

The Liberative Role of *Jhānic* Joy (*Pīti*) and Pleasure (*Sukha*) in the Early Buddhist Path to Awakening

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the traditional Buddhist positioning of the four *jhānas* under the category of ‘tranquillity meditation’ and the premise regarding their secondary and superfluous role in the path of liberation. It seeks to show that the common interpretation of the *jhānas* as absorption-concentration, attainments that have no liberative value — a premise that is widely held in the modern *vipassanā* movement — is incompatible with the teachings of the Pāli *Nikāyas*. The paper argues several things. First, that one attains the *jhānas*, not by one-pointed concentration and absorption into a meditation object, but by releasing and letting go of the foothold of the unwholesome mind. Second and related, that the entrance into the first *jhāna* is the actualization and embodiment of insight practice. Third, that *jhānic* joy (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukha*) have significant liberative importance on the path to liberation; they allow the mind to let go of a rooted and basic tendency that causes suffering: the tendency to desire sensual pleasures (*kāma*).

Keywords

early Buddhism, Buddhist meditation, *jhāna*, *satipaṭṭhāna*, *samatha*, *vipassanā*, liberation, Theravāda

Introduction

Buddhist scholars and contemporary academics have long been intrigued by the relationship between the four *jhānas* and insight meditation (what is called *vipassanā-bhāvanā*, and described as the practice of establishing mindfulness (the four *satipaṭṭhānas*)). The existence of what appear to be two different types of

meditative techniques in the Pāli *Nikāyas* evoked a difficulty in understanding the relationship between two significant path factors: *sammā samādhi* (i.e., the four *jhānas*) and *sammā sati* (i.e. the four *satipaṭṭhānas*). If the *jhānas* are a meditative procedure leading to one-pointed absorption disconnected from the experience of the five senses, how can it be combined and integrated with a meditative technique that aims at seeing (*vipassanā*) the true nature of the phenomenal field? If they are a borrowed element from Indian contemplative traditions, how can we explain their central position in the *Nikāyas*' liberation scheme?

Some modern scholars have argued that the attempt to integrate the two methods of meditation into a single process of liberation is especially difficult (Griffiths 1999, 19). Other scholars claim that there appear to be at least two paths to liberation in the *Nikāyas* (Schmithausen 1981, 219), while others argue that one path is more Buddhist than the other (Katz, 1982). According to the Theravāda tradition and many Buddhologists, the attainment of the four *jhānas* is not necessary for liberation¹ or even distinctively Buddhist.² A common modern supposition is that the *jhānas* are a borrowed element from Indian contemplative traditions while the practice of *satipaṭṭhānas* is the only Buddhist innovation (e.g., Gimello 1978; King 1992; Sole-Leris, 1999).

Furthermore, the academic literature about the phenomenology of the four *jhānas* and their relationship with the practice of *satipaṭṭhānas* has mostly recapitulated traditional Theravāda interpretations which mainly perceive the four *jhānas* as *samatha-bhāvanā*, the first part of a 'meditation vehicle' called *samathayāna*, that is, deep *samatha* (peace) prior to the practice of *vipassanā*. This sees the *jhānas* as arising from a meditative technique that aims at increased mental absorption by means of maximal one-pointed concentration, possibly on a synthetic object (*kaṣiṇa*), that is, on a mentally created object.³ In other words, phenomenologically, the *jhānas* are understood as states of absorption which are disconnected from the experience of the five senses.⁴ Most importantly is that the four *jhānas* are almost unanimously perceived in modern Theravāda tradition, and subsequently by most scholars of early Buddhism, as meditative states that can be attained without the development of liberating wisdom (*paññā*), in

1. The Pāli commentaries explain that there is a type of *arahant* called 'dry insight' *arahants* (*sukkha-vipassaka*) who attain liberation without the four *jhānas* (SA II 127). See also DA II 511, MA III 188 and PugA 191.
2. See Crangle 1994, 272; Griffiths 1981, 614; Premasiri 2003, 164.
3. The *kaṣiṇa* is a meditation object that can come in four colours: blue/black, yellow, red and white and as light *kaṣiṇa*, water *kaṣiṇa*, earth *kaṣiṇa*, fire *kaṣiṇa*, air *kaṣiṇa* and limited space *kaṣiṇa* (Vism III 105). According to Buddhaghosa, all types of *kaṣiṇa* can be used for attaining the four *jhānas*. This is contrary to the four element meditation that brings only access-concentration (Vism III 106 and XI 44). At Vism XVIII 5 Buddhaghosa explains that the discernment of the four elements is the way to achieve 'purification of view' for 'one whose vehicle is pure insight'. For a clear presentation of this practice by a contemporary Theravāda meditation teacher, see Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw 2003, 73–79.
4. For Buddhaghosa, and contemporary Theravāda thinkers and meditation teachers, the *jhānas* are not merely one-pointed concentration, but one-pointed absorption. See for example Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu 1980, 156. Furthermore, it seems that as soon as the mind drops the particular meditation object that was chosen for entering the *jhānas*, the happiness and tranquillity disappear and the mind is again open to the flow of defilements. In other words, the *jhānas* are dependent on the particular object one has chosen and cannot be sustained when the awareness moves to another object.

the sense of insight into the three characteristic of experience.⁵ That is, as attainments not relevant to the process of de-conditioning misconceived perceptions.⁶

However, if we assume that the fourfold *jhāna* model is a 'Buddhist' innovation, that is to say, only the term itself was adopted from non-Buddhist sources, in what way are they actually 'Buddhist'? What is the psychological and liberative value of the *jhānas* in the path to awakening? How do they express phenomenologically the unique Buddhist understanding of the path to liberation and the notion of an awakened mind? Is it plausible to argue against the claim of Paul Griffiths (1981, 615) that the fourfold *jhāna* model 'does not itself have soteriological effect'? That is, how do these attainments incline the practitioner's mind towards *nibbāna*?

In this article I wish to offer some answers to the above questions by rethinking the nature of the first *jhāna*, and specifically, the phenomenology of *jhānic* joy (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukha*). I will first argue that the first *jhāna* (and therefore the other three *jhānas* as well) embody a distinct Buddhist view of mental cultivation. I will show how the entrance into the first *jhāna* (and consequently, the progression from one *jhāna* to the next) is the actualization and embodiment of insight and the development of the seven 'awakening factors' (*bojjhaṅga*). In other words, the *jhānas* are not separated and distinguished from the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*; they are the fruit of this type of *bhāvanā* which includes calming the mind but also insight into the nature of experience.

