragraphs of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, one of the instructions for beginning practice is a phrase typically translated as "having put aside covetousness and grief of the world." How would you interpret that phrase?

AT: The phrase can also mean "putting aside covetousness and grief with reference to the world." In other words, the practice doesn't begin after you've put aside covetousness for the world. The beginning steps include the process of putting it aside.

As I said earlier, I don't see any clear distinction between mindfulness practice and *jhāna* practice. There are several passages in the Canon where the Buddha talks about developing *satipaṭṭhāna* in a way that sounds like working toward and getting into the first *jhāna*. One is the case of the monk who's like an elephant who's been trapped and tied to a post, going through all the torments of being tamed. In the same way the monk has to use the body in and of itself as his frame of reference. That's the post that he's tied to, and his mind is going to rebel. When it rebels, he's told to think of an inspiring theme, something uplifting to the mind. According to the commentary, this might be the recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha. Then when the mind calms down, he can stop using directed thought and evaluation with that uplifting theme and go straight into the second *jhāna*. So it would seem that everything up to that point is referring to issues in mastering the first *jhāna*.

RS: In the fourth foundation of mindfulness, one of the categories is knowing when the hindrances are there. And in the third foundation, we are instructed to know a contracted mind, and so on. So, clearly hindrances can arise and be known. It would seem to suggest that while *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is leading toward *jhāna*, putting aside covetousness for the world is not a prerequisite for beginning the practice.

AT: This is related to how you're defining your frame of reference. The grief can be there, but instead of looking at it in reference to the world, you see it just as an event of grief in and of itself. That's a very different state of mind: looking at these mental states as events arising and passing away, as opposed to viewing them in the context of any outside reference. You're changing your frame of reference in the course of doing this practice.

You could relate to the body in terms of how other people look at your body, whether it's strong enough to do the work you've got to do today, whether it's getting too old or whatever. That's looking at the body in terms of the world, whereas in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice you're looking at the body just in and of itself, with no reference to the world at all. There still may be grief and distress, but you're cutting away any reference they may have to the world so that you can maintain your focus on events in and of themselves.

RS: Do you think *jhāna* is attainable only in the context of long intensive retreats as opposed to shorter retreats? Can it be attained in daily practice?

AT: It really varies for the person.

RS: Do you think everyone has potential to attain *jhāna*?

AT: I don't see why not. But there's the question of whether everyone will be interested, or will put in the necessary effort. We all have the potential for following the path, but even the Buddha himself never answered the question of whether everyone is going to follow it.

RS: Since some people are more naturally adept at getting concentrated, and some less, do you teach the same way about working with the breath in both cases or do you tailor your teaching for those who aren't naturally going to get that concentrated?

AT: Ajaan Maha Boowa makes a useful distinction between people who naturally find it very easy to get the mind into concentration, and others

who have to analyze their way in. With this latter group, if they don't really understand what's going on in their minds, they're not able to let go. And for those sorts of people I would encourage analyzing the breath, looking at how they're conceiving the breath, their perceptions of the breath, and how their perceptions shape the process of breathing. That may sound like a lot of mental activity, but it connects them with the breath because it makes them curious about the breath and the breathing process. They're not going to connect with anything unless they understand it and it captures their imagination. But then there are people who are happy just to sit with the breath and be very quiet. So you have to tailor your instructions to the individual.

For those who find it easy to get very concentrated, the danger is that they haven't had to work for it, and so it's not really a skill. They'll have days when, seemingly for no reason at all, they can't do it. If they haven't figured out the ins and outs of their minds, they can feel totally lost on those days. These are also the people who tend not to analyze things very much, and they have to be pushed—sometimes against their will—to ask the questions that will give them more insight into what they're doing.

RS: In the first jhāna are there body sensations?

AT: Oh yes, yes. In fact, there are body sensations in all four rūpa jhānas. As it says in Majjhima 44, the four frames of reference (*satipaṭṭhānas*) are the nimitta, or theme, of right concentration. One of those frames is the body in and of itself. If there weren't body sensations in jhāna, how could the body be a theme of right concentration?

RS: So the breath has not disappeared in jhāna.

AT: The in-and-out breath disappears at the fourth jhāna.

RS: Sounds?

AT: Yes, there can be sounds in the background. But as I said, this point varies with some people.

RS: There is a story in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta of the Buddha sitting in meditation while five hundred carts go by and he has no experience of it.

AT: He was in a very pure form of an āruppa—a state of formlessness. There's a story in the Vibhaṅga to the fourth Pārajika rule, where Moggallāna states that he can hear sounds while in the imperturbable

states—which isn't defined in that context, but in other contexts means either the āruppas or the āruppas plus the fourth jhāna. Other monks get upset when he says this, feeling that he's making a false claim—which is why the story falls under that rule—and so they take the matter to the Buddha. He states that Moggallāna's attainment is impure. Now, notice he didn't say that Moggallāna hadn't attained those states, simply that his attainment wasn't as pure as it could have been. And as we all know, Moggallāna was an arahant, so whatever his jhāna attainment, it was good enough for full awakening. And if it was good enough for him . . .

