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JAMES HEVIA

**Lamas, Emperors, and Rituals: Political Implications in
Qing Imperial Ceremonies** 243

LEONARD W. J. VAN DER KUIJP

**Two Mongol Xylographs (*Hor Par Ma*) of the Tibetan
Text of Sa Skya Paṇḍita's Work on Buddhist Logic and
Epistemology** 279

PER KVAERNE

**Recent French Contributions to Himalayan and
Tibetan Studies** 299

TODD T. LEWIS

**Contributions to the Study of Popular Buddhism: The
Newar Buddhist Festival of Guṃlā Dharma** 309

JOHN C. HUNTINGTON

**A Re-examination of a Kaniṣka Period Tetradrachm
Coin Type with an Image of Mētrago/Maitreya on the
Reverse (Göbl 793.1) and a Brief Notice on the Impor-
tance of the Inscription Relative to Bactro-Gandhāran
Buddhist Iconography of the Period** 355

RODERICK S. BUCKNELL

Reinterpreting the *Jhānas* 375

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Reinterpreting the *Jhānas*

The *jhānas*, the stages of progressively deepening concentration that figure so prominently in Buddhist meditation theory, have recently been the subject of several excellent critical studies.¹

Two such studies, those of Griffiths (1983) and Stuart-Fox (1989), have drawn attention to one problem in particular that is demonstrably crucial in any attempt to understand the *jhāna* series. It has to do with the composition of the first *jhāna*. The Pāli Abhidhamma and classical meditation manuals, and with them most present-day accounts of Theravādin meditation theory, consistently state that the first *jhāna* has mental onepointedness (*cittass' ekaggatā*) as one of its component "factors." Yet the description which appears repeatedly in the first four Nikāyas (and which, therefore, certainly antedates the Abhidhamma version) states that mental onepointedness becomes established in the second *jhāna*, not in the first. Stuart-Fox, who discusses this matter in detail, concludes that the Abhidhamma description of the first *jhāna* is a secondary development, a result of scholastic editing of the earlier Nikāya account.

Both Griffiths (briefly and in passing) and Stuart-Fox (at length and explicitly) draw another closely related conclusion regarding the composition of the first *jhāna* as described in the Nikāyas: *vitakka-vicāra*,

1. See in particular Martin Stuart-Fox, "Jhāna and Buddhist Scholasticism," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 12.2 (1989): 79-110; and Paul Griffiths, "Buddhist Jhāna: A form-critical study," *Religion* 13 (1983): 55-68. Also relevant are Winston L. King, *Theravāda Meditation: The Buddhist Transformation of Yoga* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980) (esp. Chapters 3-6); and Johannes Bronkhorst, *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, *Alt- und Neu-Indische Studien* 28 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1986). Such critical studies contrast with the largely uncritical, though very thorough and useful, descriptive account by Henepola Gunaratana, *The Path of Serenity and Insight* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985). The present paper was presented in much abbreviated form to the International Congress on Religion, Melbourne, July 1992.

the factor that particularly characterizes the first *jhāna*, is probably nothing other than the normal process of discursive thought, the familiar but usually unnoticed stream of mental imagery and verbalization.²

These conclusions conflict with the widespread conception of the first *jhāna* as a state of deep concentration, a profoundly altered state of consciousness attainable only after long and arduous practice.³ They can be shown also to challenge some long-held notions about the *jhāna* series as a whole. To investigate the further implications of this revised understanding of the first *jhāna* is a major objective of the present study.

As to method, this study employs the kind of text-critical approach adopted by Griffiths and Stuart-Fox, while also taking into account what is known of the practical-experiential side of *jhāna* meditation. It carefully distinguishes the earliest account of *jhāna*, found throughout the Nikāyas, from the historically later versions found in some late *suttas*, the Abhidhamma, and Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*. Indeed, one of its specific aims is to clarify the relationship between the earlier and later accounts.

The inclusion of meditative experience among the data to be used in the interpretive process raises some difficult methodological issues.⁴ For present purposes the central problem is that scholars who are non-meditators, and who are therefore in no position to check the accuracy of accounts of meditative experience, are naturally inclined to have reservations about interpretive procedures that draw on such accounts. Adequate discussion of this and related methodological issues is clearly beyond the scope of this paper, so it must suffice here to make just the following point. In the present case the account of meditative experience in question is shown to agree substantially with the relevant description given by Buddhaghosa in his *Visuddhimagga*—a situation that should minimize possible concern on the part of non-meditator scholars.

Whereas previous studies have focused on the first two *jhānas*, the present analysis covers the entire series, comprising the four basic

2. Griffiths 59-60; Stuart-Fox 81-82 and *passim*.

3. For a typical example of that conception, see Bhikkhu Buddhadasa, *Ānāpānasati* (Mindfulness of Breathing), trans. Bhikkhu Nagasena, (Bangkok: Sublime Life Mission, 1976). The first 153 pages of Buddhadasa's book are devoted to the practicalities of attaining the first *jhāna*.

4. Some of the methodological issues raised in this paragraph are noted briefly by Stuart-Fox 94-96. The field of Buddhist Studies will eventually have to come to terms with such issues if it is ever to do justice to meditation.

jhānas (called, in the *Abhidhamma* and *Visuddhimagga*, *rūpa-jhānas*, “material *jhānas*”) and the four *ārūppas* (*arūpa-jhānas*, “non-material *jhānas*”).⁵ For convenience, the separate *jhānas* are henceforth referred to as “*jhāna* 1,” “*jhāna* 2,” and so on up to “*jhāna* 8” (*neva saññā nāsaññāyatana*).⁶ The *Nikāya* account is examined first, followed by Buddhaghosa’s more elaborate version. The two are then considered in the light of meditative experience. Finally, conclusions are drawn regarding the relationship between the two versions, and regarding the identities of the various stages in terms of meditative practices and attainments. These conclusions are seen as indicating a need to revise some long-established ideas about the *jhānas*.

Analysis of the Nikāya Account

The often repeated *jhāna* formula or “pericope” may be provisionally, and rather literally, translated as follows.⁷

5. All eight are listed at, e. g., M i 40-41; the first four alone (i. e. the *rūpa-jhānas*) are listed at, e. g., D i 73-75. (All such source references are to volume and page numbers in the Pali Text Society’s editions of the Pāli texts. D = *Digha Nikāya*, etc.; Vism = *Visuddhimagga*; Vibh = *Vibhaṅga*.) Griffiths states (57) that the shorter listing occurs at least 86 times in the first four *Nikāyas*. Because the *ārūppas* are often omitted from textual accounts, some investigators have suggested that they were not part of the Buddha’s original teaching; e. g. Friedrich Heiler, *Die Buddhistische Versenkung* (München: Reinhardt, 1922) 47-51; King 14-15; and Bronkhorst 82-86. That debate is not pursued here. Instead, the *jhānas*, *rūpa* and *arūpa*, are considered together, as they are in many *suttas*, as constituting a single series.

6. Cf. Amadeo Solé-Leris, *Tranquillity and Insight* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986) 68-71, where essentially the same nomenclature is adopted.

7. The Pāli reads: 1) *viviceva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkam savicāram vivekajam pītisukham pathamam jhānam upasampajja viharati.* 2) *vitakkavicārānam vūpasamā ajjhantam sampasādanam cetaso ekodibhāvam avitakkam avicāram samādhijam pītisukham dutiyam jhānam upasampajja viharati.* 3) *pītiyā ca virāgā upekkhako ca viharati sato ca sampajāno sukhañ ca kāyena paṭisaṃvedeti yan taṃ ariyā ācikkhanti upekkhako satimā sukhavihāri ti tatiyam jhānam upasampajja viharati.* 4) *sukhassa ca pahānā dukkhassa ca pahānā pubbeva somanas-sadomanassānam atthagamā adukkham asukham upekkhāsatipārisuddhim catuttham jhānam upasampajja viharati.* 5) *sabbaso rūpasaññānam samatikkamā paṭighasaññānam atthagamā nānattasaññānam amanasikārā ananto ākāso ti ākāśanañcāyatanam upasampajja viharati.* 6) *sabbaso ākāśanañcāyatanam samatikkamma anantam viññānan ti viññānañcāyatanam upasampajja viharati.* 7) *sabbaso viññānañcāyatanam samatikkamma natthi kiñci ti ākiñcaññāyatanam upasampajja viharati.* 8) *sabbaso ākiñcaññāyatanam samatikkamma nevasaññānāsaññāyatanam upasampajja viharati.*



Jhāna 1: Quite separated from sense desires, separated from unwholesome mental states, he [the meditator] attains and abides in the first *jhāna*, in which are present initial thought (*vitakka*), sustained thought (*vicāra*), and separation-born zest (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukha*).

Jhāna 2: Through the suppression of initial thought and sustained thought, he attains and abides in the second *jhāna*, in which there is inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, and in which initial thought and sustained thought are absent, and concentration-born zest and pleasure are present.

Jhāna 3: Through the fading away of zest, he abides equanimous, mindful and discerning; and experiencing pleasure with the body, he attains and abides in the third *jhāna*, of which the Noble Ones say “equanimous, mindful, abiding in pleasure.”

Jhāna 4: Through the relinquishing of pleasure, through the relinquishing of pain, through the previous disappearance of happiness and sorrow, he attains and abides in the fourth *jhāna*, in which pleasure and pain are absent, and the purity of equanimity and mindfulness is present.

Jhāna 5: Through the complete transcending of material perceptions, through the disappearance of impact-perceptions, through non-attention to variety-perceptions, [aware] that space is endless, he attains and abides in the realm of endless space (*ākāśānañcāyatana*).

Jhāna 6: Through the complete transcending of the realm of endless space, [aware] that consciousness is endless, he attains and abides in the realm of endless consciousness (*viññāṇañcāyatana*).

Jhāna 7: Through the complete transcending of the realm of endless consciousness, [aware] that there is nothing, he attains and abides in the realm of nothingness (*ākīñcaññāyatana*).