Second, I will demonstrate that *jhānic* joy (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukha*) have significant liberative importance on the path to liberation according to the four

5. See Cousins' statement that 'if *jhāna* practice is undertaken, it will be necessary to return therefrom in order to develop insight' (Cousins 1973, 123). Buddhaghosa states that to attain *jhāna* one must balance the five faculties (Vism IV 45–49) and also the seven *bojjhaṅgas* (IV 51–64). However, it is not clear what kind of wisdom he is referring to in these. Perhaps the wisdom (*paññā*) in this regard is not insight into the three characteristic but an understanding of how to train the mind to attain the *jhānas* (that is, how to still the mind) and also how to re-attain the *jhānas* easily, when they are lost (Vism IV120–122). That is, 'learning one's consciousness sign' (Vism IV 122). Nevertheless, as pointed out to me correctly by Peter Harvey, even though the wisdom Buddhaghosa refers to with regard to the *jhānas* was not about *vipassanā* into the three characteristics, one does see the ever-changing nature of the mind naturally when trying to still it. Furthermore, the mind that emerges from the *jhānas* is also very sensitive to small changes, and subtle *dukkha*. Even if this is so, it seems that for Buddhaghosa, while the *jhānas* are states of absorption that can aid the process of wisdom when stilling the mind, and when emerging from them, one cannot develop insight into the nature of experience while dwelling in them. For modern views on this, see Ajahn Dhammaddaro's statement about absorption concentration that '(T)here is additionally a danger of this fixed concentration. Since it does not generate wisdom it can lead to clinging to bliss or even misuse of the powers of concentration, thereby actually increasing defilements.' (in Kornfield 1977, 266). See also Ajahn Chah (2002, 149) and Buddhaddāsa Bhikkhu's statement that 'a deeply concentrated mind [which clearly refers to the *jhānas*] is in no position to investigate anything. It cannot practice introspection at all; it is in a state of unawareness and is of no use for insight' (in Bucknell and Kang 1997, 107). He further emphasizes that: 'deep concentration is a major obstacle to insight practice' (in Bucknell and Kang 1997, 107; italics in the original).
6. See for example Sarbacker who distinguished between the 'cathexis' (which he associates with both the *jhānas* and the *arūpa samāpattis*) and the *nirodha* aspect of 'catharsis'. According to Sarbacker, the latter intends to reduce the field of awareness and focus on one object of attention, which he characterizes as a process of conditioning. The former on the other hand, is characterized by the releasing of objects and the de-conditioning of habitual process of awareness (Sarbacker 2005, 43–44).

primary *Nikāyas*. Understanding these specific qualities of experience, in the context of the early Buddhist model of mental cultivation, will clarify, I believe, the process by which the mind becomes liberated from the desire for sense pleasure (*kāmachanda*): a deeply rooted tendency of an un-awakened mind. In other words, it will shed light on the relation between these qualities of experience and the path to liberation.

Some preliminary remarks

Much has already been written on the subject of the *jhānas* in the commentarial literature and in the *Visuddhimagga*. A thorough summary of Buddhaghosa's account of the *jhānas* and the practice leading to their attainment has already been conducted by Roderick Bucknell (1993, 387–395). Bucknell's summary shows quite clearly that for Buddhaghosa the *jhānas* are absorptions into a specific object of meditation. He therefore entitles these states 'absorption *samādhi*' (*appanā samādhi*). According to Buddhaghosa, the development of *samādhi* has different levels and not all of them are required for attaining *nibbāna*. Some practitioners develop deep states of concentration, such as the *jhānas* and the *arūpa samāpattis*,⁷ while others develop only 'access concentration' — a level of concentration before the attainment of the first *jhāna*. Buddhaghosa states that this preliminary *samādhi* is enough for the practice of *vipassanā* and the attainment of *nibbāna* (e.g., *Vism* XI 121). Interestingly, the concept of 'momentary concentration' (*khaṇika-samādhi*), appears rarely in the *Visuddhimagga*, yet it became central in certain lineages of contemporary *vipassanā* meditation⁸ which consider this type of *samādhi* as necessary and sufficient for insight practice and the attainment of liberation.⁹

7. A common supposition in the study of Buddhist meditation is that the *jhānas* and the *arūpa-samāpattis* belong to *samatha-yāna* or *samatha-bhāvana*. This view is exemplified by the Theravāda epithet '*arūpa-jhānas*', although this designation does not appear even once in the Pāli *Nikāyas* (while widely used by contemporary Buddhist meditation teachers and scholars of Buddhism). According to the Theravāda tradition and many Buddhologists, the only difference between the *jhānas* and the *arūpa-samāpattis* is the intensity of concentration and abstraction attained. While there is no indication in the *Nikāyas* that one is cut off from sense stimuli while abiding in the four *jhānas*, or that one attains the *jhānas* by focusing the mind on an unchanging object of awareness, there is clear evidence in the *Nikāyas* that for attaining the *arūpa-samāpattis* the meditator must transcend all perception of form and diversity of sense contact. E.g., *D* II 69 and *S* IV 263–268.

8. In most occasions, Buddhaghosa refers to only two kinds of *samādhi*: 'access *samādhi*' (*upacāra samādhi*) and 'absorption *samādhi*' (*appanā samādhi/jhāna*; Cousins 1994–96, 46). In his notes, Cousins gives the reference to this twofold division of *samādhi*: *Vism* III 5ff. However, Buddhaghosa also mentions a threefold *samādhi*: momentary, access and absorption in *Vism* IV 99.

9. See *Vism* I 6. Buddhaghosa considers that when bodily and mental tranquillity matures, it perfects 'threefold concentration, that is, momentary concentration, access concentration and absorption concentration' (*Vism* IV 99). This seems to mean that for perfecting the *samādhi bojhaṅga* one does not need to attain the *jhānas*, as momentary concentration or access concentration might be enough. Note that for Pa Auk Sayadaw, the most renowned teacher of *samatha* meditation in contemporary Theravāda, just as for Buddhaghosa, it is preferable that a yogi will attain the *jhānas* and the *arūpa-samāpattis* as a basis for insight practice as these facilitate it. However, as pointed out by two of Pa Auk Sayadaw's disciples in a book dedicated to his meditation system, 'the venerable Pa Auk Sayadaw indicates that if someone finds, after exhaustive effort, that she or he cannot progress through the *jhānas* beginning

Cousins explains that the path was divided in the Theravāda tradition between the vehicle (*yāna*) of *samatha* or *samādhi* and the vehicle of insight (*vipassanā-yāna*). In the former, the practitioner develops the *jhānas*, and optionally the four formless attainments and the various special powers (*iddhi*), and then embarks on the development of insight (*paññā*). Alternatively, one can choose to pursue the vehicle of insight alone,¹⁰ by developing a minimal degree of concentration (either ‘access concentration’ or ‘momentary concentration’) which is less than the *samādhi* of the *jhānas* (Cousins (1973, 116; Vism XVIII 5). The commentaries state that an *arahant* who attains liberation without the *jhānas* is called ‘liberated by wisdom’ (*paññā-vimutti*). They explain that *paññāvimutti arahant* include ‘those who attain arahantship either as a dry insight meditator (*sukka-vipassaka*) or after emerging from one or another of the four *jhānas*’ (SA II 127).

