

A summary article of the book

Early Buddhist Meditation: The Four Jhanas as the Actualization of Insight

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"Bhikkhus, just as the river Ganges slants, slopes, and inclines towards the east, similarly, a bhikkhu, who develops and cultivates the four *jhanas* slants, slopes, and inclines towards Nibbana."
[SN V.308]

"There is no *jhana* for the one without liberating wisdom,
no liberating wisdom for the one without *jhana*;
the one who has *jhana* and liberating wisdom
he indeed is in the presence of *nibbana*."
[Dhammapada v.372]

These citations from the early Buddhist texts in Pali (i.e., the *suttas*), and many others in these inspiring texts, captured my curiosity from the first time I heard about the *jhanas* from my Dhamma teachers and from books I have read on Buddhist meditation. The references to these four specific psych-somatic states, which the Buddha called "the four *jhanas*", and the frequentness in which they appear in the path taught by the Buddha, awakened a deep interest in me, first as a practitioner of *vipassana* meditation, and later on, as a scholar.

I assume that anyone who heard about the *jhanas* in most traditional Theravada practice environments heard that these states are not necessary for insight and awakening. However, anyone who read the *suttas*, quickly realize, that these four states, appear repeatedly in the Buddha's descriptions of the path to liberation. Reading the *suttas* over many years I have found many passages **in which the Buddha refers to the four *jhanas* as intrinsic and essential to the development of liberating wisdom and awakening.** The four *jhanas* were certainly fundamental in the Buddha's own path to awakening:

The one with great wisdom,
have found an opening in the obstruction;
The Buddha, the withdrawn, the bull among men, the sage,
awakened to the *jhanas* (*jhanambujha buddho*).[SN I.48]

The obvious inconsistency between the representation of the *jhanas* in the *suttas* and their representation in mainstream Theravada teachings seems to express discontinuity between the two traditions. Realizing this discontinuity challenged deeply my initial acceptance of the

traditional understanding. It carried me into a long contemplative and scholarly journey into the subtlety of Buddhist meditation which led me to question the common Theravada understanding.

I have come to understand the attainment of the four *jhanas* as the outcome of both calming the mind and developing insight into the nature of experience, and that which allow the practitioner to further de-condition ignorance and unwholesome mental tendencies. In other words, they are an integral dimension of the path to awakening.

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The Theravada commentarial texts (mainly Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification*), and modern teachers who rely on these texts, consider the four *jhanas* as states of deep concentration attained by means of one-pointed concentration and separation from sense experience. According to this view, while this kind of concentration can strengthen the mind of the practitioner (and yield various spiritual powers), these "altered states of consciousness" are not really necessary for liberation, or express an important dimension of the progress of insight. In other words - according to this view - they are not necessary to the process of de-conditioning ignorance. There is a famous quote from Walpola Rahula, the famous Theravada scholar who said: "all these mystic states, according to the Buddha, have nothing to do with Reality, Truth, Nirvana" [Rahula 1978, 68].

The view that the four *jhanas* can be attained without developing liberating wisdom (*panna*), i.e., that they are mere concentration states - practiced and attained also by non-Buddhists, and therefore, do not exemplify a unique Buddhist understanding - prompted the idea in the Theravada commentaries that one can "bypass" the attainment of the *jhanas* on the path to liberation. According to the Theravada commentarial tradition, those who attain liberation without attaining the four *jhanas* are called "dry insight arahants" (*sukkha-vipassaka*) [SA II.127].

Although this issue seems as an ancient matter, it is relevant for us practitioners today, as this interpretation of the *jhanas* shaped the teaching of many modern influential *vipassana* meditation teachers in Asia and the west who marginalized the liberative significance of the *jhanas* in their teachings.

This common view of the *jhanas*, which I assume most practitioners encountered sometime during their practice, is based on the idea that the Buddha actually taught two different

meditation techniques: ***samatha-bhavana*** and ***vipassana-bhavana***. ***Samatha-bhavana*** – where the four *jhanas* were placed - is described as a practice of deep concentrated-absorption brought about by a gradual separation from sense experience. ***Vipassana-bhavana***, on the other hand, is a meditation technique in which the practitioner develops mindfulness of experience as a foundation of liberating insight. In *vipassana* meditation one observes clearly the nature and characteristic of phenomena which is analyzed in the Satipatthana Sutta into four experiential fields: body, feeling, mind-states and mental phenomena.