Jhāna 8: Through the complete transcending of the realm of nothingness, he attains and abides in the realm of neither perception nor non-perception (*n’eva saññā nāsaññāyatana*).

This translation is tentative and subject to later revision, particularly in respect of the major technical terms. Some of the renderings adopted are based simply on common western usage, for want of more adequate criteria at this early stage in the investigation. For example, *pīti* is provisionally given as “zest” because that word is often preferred in English translations. There are also some syntactic ambiguities in the Pāli, which will be addressed as the analysis proceeds.

The above standard description of the *jhānas* will now be examined critically within a purely linguistic-textual-doctrinal framework, i. e. without at this stage making any attempt to link it to meditative practice. Since it is the Nikāya description that is in question, the later interpretations and explanations found in the *Abhidhamma* and the *Visuddhimagga* will be referred to only sparingly and with caution. Attention focuses first on the four *rūpa-jhānas* (*jhānas* 1 to 4).

Each of the first four paragraphs consists essentially in a statement of (a) the mental factors that are present or absent in each *jhāna*, and (b) the factors that are developed or eliminated in making the transition to that *jhāna* from the one preceding it. The mental condition of the monk or meditator before beginning the *jhāna* practice is not described directly. Indirectly, however, the account does indicate that this pre-*jhāna* condition is characterized by the presence of sense desires (*kāma*) and other unwholesome mental states (*akusala dhammas*), for it is by becoming separated or isolated (*vivicca*) from these that the meditator attains *jhāna* 1.

It is stated that in *jhāna* 1 there exist initial thought (*vitakka*) and sustained thought (*vicāra*), together with zest (*piṭi*) and pleasure (*sukha*), both of which are “separation-born” (*viveka-ja*).⁸ The adjective “separation-born” amounts to a reiteration of the statement that the meditator attains this *jhāna* through becoming separated (*vivicca*)—i. e. separated from sense desires and unwholesome states. Its application to “zest” and “pleasure” (which immediately follow it in the sentence) and not to “initial thought” and “sustained thought” (which immediately precede it) indicates that it is above all this separation, with resulting zest and pleasure, that distinguishes *jhāna* 1 from the pre-*jhāna* condition. It indicates that the presence of initial and sustained thought in *jhāna* 1 is not a consequence of the separation from sense desires and unwholesome states; that is, initial and sustained thought are present already in the pre-*jhāna* condition and merely persist through the transition. The essence of the transition from normal consciousness to *jhāna* 1 consists,

8. Buddhaghosa suggests that *viveka-ja*m can be seen as qualifying either *piṭisukham* or *jhānaṃ* (*Vism* 145). I follow the former interpretation, as do Nānamoli and many others. See Bhikkhu Nānamoli, trans., *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* (Berkeley & London: Shambhala, 1976) 151. (Nānamoli's translation is hereafter denoted *Path*.)

therefore, in (a) the elimination of sense desires and other unwholesome states, and (b) the arising of zest and pleasure.⁹

The transition from *jhāna* 1 to *jhāna* 2 is achieved through the suppression or stilling (*vūpasamā*) of initial and sustained thought, and the establishing of inner tranquillity (*ajjhataṃ sampasādanam*) and oneness of mind (*cetaso ekodibhāvam*). This is reiterated in the statement that *jhāna* 2 is without initial thought and sustained thought (*avitakka, avicāra*). Zest and pleasure, already established in the preceding *jhāna*, are still present but are now described as “concentration-born” (*samādhi-ja*). “Concentration,” “inner tranquillity,” and “oneness of mind” are evidently synonyms.¹⁰ The essence of the transition to *jhāna* 2 is, then, the elimination of initial and sustained thought and the establishing of concentration.

The transition to *jhāna* 3 comes about through the fading away of zest (*pīti*), as the meditator becomes equanimous or conatively neutral (*upekkhako* or *upekkhako*) and also mindful and self-possessed (*sato, sampajāno*). Pleasure continues, but is now, for the first time, said to be experienced *with the body* (*kāyena*). As Gunaratana points out, the term “*upekkhā*,” though having many different applications, always signifies a midpoint or point of neutrality between extremes.¹¹ In the present case the reference is clearly to neutrality in the domain of conation, i. e. to a

9. The vague rendering “states” for *dharmehi* sidesteps the question which of the many meanings of *dharmā* is intended here. One important meaning of *dharmā* is “mental object” or “mental image,” and this could well be the meaning intended in the present context. (See T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary* (London: Luzac, 1959) 336, *dharmā*.) If it is, then the factors said to be eliminated in the transition from ordinary consciousness to *jhāna* 1 are sense desires and unwholesome images. This would explain what otherwise appears an unnecessary repetition; for “*vivicc’ eva kāmehi, vivicca akusalehi dharmehi*” would then be referring to two different mental elements. (In Table 1 they would be in two different columns, “Conation” (*kāmas*) and “Thought” (*akusaladhammas*), rather than in the same column as shown.) A further implication would be that the *vitakka-vicāra* of *jhāna* 1, being free of unwholesome thoughts, does after all differ from the normal flow of thought.

10. *Cetaso ekodibhāva* is equated at Vibh 258 with *cittassa thiti* (steadiness of mind) and *sammāsamādhi* (right concentration); it is defined in the *Pali-English Dictionary* (160) as “concentration, fixing one’s mind on one point.” The term’s equivalence with *cittass’ ekaggatā* is self-evident. *Sampasādana* is explained at Vibh 258 as “*saddhā* (faith, confidence)”; the *Pali-English Dictionary* definition is “tranquilizing” (692). Gunaratana (83) notes these two meanings, “confidence” and “tranquillity,” and opts for the former, though the latter is clearly more appropriate in the context.

11. Gunaratana 88-90. Cf. *Vism* 160-161; *Path* 166-167.

state of affective detachment. The meditator becomes *upekkhako* through the disappearance of *pīti*, a conative factor (placed under *saṅkhāra-khandha* in the Abhidhamma classification).¹² Thus, the essence of the transition from *jhāna* 2 to *jhāna* 3 is the replacement of *pīti* (zest?) by the conatively neutral *sati-sampajañña* (mindfulness and self-possession). That the pleasure (*sukha*) is now explicitly physical appears to represent another significant development.

In the transition to *jhāna* 4, pleasure (*sukha*) is relinquished or allowed to disappear. The description states that pain (*dukkha*) disappears also, though it was not mentioned as present in earlier *jhānas*. Since *jhānas* 1, 2, and 3 are all described as pleasurable, this disappearance of pain makes sense only if understood as having been entailed in the establishing of *jhāna* 1. Such a meaning is the more likely because the next two factors mentioned, happiness (*somanassa*) and sorrow (*domanassa*), are explicitly stated to have disappeared *previously* or *earlier* (*pubbeva*).

As Gunaratana points out, analysis of the description is complicated by the existence of two different Nikāya usages of the terms *sukha* and *dukkha*.¹³

<i>First usage:</i>	<i>sukha:</i>	physical and mental pleasure
	<i>dukkha:</i>	physical and mental pain
<i>Second usage:</i>	<i>sukha:</i>	physical pleasure
	<i>dukkha:</i>	physical pain
	<i>somanassa:</i>	mental pleasure (happiness)
	<i>domanassa:</i>	mental pain (sorrow)

In the description of *jhāna* 4 all four terms occur, whence it is clear that the second usage is being followed. Thus the *sukha* that is relinquished in attaining *jhāna* 4 is physical or bodily pleasure, which is in keeping with the fact that the *sukha* present in *jhāna* 3 is experienced “with the body.” The description is not explicit regarding the type of *sukha* present in *jhānas* 1 and 2.

In the final string of adjectives describing *jhāna* 4, the pair *asukham adukkham* (without pleasure, without pain) is followed by *upekkhā-sati-*

12. Gunaratana 60, 91.

13. Gunaratana 62-63.

pārisuddhiṃ (having purity of equanimity and mindfulness).¹⁴ Since *upekkhā* and *sati* were already present in the preceding *jhāna*, the addition of the word *pārisuddhiṃ* (“purity”) evidently signifies that *upekkhā* and *sati* are now no longer associated with *sukha*; that is, *pārisuddhi* signifies absence of *sukha*, just as (in *jhāna* 3) *upekkhā* signifies absence of *pīti*.

The account of the four *rūpa-jhānas* exhibits a stylistic feature typical of the Pāli canon in general: frequent reiteration through the use of synonyms and (in negations) antonyms. For example, the statement that *jhāna* 2 is attained through suppression of initial thought and sustained thought (*vitakka-vicārānaṃ vūpasamā*) is reiterated in the further statements that that *jhāna* is without initial and sustained thought (*avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ*), that it is characterized by inner tranquility (*ajjhataṃ sampasādanam*) and oneness of mind (*cetaso ekodibhāvaṃ*), and that the associated zest and pleasure are born of concentration (*samādhi-jaṃ*). Accordingly the above analysis has, in large part, consisted in identifying such sets of synonyms and antonyms, a procedure that greatly simplifies the description.

It will be helpful at this point to depict the results of the analysis diagrammatically. This is done in Table 1. Each transition between *jhānas* is represented by a downward-pointing arrow, and the factors responsible for the transition are indicated by the boxed terms attached to the arrow.

Table 1 draws attention to some further characteristics of the *jhāna* description. One evident characteristic is inconsistency in mentioning the continued existence of a factor in *jhānas* subsequent to the one in which that factor first becomes established. For example, equanimity (*upekkhā*), which becomes established in *jhāna* 3, is stated to be present also in *jhāna* 4. On the other hand, the quality “without initial and sustained thought” (*avitakkaṃ, avicāraṃ*)—otherwise “having tranquillity” (*sampasādanam*), and “having oneness of mind” (*cetaso ekodibhāvaṃ*)—which is attributed to *jhāna* 2, is not similarly applied to *jhānas* 3 and

14. This seems more likely to be the meaning of the compound than “having mindfulness purified by equanimity,” because *upekkhā* (equanimity) was already present in *jhāna* 3. However, cf. *Path* 174; *Vism* 167-168; *Vibh* 261.