In other words, the *jhānas* were perceived as a meditation technique for attaining certain higher states of mind that might be used as a basis for insight practice, but only if one wishes or is able to attain these higher states. If the *jhānas* are viewed as attainments in which the mind is absorbed into one object of perception, while *vipassanā* and *paññā* as insight arise from observing the changing phenomenal field, it is difficult to integrate these two factors into one coherent path structure.¹¹

with *ānāpānasati* meditation, the student may be directed to try the four element meditation ... These practitioners would be considered “vipassanā yogis” or “dry-insight yogis,” as they are proceeding directly to the vipassanā practice.’ It is important to bear in mind that for Pa Auk Sayadaw, one cannot attain the *jhānas* using the four elements, as they are objects of momentary concentration. Yet this meditation can lead to access concentration (see also Vism XI 44) and liberation (see Vism XI 117; Snyder and Rasmussen 2009, 120). This view is also presented by Buddhaghosa in Vism XVIII 5 in which he instructs the discernment of the four elements as the way to achieve purification of view for ‘one whose vehicle is pure insight’.

10. A II 157 depicts different ways to attain the path before going on to *arahantship*. In this *sutta* Ānanda declares that the first way is when a monk develops insight preceded by peace (*samathapubbaṅgamaṃ vipassanaṃ bhāveti*); the second way is when a monk develops peace preceded by insight (*vipassanāpubbaṅgamaṃ samathaṃ bhāveti*); the third way is when a monk yokes peace and insight together as a pair (*samathavipassanaṃ yuganaddhaṃ bhāveti*). Cousins points out that the commentary explains that in this option, one attains successive levels of *samatha* (i.e. the *jhānas*) applying insight to each one before developing the next. Cousins (1984, 61). The fourth way is when a monk is gripped by the excitement of the Dhamma (*dhammuddhaccaviggahitaṃ mānaṃ hoti*) and then attains oneness of mind and abides in collectedness. Cousins has reiterated the commentary of the *Paṭisambhīdāmagga* on this last point. The *Paṭisambhīdāmagga* explains that while paying attention to the aggregates, elements, bases and so on as impermanent etc, ten *dhammas* arise. This list became of central importance later on, as the ten defilements of insight. The commentary interprets this fourth way as that of the pure insight follower (*sukka-vipassaka*) (PaṭiA 584). Cousins further elaborates and states that ‘states similar to those of Bodhi are reached, but become the cause of excitement. This obstructs the clarity and onward development of insight’ (Cousins 1984, 61). Note however, that the list at A II 157 is given by Ānanda and not the Buddha (or his *arahant* disciples). Also, there is no reference at the end of the *sutta* to the Buddha’s consent to this list. Furthermore, it is also not evident that *samatha* refers to the *jhānas* while *vipassanā* does not refer to the attainment of the *jhānas* either. Interestingly, the *Nettipakaraṇa* states that the Blessed One taught *samatha* for those with sharp aptitude (*tattha bhagavā tikkhindriyassa samathaṃ upadisi*), *samatha* and *vipassana* for those with medium aptitude (*majjhindriyassa bhagavā samathavipassanaṃ upadisi*) and *vipassanā* for those with weak aptitude (*mudindriyassa bhagavā vipassanaṃ upadisi*; *Nettipakaraṇa* 101).
11. Griffiths has claimed that the attempt to integrate *samatha* and *vipassanā* into a single process of liberation is particularly difficult (1999, 19).

It should be noted, however, that the *Nikāyas* nowhere mention the possibility that *paññā-vimutti arahant*, or any other *arahants* for that matter, achieve liberation without the four *jhānas*.¹² This discrepancy with the *Nikāyas*' account is added to by the commentaries' dubious linkage of the *jhānas* with the *kaṣiṇa* practice,¹³ as a key exemplar method for attaining them, and their view that the *jhānas* are concentration exercises that do not require insight into the three characteristics (what Buddhaghosa defines as *vipassanā*).¹⁴ Further, we cannot find in the *Nikāyas* a statement that the *jhānas* are trance-like experiences in which one is completely cut off from any sensory experience (e.g., Sayalay 2005, 133). On the contrary, the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* for example, states clearly that the 'signs' (*nimitta*) of *samādhi* are the four *satipatṭhānas* (M I 301), not the *kaṣiṇa* or the *brahma-vihāra*, while the *Dantabhūmi Sutta* clearly co-relates the deepening of the practice of *satipatṭhāna* with the attainment of the four *jhānas* (M III 136). Furthermore, the commonly used idioms *samatha-bhāvanā* and *vipassanā-bhāvanā* — which express the idea that the Buddha actually taught in the Pāli *Nikāyas* two distinct meditative procedures — cannot be found in the *Nikāyas*. More than that, there is no clear correlation in the *Nikāyas*, to the best of my knowledge, between the term *samatha* and the attainment of the *jhānas*, while the term *vipassanā* is never defined as the practice of *satipatṭhāna* or associated with the term *sammā-sati*.¹⁵

The first *jhāna*

Let us begin by examining the formulaic description of the first *jhāna*:

Separated from the desires for sensual pleasures, separated from (other) unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first *jhāna*, which is (mental) joy and (bodily) pleasure born of *viveka*, accompanied by thought and reflection. (e.g., M I 174: *bhikkhu vīvecceva kāmehi vīvecceva akusalehi dhammehi savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekajaṃ pītisukhaṃ paṭhamajaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati*).

12. E.g., A IV 451–456 which describes various types of liberated persons. Interestingly, none of them is envisioned without the attainment of the *jhānas*.
13. At Ps III 255–266 the commentator identifies the eight liberations with the *jhānas*, with the second liberation being from *kaṣiṇa* practice. However, there is no textual evidence in the *Nikāyas* for such identification. For example, D III 268 describes the 'ten bases for wholeness' (*dasā kaṣiṇāyatanāni*), as states brought about by perceiving different *kaṣiṇas* (earth, water, fire, wind, blue etc.) 'above, below, on all sides, undivided, unbounded'. Here we can see a specific reference to absorption by the practice of perceiving a chosen *kaṣiṇa*, in such a way that the meditator is completely absorbed in it. However, this *sutta*, or any other *sutta* in the *Nikāyas*, does not link the *kaṣiṇas* with the attainment of the *jhānas*. On the contrary, Alexander Wynne has convincingly shown that the *kaṣiṇas*, the element meditation and the *arūpa samāpattis* are connected, but not with the *jhāna* (Wynne 2007, 30–37).
14. Gethin has also pointed out that the implication of Buddhaghosa's systematization of the path (*magga*) under the headings *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* can be misleading, since it 'can make it appear that much of the account of the development of *samatha* given under the heading "purification of consciousness" (*citta-visuddhi*) has rather little bearing on the remaining five "purifications", which are therefore to be understood more or less exclusively in terms of wisdom and insight' (Gethin 2001, 350).
15. Cousins (1984, 56) has pointed out that actually the term *samatha* is also used as a synonym for *nibbāna* (Sn 732, S III 133, M I 235 D III 54). Editor: though at S IV 360, *samatha* and *vipassanā* form the path to *nibbāna*, and A II 93–94 makes it clear that a practitioner needs both 'internal *samatha* of mind', in which the mind is 'steadied, composed, unified and concentrated', and 'higher *paññā* of insight (*vipassanā*)' into conditioned phenomena.