This polarized view of the meditative path evokes serious problems in the ability to integrate the practice of *vipassana* with the attainment of the four *jhanas* into a coherent and harmonious path-model.

First, if the *jhanas* are described as a narrow field of awareness in which the mind is absorbed into one object of perception, while in *vipassana*, one is instructed to observe the changing phenomenal field, how do these two elements of the path can be integrated into one coherent path-structure?

Second, if ***samma-samadhi*** - one of the factors of the Eightfold Path - is another designation for the attainment of the four *jhanas* (while it is never identified as the four “formless attainments”) how can we not develop this path factor in full? How can we disregard these four meditative states from our practice, when the Buddha marked them out time and again in his map to liberation? Would we disregard or “bypass” “right view”, “right mindfulness” or any other path factor?

And lastly, how can we overlook the central role in which the four *jhanas* played in the Buddha’s own awakening path? How can we omit these attainments from our practice when it is evidently central in numerous *suttas* which describe a **spiritual path that places the four *jhanas* as the last phase before one attains liberation** [e.g. MN I.179ff, I.268-70, I.271-7, I.346ff, III.1-5; III.33-6; III.134-6; DN I.63ff, III.270; AN II.208ff, V.206].

These questions are added to other important facts:

First, the *suttas* never associate directly the practice of one-pointed concentration with the attainment of the *jhanas*. For example, there is no reference in the *suttas* to meditation on the *kasinas* as the way to attain the four *jhanas*, the main technique presented in the commentarial texts. On the contrary, the *suttas* present a path structure in which the *jhanas*

(i.e. *Samma Samadhi*) are the outcome of developing the other path factors (e.g., MN I.356-7, SN V.21, AN IV.40, DN II.216-7, DN III.252-3, AN V.212):

Bhikkhus I shall teach you noble right *samadhi* with its support and requisites... What bhikkhus is noble right *samadhi* with its support and requisites, that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness? Unification of mind equipped with these seven factors is called noble right *samadhi* with its support and requisites. [MN III.71]

Second, we cannot find in the *suttas* a clear statement from the Buddha that the *jhanas* are completely cut off from the five sense stimuli. On the contrary there are various statements that connect the attainment of the *jhanas* with the practice of mindfulness of sense experience [e.g. MN I.301, MN III.136] (I will turn to this issue below).

Third, the commonly used idioms *samatha-bhavana* and *vipassana-bhavana*, which express the idea that the Buddha actually taught two distinct meditative procedures, **cannot be found in the *suttas***. This is later terminology. I suggest, following Thanissaro Bhikkhu, that the terms *samatha* and *vipassana* do not designate specific practices in the *suttas*, rather, these are qualities of mind fulfilled through the development of the various path-factors [Thanissaro Bhikkhu 1997].

Fourth, in the *suttas*, the “formless attainments” (*arupa samapattis*) are never called “*arupa jhanas*”. **This is a later designation**. Furthermore, while the *suttas* clearly state that the “formless attainments” do not lead to *nibbana* [MN I 165-6], there are various statements in the *suttas*, that the four *jhanas* are conducive to awakening, and that they are the unique teaching of the Buddha [e.g. DN III.132, SN V.308, MN I.246-7, SN I.48].

Thus, in this article, when I use the term “*jhanas*”, I only refer to the four *jhanas*, not including the four “formless attainments” which are different types of experience in my understanding.

Lastly, there is never any declaration in the *suttas*, of the possibility of any type of arahant, to achieve liberation without the four *jhanas* (while the four formless attainments are definitely not a necessity).

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The above problems and inconsistencies are added to an obvious fact that there are numerous passages in the *suttas* in which **the four *jhanas* are depicted as the outcome of a growing**

depth of insight into the nature of experience, the experiential fruit of deep letting go and that which incline the mind into a free mode of being. These *suttas* offer a map in which the four *jhanas* and the practice of insight cannot not be seen as two distinct and separated meditation techniques, but as integral dimensions of a single process that leads to awakening.