4, though it is clearly to be understood to apply to them, and indeed always has been by commentators classical and modern.¹⁵

Another characteristic evident in Table 1 is that the composition of the *rūpa-jhānas* is specified in terms of three implicit categories. This has been emphasized by providing the three relevant columns with headings: "Thought," "Conation," and "Feeling" (i. e. hedonic tone).

When the above points are taken into account, Table 1 reduces to the much simpler Table 2. In Table 2 we immediately see the *jhāna* series as a process of successively eliminating mental factors. The term below each arrow is functionally the negation of the one above it; e. g. *ekodibhāva* is the negation of *vitakka-vicāra*.¹⁶

Table 2 can in its turn be simplified by replacing each negating term with a dash, on the understanding that a dash signifies the absence or elimination of the factor immediately above it. The result is the maximally economical representation shown in Table 3.

The terms that appear in Table 3 are the first four of the familiar five "jhāna factors" (*jhānaṅgāni*): *vitakka*, *vicāra*, *pīti*, *sukha*, *ekaggatā*. The practice of summarizing the composition of the *jhānas* by listing the relevant *jhāna* factors appears sporadically in a few late *suttas*, and becomes well established in the *Abhidhamma*.¹⁷ The odd development whereby the factor *ekaggatā* (= *ekodibhāva*) came to be attributed to *jhāna* 1 is among the problems dealt with by Stuart-Fox.

The analysis can now move on to the *arūpa-jhānas*, the non-material *jhānas*. The first of these (in our terminology, *jhāna* 5) is the realm of endless space (*ākāsānañcāyatana*). It is attained "through the complete transcending of material perceptions (*rūpa-saññā*), through the disappearance of impact-perceptions (*paṭigha-saññā*), through non-attention to variety-perceptions" (*nānatta-saññā*), and it entails the awareness that "space is endless" (*ananto ākāso*).

Of the three terms ending in *-saññā*, the first, *rūpa-saññā*, is familiar as denoting perception of visual forms, the first of six recognized classes

15. Cf. Buddhadasa 158: ". . . it should be understood that anything discarded in a lower stage remains absent in higher stages and is therefore not mentioned again."

16. In choosing such negative terms for inclusion in Table 2, I have intentionally avoided the visually self-evident ones (e. g. *avitakka* as the negation of *vitakka*) in order to make the diagram maximally informative. That *ekodibhāva* is the negation of *vitakka-vicāra* is not immediately apparent and therefore worth stating explicitly.

17. In the *suttas* it appears (with *ekaggatā* included) at M i 294, M iii 25-29, S iv 263. See Stuart-Fox 85 ff.

of sense perception.¹⁸ However, in the present context it clearly has a wider scope, justifying the usual translation “material perceptions” or “perceptions of matter.”¹⁹ (Buddhaghosa explains it as perceptions of the *rūpa-jhānas* and of their objects—presumably the *kaṣiṇa* disks, the breathing, etc.)²⁰ This ambiguity of *rūpa-saññā* corresponds to an ambiguity in the word *rūpa*: *rūpa* is sometimes “visible form” (the object of visual perception) and sometimes “matter, materiality” (as when contrasted with *nāma* or with *arūpa*).²¹ In the present context, then, *rūpa-saññā* covers all but the sixth class of *saññā*, i. e. all but *dhamma-saññā*, the type that has mental images (*dhammas*) as its objects.

The second of the three terms, *paṭigha-saññā* (“impact-perception”), is explained in the *Vibhaṅga* as denoting perceptions of visual forms, sounds, odors, tastes, and tangible objects.²² This indicates that *paṭigha-saññā* is identical with the preceding item, *rūpa-saññā*. The third term, *nānatta-saññā*, (“variety-perception”) contains in its literal meaning little indication just what type of perception is being referred to. However, the pattern established by *rūpa-saññā* and *paṭigha-saññā* makes it likely that *nānatta-saññā* is a further synonym, i. e. that it too signifies “sense-perception,” an interpretation explicitly affirmed by Buddhaghosa.²³

18. The six are: *rūpa-saññā*, *sadda-*, *gandha-*, *rasa-*, *phoṭṭhabba-*, *dhamma-saññā*. See D ii 309 and S iii 60.

19. See *Path* 356, and many other translations of the *jhāna* description.

20. *Vism* 328; *Path* 356-357.

21. See *Pali-English Dictionary* 574-575, *rūpa*, 1 and 2.

22. *Vibh* 261. See also *Vibh* 6 and D ii 62, where *paṭigha-samphassa* is contrasted with *adhivacana-samphassa* “verbal (or conceptual, i. e. mental) impression.” (Definition from Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary* [Colombo: Frewin and Co., 1972] 142.) The *Vibhaṅga*’s explanations of *rūpa-saññā* and *nānatta-saññā* are uninformative.

23. In such a succession of parallel terms we may expect *either* that all have the same meaning (appositional relationship) *or* that all have different meanings (additive relationship). Clearly the former applies here. (An example of the latter occurs at the beginning of the *jhāna* 4 formula.) Buddhaghosa’s support for this interpretation of *nānatta-saññā* comes in the following statement. “Through the disappearance of impact-perceptions, through non-attention to variety-perceptions’: by this is meant the relinquishing of and non-attention to all sense-sphere consciousness and its concomitants” (*Vism* 331). Buddhaghosa implausibly also states that such perceptions were already abandoned in *jhāna* 1 (*Vism* 329-330)—evidently in an attempt to reconcile the *Nikāya* account of the *jhānas* (which he professes to be explicating) with the *Abhidhamma* understanding of *jhāna* 1.

We therefore have here a thrice uttered statement that the transition from *jhāna* 4 to *jhāna* 5 entails the cessation of physical sense perceptions. It is appropriate that this cessation of physical or material perception (*rūpa-lpaṭigha-mānatta-saññā*) coincides with the transition out of the physical or material (*rūpa*) *jhānas*. The first *arūpa-jhāna* (*jhāna* 5) can, therefore, be readily incorporated into the condensed table of the *jhānas* by adding a further column, headed "Sense Perception" (see Table 4).

Jhāna 5 is further characterized by the awareness or realization that "Space (*ākāsa*) is endless." In the Nikāyas, *ākāsa* is occasionally appended to the list of four elements or *mahābhūtas*, and in later times it assumes the status of a fifth element.²⁴ The four—earth, water, fire, and air—are together equated with *rūpa*, i. e. materiality or physicality, sometimes more specifically the human body. *Ākāsa* is what remains when these four are removed. Thus the awareness that "*ākāsa* is endless" amounts to the awareness that "*rūpa* is non-existent"; and this again is an appropriate concomitant to the transition from the material or *rūpa jhānas* to the non-material or *arūpa jhānas*. The contrast between *rūpa* as earth, water, fire, and air, and *arūpa* as the realms of endless space, endless consciousness, etc., is apparent in the well known *Udāna* passage: "There exists, monks, a realm in which there is not earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air, nor realm of endless space, nor realm of endless consciousness, nor realm of nothingness, nor realm of neither perception nor non-perception . . ." ²⁵

The transition to *jhāna* 6, the realm of infinite consciousness (*viññāṇaṅcāyatana*), is achieved by transcending the realm of endless space and realizing that consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is endless. The type of analysis applied in earlier *jhānas* is hardly applicable here. By this stage in the series the information given has become so meager that nothing remains to be considered except the significance of the term *viññāṇa*.

24. In the Nikāyas the set of four elements occurs frequently, e. g. at D i 55, M i 53; the set of five occurs only rarely, e. g. at M i 413, S iii 227. On the seemingly late addition of *ākāsa*, see G. P. Malalasekera, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, vol. 1 (Colombo: Government of Ceylon, 1966) 341.

25. *Udāna* 80. *atthi bhikkhave tad āyatanam yattha neva pathavi na āpo na tejo na vāyo na ākāsānaṅcāyatanam na viññāṇaṅcāyatanam na ākiñcaṅṅāyatanam na nevasaññā-nāsaññāyatanam . . .* See the *Vibhaṅga* analysis of *jhāna* 5, which explains that *ākāsa* is "untouched by the four primary elements, *asamphutṭham catūhi mahābhūtehi*" (*Vibh* 262).

That is itself a daunting problem, discussion of which will be deferred until later in the paper.

The situation becomes even more difficult with the two remaining *jhānas*, the realm of nothingness and the realm of neither perception nor non-perception, each of which is attained by “transcending” the realm that precedes it. The possibilities of the text-analytical approach, as it can be applied to the Nikāya account, have, therefore, been exhausted for the present. Accordingly, we now turn to other sources, sources that provide information on the techniques and experiences associated with attaining the *jhānas* in practice.

The Nikāya account of the *jhānas* provides little information for the practicing meditator. *Suttas* such as the *Ānāpāna-sati Sutta* do give some guidance; however, the standard source of practical information is the post-canonical manuals, particularly Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* (5th century CE), to which we now turn.

Analysis of Buddhaghosa’s Account

The description of *jhāna* practice that Buddhaghosa presents in his *Visuddhimagga* is widely regarded, rightly or wrongly, as authoritative on Theravādin meditation. It undoubtedly represents an already well established tradition, for essentially the same description is found in the less well known *Vimuttimagga* of Upatissa, dated a few centuries earlier.²⁶ (I shall nevertheless, for convenience, refer to this description as “Buddhaghosa’s.”) Buddhaghosa’s account has been largely responsible for the widespread understanding of *jhāna* 1 as a state of deep concentration. In it he indicates that attainment of *jhāna* 1 entails a long and difficult progression through a series of sub-stages, of which the more advanced clearly do involve deep concentration. His portrayal of *jhāna* 1 as a deeply concentrated state therefore affirms the Abhidhamma account (which ascribes *ekaggatā* to *jhāna* 1), while conflicting with the earlier Nikāya account.