RS: Are there thoughts in the first jhāna?

AT: There's the directed thought and evaluation connected with the breath itself—evaluating how comfortable it is, and how to spread whatever sense of comfort is there—but these thoughts aren't very wordy or discursive.

RS: In relation to jhāna, when the suttas use the term *kāyā* ("body"), are they referring to a mental body as opposed to a physical body?

AT: In the Kāyagāṣāṭi Sutta, the Buddha first talks about focusing on the body in and of itself as a frame of reference, and he's obviously talking about the physical body: the breath, the thirty-two body parts, and so forth. When he then moves into instructions on jhāna, he talks about spreading the rapture, the ease through this very body. If he had meant a different body, he would have said so clearly. If you follow the people who insist that there's no experience of the physical body in jhāna, you have to assume that the Buddha was a very sloppy teacher, talking about body again and again in his jhāna instructions when he actually meant "no physical body." Either that, or you have to assume that he was devious. It's like when a crafty lawyer keeps saying, "The body is too big for my client to have killed it," the jury is going to think one thing: the client is innocent. If they later catch on that he's talking about the body of evidence, they're going to think something else: the lawyer can't be trusted. I doubt that the Buddha was sloppy or devious in his meditation instructions.

RS: Some people talk about skipping jhānas. Do people do that? Do you teach that?

AT: It is possible for people to go straight down to the fourth jhāna, but it may be that they're going very quickly through one, two, and three

first—as in Ajaan Chah's image of a person falling out of a tree. You go past each branch, but too quickly for any one branch to stand out in your awareness. Being able to zero in on a particular jhāna like that is a great talent if you can develop it. You can tap into that whenever you need it. But I don't put my students through jhāna hoops.

RS: As people progress through the jhānas, do the grosser levels drop away on their own or does the meditator have to do something specific to move to the next stage?

AT: It can happen either way. By pulling slightly out of where you are, you can survey what's going on. You can't do this analysis at all unless you pull out a little bit, and it's a very basic, almost preverbal level of surveillance. You see where there's disturbance and where there's not, and if you see that the way you're relating to your object is causing the disturbance, you change that. That's how you can go intentionally to another level. In other cases, all you have to do is focus in, and the extraneous factors simply fall away.

RS: In the West now, there are a variety of jhāna systems being taught.

AT: I always found the most useful way of avoiding the jhāna wars is that, when you get into a state of concentration, whatever it is, you master it and then you analyze it. Is there any disturbance here? Then you look to see what the mind is doing around its object. If you see any kind of disturbance, in terms either of the state of concentration itself or of the defilements surrounding that state, then, if you're an honest person, you have to admit to yourself, "Okay, there's still more work to be done." And regardless of whether you're in jhāna or out of jhāna, if you approach every state of concentration this way, in full honesty, then you're going to get through it and eventually arrive at awakening. But honesty is the important part of the equation.

People like to compare their jhānas, which is not healthy for their practice: "My jhāna is better than your jhāna." I'm in the third jhāna now. How about you?" As the Buddha said, this is the sign of a person of no integrity. So it doesn't really matter which jhāna you're in. You have to know what to do with whatever state of concentration you've got. If you're using it for the purpose of understanding stress and abandoning the cause of stress, then you're using it for the right purpose.

THĀNISSARO BHĪKKHU (Ajaan Geoff) was ordained in Thailand in 1976, and studied under Ajaan Fuang Jotiko, a master of the Thai forest tradition, until the latter's death in 1986. In 1991, he returned to the U.S. to help found Metta Forest Monastery in northern San Diego County, where he is currently abbot. He has translated many meditation guides from the teachings of the forest tradition, and is the author of several books, including *The Wings to Awakening*, *The Mind Like Fire Unbound*, *The Paradox of Becoming*, *Meditations*, *Meditations*², and *Meditations*³.

The Venerable Buddhaghosa (who wrote the Visuddhimagga) invented these terms. Parikamma samādhi (preparatory concentration), upacāra samādhi (access concentration), appanā samādhi (absorption concentration)—even these are his own words. You don't find these terms in the suttas, either. So therefore we don't see any evidence for supporting dry insight in the suttas. If you read the suttas, anybody can see this.

I don't want to separate this. Even in a single sitting, at one moment one time you may feel that your concentration is very good, and another moment you experience the concentration is not very good, but your mindfulness is good. So you practice that.

With concentration, you can never practice straight away without any problem. You have sleepiness, restlessness, worry, and all these hindrances. They keep bombarding your mind all the time. In those times you use mindfulness to deal with these hindrances and then to proceed with concentration. And therefore anytime you practice concentration, you have to use mindfulness to deal with problems. You cannot simply focus your mind to get you through problems. You can't do that.