Thus, my understanding, which I will only sketch here, and is fully developed in my book *Early Buddhist Meditation: the Four Jhanas as the Actualization of Insight* (Routledge, 2017)) is that the four *jhanas* embody a distinct Buddhist view of mental cultivation and express an ethical mind. They are *not* states of absorption disconnected from sense experience, but four meditative states, that actualize the aim of Buddhist meditation: they purify the mind from that which obstructs clear seeing, and fulfil those wholesome qualities that can awaken the mind. By progressing through the *jhanas* one can observe the nature of experience more and more clearly and hence gradually de-conditions the misconceived sense of self. That is, they are not just specific experiences, but actually modes of perceiving, that fabricate less.

Here, I will offer an outline of this new phenomenology of the four *jhanas*. I will also delineate several key points regarding their liberative value in practice. Hopefully, this new way of thinking about the four *jhanas* will restore to wholeness the fragmented view of the meditative path in a way that makes sense. While this is not a meditation manual, this new analysis of the *jhanas*, and the liberating value of insights they bring about, can give us a framework to contemplate the trajectory of our practice and the emphasis we place on various elements of the path. **By providing a map of practice that includes the *jhanas* as part of the practice of insight, I hope to reclaim these psycho-somatic states into the path of practice in a beneficial way.** I hope that this map will assist practitioners to recognize the *jhanas* in their own lived experience, and through this recognition, further nourish the awakening qualities that can liberate and awaken the mind.

Having said that, I would like to request you - the readers - to be open to the possibility **that what the *suttas* call *jhanas* and what the Theravada tradition calls *jhanas*, might be two different types of experiences brought about by two different types of practices.** This suggestion, does not in any way, intend to negate the existence of the type of experiences the Theravada tradition calls *jhanas* (i.e., absorptions brought about by one-pointed concentration practice). It merely suggest that there might be another way to understand the nature of the four *jhanas* in the *suttas*, a way which makes it easier to integrate these

attainment with other factors of the path, such as the establishment of mindfulness (*satipatthana*), the deepening of ethical mind and the development of the seven factors of awakening (*bojjhangas*).

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I would like to first present the formulaic description of the *jhanas* as it appears in numerous *suttas* and since it depicts the eighth factor of the Eightfold Path:

And what, friend, is right *samadhi*?

Here, separated from the desire for sensual pleasures, separated from [other] unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the **first *jhana***, which is [mental] joy and [bodily] pleasure born of *viveka*, accompanied by thought and reflection. With the stilling of thought and reflection, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the **second *jhana***, which is [mental] joy and [bodily] pleasure born of *samadhi*, inner stillness and unification of mind, without thought and reflection. With the fading away of [mental] joy, a bhikkhu abides in equanimity, mindful and fully aware. [Still] experiencing pleasure with the body, he enters upon and abides in the **third *jhana***, on account of which noble ones announce: “abiding in pleasure, one is equanimous and mindful”. With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the **fourth *jhana***, which is neither-painful-nor-pleasurable, and has purity of mindfulness and equanimity. This is called right *samadhi*.

[MN III.252. See also SN V.9 and SN V.196]

Few things pop up immediately from reading this succinct description: the *jhanas* are four gradual states in which something important happens when one enters the first *jhana* and moves from one *jhana* to the next. In this meditative process, some important wholesome qualities arise and affect the mind and when they fade away, they give room for other wholesome qualities to “shine forth”. The culmination of this process is the “purification of mindfulness and equanimity” - the first and the last qualities in the list of the seven factors of awakening - and the two most important qualities, developed in *vipassana* meditation.

While I cannot present here my full analysis of this meditative process, I would like to offer some examples to what I suggest above. For my full analysis, one will have to read my book...

The First Jhana

The entrance into the first *jhana* was a momentous moment in the Buddha’s path. This suggests that it is important for all practitioners. It is an attainment of a **completely wholesome state** in which “one enters and abides in”. That is, **it is not a momentary event**. In the Indriya-vibhanga Sutta [SN V.198] the Buddha explains that for entering into the first *jhana* the mind has to **release and let go** (*vossaga*) of the foothold of the unwholesome mind

which is defined as the hindrances (*nivarana*) and [other] unwholesome states (*akusalehi dhammehi*) [MN III.136]. In other words, **one has to let go of any unwholesomeness for entering the *jhanas*.**

In the first *jhana* the mind is free from the hindrances and other unwholesome states for a prolonged period of time. This means that for multiple mind-moments the practitioner can dwell in a wholesome stream of consciousness and, as I would argue below, observe phenomena more clearly than before since there is no obscuration of mind, and unwholesome reactions, which characterize ordinary cognition.