The task of sorting out the relationship between these two accounts, and discovering how the differences may have come about, has already been tackled in a preliminary way by Griffiths and Stuart-Fox. Here it will be dealt with more thoroughly, by first considering certain problems that arise out of the series of sub-stages which Buddhaghosa describes

26. *Vimuttimagga* of Upatissa (Taishō 1648), transl. by N. R. M. Ehara, Soma Thera, and Kheminda Thera as *The Path of Freedom* (Colombo: D. Roland D. Weerasuria, 1961).

as leading up to *jhāna* 1 (and to each subsequent *jhāna*.) This series is not mentioned in the Nikāyas, nor even in the canonical Abhidhamma texts. Its appearance in the post-canonical *Vimuttimaggā* and *Visuddhimagga* is evidently associated with the revision whereby *ekaggatā* was ascribed to *jhāna* 1. Consequently, any elucidation of the significance of Buddhaghosa's sub-stages may be expected to contribute to an improved understanding of the entire *jhāna* series. To that end a summary of Buddhaghosa's account is now provided.²⁷

In the example given by Buddhaghosa the meditation object is a specially prepared "earth *kaṣiṇa*," a disk of clay about two spans in diameter. The meditating monk begins by gazing with concentrated attention at this disk, which therefore serves as the "preliminary sign" (*parikamma-nimitta*). After long and persistent effort, he becomes able not only to keep his attention firmly fixed on the disk itself, but also to retain an accurate mental image of it, i. e. to "see" inwardly a clear mental replica of the disk when he closes his eyes. This replica image is the "acquired sign" (*uggaha-nimitta*). The monk thereafter gives up gazing at the original disk and concentrates on the replica image instead. Through this exercise the replica image is progressively stabilized and reinforced until eventually it gives way to a different type of image, the "counterpart sign" (*paṭibhāga-nimitta*). This is an abstract derivative of the preceding image, bearing a general resemblance to it but lacking its "faults" and its specific identifying features. Whereas the acquired sign was a near-perfect mental replica of the original clay disk, the counterpart sign is likely to appear as a pure disk of light, for example resembling the full moon or a well polished mirror. The meditator now focuses on this counterpart sign, seeking to "extend" it progressively. This exercise is carried out in two stages: "access concentration" (*upacāra-samādhi*) and "fixed concentration" (*appanā-samādhi*). With the perfection of *appanā-samādhi*, the meditator attains the first *jhāna*.

Once he has fully mastered these practices, the meditator may go on to develop the second *jhāna*. This entails, according to Buddhaghosa, the same series of sub-stages, but preceded by practice of five "masteries" (*vasī*). These include reflection on the grossness and undesirability of the *jhāna* factor to be eliminated next, which in this case is *vitakka* (Buddhaghosa here follows the Abhidhamma division of *jhāna* 1 into two separate *jhānas*: *vitakka* and *vicāra* are eliminated successively.)

27. The summary is based on *Vism* 118-155; *Path* 122-161. Also, cf. *Vimuttimaggā* (Ehara et al.) 71-92.

Much the same procedure applies for each of the remaining *jhānas* in turn. Thus, for every one of the *jhānas*, *rūpa* and *arūpa*, the meditator passes through the same series of sub-stages: concentration on the chosen physical object (*parikamma-nimitta*), development of the acquired sign (*uggaha-nimitta*), development of the counterpart sign (*paṭibhāga-nimitta*), access concentration (*upacāra-samādhi*), and finally fixed concentration (*appanā-samādhi*). On each occasion, the perfection of *appanā-samādhi* marks attainment of the relevant *jhāna*.

It can be fairly readily confirmed that Buddhaghosa's account is generally accurate as a description of the meditative practice. Numerous practicing meditators, particularly in the Buddhist countries of southeast Asia, routinely experience many of the stages Buddhaghosa describes. They are well able—though not always very willing—to discuss the process as far as they have experienced it.²⁸ Such meditators and their teachers do not necessarily use Buddhaghosa's terminology; however, some of the stages they describe can be readily recognized and correlated with his account. In particular, a sequence of three meditation objects—the original physical object, a replica image of it, and an abstract image derived from the replica image—is well attested. And for competent meditators the process culminates in attainment of an imageless state barely distinguishable from total unconsciousness, which masters identify as “entry into *jhāna*.”²⁹

Researchers wishing to investigate the matter at first hand can do so by taking up intensive meditation themselves. Such experimentation will support the claim that all meditators pass through essentially the same sequence of stages, provided they pursue the practice intensively and persistently enough, in a suitable environment, and with competent guid-

28. A major difficulty in finding out about meditation practice is that meditators are often very reticent about discussing their experiences and attainments. Such reticence is usually enjoined by their meditation masters on various grounds, e. g. that to talk about one's attainments could generate conceit and thereby hinder one's further progress. However, for alternative views on this question see Winston L. King, “A Comparison of Theravada and Zen Meditational Methods and Goals,” *History of Religions* 9 (1970): 313; and Rod Bucknell, “Experiments in Insight Meditation,” *The Australian Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 3.2 (1983): 115.

29. Regarding these practical details, I am drawing particularly on a series of verbal communications with the late Chaokhun Rajasiddhimuni, formerly meditation master at Khana 5, Wat Mahathat, Bangkok. Though the style of meditation he taught was purported to be *vipassanā-bhāvanā*, insight meditation (in the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition), it entailed a large component of *samatha-bhāvanā*, concentration meditation.

ance.³⁰ That *kaṣiṇa* disks are rarely if ever used nowadays is unimportant, because the sequence is largely the same, whether the concentration object is a clay disk, a chanted mantra, or the sensation of the breath at the nostril. (Details are given in the next section.) Buddhaghosa's account therefore deserves acceptance as a reliable description of the stages in *jhāna* practice as far as the attainment of what he calls "the first *jhāna*."

However, as an *interpretation* of those stages in terms of Buddhist doctrine, Buddhaghosa's account presents several problems. One obvious problem has to do with the above-noted question concerning the nature of the first *jhāna*. Development of a stable mental image as the object of concentration—whether a replica image (*uggaha-nimitta*) or an abstract derived image (*paṭibhāga-nimitta*)—implies well established mental onepointedness. The final stage, *appanā-samādhi* (which Buddhaghosa identifies with *jhāna* 1—subsequently also *jhāna* 2, etc.) is portrayed as an even more advanced stage of samādhi. It follows that Buddhaghosa's account is in conflict with the Nikāya account; because, as the Stuart-Fox study makes clear, the *jhāna* 1 of the Nikāya account is a rather preliminary stage in which mental onepointedness has not yet been established. The condition attained by the meditator who has mastered *appanā-samādhi* cannot be identical with the stage which the Nikāyas call "the first *jhāna*" (*paṭhamam jhānam*).

It could be suggested, in Buddhaghosa's defense, that perfect correspondence is not to be expected: in his account of *kaṣiṇa* meditation Buddhaghosa is referring to the first *jhāna* of the Abhidhamma, not the first *jhāna* of the Nikāyas. (The Abhidhamma version states that the first *jhāna* has mental onepointedness as a factor; the Nikāya version does not.) But such an argument would carry no weight, because Buddhaghosa understands the Abhidhamma and Nikāya descriptions of "the first *jhāna*" to be referring to one and the same meditative attainment. He maintains that the verbal discrepancies between the two descriptions are of no consequence, but merely reflect differing perceptions about what was worth mentioning.³¹

30. Such claims entail certain problems, on which see Frank J. Hoffman, *Rationality and Mind in Early Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987) 98.

31. On the question whether *ekaggatā* was worth mentioning as a factor in *jhāna* 1, see the suggestions by Gunaratana, 67 and 84, and the refutation of them by Stuart-Fox, 88.

Another problem with Buddhaghosa's account is that such details as the *uggaha-* and *paṭibhāga-nimittas*, and *upacāra-* and *appanā-samā-dhi* are nowhere explicitly mentioned in the Nikāyas. There is not even any indication in the Nikāyas that attainment of *jhāna* 1 entails a lengthy sequence of sub-stages such as Buddhaghosa describes. This raises questions concerning the transmission of the teaching. If this very basic information is genuine, why was it not recorded in the Nikāyas? And how did commentators like Upatissa and Buddhaghosa manage to come by it?

It is now evident that the interpretation implicit in Buddhaghosa's account of *kaṣiṇa* meditation is problematic. As a *description*, Buddhaghosa's account of the sequence of meditative stages as far as *appanā-samā-dhi* appears to be accurate; it corresponds with meditative experience. However, as an *interpretation*, it is demonstrably in conflict with the Nikāya account.

We therefore confront the question: How does Buddhaghosa's description, with its detailed series of sub-stages, relate to the much simpler Nikāya account of the *jhānas*? This question will be approached initially by considering in greater detail the techniques and experiences actually involved in the practice of *jhāna* meditation.

The Practice of Concentration

Kaṣiṇa disks are rarely, if ever, used by present day meditators. The account that follows therefore describes, instead, the practice of mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpāna-sati*), which is probably the most widely used, and certainly the best documented, Buddhist technique for *jhāna*.³² The description is based on the standard Theravādin style of practice, but in respect of the resulting experiences and attainments it is probably valid for all styles.

The meditator, having found a quiet spot in which to practice, and having adopted the approved sitting posture, begins by developing an appropriate mental attitude. This may entail reflecting for a few minutes on the value and purpose of the practice he or she is about to undertake, on the virtues of Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, or on any similarly up-

32. For relevant textual sources, see Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, *Mindfulness of Breathing (Ānāpānasati)*, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1973). For a very detailed discussion of the practice, see Buddhadasa, *op. cit.* Buddhadasa's monastery (Suan Mok, near Chaiya in southern Thailand) is one of the main centers at which *ānāpāna-sati* is currently taught and practiced on a large scale.

lifting topic. Thus prepared, he or she then closes the eyes and begins concentrating on the breathing.

