

THE PATH OF  
SERENITY AND INSIGHT

*An Explanation of the Buddhist Jhānas*

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**For FAVOUR OF REVIEW**

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when these are arisen that jhāna is said to be arisen, which is why they are called the five factors of possession.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Jhāna Thought-Process*

The commentaries and later analytical treatises of the Theravāda tradition connect the process of *jhāna* attainment with a special account of the cognitive process (*cittavithi*) based upon the Abhidhamma. The Abhidhamma analyzes experience into a succession of discrete, causally connected occasions of consciousness called *cittas* or *citt'upphādas*. Each *citta* endures for only a small fraction of a second, undergoing three stages: arising (*upphāda*), duration (*thiti*), and dissolution (*bhanga*). *Cittas* succeed one another with inconceivable rapidity, so much so that it is impossible for an average person to note the distinct mental moments. Experience as we know it is a coarse fusion of a sequence of *cittas* indiscernible in their uniqueness and discreteness as they rise and fall away.

According to the Abhidhamma philosophy, *cittas* do not occur in isolation but as parts of a series. These series are of two types. One is the passive stream of consciousness which functions as the underlying "limb of becoming," the life-continuum (*bhavaṅga*). The second type is the process of active consciousness, by which clear perceptions are made, thoughts and volitions generated, and actions performed. This active series is called the cognitive process (*cittavithi*).

The life-continuum is made up of a succession of *cittas* proceeding through beginningless time. With each new life the continuum springs up in the mother's womb at the moment of conception (in the case of human or animal life), rooted in ignorance, supported by the desire to exist and given its specific form and character by the generative *kamma* of the past. Through the course of a lifetime it continues to function whenever the mind is free from active thought processes. It is most conspicuous in deep sleep, but it also occurs very briefly innumerable times during waking life between occasions of active perception and cognition.

When a sensory datum or idea impinges on the mind, the

1. PP., p. 152. Visn., p. 118.

passive flow of the life-continuum is interrupted. The mind then enters a phase of active consciousness, after which it returns to its passive state. The process of *jhāna* attainment occurs as such an active process of cognition. When the mind has been freed from the hindrances and fully prepared for the attainment of absorption, the mind which has subsided into the life-continuum is stimulated to break out from it by the force of previous intention. This break consists of three moments. The first is simply the past moment of the life-continuum (*cittibhavaṅga*); the second is the vibration of the continuum (*bhavaṅga calana*), caused by the decisive intention; the third is the cutting off or arrest of the passive stream of consciousness (*bhavaṅga upaccheda*), as active consciousness is about to supervene. Immediately after this arrest moment the mind, well-impressed with the counterpart sign of the meditation subject, rises up in active form, adverting to the object through the "mind-door" (*manodvāra*) as a datum of internal perception.

Following the act of adverting, there takes place the most important part of the cognitive process—a succession of highly active occasions of consciousness called *javanas*. We will translate *javana* as "impulsion." As the hindrances have been suppressed the four or five impulsions that arise in the *jhānic* process following the advertance are associated with unusually intense applied thought, sustained thought, rapture, happiness, and one-pointedness. The first impulsion in this series is called "the preliminary work" (*parikkama*), since it prepares the mind for the first *jhāna*. In the case of a quick-witted mediator, the moment of preliminary work is skipped over and the series begins with the next moment. The second impulsion is called "access" (*upacāra*) as it brings the mind to the neighborhood of *jhāna*. The third, called "conformity" (*anuloma*), qualifies the mind further for the *jhāna*. The fourth, called "change-of-lineage" (*gotrabhāvi*), is the act by which the stream of consciousness crosses over from the sense-sphere plane (*kāmaṅgavāra*) to the *jhānic* plane. These four moments gain the general designation "access concentration" (*upacārasamādhi*), though technically speaking only one is singled out as the moment of access. Immediately after this sequence the *jhāna* consciousness arises. On the occasion of initial attainment it lasts for only one great thought-moment. Then the *jhāna* thought passes away and the mind returns to the passive state of

the life-continuum, since the first *jhāna* consciousness is close to the passive continuum.