While Buddhaghosa considered the hindrances to be specifically obstructive to concentration, given that they do not allow the mind to concentrate on the meditation object [Vism IV.104-5], in various *suttas*, the Buddha states that the five hindrances are obstructive to seeing experience clearly. That is, they are the cause and condition for lack of knowledge and vision (*nana-dassana*) [MN I.323; SN V.97; MN I.276; SN V.127]. He further states that the hindrances prevent the radiance of the mind to be known, and hence, prevent the attainment of liberation [SN V.92].

The second important issue regarding the *jhanas* is whether entering the first *jhana*, means that one is completely cut off from sense experience, as it is stated in traditional Theravada teachings. If that was the case, I would expect that the Buddha would clearly state that the meditator is either (1) cut off from the five faculties (*indriya*), which refer to the five sense organs, or (2) from the twelve *ayatanas*, which designate the senses and their corresponding objects or (3) from “the five strings of sensual desires” (*panca-kama-guna*), namely forms, sounds, odours, flavours and tangibles. However, this is not the case. The Buddha simply states, that for entering the first *jhana*, one is separated from ***kama*** (the desire of sense pleasure) and **other unwholesome states**.

Kama is an important term in the Buddha’s teaching, and it is quite different than the object of the senses. The Buddha states quite clearly that:

**“The thought of desire in a person is *kama*,
not the wonderful sense pleasures [found] in the world.**

The thought of desire in a person is *kama*.

The wonderful [things] remain as they are in the world,
while the wise men remove the impulse [for them].”[AN III.411]

In other words, **when one enters into the first *jhana*, one is not cut off from sense experience but from unwholesome reactions to experience.** Experiencing phenomena

without unwholesome reactions such as desire, aversion etc., allows the mind **to find delight not in sense pleasures, but from letting go of the unwholesome; this is the joy of letting go, the joy of clarity.** (Arbel, p.51-2, 58-60).

This last point takes us to another liberating dimension of the first (and second) *jhanas* - the experience of “spiritual [or *jhanic*] joy and pleasure” [SN IV.236]. In the Maha-Saccaka Sutta the Buddha describes the moment he entered the first *jhana* as the moment where he understood something significant about the path to awakening after years of practicing asceticism:

“I realized that when my father the Sakyen was working, while I was sitting under the cool shade of the rose-apple tree, separated from the desire for sensual pleasures, separated from [other] unwholesome states, I entered and abided in the first *jhana*, which is [mental] joy and [bodily] pleasure born of *viveka*, accompanied by thought and reflection. Could that be the path to awakening?” Then, following that memory, I realized: “this is the path to awakening.”[MN I.246-7]

This reflective memory was a pivotal turning point in his spiritual quest. At this important moment, he realized that he should not fear all types of pleasure, as he did when he practiced asceticism (*tapas*). **He understood that there is a pleasure (*sukha*) and joy (*piti*) that lead one to awakening and do not perpetuate desire.** About this pleasure and joy he declared: “I say of this kind of pleasure that it should be pursued, that it should be developed, that it should be cultivated, and that it should not be feared” [MN III.233-4 & MN I.464]. These joy and pleasure are experienced in the *jhanas*:

“These [four *jhanas*] are the four kinds of life devoted to pleasure that are entirely conducive to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to tranquility, to special knowledge, to full awakening, to Nibbana.” [DN III.132]

To put it another way, a mind entangled in clinging, anger, jealousy and so on is usually accompanied by bodily experience such as tension, density, and even pain. On the other hand, a relaxed body reflects a relaxed, peaceful and joyful mind. Thus, there are pleasure and joy that operate as tools for purification; pleasure and joy that assist in freeing the mind from attachment and clinging. The Buddha’s understanding was that the path to awakening goes through this type of physical and mental pleasures [Arbel, 58].