Meditation always needs the support of mindfulness, and therefore, when you practice concentration, you naturally bring the sources, information, and support from mindfulness. When you practice mindfulness, you gain concentration, and because your mindfulness is very strong, you learn how to deal with the hindrances to gain concentration. So if you start with mindfulness, you gain concentration. If you start with concentration, you use mindfulness.

The Buddha used a simile, likening samatha and vipassanā to two swift messengers delivering the message of liberation. They work together to bring the message of liberation.

Right concentration is really mindfulness and concentration together.

RS: How would you define right samādhi?

BG: Right samādhi is invariably defined in the Noble Eightfold Path in terms of the four jhānas.

RS: Would you call the Visuddhimagga path of samatha right samādhi?

BG: The Visuddhimagga does not emphasize the practice of mindfulness in order to practice samatha. The Buddha was always citing mindfulness, emphasizing its relationship with concentration.

Interview with Bhante Gunaratana

Richard Shaukenai: Why do you think there is so much disagreement among various teachers around the topic of samādhi and jhāna?

Bhante Gunaratana: One reason is that some talk from their experience and others talk from their scholarly understanding. The scholars depend mostly on commentaries, such as the Visuddhimagga, though others simply stay with the suttas.

What the suttas say is not the same as what the Visuddhimagga says, and therefore those who have practiced and talk about jhāna or samādhi from their experience might teach differently from what the Visuddhimagga explains. I think this is one reason why they have these sentiments.

RS: You're saying that the suttas and Visuddhimagga are not always saying the same thing?

BG: That's right. They're actually different.

RS: The Visuddhimagga divides meditation into two paths: samatha, calm; and vipassanā, insight. And there's also the distinction made between dry insight, without jhāna, and insight supported by jhāna. It seems that in your teaching you do not make these distinctions.

BG: Dry insight, without the support of mental calm, is a commentarial idea. You can never find any reference to dry insight in the Sutta Piṭaka. Even the word is not there.

The Visuddhimagga uses kasīnas as objects for gaining concentration and deep states of calm. In the suttas the Buddha mentions all forty of the objects of meditation discussed in the Visuddhimagga, including kasīnas, but he has not elaborated on them. He just casually mentions the list, but you don't get any detail at all. But the Visuddhimagga goes into very great detail explaining how to develop kasīnas.

RS: As you know, different teachers define *jhāna* in different ways. How would you distinguish between strong states of concentration, such as access concentration of the Visuddhimagga, and *jhāna*?

BG: Although I don't find the term "access concentration" in the suttas, borrowing the Visuddhimagga word, I must say that access concentration is not strong enough to penetrate nonself. The purpose of gaining concentration is to see impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and nonself at the deepest level. Access concentration cannot do this. Vipassanā practice makes us understand these three characteristics to some extent. Only deep concentration can do this penetration with deep and sharp concentration. That is why the Buddha said that a concentrated mind can see things as they really are. The Buddha has not said anywhere that deep mindfulness can see things as they really are. For this very reason concentration is placed as the last factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.

RS: Is that the reason *jhāna* is right *samādhi*?

BG: That is correct. Consolidating all the wholesome mental factors is called "samādhi." When you consolidate all the wholesome mental factors, that is the stage where you gain *jhāna*. Access concentration is just getting ready for that consolidation, but not being consolidated as yet. And therefore at that level, your attainment of any stage of enlightenment is questionable.

RS: When you teach meditation to your students, how much emphasis do you place on the cultivation of *samādhi* versus emphasizing the mindfulness and just letting the *samādhi* naturally strengthen on its own?

BG: I want to emphasize the necessity of developing both concentration and mindfulness. Because these two must go hand in hand when you practice mind concentration, mindfulness naturally comes in. For example, you have to overcome hindrances when you try to attain *jhāna* concentration.

The techniques and methods the Buddha has recommended to overcome the hindrances are always based in mindfulness and also concentration. The first step for all of this is restraint.

"To restrain" means morality and practicing *mettā*. And then mindfulness and clear comprehension. These are mentioned everywhere the Buddha has talked about practicing right concentration. *Samādhi* is the crown of meditation. Restraint is a supporting factor, a stepping-stone, so to speak, to gaining concentration, especially for right *samādhi*.

If you talk about *samādhi* without it being right *samādhi*, then you can talk about concentration without talking about mindfulness. Right concentration always has mindfulness; otherwise, it is not right concentration.

RS: Teachers do not all agree that *jhāna* is necessary to attain enlightenment, regardless of the style of practice you engage in.

BG: When you attain enlightenment, you have to attain *jhānic* concentration at the attainment of stream entry. You may not have practiced *jhāna*, *per se*, separately. But when you attain stream-entry, that attainment is always attained at the *jhānic* concentration level.