This process can be made more vivid by the following diagram:

A	B
<hr style="width: 50%; margin: 0 auto;"/>	<hr style="width: 50%; margin: 0 auto;"/>
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17
... ..	... ..
bh l ch m p u a g jh bh bh bh bh bh bh bh bh	... ..

Here line A represents the four great thought moments preceding the *jhāna* process. This comprises the past life-continuum (bh), its vibration (l), its cutting off (ch), and the mind's advertance to the counterpart sign through the mind-door (m). Line B represents the lapsing of the mind back into the passive life-continuum after the *jhāna* attainment is over. P represents the moment of preliminary work (*parikamma*), u the moment of access (*upacāra*), a the moment of conformity (*anuloma*), and g the moment of change-of-lineage. The following jh represents the first *jhāna*. After this the mind relapses into the life-continuum (*bhavaṅga*) which is represented by bh repeated seven times. The groups of three dots in each *citta* represent the arising (*up-  
pāda*), duration (*thiti*), and dissolution (*bhaṅga*) of each thought moment.<sup>1</sup>

It is evident from this diagram that on the occasion of initial attainment *jhāna* lasts only for a single thought moment. Unless the meditator masters this attainment by the five ways of mastery to be explained he cannot sustain it. But when he has mastered the *jhāna*, a succession of *jhāna* thought-moments will continue on for as long as he determined before entering the attainment. Therefore if we were to represent this situation diagrammatically we would find a repetition of jh rather than bh after the first jh in our diagram.

#### *Perfecting the First Jhāna*

The elevated forms of concentration, as we mentioned, are divided into two basic stages, access concentration (*upacāra-*

1. For a more detailed account of the *cittavithi* see Nārada, *Manual*, pp. 214-19; *Vism.*, pp. 111-12; *Compendium*, pp. 54-55.

*samādhi*) and absorption concentration (*appanāsamādhi*). Access concentration is obtained when the hindrances have been suppressed and the mind has become focussed on the counterpart sign. Absorption concentration develops later when the *jhāna* factors become manifest in full force. The difference between access and absorption lies in the relative strength of the *jhāna* factors. In access the factors are still weak, so that concentration is intermittent. Just as a young child, lifted to its feet, stands for a while and then falls down, the mind in access remains focussed on the sign for a short while and then falls away. In absorption the *jhāna* factors are strong and fully developed; thus the mind can remain continuously in concentration just as a healthy man can remain standing on his feet for a whole day and night.

Absorption concentration is the concentration of the four *jhānas* and access the concentration immediately preceding entrance upon the *jhānas*. Once the meditator gains access and the counterpart sign appears to him, he still has to strive to attain absorption. To develop his practice the *Vissuddhimagga* recommends several essential measures based on the testimony of the ancients. He has to live in a suitable dwelling place, rely upon a suitable alms resort, avoid profitless talk, associate only with spiritually-minded companions, make use only of suitable food, live in a congenial climate, and maintain his practice in a suitable posture.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond these measures the earnest yogi should rely on the ten kinds of skill in absorption.<sup>2</sup> The first is "making the basis clean," which means that he should clean his lodging and his physical body so that they conduce to clear meditation. The second is "balancing the spiritual faculties" (*indriyassanattapātipādana*). Of the five spiritual faculties, faith must be balanced with wisdom and energy with concentration; the fifth faculty, mindfulness, is always useful and has no opposite counterpart. Third, the yogin must be skilful in producing and developing the sign of concentration. Measures four through seven involve exerting the mind (*paggaha*) on an occasion when it is slack and needs to be exerted, restraining it (*niggaha*) on an occasion when it is agitated and needs to be restrained, encouraging it (*sampahāna*)

1. *PP.*, pp. 132-34. *Vism.*, pp. 103-104.

2. *PP.*, pp. 134-40. *Vism.*, pp. 104-110.