This involves focusing attention on the fine tactile sensation experienced at the rim of one nostril as the breath passes in and out. That sensation is the concentration object. At each sitting attention must be focused on it and restrained from wandering. Invariably, however, attention does wander. After only a few breaths the meditator realizes that instead of concentrating on the sensation at the nostril rim, he or she is involved in a train of thought having no apparent connection with the practice. He or she immediately returns attention to the concentration object and begins again, but before long the same thing happens. Repeatedly, despite all efforts to keep the mind fixed on the concentration object, thoughts arise; and the trains of mental imagery and inner speech sometimes continue for a minute or more before the meditator realizes the digression and is able to cut them short. Only after long and persistent effort—over weeks or months, depending on individual temperament and the intensity of the practice—does success come. Finally, however, the dedicated meditator does succeed in keeping attention fixed on the concentration object for up to a minute without any thoughts intervening.

With further practice the periods of full concentration and freedom from thought grow longer and more intense. The meditator becomes able to sit fully concentrated for several minutes together. With thought totally absent, there is no sense of boredom; the practice, which had formerly seemed dull and tiresome in the extreme, has now become irresistibly interesting.

During this phase of the practice the meditator often finds the body making strange involuntary movements, for example a pronounced trembling, intermittent jerking, or creeping goose-flesh. The meditation master reassures the student that reactions of this kind are common. They are by-products of the high level of mental energy being developed, and have no importance other than as signs that progress is being made. The meditator must merely note their presence and resume the concentration practice.

Following this advice, the meditator finds that the strange movements do soon cease, and facility in concentration improves accordingly. But now a new effect appears, in the form of various delightful bodily feelings: a feeling of lightness as if the body were floating some distance above the seat, or a pervading warmth as if the body were glowing. The

meditator may find it possible to bring about an intensification of these effects; however, the master warns against this. The pleasant feelings are once again unimportant by-products of the practice; the meditator must merely acknowledge their existence and return to the concentration object.

With further practice the delightful feelings subside in their turn, leaving nothing in consciousness but the concentration object. Formerly faint and barely discernible, the sensation at the nostril rim is now experienced vividly as a zone of intense tactile sensation. There is now nothing else in consciousness. As far as the meditator is concerned the rest of the body is non-existent.

Further prolonged concentration eventually results in a strange transformation of the object. The zone of intense tactile sensation is replaced by a glowing patch of light of similar shape and orientation, experienced inwardly as a vivid mental image. (The eyes remain closed throughout these exercises.) For example, if the zone of sensation at the nostril was experienced as crescent-shaped, the glowing patch of light that takes its place is likely to be similarly crescent-shaped. This abstract image is of variable color, indeed the meditator may find that its color and brightness can to some extent be modified at will. Its size seems indeterminate, there being no other content of consciousness with which it might be compared. Having once developed such an abstract image, the meditator is instructed to adopt it as the new concentration object. At each sitting he or she must begin by concentrating on the breath as usual; but as soon as the abstract image appears, that must be made the concentration object instead. This has the effect of causing the abstract image to arise more rapidly each time, and, once arisen, to become progressively more vivid and stable.

The meditator continues practicing in this way, until one day, without warning, the abstract image suddenly disappears. Thus deprived of the only content of consciousness, the meditator has the sense of confronting an infinite black vacuum. This strange experience may lead to a loss of composure, with a consequent abrupt return to normal consciousness. However, the master gives reassurance and advises the student to cultivate this state of mental emptiness, entering it at every opportunity. In addition, the master advocates prolonging its duration by making a resolution to that effect at the beginning of each meditation session. Following these instructions, the meditator finds that the state of emptiness stabilizes and, as promised, lasts progressively longer.

In this state of emptiness, as at all previous stages of the practice, the meditator remains conscious of the condition, retaining a detached awareness of the state of zero mental content. However, there eventually comes a time when even this residual consciousness abruptly ceases. The effect is as if the meditator had suddenly gone under total anesthetic, or fallen into deep dreamless sleep. It cannot be said of this state that the meditator *experiences* it; rather, he or she *infers* it after the event, perhaps by referring to a clock or some other indicator of the passage of time.

It is said that particularly competent meditators develop the ability to sit in this state of unconsciousness for as long as seven days together. Some masters set up the less ambitious goal of twenty-four hours, and tell their students that when they have achieved that they will have gone as far as this style of practice can take them.

The above account, based on mindfulness of breathing, is broadly applicable for all forms of concentration meditation (*samatha-bhāvanā*), though with some variations in detail depending on the type of object used. For example, concentration on the sound of a clock ticking naturally differs in the early stages. (Some meditators find an auditory object easier to concentrate on than a tactile one; others find it more difficult.) The abstract image develops in much the same way as with mindfulness of breathing, though it is likely to be different in appearance, e. g. exhibiting a rhythmic movement in time with the ticking. Thereafter the sequence of events is identical.

A substantial difference from the course of events described above exists in the case of a visual object or a chanted mantra. With a visual object, the meditator begins with the eyes open, but closes them once the object has so imprinted itself on the memory that it can be visualized clearly "in the mind's eye." With a mantra, the meditator begins by repeating the phrase softly, and continues doing so until he or she can "hear" it inwardly after the voice stops. In either case, the mental replica—the image of the visual object or the internalized sound of the mantra—becomes the new concentration object, and in time yields an abstract image as before.

Practice based on a visual object or a mantra therefore differs from practice based on the types of object described earlier (e. g. the breathing) in having a distinct extra stage, that in which the original object is replaced by a mental replica. However, this difference is perhaps more apparent than real. It may well be that concentration on the breathing

does actually give rise to a mental replica of the original tactile sensation; for such a mental replica would naturally be masked by the original sensation, which itself continues. With a visual object, the original sensation can be terminated at any time by shutting the eyes, which makes the replica image clearly distinguishable from it; but one cannot simply stop breathing at will, whence the apparent skipping of one stage. It is the fuller sequence of stages that is presented by Buddhaghosa in his account of the *kaṣiṇa* practice.

Correlating Doctrine and Practice

Despite the overall correspondence between the above description and Buddhaghosa's account, there are some evident differences. One that deserves mention here has to do with the phenomenon of goose-flesh, trembling, and other involuntary bodily movements, which meditators commonly experience early in the practice. Present day meditation masters identify these effects as *pīti*, a component "factor" (*aṅga*) of *jhānas* 1 and 2. The main basis for this identification is a vivid description given by Buddhaghosa.³³ However, that description occurs not in his account of the sub-stages leading to *jhāna*, but rather in his description of *jhāna* itself.

Before discussing the significance of this discrepancy, let us note the potential usefulness of *pīti* as a landmark for correlating the practical sequence of meditative stages with the textual sequence of *jhānas*. All accounts of the *jhānas* agree in stating that the *jhāna* factor *pīti* is present in *jhānas* 1 and 2, but ceases with the attainment of *jhāna* 3. If *pīti* is correctly identified with the goose-flesh and similar reactions, then the ceasing of those reactions in the course of meditation should correspond to the transition from *jhāna* 2 to *jhāna* 3.

In considering such apparent correspondences, one has to be prepared to put aside long-held notions about the nature of the *jhānas*. The old understanding of *jhāna* 1 as a deeply concentrated state has already been rendered dubious, and that means that both scholars and meditators now have to be ready to re-think the entire *jhāna* series. In such an enterprise intellectual flexibility is naturally essential.

33. Vism 143-144; *Path* 149-150. Mahasi Sayadaw, *Practical Insight Meditation* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971) 21, gives the following brief description: "There arises also in him rapture [*pīti*], causing 'goose-flesh,' falling of tears, tremor in the limbs. It produces in him a subtle thrill and exhilaration. He feels as if on a swing. He even wonders whether he is just giddy."

Another potentially useful landmark for correlating meditative stages with *jhānas* is provided by the classification of the *jhānas* into two categories: *rūpa* and *arūpa*, material and non-material. Common sense indicates that this classification would appropriately be applied to the meditative stages as follows: Those stages in which attention is directed to a physical object—the actual *kaṣiṇa* disk, the breathing, a chanted mantra, etc.—are *rūpa*, material; and those in which it is directed to a mental image, or in which there is no specifiable object at all, are *arūpa*, non-material.³⁴ On this basis, the arising of the mental replica of the meditation object would mark the transition from *jhāna* 4 (the last *rūpa-jhāna*) to *jhāna* 5 (the first *arūpa-jhāna*).

Here a further conflict with Buddhaghosa's account becomes apparent. We have already noted that one of the earlier sub-stages listed in his account, namely the arising of the *uggaha-nimitta*, clearly corresponds to the arising of the replica image in the meditation practice. Yet now we have grounds for inferring that the transition from *jhāna* 4 to *jhāna* 5 corresponds to that same meditative event. This is another problem that will be deferred until later. For the present, the discussion will focus on possible correspondences between the meditative series and the Nikāya *jhāna* series, independently of any connection with Buddhaghosa's sub-stages.

Two points of correspondence between the meditative series and the *jhāna* series have already been tentatively identified. Application of similar reasoning elsewhere in the two series yields the following tentative pattern of correspondence.

34. Present-day writers on *jhāna* often translate the *rūpa* in *rūpa-jhāna* as "fine-material" (e. g. Gunaratana 108, Nyanaponika 70, 71; contrast Solé-Leris, 57). This addition of "fine," for which there is no textual justification, has evidently been felt necessary because of the seeming inappropriateness of "material" (let alone "physical") to describe the very subtle state that *jhāna* 1 is widely assumed to be. Similar considerations no doubt lie behind the "explanation" (e. g., Gunaratana 92-93, following Vism 163) that the body referred to in *jhāna* 3 (*sukhañ ca kāyena paṭisaṃvedeti*) is actually "the mental body," i. e. the mind. When "body" has to be interpreted as meaning "mind," there is clearly something seriously wrong.