So that is what is called "supramundane *jhāna*." You don't need mundane *jhānas*. You may have practiced mundane *jhānas*, but later on you may not have used them.

RS: Mundane *jhānas* are those experienced before entering one of the stages of enlightenment?

BG: Yes. Mundane *jhāna* is the meditative state of *jhāna* before you have attained one of the four stages of enlightenment. The mundane *jhānas* have their own purpose, such as to be reborn in the brahma realms and so forth. The specific purpose of supramundane *jhāna* is to liberate oneself from fetters.

So when you practice, say, mindfulness, you just practice mindfulness. You'll gain some concentration and you'll use the concentration to practice mindfulness. And if you keep practicing mindfulness, when the mind is ready to destroy the first three fetters, you will see reality clearly. You doubt about the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, rebirth, *kamma* (Pāli; Sanskrit: *karma*), and so forth will completely vanish. At that moment the mind is so clear, you gain concentration and at the same time you enter the stream and the path. And that is attained with supramundane *jhāna* concentration.

RS: Are you saying you always start with mundane jhāna, and it changes into supramundane jhāna with the attainment of stream-entry?

BG: You start with mindfulness. As many meditation teachers say, you don't need jhānas, assuming it is only mundane jhāna. You simply practice mindfulness. When mindfulness is very clear, the mind becomes concentrated. With that concentration, doubt will vanish and supramundane jhāna concentration arises. You attain stream-entry.

When the fetters are destroyed, hindrances are naturally destroyed, because hindrances arise from fetters. So long as fetters are there, hindrances arise. So in order to remove hindrances completely you have to destroy the fetters, because they are the roots.

One enters the stream with supramundane jhāna concentration. And therefore jhāna concentration is absolutely necessary to penetrate the hindrances and destroy the fetters, as long as you are talking about supramundane jhāna. No other concentration can destroy fetters. And therefore to say that jhānas are not necessary is confusing, unless we clarify and define what kind of jhāna you don't need.

RS: There are examples in the suttas of people who attained some degree of deep insight without jhāna, from just hearing a Dharma talk.

BG: There are five ways of attaining that state. In each case your mind has to be calm, relaxed, and peaceful in order for joy to arise. By listening to a Dharma talk you can be really filled with joy and you are so serene that you completely, totally focus your attention on the teaching. And you become filled with joy. Full of joy you become happy, and happiness leads to concentration.

So by listening to a Dharma sermon, by giving a Dharma sermon, by devotion in reciting suttas, by investigating very deeply into the Dhamma, and by focusing the mind on one object in meditation, in these five ways you gain the same result.

Therefore, what you said is true, you can gain deep insight by listening to a Dharma talk. In those days, when people listened to Dhamma talks, their minds were completely focused on the teacher. They didn't have complicated minds like we have today, confused minds. Today so many things are happening to us every moment, from so many directions.

So these days when we're trying to focus our mind on something, especially Dhamma, we cannot do that. Also, in those days people's minds were so pure and clean. And also the Buddha and his enlightened disciples were very supreme individuals, and when they delivered Dhamma talks, they were crystal clear.

RS: In addition to the five jhāna factors, the suttas list about eleven additional factors present in jhāna, including mindfulness, feeling, and sense contact.

BG: Yes. Mindfulness is there. Feeling is there. Contact is there. Then consciousness is there, in addition to the five factors. There are so many factors. These are all consolidated in that particular state.

RS: Is there awareness of the body in jhāna?

BG: Only when you are in jhāna, not out of jhāna, can you see the most subtle reality in the body and mind. And so that is why the Buddha emphasized many times that through the concentrated mind you can see things as they really are, not when the mind is unconcentrated. In that concentrated mind mindfulness is pure. Now you have two powerful factors: powerful concentration and powerful mindfulness. And to support them, you also have equanimity. Equanimity is the balancing factor. Concentration is the sharpening factor. Mindfulness is the seeing factor.

When these three come together, you see reality exactly as it is. The Visuddhimagga does not emphasize this, but you can see it in the suttas.

RS: Do you think everyone can attain jhāna?

BG: Everyone can attain jhāna, but some people are very slow. Some people are fast.

RS: Do you think it's possible to attain jhāna in the daily-life context?

BG: In the daily-life context it cannot happen unless you take some time off from daily activities. That is why the Buddha emphasized the necessity of being secluded from sense pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states of mind, and so forth. You've got to cut off at least temporarily from them. These two situations are ideal, because you have temporarily left them behind.

So laypeople can attain jhāna provided they follow the steps, spending time quietly in a solitary place. It's just like going to the Olympics. Even a

monk can compete in the Olympics if he practices diligently in the proper way. All they have to do is practice and practice and practice and follow the same rules.

RS: One of the factors of *jhāna* is sometimes translated as “one-pointedness,” whereas sometimes a different term, “unification of mind,” is used.