At first glance, this description (as with the descriptions of the other three *jhānas*) seems simple and therefore it has received little attention from modern Buddhist scholarship, which did not endeavour to understand the exact nature of this state and its liberating value. As I observed above, a common perception in the Theravāda tradition is that this description refers to one-pointed absorption, brought about especially by the practice of one-pointed concentration, albeit supported by mindfulness as a mental factor that protects the mind from agitation and idleness (Vism IV 49).¹⁶ However, I think this state is much more intricate and interesting than thought before, revealing quite a lot about the nature of the Buddhist path to liberation and its psychological and phenomenological aspects.

The attainment of the first *jhāna* has a momentous place in the Buddha's own awakening story: the spontaneous attainment of the first *jhāna* marked a turning point in the Buddha-to-be's spiritual path. After he had practised severe asceticism, he thought to himself:

'even with this severe and hard practice, I have not attained states beyond (ordinary) human (condition), and any distinction in insight and knowledge which fits the noble ones. Could there be a different path to awakening?' Then it occurred to me: 'I realized, that when my father the Sakyan 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 *jhāna*, 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 (*esova maggo bodhāyāti*)'.

(M I 246–247)

This record from the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* is well known in the Buddhist tradition. Although it seems to depict an important experience and realization, one that steered the unawakened Bodhisatta into the correct path to awakening after years of unfruitful meditative and ascetic practices, there are several interesting questions which are unanswered: (1) What was so special in this reflective memory, and the following re-attainment of this state, that enabled the unawakened Gotama to discover the correct path to awakening? (2) Does this attainment have a liberative value to the Buddha's disciples as well? (3) Since there are no apparent techniques through which the Bodhisatta attained this state, how can one retrace the Buddha's own path and attain it? (4) If absorption into one object of meditation is not the way to achieve this state, what is? In other words are there any other prescribed techniques in the *Nikāyas* for entering the first *jhāna*?

Other matters are also unclear: (5) Is this state really cut off from the five sense stimuli as the Theravāda (and Sarvāstivāda) traditions have claimed? And most importantly for this paper: (6) What kind of joy (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukha*) is this attainment referring to (i.e., born of *viveka*), and (7) how should we understand the term *viveka* in this context?

16. It should be noted that in the Theravāda tradition, mindfulness (*sati*) can be used as a basis for *samatha* meditation, and *not* only in the development of liberating wisdom. Erik Braun has pointed out in his book on Ledi Sayadaw's presentation of meditation (which is based on Buddhaghosa) that 'it is noteworthy that mindfulness, contrary to presentations by many later meditation teachers, is not a quality emphasized as more properly in the domain of insight practice. In fact, it also lays the basis for calming meditation' (Braun 2013, 138).

Entering the first *jhāna*

As pointed out rightly by Bucknell (1993, 403), there is no support in the *Nikāyas* for the view that entering the first *jhāna* is the outcome of one-pointed concentration and absorption into a specific meditation object, and even more so, by an absorption into a certain *kaṣiṇa*. There is also no textual evidence for arguing that this attainment is not originally Buddhist. Interestingly, although the *Nikāyas* do not offer specific techniques through which one can enter into the first *jhāna*, many *suttas* describe gradual training (*sikkha*) and development (*bhāvanā*) that lead to the attainment of the *jhānas*, and consequently to liberation.

These common descriptions depict a unique vision of the spiritual path and a structured model; they form a model that places the *jhānas* as the last phase before one attains liberation. This model describes a series of practices that enable the practitioner to possess the qualities that comprise the Buddhist path. These practices are: (1) the training in morality (*sīla-khandha*); (2) the practice of guarding and restraining the impressions brought about by sense experience (*indriya-saṃvara*); and (3) the practice of full awareness (*sampajāna*). Following these practices, numerous *suttas* state that one possesses (*samannāgato*) three qualities: (1) the aggregate of noble virtue, (2) noble restraint of the faculties, and (3) noble mindfulness and full awareness (*sati-sampajāna*).¹⁷ At this point of the spiritual path, one can advance to the start of the last stage, namely resorting to a secluded place, where the instruction is very clear: to ‘sit down, folding the legs crosswise, setting the body erect and establishing mindfulness in front (*parimukhaṃ satiṃ upaṭṭhapetvā*)’ (e.g., M I 181, see also M III 3): the famous opening practice prescribed by the Buddha in the beginning of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and other *suttas* which describe the establishing of *sati*. When this is achieved, the practitioner abandons the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) and enters into the first *jhāna*, after which, he or she attains the other three *jhānas* and then the three types of knowledge.¹⁸ The last type of knowledge is the knowledge of the destruction of the *āsavas* and the attainment of liberation.

This is a well-known path structure in the *Nikāyas* and it clearly points to the obvious fact that only when one possess qualities such as *sīla*, *sampajāna* and *sati*, and abandons the five hindrances that obstruct wisdom (*cetaso upakkilese paññāya dubbalīkaraṇe*, e.g., M III 136), can one enter into the first *jhāna*. In other words, the cultivation of these path factors is a prerequisite for entering the first *jhāna*.

The formulaic description of the first *jhāna* does not however specify how exactly the practitioner abandons the hindrances and enters into the first *jhāna* (except from the above gradual cultivation). For an interesting and helpful description of the process by which one enters the first *jhāna*, I turn to S V 198 which gives us a clue. This *sutta* explains that having made relinquishment (or letting go) his basis (*vossaggārammaṇam karitvā*) one enters into the first *jhāna*.¹⁹

17. E.g., M I 181. See also M I 356–357 where when one has gone through the gradual process of cultivation of virtue, restraint of the senses, moderation in eating, wakefulness, possessing seven good qualities, one then attains the *jhānas* at will, which are the basis for the three types of knowledge. Note that the fourth *jhāna* is the basis for attaining liberation.

18. This gradual description occurs for example at M I 179ff, I 268–270, I 271–277, I 346ff, III 1–5; III 33–36; III 134–136; D I 63ff, III 270; V 206.

19. S V 198: *katamaṇa bhikkhave, samādhindriyaṃ: idha bhikkhave, ariyasāvako vossaggārammaṇaṃ karitvā labhati samādhim, labhati cittassekaggataṃ. So viviceva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi*

The term *vossaga* ('relinquishment' or 'letting go')²⁰ appears repeatedly in the *Nikāyas* as the result (*pariṇāmiṃ*) of cultivating the seven factors of awakening (*bojjhaṅga*) and the five powers (*bala*, S IV 367). The cultivation of these qualities is 'supported by discernment (*vivekanisṣitaṃ*), dispassion and cessation, and resulting in *vossagga* (*vossaggapariṇāmiṃ*).'²¹ In other words, when the seven factors of awakening are developed to a certain extent, the result is relinquishment (*vossagga*). But what is that which is being relinquished?