*Comparison of Meditative Stages and Jhānas***MEDITATIVE STAGES**

Stage 1: The meditator's efforts at concentrating on the assigned object fail to stop the flow of thought, but do bring a pleasant freedom from affective involvement.

Stage 2: The flow of thought ceases, yielding a pleasant stillness. Trembling, gooseflesh, etc. occur.

Stage 3: The trembling, etc. cease, as the power of attention becomes more balanced. Pleasant bodily feelings of warmth etc. are experienced.

Stage 4: The pleasant bodily feelings cease. Balanced attention to the concentration object continues.

Stage 5: Physical sensation ceases, giving way to a mental image which is a replica of the original concentration object.

Stage 6: There develops a derived image, an abstract counterpart of the preceding replica image.

Stage 7: This abstract image disappears, giving way to mental emptiness, and leaving a sense of being suspended in an endless black vacuum.

JHĀNAS

Jhāna 1: *Vitakka* and *vicāra* are present, along with *pīti* and *sukha*, both of which are born of separation from sense desires and unwholesome states.

Jhāna 2: *Vitakka* and *vicāra* cease with the attaining of *ekodibhāva*. *Pīti* and *sukha* are now *samādhi*-born.

Jhāna 3: *Pīti* ceases, as *upekkhā* and *sati-sampajañña* are established. *Sukha* is now felt with the body.

Jhāna 4: *Sukha* ceases, leaving pure *upekkhā* and *sati*.

Jhāna 5: *Rūpa-*l*paṭigha-*l*nānatta-saññā* ceases. There comes the awareness that *ākāsa* is endless.

Jhāna 6: Endless *ākāsa* is transcended and there comes the awareness that *viññāna* is endless.

Jhāna 7: Endless *viññāna* is transcended and there comes the awareness that nothing whatever exists.

Stage 8: Even the sense of experiencing mental emptiness ceases, as total unconsciousness supervenes; however, the meditator is aware of this only in retrospect.

Jhāna 8: Nothingness is transcended and the realm of neither *saññā* nor non-*saññā* is attained.

The reasoning behind this proposed pattern of correspondences will now be spelled out by considering, in order of their occurrence, those Pāli terms whose meanings are of significance in defining the different *jhānas*.

Vitakka-vicāra. The meaning of these paired terms is a key issue in Stuart-Fox's analysis of *jhānas* 1 and 2. Outside of the *jhāna* context, *vitakka* and *vicāra* together mean, as Rhys Davids and Stede note, "just thought, thinking."³⁵ The evidence adduced by Stuart-Fox indicates that this is also what they mean in the standard *jhāna* formula as we find it in the Nikāyas: *vitakka-vicāra* simply denotes the normal flow of thought, the stream of imagery and verbalizing which, like a television program that is rarely switched off, provides a persistent though vague and unobtrusive background to our everyday waking consciousness.³⁶ Rarely noticed under normal circumstances, the thought-stream becomes only too obvious to the meditator when he or she tries to bring it to a halt and keep all attention focused on the concentration object. Indeed, as practitioners of concentration meditation well know, stopping the flow of thought is one of the most difficult aspects of the practice. Success in this task represents a major breakthrough; and the resulting state of prolonged freedom from thought (*cittass' ekaggatā*) constitutes a radically

35. *Pali-English Dictionary* 620, *vitakka*; and 615, *vicāra*.

36. For details see Bucknell, "Experiments . . ." 103-104. The verbalizing or "inner speech" aspect of the thought-stream is stressed in the textual explanation of *vitakka* as *vaci-saṅkhāra*, "speech-activity," or the precursor of actual physical speech (M i 301). It is also recognized in the equating of *jhāna* 2 with "ariyan silence" (S ii 273). Reinterpretation of "*vitakka-vicāra*" as some kind of focused attention was one of the ad hoc adjustments that became necessary once *ekaggatā* had been attributed to *jhāna* 1. For an example of the inconsistencies to which this reinterpretation continues to give rise, see Phra Khantipalo, ed., *A Treasury of the Buddha's Discourses from the Majjhima-nikaya (Middle Collection)*, vol. 2 (Bangkok: Mahamakut Rajavidyalaya Press, n. d.) 62 (translation of *Dantabhūmi-sutta*). There *vitakka* is translated "thoughts" in one sentence ("Do not think thoughts. . ."), and "initial application" in the next sentence (a description of *jhāna*). The editor acknowledges the inconsistency (note 4), but claims it is unavoidable.

altered state of consciousness, a most satisfying and encouraging attainment.

It is, therefore, to be expected that the thought-stream, and the task of suppressing it, should figure prominently in the textual account of *jhāna* practice. This expectation is fulfilled once one allows that *vitakka-vicāra* in the *jhāna* description has the same meaning it has in other more general contexts in the Nikāyas. These various considerations support the identification of *vitakka-vicāra* with the normal flow of thought; the suppression of *vitakka-vicāra* in the transition from *jhāna* 1 to *jhāna* 2 is the meditative achievement of bringing the flow of thought to a standstill.

Piti. The *jhāna* description indicates two different varieties of *pīti*: separation-born and concentration-born (*viveka-ja* and *samādhi-ja*).³⁷ Accordingly, the “Conation” column of Table 1 presents the following series:

<i>pre-jhāna</i> :	sense desires and unwholesome states
<i>jhāna</i> 1:	separation-born <i>pīti</i>
<i>jhāna</i> 2:	concentration-born <i>pīti</i>
<i>jhāna</i> 3:	equanimous mindfulness and self-possession

Concentration-born *pīti*, the phenomenon of trembling, gooseflesh, etc., is easy to identify; and indeed for an experienced meditator, particularly one who has also done some insight meditation, the progression through the entire series is fairly readily perceived, as follows. The practice can begin only if the meditator is able to curb for a time the mind’s habit of reacting emotionally to the contents of consciousness, i. e. to external sense objects and mental images. Such affective reaction—endless in its variety but adequately covered by the broad opposing categories “liking” and “disliking”—represents a pointless squandering of the energy that is indispensable for attentive focusing, and thus for the establishing of mental onepointedness. The beginning meditator, struggling to block the flow of thought and keep attention fixed on the prescribed concentration object, applies considerable mental effort, sometimes so much as to cause sweat to stream from the body. This blocking and fixing, once achieved, can be maintained with a much lower level of effort; however, inexperienced meditators usually fail to make the appropriate adjustment. Having achieved onepointedness, they continue to put out the same high level of effort, with the result that the excess manifests in the form of un-

37. On these two types, cf. Buddhadasa 157, 159.

controlled physical movements. With practice, meditators learn to diminish the intensity of the attentive focusing, yielding a state of equilibrium which, because it entails no wasteful loss of energy, can be maintained for long periods.³⁸

This view of the process indicates that the relevant *jhāna* terms are to be understood as follows: "Sense desires and unwholesome states" are the varied affective reactions that characterize the pre-*jhāna* condition, i. e. ordinary consciousness. "Separation-born *pīti*" is the high-powered attentive focusing on the concentration object which the meditator brings to bear by redeploing the energy normally expended in affective reaction. "Concentration-born *pīti*" is the phenomenon whose outward manifestation is physical trembling, etc., and whose cause is the maintaining of this high level of attentive focusing after it is no longer needed, i. e. after onepointedness has been established. And "mindfulness and self-possession" is the condition of balanced attention that is ultimately achieved by reducing the intensity of the focusing and establishing the appropriate equilibrium (*upekkhā*).

Sukha. As noted in the textual analysis, *sukha* is said to be present in *jhānas* 1, 2, and 3, but is stated to be felt with the body only in *jhāna* 3. This tallies with the meditator's experience of delightful bodily feelings following the cessation of the physical forms of *pīti*. In addition it suggests, though not unequivocally, that the *sukha* of *jhānas* 1 and 2 is to be understood as purely mental pleasure (i. e. *somanassa*). This again is in keeping with experience: freedom from affective involvement (*jhāna* 1) is a pleasurable state of mind, and so too is steady mental onepointedness (*jhāna* 2). It is doubtful, however, if a phenomenological distinction between "separation-born *sukha*" (*jhāna* 1) and "samādhi-born *sukha*" (*jhāna* 2) can really be drawn.

Ākāsa. We have already noted the appropriateness of the term *ākāsa* ("space") in the title of the first *arūpa-jhāna*: space is all that remains following cessation of the four material elements (earth, water, fire, and air), i. e. following the cessation of *rūpa*. "Realm of endless space" is therefore appropriate as a term for the meditative state in which all input

38. If one may invoke a simile worthy of Buddhaghosa, it is like cooking a stew. The cook at first turns the gas up high in order to bring the contents of the pot to boiling point. If, being inexperienced, he leaves the flame high after that point has been reached, the pot boils over. He then learns to turn down the flame to a level just sufficient to maintain a steady simmer. The flame in these three situations corresponds to separation-born *pīti* in *jhāna* 1, concentration-born *pīti* in *jhāna* 2, and *sati* in *jhāna* 3.

from the five physical sense organs (*rūpa-saññā/ paṭigha-saññā/ nānatta-saññā*) has ceased. For the meditator in this state there exists only the replica image (*dhamma-saññā*). Here it is well to recall that *ākāsa* is not emptiness or nothingness, a fact emphasized by the contrast with the “realm of nothingness” (*jhāna* 7).