## [7] Purification by Knowledge and Vision

*Change-of-lineage*

The last purification, purification by knowledge and vision, consists of the knowledge of the four supramundane paths—the path of stream-entry, the path of the once-returner, the path of the non-returner, and the path of arahatship. However, immediately after conformity knowledge and before the moment of the first path, there occurs one thought-moment called change-of-lineage knowledge (*gotrabhāṅgā*). This knowledge has the function of averting to the path. Because it occupies an intermediate position it belongs neither to purification by knowledge and vision of the way nor to purification by knowledge and vision, but is regarded as unassignable. It receives the name “change-of-lineage” because by reaching this stage of knowledge the mediator passes out of the “lineage of the worldly” (*puthujhānagotta*) and enters the “lineage of the noble ones” (*ariyagotta*).<sup>1</sup> In bringing about such a radical transformation change-of-lineage is clearly a most important and crucial moment of spiritual development.

The three kinds of conformity knowledge—preliminary work, access, and conformity proper—dispel the “mirk of defilements” that conceals the Four Noble Truths. Each of the three clears away a degree of delusion, permitting the truths to become more and more manifest. However, though conformity-knowledge dispels the delusion that conceals the truths, it cannot penetrate them. For the truths to be penetrated *nibbāna* must be realized as object. Change-of-lineage knowledge, which arises right after conformity, is the first state of consciousness to make *nibbāna* its object. It is the initial advertance to *nibbāna*, and the proximate, immediate and decisive-support condition for the arising of the first path.

*The first path and fruit*

Change-of-lineage knowledge perceives *nibbāna* but cannot destroy the defilements. The eradication of defilements is the work of the four supramundane paths (*lokuttaramagga*). Each path attainment is a momentary experience apprehending *ni-*

1. PP., p. 785. *Vism.*, p. 577.

*bāna*, understanding the Four Noble Truths, and cutting off certain defilements. The first path, as Buddhaghosa explains, arises in immediate succession to change-of-lineage:

...After, as it were, giving a sign to the path to come into being it [change-of-lineage] ceases. And without pausing after the sign given by that change-of-lineage knowledge the path follows upon it in uninterrupted continuity, and as it comes into being it pierces and explodes the mass of greed, the mass of hatred, and the mass of delusion, never pierced and exploded before.<sup>1</sup>

The first path is called the path of stream entry (*sotāpattimagga*) since the disciple who has reached this path has entered the stream of the Dhamma (*dharmasota*), the Noble Eightfold Path, which will take him to *nibbāna* as surely as the waters in a stream will be carried to the ocean.<sup>2</sup> On entering this path he has passed beyond the level of a worldly and become a noble one, an *ariyan*, who has seen and understood the Dhamma for himself.

When the path-knowledge arises it breaks through the mass of greed, hatred, and delusion, the root-defilements which drive living beings from birth to birth in beginningless *saṃsāra*. Each supramundane path has the special function of eradicating defilements. The defilements cut off by the successive paths are classified into a set of ten “feters” (*samyojana*), so called because they keep beings chained to the round of existence. The ten fetters, which all arise out of the three unwholesome roots, are: [1] wrong views of personality, [2] doubt, [3] clinging to rites and rituals, [4] sensual desire, [5] ill will, [6] lust for fine material existence, [7] lust for immaterial existence, [8] conceit, [9] restlessness, and [10] ignorance.<sup>3</sup> The ten are divided into two groups: the first five are called the fetters pertaining to the lower worlds (*orambhāgiyāni samyojanāni*) because they keep beings tied to the sensuous realms; the last five are called the fetters pertaining to the higher worlds (*uddhambhāgiyāni samyojanāni*) because they remain operative even in the fine material and immaterial

1. PP., pp. 787-88. *Vism.*, p. 579.

2. SN. 5:347.

3. In Pali: [1] *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, [2] *vicikicchā*, [3] *siḷabbataparāmāsa*, [4] *kāmacchanda*, [5] *vyāpāda*, [6] *rūparāgā*, [7] *arūparāgā*, [8] *māna*, [9] *uddhacca*, and [10] *avijjā*.