A possible answer is the recurrent statement that for entering the first *jhāna* one must be separated from the hindrances and (other) unwholesome states (*akusalehi dhammehi*). That is, one has to relinquish or let go of any unwholesomeness for entering the first *jhāna*.²² This is the proximate cause and it is done by developing the other path factors. Further, M III 95 states that Māra (as the personification of unwholesomeness) can find support only in one who does not cultivate (*bhāvita*) and intensify (*bahulikato*) mindfulness referring to the body (*kāyagatā-sati*), which is developed and intensified by the attainment of the four *jhānas* (M III 92–94). The *sutta* further specifies that when one enters the *jhānas*, one has included within himself whatever wholesome states there are that partake of true knowledge (*vijjābhāgiyā*) (M III 94). In other words, for entering the first *jhāna* — a completely wholesome state — all other unwholesome states must be relinquished.²³ As we will see below, this relinquishment seems to occur out of insight into the nature of experience and not from suppression of the defilements due to strong concentration and absorption into one object of meditation.

Note that this is very different from the common perception that for entering the *jhānas* one has to focus the mind on one particular object (such as the *kaṣiṇa*).²⁴ In the above description the Buddha did not state that it is by focusing the mind or being absorbed into a meditation object that one attains the first *jhāna*, but that this is attained by releasing and letting go of unwholesomeness. This is achieved by the cultivation of the seven factors of awakening to some extent,²⁵ and by the practice of morality, sense restraint and observation of phenomena as prescribed

savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekaṃ pītisukhaṃ. Paṭhamajjhānaṃ upasampajja viharati. See also S V 197, and V 225.

20. *Vossagga* is from the Sanskrit verb *ava+srj*: to let go, abandon, relax, to give up etc.
21. E.g., M I 11, See also D III 226; M II 12; M III 88; A II 6.
22. *Vossagga* has various meanings in the *Nikāyas* (e.g. S V 395; A IV 266; MN III 88). In this context, it seems that *vossaga* refers to some degree of 'relinquishment' or 'letting go', and not to complete and final 'relinquishment' (i.e., *nibbāna*). In other words, it refers to relinquishment of what is needed for attaining the *jhānas*. I also suggest that the four *jhānas* become the basis for further letting go that will incline the mind to the attainment of liberation.
23. At M I 435, there is a slightly different description of the way one enters the first *jhāna*: 'with separation from the foundation (of attachment) (*upādhivivekā*), with the abandoning of unwholesome states, with tranquilizing all coarse bodily (activities)' (*sabbaso kāyaduṭṭhullānaṃ paṭipassaddhiyā*) one enters and abides in the first *jhāna*. Here the Buddha describes the first *jhāna* as the outcome of abandonment all that causes suffering — *upadhi* — the foundation of *samsāra* and the cause of *dukkha*. See also M I 454, M II 260.
24. Note, that the term *nimitta* is the usual term which designates 'object', that is, an object of meditation (e.g., S V 156 and M I 273) or the object of the senses (e.g., S III 10).
25. Liberation occurs when the various obstructions of mind are abandoned, and when the seven factors of awakening mature and are fulfilled: 'and what bhikkhus is the path crushing the army of Māra? It is the seven factors of awakening'. See for example S V 99 and S V 329.

in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, which allow one to ‘be endowed with’ noble mindfulness and full awareness.

Given the above, it is no surprise that the Buddha’s memory of the first *jhāna*, and the consequent re-entering into this state just before his awakening, enabled him to re-discover its power and significance in the spiritual path. While his asceticism and meditative practice up to that moment of remembrance did not take him ‘beyond (ordinary) human (condition) or granted him any distinction in insight and knowledge which fits the noble ones’, this attainment did. It allowed him to abandon exactly the thing that he was aiming to abandon:²⁶ the unwholesome states of mind.

Abandoning the *nīvaraṇas*

I have already pointed out that, according to numerous *suttas*, the first *jhāna* is attained when the mind is purified from the hindrances (*nīvaraṇas*). This is a prerequisite for entering the first *jhāna*.²⁷ These hindrances are specifically referred to in various *suttas* as the ‘five hindrances, imperfection of mind that weakens wisdom (*cetaso upakkilese paññāya dubbhikāraṇe*)’. In other words, the five *nīvaraṇas* are obstructive to seeing the nature of experience clearly²⁸ and for perfecting and consummating the seven factors of awakening. A mind that is not purified from these obstructions cannot see clearly.

S V 92 clearly states this, when it has the Buddha compare the purified mind to refined gold, while the five hindrances are likened to impurities that corrupt gold from being malleable, wieldy and radiant:

So too bhikkhus, there are there five corruptions of the mind, corrupted by which the mind is neither malleable nor wieldy nor radiant but brittle and not rightly calmed for destruction of the *āsavas* (*cittassa upakkilesā yehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhaṃ cittaṃ na ceva mudu hoti na ca kammaniyaṃ na ca pabhassaraṃ pabhaṅgu ca, na ca sammāsamādhīyati āsavānaṃ khayāya*). What five? Sense desire ... ill will ... sloth and torpor ... restlessness and remorse ... doubt is a corruption of the mind.²⁹

The *nīvaraṇas* do not just obstruct strong concentration, they actually obstruct liberation. Although it is quite clear that liberation is possible only when the *nīvaraṇas* are absent, the actual way to purify the mind from these five corruptions is not explicated in detail in the *Nikāyas*. Yet the *Nikāyas* do offer a more precise depiction of the mental process (and not a technique) by which the mind is actually purified from the hindrances (presumably by first recognizing them as prescribed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*).³⁰ This depiction reveals the mechanism by which the five *nīvaraṇas* can be abandoned.

It starts with the instruction of sitting down while establishing mindfulness in front of the meditator. This instruction of placing ‘mindfulness in front’ occurs

26. Gethin (2001, 166) has observed concerning the term *vossagga* that ‘its basic import of “release” or “letting go” as a term for the final goal of *nibbāna* or liberation seems clear’.

27. E.g., D I 73, D I 157 and A III 428–429.

28. See M I 323 and S V 127 where the Buddha states that the five *nīvaraṇas* are the cause and condition for lack of knowledge and vision (*ñānadassana*).

29. S V 92. Although here these obstructions are called *upakkilesas*, it is the usual list of the five *nīvaraṇas*.

30. See for example M III 3 and M III 136.

both in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (and in *suttas* that depict the gradual path). I believe that this phrase alludes to the necessity of developing the four establishings of mindfulness as prescribed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* to some extent, and implies the preliminary development of the seven factors of awakening as a prerequisite for abandoning the *nīvaraṇas*. Hence, establishing mindfulness (*sati*), which is done by following the instructions of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (and alternatively the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*), enables the meditator to develop the seven factors of awakening to some degree. This can then be seen as the basis for abandoning the five hindrances.³¹ When mindfulness is established, the Buddha explains that:

1. Abandoning covetousness for the world, he abides with a mind free from covetousness. (Thus) he causes the mind to become pure (*cittaṃ parisodheti*) from covetousness.
2. Abandoning ill will and hatred, he abides with a mind free from ill will, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings. (Thus) he causes the mind to become pure from ill will and hatred.
3. Abandoning sloth and torpor, he abides free from sloth and torpor, having clear perception; he is mindful and fully aware. (Thus) he causes the mind to become pure from sloth and torpor.
4. Abandoning restlessness and remorse, he abides un-agitated with a mind inwardly peaceful. (Thus) he causes the mind to become pure from restlessness and remorse.
5. Abandoning doubt, he abides having gone beyond doubt, un-perplexed about wholesome states. (Thus) he causes the mind to become pure from doubt (M III 3).