Viññāṇa. Given the very incomplete state of research into the actual identities of Buddhist psychological categories, any attempt at interpreting the term *viññāṇa* in the *jhāna* context is necessarily speculative.³⁹ Nevertheless, some useful observations are possible, especially as regards the distinction between *viññāṇa* and *saññā*. Buddhaghosa likens *saññā* to a child’s perception of a coin (awareness of its color, shape, texture, etc.), and *viññāṇa* to an adult’s perception of the same coin (awareness of its purchasing power and usefulness).⁴⁰ This explanation, if valid, indicates that *viññāṇa* is a processed, more abstract derivative of *saññā*. Such an understanding of the relationship between *saññā* and *viññāṇa* makes good sense in the case of *jhānas* 5 and 6, for those two stages can now be interpreted as follows. The awareness of the replica image (*jhāna* 5) is an example of the sixth class of *saññā* (*dhamma-saññā*), while the awareness of the derived abstract image (*jhāna* 6) is an example of the sixth class of *viññāṇa* (*mano-viññāṇa*).⁴¹ The steady persistence of each type of image, as the only content of the meditator’s consciousness, makes good sense of the phrases “[aware] that *ākāsa* is endless” (*jhāna* 5) and “[aware] that *viññāṇa* is endless” (*jhāna* 6).

Akiñcañña. This word, meaning “nothingness,” indicates a meditative state having zero content. The description of *jhāna* 7 includes the statement “*n’atthi kiñcī ti*, [aware] that there is nothing,” which, like the parallel “*ti*” clauses for *jhānas* 5 and 6, implies that the meditator is con-

39. For an example of such research, see Rune E. A. Johansson, “Citta, Mano, Viññāṇa—a Psychosemantic Investigation,” *University of Ceylon Review* 23 (1965): 165-215.

40. *Vism* 436-437; *Path* 480.

41. The six classes of *viññāṇa* are: *cakkhu-viññāṇa*, *sota-*, *ghāna-*, *jivhā-*, *kāya-*, *mano-viññāṇa*. See D ii 308, S iii 61; and cf. the corresponding six classes of *saññā* at note 18. In many contexts the words *viññāṇa* and *saññā* appear to be used loosely and almost interchangeably to denote a general, non-specific awareness or consciousness. Examples are the usage of *viññāṇa* at M i 293 (cited by Johansson 196), and the seeming interchangeability of *viññāṇa*, *saññā*, and *vedanā* at M i 293 (Johansson 202). Nevertheless, it is clearly appropriate to focus on the distinction between *saññā* and *viññāṇa* in the case of *jhānas* 5 and 6, where the two stand contrasted.

scious of the condition. This is, therefore, an accurate description of the meditative state in which, following the disappearance of the abstract image, consciousness is empty of all content and the meditator is left only with a sense of an endless void.⁴²

Neva saññā nāsaññā. Buddhaghosa states that “neither *saññā* nor non-*saññā*” implies also “neither *vedanā* nor non-*vedanā*,” “neither *citta* nor non-*citta*,” and “neither *phassa* nor non-*phassa*.”⁴³ If he is right, then the expression “*neva saññā nāsaññā*,” though specifying only *saññā*, actually covers all mental components.⁴⁴ Now, this expression (“neither *saññā* nor non-*saññā*”) has the form of the fourth member of the Indian tetralemma. To the question “Is there *saññā*?” Indian logic allows not only for “There is” and “There is not,” but also for “There both is and is not” and “There neither is nor is not.” A connection with the meditative practice can now be made. In the eighth and final stage the meditator becomes totally unconscious, but can know this only by inference after the event. Consequently, it can be argued, the presence of consciousness, or of any specified mental factor, can be neither affirmed nor denied. Any question about whether there is consciousness can be answered, strictly speaking, only with “There neither is nor is not.” But

42. The question whether consciousness with zero content is possible continues to be debated within the field of mysticism studies. The case against such a state of consciousness (variously called “contentless experience,” “pure consciousness,” “unmediated consciousness,” etc.) is particularly identified with Steven Katz; the case for it has been no less persuasively put by W. T. Stace and others. See, for example, Steven T. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” in Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 22-74; W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1960) (esp. 110); Philip C. Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine* (Berlin: Mouton, 1982) (esp. 174-175); and Robert K. C. Forman, “Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting,” in Robert K. C. Forman, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 3-49. Also see Roderick S. Bucknell, “Buddhist *Jhāna* as Mystical Experience,” in G. K. Zollschan, J. F. Schumaker, and G. F. Walsh, eds., *Exploring the Paranormal* (Bridport: Prism Press, 1989) 131-149, where (foreshadowing the conclusions reached in the present paper) I identify *jhāna* 7 as contentless experience, and *jhāna* 8 as what one might call contentless non-experience.

43. *Vism* 337; *Path* 367.

44. The four expressions effectively cover all four mental *khandhas*: *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhārā* (*citta*), and *viññāṇa* (*phassa*). In any case, we have the fact (see note 41) that *saññā* is sometimes used in a very loose sense to refer to any consciousness. Also cf. Nyanaponika 164: “*Saññā* stands sometimes for consciousness in its entirety, e. g., in *neva saññā-nāsaññā’ āyatana . . .*”

to non-Indian minds this is philosophical hair-splitting; by generally accepted standards of logicality and phenomenological accuracy, the final meditative stage would be quite correctly described as a state of total unconsciousness. It is therefore noteworthy that there does exist (in the *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta*, belonging to the earliest stratum of the Nikāyas) a single variant version of the account of the eight *jhānas* in which the eighth stage is described straight-forwardly in terms of cessation of *saññā* (*saññā nirujjhantī*).⁴⁵

Implications

The above discussion has shown that the series of eight *jhānas* described at numerous places in the Nikāyas, correlates well with the series of eight stages experienced by practitioners of concentration meditation. One can hardly escape the conclusion that the eight *jhānas* are the eight meditative stages.

This conclusion has serious implications for Buddhaghosa's series of sub-stages. That series is said to precede attainment of each *jhāna*; but, as already noted, some of the sub-stages appear to be identical with cer-

45. D i 184-5. According to this *sutta*, the monk who has attained the realm of nothingness recognizes that he is at the peak of *saññā*, but that to be without *saññā* would be a still higher attainment. He therefore practices further until he "touches cessation" (*nirodha phusati*). This phrase provides a link with a common variant of the *jhāna* description, according to which *jhāna* 8 is followed by a yet higher attainment wherein the meditator "touches cessation" (e. g. M i 455-456). As described in the texts, this ninth attainment, "cessation of perception and feeling" (*saññā-vedayita-nirodha*) or "attainment of cessation" (*nirodha-samāpatti*), tallies well with the state of total unconsciousness already identified with *jhāna* 8. For several good reasons, including its frequent anomalous association with "destruction of the *āsavas*" (e. g. M iii 28), this ninth attainment is under suspicion of being a later addition to what was already a complete list of the stages in concentration meditation—see Paul Griffiths, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-Body Problem* (La Salle, Ill.: Open court, 1986) 16-31; also Bronkhorst 77-78; and King 17. The evidence, particularly the existence of the *Poṭṭhapāda* version, suggests that the description of *jhāna* 8 and the description of *nirodha-samāpatti*, though usually made to follow each other in accounts of the *jhānas*, were in origin two alternative descriptions of one and the same meditative attainment. (The Chinese counterpart of the Pāli *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta* [Taishō vol. 1, 110 b 12-16] does recognize a discrete ninth stage, its description being identical in wording with the above-mentioned descriptions of *jhāna* 8 followed by *nirodha-samāpatti*. This discrepancy between the Pāli and Chinese versions of the *Poṭṭhapāda* is most readily explained on the premise that the unique Pāli version preserves the "original," since the Chinese version can then be attributed to editing designed to yield conformity with the stereotype.)

tain of the *jhānas*. For example, Buddhaghosa's sub-stage characterized by the *paṭibhāga-nimitta* clearly corresponds to the meditative stage in which an abstract image becomes established; and that meditative stage has been shown to correspond also to *jhāna* 6. The first three of Buddhaghosa's sub-stages can be fairly positively equated with *jhānas* in this way, which points to the pattern of correspondences shown in Table 5.⁴⁶ Thus, Buddhaghosa's series of sub-stages duplicates the series of *jhānas*. What Buddhaghosa portrays as steps on the way to the first *jhāna* (and to each subsequent *jhāna*) are in fact steps on the way to the last *jhāna*.

It is now evident that Buddhaghosa's account is not, as generally supposed, merely a more detailed and precise formulation of the account found throughout the Nikāyas. Rather, it is a fundamentally *different* version which is in serious conflict with the Nikāya account. By Buddhaghosa's day the *jhāna* doctrine had been drastically modified. The first and crucial modification, already introduced, it seems, by the earliest Ābhidhammikas, consisted in equating the final stage of the meditative sequence (i. e. the state of total unconsciousness) with attainment of the first *jhāna* rather than the last (*jhāna* 8). Once this new equation had been set up, two further things became necessary: (1) a set of terms for the meditative stages passed through on the way to this new "first *jhāna*"; and (2) a description of a series of further meditative practices whereby the remaining *jhānas* could (allegedly) be attained. Accordingly, the new set of terms, *uggaha-nimitta*, etc., was created and brought into association with a practice consisting in systematic reflec-

46. The correspondence shown in Table 5 is less secure for *upacāra-* and *appanā-samādhi* than it is for the three *nimittas*. It is based in part on the sequence of sub-stages as described in the texts, and that sequence is not entirely clear. The *Vimuttimaggā* (79) states: "And if the (after-)image [*paṭibhāga-nimitta*] appears in his mind, he gains access-meditation [*upacāra-samādhi*]. And if access-meditation appears in his mind, he, by means of this, accomplishes fixed meditation [*appanā-samādhi*]." This indicates the sequence: *paṭibhāga-nimitta*, *upacāra-samādhi*, *appanā-samādhi*. The *Visuddhimaggā* appears to indicate the same sequence, but with some overlap: ". . . he should besides extend the counterpart sign [*paṭibhāga-nimitta*] . . . for it is possible to extend it on reaching access [*upacāra-samādhi*] and on reaching absorption [*appanā-samādhi*]" (Vism 152). However, at another point (Vism 126) the *Visuddhimaggā* refers to ". . . the counterpart sign, which arises together with access concentration [*upacāra-samādhi*] . . ." suggesting that the *paṭibhāga-nimitta* arises simultaneously with *upacāra-samādhi* rather than before it. The resulting slight uncertainty is acknowledged by the query marks in Table 5.

tion on the need to eliminate the next *jhāna* factor, or (in the case of the *arūpa-jhānas*) to move on to the next, more subtle object.