In the Culadukkhakkhandha Sutta the Buddha further elucidates the liberative value of this joy and pleasure:

Even though a noble disciple has clearly seen, as it is, with proper wisdom, how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering and much despair, and how great is the danger in them, he is (still) not un-enticed by sensual pleasure. As long as he does not attain [mental] joy and [bodily] pleasure other than sensual pleasures, other than unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, he may still be enticed by sensual pleasures. [MN I.91]

This explanation touches upon the relationship between insight and liberation. The Buddha says directly that “seeing clearly as it is with proper wisdom” is not enough for the mind to become disillusioned and disenchanted with sense gratification. Something further is required for abandoning the attraction and desire for sense pleasures. Only by experiencing a different type of bodily and mental pleasure, can one actually let go of the rooted desire for sensual pleasures. The cognitive understanding that these pleasures are impermanent can be a catalyst for the spiritual path, but cannot transform rooted tendencies. For a deeper change, the Buddha says - for the transformation of ordinary, recurrent patterns - a different embodied reality must be experienced [Arbel, p.63].

It is important to notice here that the Buddha speaks of **bodily pleasure and mental joy not only as the fruit of practice, but as a central part of practice itself, as a way to freedom and awakening. When we learn how to allow this pleasure and joy to nourish and support the wholesome mind, it can deepen our ability to let go, and hence, the clarity and the insight into the nature of experience.**

As I reflected in my book, while all of us experience moments of “spiritual” pleasure and joy, i.e., happiness independent of sense gratification, which may be similar to *jhanic* joy and pleasure, these moments are usually brief, and therefore, not able to loosen our attachment to sense pleasures. However, the *jhanas* are attainment in which one “enters into and abides in” (*upasampajja viharati*). That is, the practitioner dwells in, or better put, experiences “being in” this attainment for a period of time. Such a comprehensive experience that saturate both body and mind allows one to experience fully and intimately a different mode of being, very different from ordinary experience. **Knowing intimately, that there is a type of wholesome pleasure which does not depend on pleasant sense experience - but on letting go - is the way to wear out deeply rooted disposition to regard sense pleasures as the most gratifying experiences** [Arbel, p.67].

The Second Jhana

The transition into the second *jhana* has an important liberative dimension. In this meditative state, the interpretative and conceptual element of the mind is stilled. While this is usually seen as the outcome of suppressing thoughts through one pointed concentration, the Dantabhumī Sutta expresses a different process - one which connects the practice of mindfulness (*satipatthana*) with the attainment of the *jhanas* and the stilling of thoughts:

[C]ome bhikkhu, abide observing the body as the body but do not think thoughts connected with the body; abide observing feelings as feelings but do not think thoughts connected with feelings; abide observing mind as mind but do not think thoughts connected with the mind; abide observing phenomena as phenomena but do not think thoughts connected with phenomena. With the stilling of thoughts and reflections he enters upon and abides in the second *jhana*. [MN III.136]

This *sutta* expresses quite clearly that one can, and should observe experience, while dwelling in the *jhanas*. It also elucidates how the transition between the first and second *jhana* occur: when the practitioner does not react or cling to experience by thinking and commenting about it, thoughts fade away, and one enters naturally into the second *jhana*.

Anyone who has practiced mindfulness and *vipassana* meditation has often heard that thinking is not the problem, as the cause of our suffering, is the identification with thoughts, our clinging to them. In the practice of *vipassana*, we are instructed to observe the impermanent and unsubstantial in nature of thought, while also to observe that thoughts are actually sustained by a continual identification with their content.

What I would like to point out here, is that although thoughts are not “the problem”, and discursive thinking is useful in the preliminary stages of developing insight, it also has serious disadvantages. Even when thinking is wholesome it has a relative liberative value [e.g., SN II.66]. This is because thinking is that which sustains the sense of self, at least, the grossest sense of “me” and “I”. We can say that “I am”, “this is mine” and “this is myself” are certain types of thoughts. Therefore, experiencing the cessation of thinking when transitioning from the first *jhana* to the second, lends insight into the emptiness of thoughts, and at the same time, into the origin and nature of the misconceived sense of self. **Thus, the cessation of the thinking process - accompanied by the observation of this cessation - is an important realization for loosening attachment and clinging to subjective experience and to a “thinker”. After one has seen directly the origination and cessation of thinking and its connection to the sense of self, thinking will no longer have the same delusive power** [Arbel, 87-9].