BG: I don’t agree with the mind uniting with the external object to gain concentration and become one. It can never happen. When you use any external object to gain concentration, you use it only temporarily in order to collect the mind. Once you get that, even according to the *Visuddhimagga*, you have a preparatory *nimitta* and access *nimitta* as signs to learn external objects.

Once you learn it, you memorize it. That is *paṭibhāga nimitta*. Once you memorize it, you no longer have the external object. What you have is the memory. It is totally internal. Then you focus the mind on that. Then even that object can disappear and the mind itself will gather around one point. It is like a whirlpool. A whirlpool creates a vortex. Water does not come from outside. Because of the power of the water’s turning, a center is created in one point, called a vortex, but it needs external things to make it go in a circle. The water goes into one place and then it turns around. It keeps turning, turning, turning, turning, turning to create a vortex.

Similarly, you use one object, an external object, in-breath and out-breath or a *kaṣiṇa* or something else, for the scattered mind to focus upon. And then once you focus on it, you’ll remember it and then you’ll forget the external object and it will stay with your memory. Then you focus the mind there. The mind unifies within itself.

Once you gain that concentration, you have nothing more to do with that external object. It is this concentration that you use to see your own experience of impermanence, which is going on at a very subatomic level in your body and mind. And external objects have nothing to do with that.

RS: In the beginning section of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* one is instructed to practice “having put aside covetousness and grief for the world,” which is generally understood as attaining enough concentration to suppress the hindrances, at least temporarily.

BG: You cannot destroy covetousness until you attain the state of non-returner. Only when we attain this state are greed, covetousness, and hatred

completely destroyed. Before that, you cannot destroy them at all. Even in the attainment in the second stage of sainthood (once-returner), you merely weaken them.

Until the roots of the hindrances have been destroyed, the hindrances are merely suppressed. Greed and aversion or resentment will be suppressed. By suppressing these two, you don’t suppress all of the hindrances, because doubt is still there, restlessness and worry are still there, and sleepiness and drowsiness are still there, so only two of the hindrances are suppressed. You do this by discipline and restraining your mind.

RS: Not necessarily through high concentration, you’re saying?

BG: No, no, not through high concentration, restraint. If you can gain high concentration before you begin mindfulness meditation, you have already done a lot of work before that. But in the very beginning you cannot do all this. So you have to at least have discipline and restraint. By restraining your senses you can suppress your greed and aversion without requiring strong concentration.

RS: You’re saying that in the beginning the hindrances must be suppressed through restraint, but later, when you’ve strengthened concentration, they may be suppressed through strong *samādhi*? It just depends on where you are in your practice?

BG: That’s right.

RS: Some teachers teach that the stages in the *Anāpānasati Sutta* correspond to *jhāna*, while others teach that they don’t.

BG: Some people say the *Anāpānasati Sutta* is a very deep *sutta*, even though it appears to be very simple. And they say that it corresponds to *jhāna* when you come to the second tetrad, which begins with two of the *jhāna* factors, *pīti* and *sukha*. Based only on these two factors—*pīti* and *sukha*—they say, when you finish the first tetrad, you will attain *jhāna*. In other words, you’ve got to spend a lot of time practicing the first tetrad to gain *jhāna*. A lot of time.

But attaining *pīti* and *sukha* doesn’t necessarily mean that you are in *jhāna*. You can have ordinary *pīti* and *sukha*, ordinary joy and happiness. And that is how I understand it. The *sutta* is referring to just ordinary joy and happiness.

I have my own interpretation of the explanation of the sutra. In the Ānāpānasati Sutra each tetrad is complete in itself. That is why the Buddha mentions four times that you can practice the seven factors of enlightenment. It is mentioned four times. That means at the end of the first tetrad you have completed mindfulness of the body. When you complete mindfulness of the body, you have already completed mindfulness of feeling, mindfulness of consciousness, and mindfulness of dhammas.

All of them are there. That is why you will be able to practice the seven factors of enlightenment at the end of the first tetrad. And if you don't attain the seven factors of enlightenment at the end of the first tetrad, then you try in the second. Then, at the end of the second practice with the second tetrad you can develop the seven factors of enlightenment, and so on. Four times you can practice the seven factors of enlightenment.

That is, each section is complete in itself. So therefore I don't agree that you've got to finish all sixteen steps in order to practice the seven factors of enlightenment, because the sutra itself says four times, at each tetrad, that you fulfill the seven factors of enlightenment.

But that is not how many people look at the sutra.

RS: The Satipatthāna, Ānāpānasati, and Kāyagāsati suttas all talk about experiencing the "whole body" of breath. Some interpret this to mean one should be mindful of the entire breath from beginning to end, but could still focus on the breath at one particular location, maybe at the nose, for example. Others teach that it means being mindful of the entire body breathing.