From this account it is quite clear that a mind in which these obstructions are not present is a mind where wholesome qualities are present, such as compassion, clear perception, mindfulness, full awareness, peacefulness, and confidence regarding what is wholesome (i.e., confidence regarding what is the path and what it is not). What is more interesting in these accounts is the repeated description that one dwells (*viharati*) with a mind free from the five hindrances (presumably when one enters the first *jhāna* and during the attainments of the other three *jhānas*); by this ‘dwelling’ (*viharati*) the practitioner ‘causes the mind to become pure’ (*cittaṃ parisodheti* e.g., M III 3 and M III 136).

From the way the clauses are constructed in Pāli, it seems that the actual abiding (*viharati*), when the mind is free from the various hindrances is the mechanism by which the mind actually becomes purified. This, I would suggest, is reflected by the last sentence of each clause, since it uses the verb *parisudh* in the causative form (*parisodheti*). Here we find the notion that what causes the mind to become purified from the hindrances is the actual abiding — for a period of time — in a state of mind which is free from these hindrances.

31. See also S V 225 which explains that a person who has confidence (*saddhā*), whose energy (*virīya*) aroused, and mindfulness (*sati*) is established, will gain *samādhī* and oneness of mind (*cittassekaggatā*), though I do not see such ‘oneness’ as meaning absorption, only calm collectedness.

S V 95 also points out that ‘when the five *nīvaraṇas* are not present in the mind, on that occasion, the seven factors of awakening progress to fulfilment by development’.³² In other words, one can start to develop the seven factors of awakening while the mind is not purified from the hindrances. Yet, until the five *nīvaraṇas* are not completely absent from the mind, these wholesome factors cannot be perfected and matured.³³

S V 97 states that ‘these five hindrances are causing blindness, causing lack of vision, causing lack of knowledge, impeding wisdom, tending to vexation, leading away from *nibbāna* (*andhkaraṇā acakkhukaraṇā aññāṇkaraṇā paññānirodhikā vighātapakkhiyā anibbānasamvattanikā*)’. M I 276 further declares that when these hindrances are abandoned, the practitioners sees (*samanupasati*) that there is a situation akin to ‘freedom from debt (*ānanyaṃ*), healthiness (*ārogyaṃ*), release from prison (*bandhanāmokkhaṃ*), freedom from slavery (*bhujissam*) and a land of safety (*khemantabhūmiṃ*)’.³⁴ To put it otherwise, only when the five hindrances are absent, presumably when one is dwelling in the *jhānas*, can the final stages of liberation occur by perfecting and fulfilling the seven factors and by eradicating the *āsavas* (S V 93).

Note that although the *nīvaraṇas* impede wisdom (*paññā*), there is nowhere an explanation of what kind of ‘wisdom’ (*paññā*) they impede. A possible understanding is that when the mind is free from the various obstructions (*nīvaraṇas*) and unwholesome states (*akusala dhammas*), and contains only wholesome factors, experience is perceived without any distorted perception and mental impediments.³⁵ In other words, when the mind is wholesome and pure, it is a ‘state of wisdom’ — a state in which no *akusala dhammas* exist. Thus, it is quite justified to suggest that the *jhānas* are states where wisdom is strong (Dhp 372) since the mind is not hindered by mental obstructions and experience can be seen more clearly.

Viveka

The *Pāli English Dictionary*, and consequently most translators, translates *viveka* as ‘detachment’, ‘separation’ and ‘seclusion’ (PED, p.638). Buddhaghosa explains that *viveka* means either the disappearance of the hindrances, or that the *jhāna* factors are secluded from the hindrances (Vism IV 93).³⁶ However, according to the Sanskrit dictionary, the first meaning of *viveka* is ‘discrimination’.³⁷ The Sanskrit dictionary further describes *viveka* as (1) ‘true knowledge, (2) discretion,

32. Note that in the Chinese and Sanskrit versions of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the section about the contemplation of *dhammas* contain an observation of only the *nīvaraṇas* and the seven *bojjhaṅgas*. This might indicate that these two contemplations are the oldest.

33. See M I 464 which state that only when *pīti* and *sukha* of the first *jhāna* are attained, the hindrances do not invade the mind and remain.

34. M I 60. This type of contemplation, of seeing that the mind is free from hindrances, accords well with the instruction in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* of seeing the non-arising of the hindrances and the presence of the seven factors of awakening. See also S V 127 where the Buddha explains that the *nīvaraṇas* are the cause and condition for the lack of knowledge and vision.

35. See S V 124ff where only when the defilements are not present one can see reality as it actually is and the seven factors of awakening can manifest and be realized.

36. The *Niddesa* classified three types of *viveka*: *kāya-viveka*, *citta-viveka* and *upadhi-viveka* (Nd I 140) while the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* II 220 lists five types of *viveka*.

37. Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (2008).

(3) right judgement, and (4) the faculty of distinguishing and classifying things according to their real properties'. These meanings of the term *viveka* can assist in interpreting this term in the Buddhist context as well since *viveka* has no clear definition in the *Nikāyas* and it seems to be used in different ways. I suggest that the use of *vivicca* and *viveka* in the description of the first *jhāna* (both from the verb *vi+vic*), plays with both meanings of the verb, namely discernment, and the consequent 'seclusion' and letting go. Although there are times that the Buddha changes completely the meaning of a Sanskrit term, sometimes he does not (as for example with terms such as *dukkha*, *sukha*, *mettā* etc.). I believe that the term *viveka* retained in the *Nikāyas* also its Sanskrit meaning as 'discernment'.

This interpretation is supported by a description from S V 301. In this *sutta*, the quality of *viveka* is developed by the practice of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. Anuruddha declares that

Indeed friends, when that bhikkhu is developing and cultivating the four establishments of mindfulness, it is impossible that he will give up the training and return to the lower life. For what reason? Because for a long time his mind has slanted, sloped, and inclined towards *viveka* (*vivekaninnaṃ vivekaṇaṃ vivekaṇaṃ*).

Here Anuruddha clearly states that by seeing clearly (*anupassati*) body, feeling, mind and *dharmas* (the four focuses of mindfulness) the practitioner develops the quality of *viveka*. In this context, it seems that *viveka* is a quality connected to clear seeing, to discernment of the nature of experience.³⁸ We also see here that the *jhānas* follow the development of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* and not some practice of one-pointed concentration.³⁹ The above also indicates that the development of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* inclines the mind toward discerning the true nature of phenomena; discernment that allows the mind to see the disadvantage of sense pleasures, and hence, let go of the desire for them and other unwholesome states (such as clinging and aversion for example).⁴⁰ That is, the cultivation of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* develops the ability to recognize and discern the mechanism of mind and body for seeing clearly into the nature of the various physical and mental phenomena and their interdependency. I would suggest that this discernment of phenomena (*dharmas*), and the consequent seclusion and non-attachment (*vivicca*), is indicated by the term *viveka*, the same *viveka* from which *pīti* and *sukha* of the first *jhāna* are born (M I 60). Discerning the nature of phenomena enables the mind to change its inclinations and let go of our basic unwholesome tendencies and desires, which are based on a mistaken perception of reality.