Thus, the fading away of thoughts and reflections is the actualization of loosening attachment to them; this is achieved by not following the trajectory of thoughts. When they are stilled in this way (contrary to their stilling by vigorous one-pointed concentration), their cessation has a liberative value [e.g. AN II.14]. Subsequently, in the second *jhana*, the practitioner can observe experience even more clearly than in the first *jhana* since there are less hindering mental process and reactions.

Another liberative value of the second *jhana* is connected to the qualities present in this meditative state, that is, *samadhi* and unification of mind. The Satipatthana Samyutta sheds light on the significance of these qualities:

Come friends, dwell observing the body as body, ardently, fully aware with unified and clear mind, calm and with unification of mind, in order to know the body as it really is. Dwell observing feeling as feeling... dwell observing mind as mind... dwell observing phenomena as phenomena ardently, fully aware with unified and clear mind, calm and with unification of mind, in order to know phenomena as it really is. [SN V. 144]

In this *sutta*, the Buddha states that for understanding the nature of phenomena, the mind has to be unified and clear. It has to be “one-natured” (*ekodibhuta*). This imply an intimate relationship and closeness with experience - “being-at-one-with” that which we are experiencing. However, “being-at-one-with” experience does not mean absorption, but close contact with what presents itself to awareness, devoid of discursive interpretation and mental reactions [Arbel, 96-7]. I would suggest that *samadhi* in this context refers to a broad field of awareness, knowing but non-discursive. Here we see again, how the practice of *satipatthana* and the attainment of the *jhanas* are interrelated in the *suttas*’ vision of the meditative path.

The Third & Fourth Jhanas

I will refer to the third and fourth *jhanas* together as I believe the fourth *jhana* is the grounding of a specialized form of awareness that becomes established in the third *jhana*. These two meditative states express the fulfilment and grounding of three qualities: full knowing (*sampajana*), mindfulness (*sati*) and equanimity (*upekkha*) (note that the last two are “officially” “awakening factors” (“*bojjhangas*”). The Pathamahuneyya Sutta gives us an illuminating description of this state, where full knowing, mindfulness and equanimity are fully matured:

Monks, herein a monk on seeing a form with the eye he is neither elated nor sad; rather he abides in equanimity, mindful and fully knowing. On hearing a sound with the ear...; on smelling a smell with the nose...; on tasting a taste with the tongue...; on touching a

touchable with the body...; on cognizing a mental phenomenon with the mind he is neither elated or sad; rather he abides in equanimity, mindful and fully knowing. Monks, a monk who possesses these six things is worthy of offerings, worthy of gifts, worthy of donation, worthy of being honoured, unsurpassed, the world's field of merit. [AN III.279]

While this passage does not explicitly state that this is a description of the third *jhana*, one can clearly see that it refers to it. It points out that when full knowing, mindfulness and equanimity are fully matured, in a wholesome stream of consciousness, the mind is not conditioned in an ordinary way; it is an **ennobling dwelling**.

When the mind is devoid of this habitual reactivity of desire and aversion (the active aspects of ignorance), awareness is present with whatever contacts the senses, knows their nature fully, and therefore, remains completely equanimous in the midst of it. The meditator experiences the sensory world without clinging or attaching to the flow of experience. This is the embodiment of wisdom in the sense of wise relationship to experience (contrary to referring to wisdom as a specific content). It is the actualization of non-clinging, the actualization of *anatta* – the understanding that no experience can be regarded as “me”, “mine” or “I”.

In a discourse from the Sutta Nipata the Buddha also states how the deconditioning of ignorance is related to the fully fulfilled mindfulness and equanimity of the fourth *jhana*. In this discourse, Udaya questions the Buddha about the nature of liberation. He specifically asks the Buddha to explain “the breaking of ignorance” for “one who attained *jhana*, seated, free from defilements” (*jhayin virajam asinam*). As a response to Udaya's question, the Buddha states thus:

The abandonment of both the desire for sensual pleasures, said the Blessed One to Udaya, and discontent, and the dispelling of sloth and the hindrance of worry,

I tell [you], that liberation by perfect knowledge, the breaking of ignorance, is **pure mindfulness and equanimity**, preceded by examination of phenomena. [Sn 1106-7]

It seems clear that these verses make reference to the beginning and ending of the *jhanic* process. What is particularly interesting in this account is the Buddha's statement that “pure mindfulness and equanimity”, which quite evidently refer to the attainment of the fourth *jhana*, is “where” the breaking of ignorance, the “liberation by perfect knowledge” happens.