BG: The Buddha has said that the breath alone is one of the bodies. What do we have in a body? We have four elements: earth, air, water, fire. This is what we find in the breath. We find four elements in the breath. And therefore the breath alone is fully qualified to be called a body, the breath body.

Therefore, if one practices the first tetrad, that individual has practiced mindfulness of the body just by practicing mindfulness of the breath. Some people ignore this particular sentence where the Buddha says the breath is a body, and they give their own interpretation.

Born in rural Sri Lanka, BHANTE HENEPOLA GUNARATANA has been a monk since the age of twelve, and took full ordination at twenty in 1947. He came to the United States in 1968. Prior to coming to the United

States, "Bhante G," as he is fondly called by his students, spent five years doing missionary work with the Harijanas (Untouchables) of India and ten years in Malaysia. In 1985 Bhante G cofounded the Bhāvanā Society in West Virginia and became its abbot. Bhante G is known for his emphasis both on samādhi and on mettā as part of spiritual training, and teaches in a style that emphasizes loving-kindness as a basis for right concentration.

RS: Of these samatha meditation subjects, is there one you particularly emphasize?

PA: All of these practices can be useful, but I emphasize mindfulness of breathing, *ānāpānasati*. If they practice *ānāpāna*, they should train systematically. The Buddha taught four stages—number one, long breath; number two, short breath; number three, the whole breath-body; and number four, subtle breath or cessation of breath. The awareness should stay at the “touching point” of the breath, which is either the tip of the nose or the upper lip. The awareness should stay with the breath at this one point, and should not follow the breath inside or outside.

When one practices these four stages, an *ānāpāna nimitta* is necessary. A *nimitta* is a sign of concentration. For breath meditation, at any of these four stages, when concentration develops, a *nimitta* naturally appears. For beginners the *nimitta* is usually a gray smoky color appearing in front of them. When the *nimitta* appears, they should continue to concentrate on the natural breath, and slowly, as their concentration develops further, they will see that the breath and the *nimitta* will become one. At that stage, their mind usually or automatically stays focused on the sign, the *nimitta*, and at that point they should concentrate on the *nimitta* only.

As their concentration develops further, the gray smoky *nimitta* will change in color to white. The white color *nimitta* is called “the learning sign,” *uggaha nimitta*. Continue to concentrate on the learning sign, the white form *nimitta*, and with continued practice that white one will change into a transparent *nimitta*, which is called the *paṭibhāga nimitta*, “the counterpart sign.” Now you must concentrate wholly on that transparent *nimitta*. When you concentrate well on that transparent *nimitta*, it will become transparent like a morning star. Slowly your concentration will go deeper and deeper until you reach the stage of full absorption.

Unless you see the counterpart sign, your *samādhi* may be superficial, not real *jhāna*. In any case, this is only the beginning stage of *jhāna*, and *jhāna* for beginners is not very stable. It is important to practice again and again, systematically, and then you will be able to maintain full absorption concentration for one, two, or three hours. Only after fully mastering the first *jhāna* can you go on to *jhāna* two, then *jhāna* three, then *jhāna* four.

Interview with Pa Auk Sayadaw

Richard Shankman: Many Western students are interested in samatha practice and *jhāna*. Why do you think there is so much disagreement about what the *jhānas* are?

Pa Auk: One reason there is disagreement about *jhāna* and *samādhi* is because people do not understand the Pāli texts well. According to our Theravāda tradition, *jhāna* practice is explained clearly in the *Visuddhimagga*, the Path of Purification. People should trace back to the original suttas, the original commentaries and subcommentaries, and then to the *Visuddhimagga*, and only then will they understand the meanings.

Although *jhāna* practice is described clearly in the *Visuddhimagga*, it is very brief and concise on some points. Because of this there are certain points they may not understand well, especially the signs of concentration, *nimitta*, and how to do *jhāna* practice. This is why they should study the suttas and the commentaries, too.

There are forty samatha meditation subjects. Of these forty, nearly thirty can produce *jhāna*. These practices are the ten *kasinas*, ten foulness meditations, thirty-two parts of the body meditation, the four divine abidings, the four types of immaterial *jhānas*, and *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing. Any of these meditation subjects can lead to *jhāna*. But when they are practicing these, it is important that they practice systematically according to the method in the *Visuddhimagga*.

So if they practice systematically in this way, they may attain true jhāna, fine-material (rūpa) jhāna.

If the meditator wants to practice the immaterial jhānas, they should begin with the ten kasīnas rather than ānāpāna. They must practice the ten kasīnas systematically. In each kasīna they should train to attain all four fine-material jhānas, and only then can they go to the four immaterial jhānas, stage by stage.

RS: Is there always a nimitta in order to obtain jhāna?