38. The *Suttanipāta* seems to connect *viveka* with insight into the danger of sensual pleasures, with seeing (*dassina*) and with the attainment of liberation. E.g., Sn 772, 822, 851, 915 and 1065. See also *paviveka* at A I 241.

39. See also A III 423 which states that *sammā-dīṭṭhi* needs to be fulfilled before *sammā-samādhi* (i.e., the four *jhānas*).

40. Note that *viveka* appears as part of what Gethin called the *viveka-nissita* formula which is connected mainly with the maturation of the *bojjhaṅgas* and hence with liberation. Gethin pointed out that it is employed on eighteen occasions: fourteen involve its application to the *bojjhaṅgas*, two to the factors of the path, one to the *indriya* and one to the *bala* (Gethin 2001, 163). He concludes that 'in the *Nikāyas*, the formula is in the first place to be associated with the *bojjhaṅgas* alone' (p.165). In other words, *viveka* is also connected with the practice of insight. It would be unclear to interpret *viveka* in the context of the '*viveka-nissita* formula' as 'seclusion' without insight.

Detachment from the desire for sensual pleasures (*kāma*)

One common understanding of the nature of the *jhāna* attainments is that these states are trance-like experiences in which one is completely cut off from any sensory experience.⁴¹ According to the *Kathāvatthu*, for example, the five senses and related classes of consciousness (eye-consciousness and so forth) do not operate in the *jhānas*.⁴² However, the *Nikāya* description of the first *jhāna* implies something quite different. What the description of the first *jhāna* indicates is that one is separated from two things upon entering the first *jhāna*: *kāmas* and unwholesome states (*akusalehi dhammehi*). For our present enquiry, *kāma* is the pivotal term.

If the first *jhāna* is a state in which the practitioner is cut off from objects of the five senses, it would be reasonable to expect a clear statement in the text that the meditator is cut off from either the five faculties (*indriya*), which refer to the five sense organs⁴³ or from those of the twelve *āyatana*s that designate the five senses and their corresponding objects (i.e., the fields of perception). Further, a statement that one is cut off from ‘the five strings of sensual desire’ (*pañca-kāma-guṇā*), namely forms, sounds, odours, flavours and tangibles would clearly point to the cutting off of sensory experience while in the *jhānas*. In other words, while the term *pañca-kāma-guṇā* describes sense experience (excluding objects of the sixth sense, *mano*), the term *kāma* refers quite straightforwardly to the attachment and clinging to the five *guṇas* together with attachment to the various mental objects related to these.

A III 411 explicitly clarifies the difference between the ‘five strings of sensual desire’ (*pañca-kāma-guṇā*) and *kāma*. In this *sutta*, the Buddha unequivocally stated that *pañca-kāma-guṇā* are desirable aspects of the five sense objects. He further states that the ‘five strings of sensual desire’ which are ‘agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing’ (A III 411) are not *kāma* in the Buddha’s teaching (*apica kho bhikkhave nete kāmā, kāmaguṇā nāmete ariyassa vinaye vuccanti*). *Kāma*, on the contrary, is the ‘thought of desire’ (*saṅkapparāga*). The Buddha explains this point in a beautiful verse

The thought of desire in a person is *kāma*,
not the wonderful sense pleasures (found) in the world’.
The thought of desire in a person is *kāma*.
The wonderful (things) remain as they are in the world,
while the wise men remove the impulse (for them).⁴⁴

41. See for example Sayalay 2005, 133 and Snyder and Rasmussen 2009, 28.

42. Kv XVIII 8, p. 572. According to Tse-Fu Kuan (2005, 299–300), this view was advocated also by the Sarvāstivādins but was negated by the Sautrāntikas. Vism IV 83–84 points out that when entering the first *jhāna* one is secluded from sense pleasures as object. This statement might mean that one can have experience of sense objects without any desire for them.

43. E.g., M I 295. Note that Kuan (2012, 50) has maintained that since the *Kaṇṭaka Sutta* points out that sound (*sadda*) is a thorn (*kaṇṭaka*) for the first *jhāna*, it means that ‘sound is not heard by one who attains the first *jhāna*’. However, this conclusion is a bit strong for what is actually said in the *sutta*, meaning that certain things might agitate one who practises certain meditations (for example, if one practises restraining the senses, restless motion of sights is a thorn). This does not mean that one does not hear in the first *jhānas* or that moving sights are not present when one practises restraint.

44. A III 411: *Saṅkapparāgo purisassa kāmo, nete kāmā yāni citrāni loke. Saṅkapparāgo purisassa kāmo Tīṭṭhanti citrāni tatheva loke. Athettha dhīrā vinayanti chandanti.*

It is safe to say that since the description of the first *jhāna* does not mention that one is separated from the *indriyas*, the five senses related *āyatanas* or from the *kāma-guṇas*, the assumption that one is cut off from sense experience while in the *jhānas* is a misunderstanding.⁴⁵ In light of this, I would suggest that what is *not* present in the experience of the *jhānas* is the movement of desire — the internal movement in which sense objects capture and captivate the mind. Furthermore, according to the description of the first *jhāna*, one is not separated from all mental phenomena, that is, from all objects of the sixth sense (*mano*) but only from *akusala dhammas* — those mental factors that are not conducive to liberation.

In summary, this discussion shows that when the practitioner enters and abides in the first *jhāna*, he or she is in fact separated from the attachment and desire for sensual pleasures — the basic tendency of an ordinary cognition (M I 504) — and not from sense experience.⁴⁶ This conclusion corresponds with the above interpretation of *viveka*. Being separated from the desire for and attachment to sensual pleasures (and other unwholesome states of mind) must originate from insight into the nature of the world of the senses. Desire for sense pleasures is a basic tendency of an un-liberated mind that considers sense pleasure as gratifying and worth seeking. Being separated from this basic tendency, and from other unwholesome states, is quite an advanced realization. It points to the strong insight into the impermanence of the various objects of cognition and to the understanding of the futility in holding on to them. Thus, the *jhānas* are an experience quite different from ordinary experience, but at the same time not separated from it. They are psycho-somatic states in which one has a different experience of being an embodied being in the midst of experience. I will return to this point later on.

An alternative to seeking pain for attaining pleasure

While trying to understand the significance of the first *jhāna* to the Buddhist path to liberation, I have come to think that *jhānic pīti* (mental joy) and *sukha* (bodily pleasure) (see S IV 236) are the key elements for deciphering this state. In the following investigation, we will see that these two factors (*nirāmisā pīti* and *nirāmisā sukha*), which characterize the first and second *jhānas* (*sukha* is also one of the factors of the third *jhāna*) are pleasure and joy that do not involve desire and attachment. On the contrary, they can only arise when one encounters the world of phenomena without clinging. When one discerns (*viveka*) the true nature of phenomena, that is the unreliability, impermanence and lack of substantiality of all phenomena, *jhānic pīti* and *sukha* are born.⁴⁷ Furthermore, it is the very attainment of *jhānic pīti* and *sukha* which allows the mind to abandon completely the desire for sense pleasures (*kāmacchanda*), and the latent tendency (*anusaya*) to seek this type of pleasure.