I would suggest that “pure mindfulness and equanimity” can “break ignorance” because a purified mindfulness and equanimity means simply, that one has a lucid and clear awareness (*sati*) of experience, without any unwholesome reactivity (*upekkha*). I would like to emphasize specifically the quality of equanimity here, as *jhanic* equanimity, is equanimity

grounded in a completely wholesome, non-discursive stream of consciousness (the fourth *jhana*). Thus, it is a profound and deep impartial attitude to experience grounded in clear seeing. This is contrary to a superficial or momentary equanimity that all of us experience in our lives. In other words, attaining the fourth *jhana* means that one has perfected this transformative quality [Arbel, 137].

The Dhatu-vibhanga Sutta, the Buddha explains, that when equanimity (*upekkha*) is thus purified:

[O]ne does not form any condition or generate any volition tending towards being or non-being. Since he does not form any condition or generate any volition tending towards either being or non-being, he does not cling to anything in the world. When he does not cling, he is not agitated. When he is not agitated, he attains *nibbana*. [MN III.244]

Thus, when the mind is imbued with fully fulfilled equanimity and mindfulness, it expresses a wise-awareness: an awareness which relates to whatever presents itself without the superimposition of “I”, “me” and “mine” [Arbel, p.119]. By allowing experience to be simply known, without any superimpositions and reactivity, the mind further deconstruct the fabricated sense of self and becomes closely in touch with a different mode of being in the world, a mode of freedom.

What I am trying to illustrate is that although the fourth *jhana* (as the other three) is a conditioned state (as all experiences and insights are), I believe it is “less” conditioned than other experiences. What I am suggesting is that the attainment of the fourth *jhana* - as the final attainment of this meditative progress - marks an important moment in the path to awakening. At this point in the spiritual path a specialized form of awareness has been fully established - a form of awareness that **resembles** an awakened awareness [Arbel, p.144].

Furthermore, since the fourth *jhana* (as the other three) is not momentary, but an attainment in which one enters into and abides in for a sustained period of time, it means that the mind can become intimately familiar with an awakened and free mode of being. This, I would suggest, is what ameliorates the link between an ordinary mind that is dominated by deeply rooted mental and physical patterns of reactivity, and an awakened mind, that is permanently free from all unwholesome tendencies and predispositions [Arbel, p.149]. I further suggested in my book that

“If the fourth-*jhana*-awareness is attained repeatedly before one attains awakening (either as an “ordinary person” or as a “stream-enterer”, “once-returner” or “non-returner”), we might hypothesize that the unawakened practitioner strengthens and establishes what I have called “wisdom-awareness” - a wholesome and lucid awareness that knows directly

the emptiness of all phenomena, knowing that is free from affective and cognitive overlays - thereby weakening the unwholesome tendencies and wrong perceptions of experience, until these mental and cognitive obstructions do not arise any longer." [Arbel, p.200].

*

Thus, I would conclude that the four *jhanas* should not be conceived as a meditative technique at all. They are not concentration exercises that one can choose to practice as a basis for *vipassana* meditation; rather, they are the actualization and embodiment of the deepening of insight and non-clinging. Thus, the fourth *jhana* - as the culmination of this meditative process - is the optimal experiential event for the utter de-conditioning of unwholesome tendencies and for transforming deep epistemological structures. It anticipates an awakened awareness for an un-awakened practitioner, and therefore, it is the threshold of awakening.

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The book itself includes much more than presented in this summary, in terms of depth of analysis of the *suttas* and in scope. Here are the contents of the book:

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

Introduction

1. The Fourfold *Jhāna* Model: Buddhist or Not?
2. The First *Jhāna*: A Turning Point in the Spiritual Path
3. The Second *Jhāna*: Non-discursive Broad Field of Awareness
4. Awakening *Jhāna* Factors
5. The Third *Jhāna*: Establishing a Specialized Form of Awareness
6. The Fourth *Jhāna*: Non-reactive and Lucid Awareness of the Phenomenal Field
7. Morality (*sīla*), Wisdom (*paññā*) and the Attainment of the *Jhānas*
8. Reconsidering Samatha-bhāvanā, Vipassanā-bhāvanā and Paññā-vimutti

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