PA: Yes. In some jhānas, especially ānāpāna, a nimitta is necessary to attain access concentration as well as full absorption jhāna concentration. Access concentration of ānāpāna and full ānāpāna absorption jhāna both take the same nimitta counterpart sign, ānāpāna paṭibhāga nimitta. The object is the same. The difference between them is that in the access-concentration stage the jhāna factors are not yet so strong. But when they reach full absorption stage, appanā jhāna, their jhāna factors are very strong and powerful. Because of this they can maintain their full absorption jhāna for a long time—one, two, or three hours—without interruption.

The Visuddhimagga mentions nimitta for some samatha meditation subjects, such as loving-kindness, mettā jhāna, that is not a real jhāna, but an “as if” jhāna. What is a real nimitta and an “as if” nimitta?

If you want to practice loving-kindness meditation to attain mettā jhāna, you should first focus on one person, who must be the same sex. You should choose one of these formulas, whichever you prefer: “May this good person be free from danger.” “May this good person be free from mental suffering.” “May this good person be free from physical suffering.” “May this good person be well and happy.”

For example, if you choose “May this good person be free from mental suffering,” you should try to focus on that person’s image, especially on their smiling face. Then you should send mettā: “May this good person be free from mental suffering.” The person’s image must always be in your mind. When you are sending mettā subsequently to each person, a dear one, neutral one, or hated one, you should try to attain first, second, and third jhāna. You must try again and again in this way until there is no difference between any of these types of people and yourself, until all four kinds of persons are very easy to send mettā to, until they are equal.

At that time, when there is no difference between them, we can say the mediator has broken down the barrier or boundary. If it is very easy to send mettā to the dear one to attain jhāna, and the neutral one is also easy, but the hostile one is not easy, if there is any difference, then you have not yet broken down the barrier. When everyone is the same, then you have broken down the barrier.

This breaking down the barrier is the sign of concentration, also called a “nimitta.” It is not a real nimitta, but rather an “as if” nimitta only, because there is no real image. If you send mettā at that time to all beings, you can easily attain mettā jhāna, which is a very strong and powerful jhāna. So this breaking down the barrier is called the nimitta. But at that time there is no light counterpart sign, no ānāpāna counterpart sign.

RS: I have heard that even for your monks and nuns who practiced with you for a long time, not everyone can attain jhāna, that some people do and some do not. Is that true?

PA: Yes. If they practice diligently, if they can control their mind, they can attain jhāna. Some people cannot control their mind because their mind is always wandering. That is one reason it is not easy to attain jhāna. Another reason is their sila is not so strong, their effort is not so strong, and their wisdom faculty is not so sharp. And because of this the four accomplishments—desire, consciousness or mind, vigor, and discrimination or the wisdom faculty—are not strong enough to enable them to maintain their concentration. Another reason is their pāramīs. If they do not accumulate pāramīs for the attainment of jhāna, it also may be difficult.

RS: For people who do not attain jhāna, should they continue to practice samatha or should they switch to vipassanā?

PA: We teach four-elements meditation, both for those who attain jhāna and for those who do not. For those practicing samatha, only after they have attained jhāna, especially up through the fourth jhāna, or even all eight attainments, do they switch to vipassanā, and their practice is very clear. They practice four-elements meditation systematically, and one day they will see small particles, called “kalāpas.” When they see kalāpas, if they can see four elements for each kalāpa, or in some kalāpas, then this is the last stage of samatha, as well as the beginning stage of vipassanā. In this beginning stage of vipassanā they can understand ultimate materiality in the small particles.

Their discernment of ultimate materiality, of the four elements in each kalāpa, is very clear. Their understanding is much clearer than for those who did not attain jhāna. This is because their jhāna concentration can produce a strong, powerful light, which is called the "light of wisdom." With the assistance of the light of wisdom, if they discern ultimate materiality, as well as ultimate mentality, their understanding is very clear. This is why we teach samatha first, before undertaking vipassanā meditation.

For those who do not attain jhāna, we also teach four-elements meditation. And if they practice diligently, they, too, can see small particles, and when they see small particles, they can discern in the small particles the four elements. Then, if they continue, they can understand their essence, color, odor, flavor, nutritive essence, and so on. It will take longer for them to discern ultimate materiality, because their wisdom faculty is not sharp enough to see clearly. So they must practice again and again, and they will be able to see ultimate materiality and mentality. But their wisdom and their understanding of ultimate materiality are not as clear as for those who have attained jhāna.

RS: When the meditator has attained jhāna and then switches away from samatha to vipassanā, is he or she then in access concentration?

PA: No, not access concentration. I mentioned earlier that if you practice ānāpāna up to the fourth jhāna, that fourth jhāna produces a strong, powerful light called "the light of wisdom." The light of wisdom is still there when you emerge from the fourth jhāna. Upon emerging from the fourth jhāna, you shift to four elements systematically, and at that time there is no jhāna and no access concentration. But there still is light. If you quickly switch your attention to the four elements as the meditation object, you will clearly see the four elements, and very certainly will see kalāpas, because of the subtlety of the fourth jhāna. The fourth jhāna is the foundation for vipassanā.