These developments must have been fairly directly linked with the developments discussed by Stuart-Fox, whereby *ekaggatā* was attributed to *jhāna* 1, and *vitakka-vicāra* was reinterpreted as some kind of attentive focusing. Only on the basis of such a revised description of *jhāna* 1 would it have been plausible, and therefore possible, to identify that *jhāna* with a deeply concentrated meditative state. Indeed, it may well be that the seemingly minor step of attributing *ekaggatā* to *jhāna* 1 was what initiated the entire process.

That such modification of the *jhāna* doctrine could come about may seem to raise doubts about the meditative credentials of those responsible for it; it suggests that the authors of the *Vimuttimagga* and *Visuddhimagga* had little practical acquaintance with meditation. However, this does not necessarily follow, because it is only the *interpretation* of the *jhāna* doctrine that is at fault in Buddhaghosa's account; the *description* of the practice (as far as the first attainment of *appanā-samādhi*) is generally satisfactory. Indeed, the fact that a new set of names for the meditative stages was developed, centuries after the correspondences with the original set of *jhānas* had been lost sight of, indicates rather that the tradition of *jhāna* practice had survived intact down to Buddhaghosa's day, and that he at least knew about the stages it entailed.

That the original correspondences between *jhāna* practice and *jhāna* doctrine were lost sight of in the first place is in keeping with the now widely acknowledged development of an early split, within the Sangha, between meditator-monks and scholar-monks.⁴⁷ The Abhidhamma-like statements about the *jhānas* contained in the *Saṅgīti*, *Dasuttara*, and other late *suttas*, are consistent with this split having begun to develop not long after the founder's death.⁴⁸ Already in the early days of the Sangha meditators and Dhamma-expounders were going their separate ways; a serious communication gap was developing.

47. On the split between the scholar-monks and the *jhāyins* or meditators, cf. A iii 355. Also see Sukumar Dutt, *The Buddha and Five After-Centuries* (London: Luzac, 1957) 99, 116-117; Louis de La Vallée Poussin, "Musila et Nārada," *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* 5 (1937): 210-222; and Rod Bucknell and Martin Stuart-Fox, "Did the Buddha Impart an Esoteric Teaching?" *Journal of Indian History* 61.1-3 (1983) 14-15.

48. See D iii 219, D iii 274, where *vitakka* and *vicāra* are said to be lost successively; also cf. M i 294, M iii 25-29, S iv 263, where *ekaggatā* is said to be present in the first *jhāna*.

One negative consequence of Buddhaghosa's complex account of *jhāna* was that mastery of the higher *jhānas* was made to seem a super-human attainment. With the entire series multiplied by itself, as it were, the total number of stages was greatly increased; and no genuine instructions were available for the attainment of any *jhāna* beyond the supposed first one. This effect continues to the present day. To most Buddhist meditators, even "the second *jhāna*" seems hardly a realistic goal, while "the *arūpa-jhānas*" appear impossibly remote. The present revised understanding of the *jhānas* should, therefore, give encouragement to practicing meditators. The path of concentration practice is not nearly as long and arduous as Buddhaghosa made it seem.

Table 1. Diagram of *jhānas* 1 to 4.

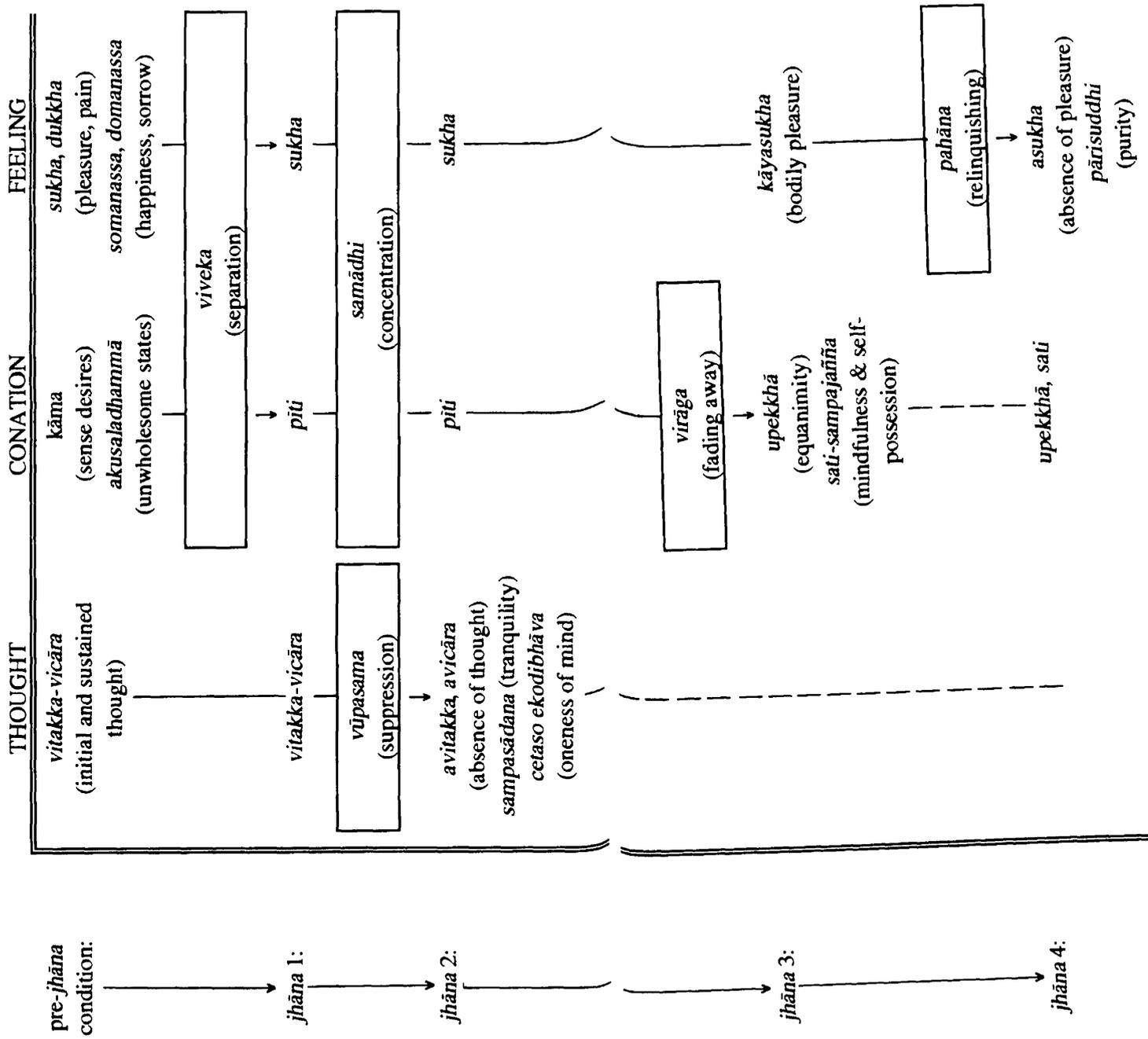


Table 2. Summary of *jhānas* 1 to 4.

	THOUGHT	CONATION	FEELING
<i>jhāna</i> 1	<i>vitakka-vicāra</i>	<i>pīti</i>	<i>sukha</i>
↓	↓		
<i>jhāna</i> 2	<i>ekodibhāva</i>	<i>pīti</i>	<i>sukha</i>
↓		↓	
<i>jhāna</i> 3	<i>ekodibhāva</i>	<i>upekkhā</i>	<i>sukha</i>
↓			↓
<i>jhāna</i> 4	<i>ekodibhāva</i>	<i>upekkhā</i>	<i>pārisuddhi</i>

Table 3. Simplified summary of *jhānas* 1 to 4.

	THOUGHT	CONATION	FEELING
<i>jhāna</i> 1	<i>vitakka-vicāra</i>	<i>pīti</i>	<i>sukha</i>
↓	↓		
<i>jhāna</i> 2	---	<i>pīti</i>	<i>sukha</i>
↓		↓	
<i>jhāna</i> 3	---	---	<i>sukha</i>
↓			↓
<i>jhāna</i> 4	---	---	---

Table 4. Simplified summary of *jhānas* 1 to 5.

	THOUGHT	CONATION	FEELING	SENSE PERCEPTION
<i>jhāna</i> 1	<i>vitakka-vicāra</i>	<i>pīti</i>	<i>sukha</i>	<i>rūpasaññā</i>
↓	↓			
<i>jhāna</i> 2	---	<i>pīti</i>	<i>sukha</i>	<i>rūpasaññā</i>
↓		↓		
<i>jhāna</i> 3	---	---	<i>sukha</i>	<i>rūpasaññā</i>
↓			↓	
<i>jhāna</i> 4	---	---	---	<i>rūpasaññā</i>
↓				↓
<i>jhāna</i> 5	---	---	---	---

Table 5. Equivalences between sub-stages and *jhānas*

SUB-STAGE	JHĀNA
<i>parikamma-nimitta</i> (preliminary sign)	1-4. <i>rūpa-jhānas</i>
<i>uggaha-nimitta</i> (acquired sign)	5. <i>ākāsānañcāyatana</i> (endless space)
<i>paṭibhāga-nimitta</i> (counterpart sign)	6. <i>viññāṇañcāyatana</i> (endless consciousness)
? <i>upacāra-samādhi</i> (access concentration)	7. <i>ākīñcaññāyatana</i> (nothingness)
? <i>appanā-samādhi</i> (fixed concentration)	8. <i>neva saññā nāsaññāyatana</i> (neither perception nor non-perception)