through the mind-door (*d*). Line *B* represents the lapsing of the mind back into the passive life-continuum after the fruition phase is over. *P* represents the moment of preliminary work (*parikkama*), *u* the moment of access (*upacāra*), *a* the moment of conformity (*anuloma*), and *g* the moment of change-of-lineage (*gotrabhū*) where the ordinary stream of consciousness belonging to the sensual plane changes over to the lineage of the noble path. The following *m* represents the noble path consciousness (*maggacitta*), which is necessarily limited to a single thought-moment. After this there are two *ph*'s representing the fruit of stream-entry, then the mind relapses into the life-continuum, represented by *bh* repeated six times. The groups of three dots in each *citta* represent the birth (*upphāda*), duration (*thiti*), and dissolution (*bhanga*) of each thought moment.<sup>1</sup>

After the attainment of fruition the stream-enterer reviews the path, fruition, and *nibbāna*. He will generally also review the defilements he has destroyed by the path and the defilements remaining to be destroyed by the higher paths; this, however, is not invariably fixed and is sometimes omitted by some meditators.<sup>2</sup> The ariyan disciples who have passed through the next two fruitions will likewise review their attainments in the same way. Thus for each there will be at a minimum three and at a maximum five items to be reviewed. For the arahat, however, there will be a maximum of four since he has no more defilements to be eliminated. In this way there are a maximum of nine kinds of reviewing (*paccavekāhana*) following he supramundane attainments.

The disciple at the moment of the path of stream-entry is called "one standing on the path of stream-entry" or the first noble person; from the moment of fruition up to the attainment of the next path he is called a stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*), reckoned as the second noble person. Though conventionally the person standing on the path and the one abiding in the fruit can be described as one and the same individual at two different moments, the philosophical perspective requires another kind of descriptive device. From the standpoint of ultimate truth, accor-

ding to Buddhism, an individual endures as such for only one thought-moment. Therefore, in classifying the types of noble persons, the Buddha drew upon the distinction between the thought-moments of path and fruition as the basis for a distinction between two types of noble persons. This bifurcation applies to each of the four stages of deliverance: for each, the individual at the path-moment is reckoned as one type of noble person, the same individual from the moment of fruition on as another type of noble person.

The texts extoll the stream-enterer as acquiring incalculable benefits as a result of his attainment. He has closed off the doors to rebirth in the woeful states of existence and can declare of himself:

Destroyed for me is rebirth in the hells, in the animal kingdom, in the spirit realm, in the planes of misery, the bad destinations, the downfall. I am a stream-enterer, no longer subject to decline, assured of and destined for full enlightenment.<sup>1</sup>

He can be certain that he is released from five kinds of fear and hostility: the fear and hostility that come from taking life, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, from false speech, and from taking intoxicants. He is endowed with the four factors of stream-entry (*sotāpattiyaṅgāni*): unwavering confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and unblemished moral discipline. He has penetrated and seen the truth with correct understanding.<sup>2</sup> By so penetrating the truth he has limited his future births to a maximum of seven in the happy realms of the human and heaven worlds, drying up the great ocean of suffering that laid beyond this. Thus the Buddha says that for the stream-enterer who has seen the Dhamma the amount of suffering that remains is like a pinch of dust on the finger nail, while the suffering that has been exhausted is like the dust on the mighty earth.<sup>3</sup>

1. SN. 2:68.

2. *Ibid.* 69-70

3. Stream-enterers are divided into three kinds: assuming that they will not go further in that same lifetime, one with sluggish faculties will be reborn seven times in the happy destinations; one with medium faculties will be reborn an intermediary number of times; and one with keen faculties will be reborn once more in the human world and there make an end of suffering. (See PP, pp. 833-34. *Vism.*, pp. 611-12.)

1. Adopted from Nārada, *Manual*, pp. 214-19. *Vism.*, pp. 111-12. *Commentum*, pp. 54-55.

2. Nārada, *Manual*, p. 410. *Vism.*, p. 581.