When you practice four elements systematically and when you see small particles, and if you can see in the kalāpas four elements again, this is also called access concentration. But it is not real access concentration. Why? The real access concentration is close to jhāna. In four-elements meditation, however hard you try, you cannot attain jhāna. So this is not a real access concentration. In ānāpāna, if you practice systematically, one

day the nimitta appears, and if you concentrate well on that nimitta, you can enter access concentration. If you continue to train hard and if you continue your concentration, then you may attain full absorption. This access concentration is real access concentration. But that access concentration and four-elements access concentration is not the same.

Because of this similarity, when your samādhī is strong enough to discern four elements in each kalāpa, the commentary says that is access concentration. Such a level of access concentration occurs throughout the vipassanā. At that time their samādhī is vipassanā samādhī, vipassanā concentration, which is nearly the same as access concentration.

RS: Can a person attain stream-entry without jhāna?

PA: Yes, it is possible. They must first practice four-elements meditation. In the Visuddhimagga, for those who are bare-insight meditators, suddha-vipassanā-yānikas, they must begin with four-elements meditation. These days many meditators do not follow this rule, and for this reason they do not see small particles, or kalāpas. Because they do not start four-elements meditation systematically when they are practicing vipassanā directly, they cannot analyze, when they see kalāpas, four elements in each kalāpa.

RS: Is jhāna only attainable in long-term intensive retreat practice, or if someone is very diligent in daily practice, can they also attain jhāna?

PA: It is definitely possible to attain jhāna in daily practice. But it depends on the person's environment and their practice. There are some meditators who meditate two or three sittings within one day, with each sitting being one or two hours. If they practice diligently in this way, they can develop the nimitta. At that point, when they sit, very soon they can see the nimitta, the ānāpāna nimitta, and for those people, within one or two weeks they can attain jhāna if they practice diligently. It is possible if they can maintain their concentration on that nimitta sign of concentration. But if they cannot maintain it, it will take a long time.

RS: Do you want your students to master the immaterial attainments, or are the first four jhānas enough?

PA: It depends on their own desire. It is not necessary, but if they want to practice four immaterial jhānas, it is okay. If they practice using the ten kasinas and realize the eight attainments, their concentration is very

powerful. Some meditators like immaterial jhānas. They are very comfortable for them.

Sometimes they may become tired when practicing vipassanā meditation, and because of tiredness their mental powers are weak. At that time if they rest in one or more of the immaterial jhānas, when they emerge from that jhāna, their mind will be fresh. So this is a dwelling place for meditators.

Practicing vipassanā is like attacking on the battlefield. The armies do not attack each other in the village or in the town. If they want to attack, they must go outside the town to a battlefield, and behind that battlefield there is a fort. When they get tired from shooting arrows and attacking each other with swords, they enter their fort, where they can eat and rest. The fort is very safe. Afterward, when they are fresh, they come back to the battlefield.

In the same way, when you are practicing vipassanā, you can get very tired. Vipassanā is like attacking on the battlefield. When tired, you go back to rest in samatha, the eight attainments. After resting in the eight attainments your mind is very fresh and you can go back to the vipassanā battlefield.

In vipassanā, when you penetrate again and again into ultimate materiality, your mental body begins to get tired and you cannot easily see clearly. At that time you should go back to rest in one of the jhāna attainments. One of the four immaterial jhānas is especially good to dwell in; the immaterial jhāna of the base of neither-perception-nor-nonperception is the best. If you rest in that jhāna for one or two hours, when you emerge from that jhāna, your mind will be fresh. At that time you should go back to practicing vipassanā again.

But if students do not want to develop the immaterial jhānas, if they want to go directly to vipassanā, when they reach the fourth jhāna stage, we usually teach them vipassanā, having them begin practicing four-elements meditation systematically.

THE VENERABLE ACINNA, commonly referred to as the VENERABLE PA-AUK TAWYA SAYADAW (and, in less formal circumstances, as "Pa-Auk Sayadaw"), is the current abbot and principal teacher at Pa-Auk Forest Monastery in Burma. In 1944, at age ten, he ordained as a novice

monk, and during the following decade he pursued the life of a typical scholar-novice, studying the Pāli Texts. In 1954, at age twenty, the Sayadaw received the higher ordination as a bhikkhu, continuing his studies of the Pāli Texts. In 1964, he turned his attention to intensifying his meditation practice and for the next sixteen years he made forest dwelling his primary practice, living a very simple life devoting his time to meditation and study of the Pāli Texts. In 1981, he was asked to take over abbot responsibilities of Pa-Auk Forest Monastery. Although he oversees the running of the monastery, the Sayadaw spends most of his time meditating in seclusion. Since 1983, both monastics and laypeople have been traveling to Burma to study meditation with the Sayadaw.