Let us backtrack for a moment and go into a deeper investigation of the term *kāma*, which is pivotal for understanding the liberative value of the first *jhāna*.

45. Kuan (2005, 299) has observed that the Sauntrātikas objected to the Sarvāstivādin and Theravādin claims that the five classes of consciousness related to the body are absent in one who attained the *jhānas*, and consequently that bodily feelings are also absent.

46. See also M I 293 where it is stated that when one has abandoned the five *indriyas* (which are the five sense bases) then one can know the four *arūpa samāpattis*. That is to say, it seems that these five faculties are still in operation when one attains the four *rūpa jhānas*. See A III 428 which states that for entering the first *jhāna* one has to clearly see the danger in *kāma*.

47. *Sukha* that leads to desire (*rajanīya*) is 'ordinary' *sukha*. See M I 85.

In Buddhist thought, *kāma* — the desire for sense pleasures — is a fundamental impediment to liberation. This is clearly stated by the Buddha at M II 261-2. It is no surprise that sense-based pleasures were considered an impediment to the spiritual life. We can even say that most ascetic-contemplative traditions fear sensual pleasures (M I 85–86, M I 507–508) and conceived these pleasures as the foremost thing to be renounced by a true seeker of spiritual liberation.⁴⁸ In fact, ascetic practices are a means to transcend sensual pleasures which are conceived as mundane.⁴⁹ Some ascetic worldviews connect sensual pleasures with the body, which is viewed as a whole as impure. The desire for sensual pleasures and the body as the vehicle for enjoying these pleasures was regarded as the primary distraction to the spiritual seeker. In the Indian context, an underlying assumption was that painful feelings⁵⁰ caused by *tapas* are the antidote to the desire for these pleasures. In this ascetic context, sense pleasures in general, no matter how subtle, were conceived as inappropriate to the spiritual life.⁵¹ A good example of this attitude was the disgust felt by the five ascetic companions of the unawakened Bodhisatta upon seeing him eat some rice porridge. This incident followed his realization that his severe ascetic practices did not lead him to awakening. That simple meal, indisputably not a feast, was interpreted by the five ascetics as the abandonment of the holy life and return to luxury by their companion (M I 171).

Walter O. Kaelber (1989, 49) has pointed out in his book *Tapta Mārga: Asceticism and Initiation in Vedic India* that one of the connotations of the root *tap*, which can be translated as asceticism,⁵² is to suffer or feel pain. Some forms of *tapas*⁵³ such as hunger, jealousy or anguish was not desirable in the *Vedas* since they are involuntary and were not self-generated for the purpose of knowledge or other religious aims. However, ‘pain’ (*tapas*) can also refer to a self-generated pain.⁵⁴ Self-imposed pain was considered in early Indian texts to ‘burn out’, ‘consume’ and ‘destroy’ evil forces and thereby purify. Kaelber asserts that the prevalent meaning of the word *tapas* in the *Brāhmaṇas* is self-imposed austerities (1989, 51). Kaelber further points out that the early meaning of *tapas*, as pain experienced within the body, once undesirable, became religiously significant and necessary (1989, 45–61). The physical pain was viewed, in the *Brāhmaṇas* and later on, as a way to

48. A good example of this concern is the questions posed to the Buddha by various ascetics in the *Suttanipāṭa*. They are mainly concerned with abandoning sensual pleasures. E.g., Sn 1071, 1088 and 1096.

49. See for example M I 94; M I 307–308.

50. In M I 92, the Buddha describes the Niganthas’ practice as a practice of asceticism which causes pain (*opakkamikā dukkha tībba kharā kaṭukā vedanā vedayanti*). See also M I 246.

51. E.g., M I 305–306: sensual pleasures are conceived by recluses and brahmins to be the reason for a painful rebirth in the future.

52. The root *tap* was used in the *Nikāyas* with reference to painful ascetic practices, practised by some *samaṇas* and *brahmanas*. See for example D I 161; M II 199; S I 29; S IV 330.

53. Note the metaphor the Buddha uses in M II 225 to describe the right time for ascetic practices that cause pain, and the avoidance of such practices: ‘Suppose, bhikkhus, an arrow smith were warming and heating an arrow shaft between two flames, making it straight and workable. When the arrow shaft had been warmed and heated between the two flames and had been made straight and workable, then at a later time he would not again warm and heat the arrow shaft and make it straight and workable’.

54. In the *Nikāyas*, self-mortification is described by the Buddha in the phrase *attakilamathānuyoga* ‘practising self exhaustion’. E.g., S IV 330.

be liberated — as pain that destroys evil, sin and impurities (e.g., *Vasiṣṭha Dharma Śāstra* 20, 47; Kaelber 1989, 57, 58). The Jains understood *karma* as a physical matter that sticks to the soul and prevents it from being liberated.⁵⁵ This notion led to the view that physical asceticism is the way to eliminate bad *karma*. There are, according to the *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (9.9), twenty two hardships such as hunger, thirst, cold heat, seat and posture for practising austerities. There are six external austerities and six internal ones (*Tattvārtha Sūtra* 9.20–27), which are aimed at eliminating *karma*. The difference between a hardship and austerities is that hardship is random while austerities are created by the soul to purify itself from impurities (*Tattvārtha Sūtra*, p.232).

In the Buddha's teaching, desire for sensual pleasures (*kāma*), or better put, desire for sense gratification (together with the pleasure attained dependent on this gratification) is also considered as the central impediment to attaining liberation.⁵⁶ *Kāma* is enumerated in all the different lists of hindrances and obstacles.⁵⁷ It is the first in the list of *āsava*s, the *nīvaraṇa*s, the *ogha*s ('floods'), the *yoga*s ('bonds') and the *anusaya*s ('latent tendencies'; M I 454; M III 233).

We know from the Gotama's own spiritual quest that asceticism, with its severe bodily pain, did not lead him to awakening. Although the young Siddhattha Gotama practised severe asceticism, his desire was not eradicated and liberation was not achieved. In light of this, we may ask in what ways the Buddha's notion of *kāma*, and the way he prescribed to eradicate the basic tendency of mind to cling to sense pleasures were different from other ascetic worldviews of his time? This, I believe, is answered quite directly in the famous story about how he suddenly remembered his attainment of the first *jhāna* when he was younger. This reflective memory, of a unique body-mind attainment, was a pivotal turning point in his spiritual quest. This passage describes how Gotama realized that he should not fear all types of pleasure, as he did when he practiced *tapas*. He understood that there was pleasure (*sukha*) and joy (*pīti*) that lead one to awakening and do not perpetuate desire.⁵⁸ Although the Buddha was quite adamant in explaining that *kāma* should be feared (M I 454), since it is 'the first army of Māra' (Sn 436), he has also stated time and again that another type of pleasure, that of 'renunciation, solitude, peace and awakening (*nekkhammasukhaṃ pavivekasukhaṃ upasamasukhaṃ sambodhisukhaṃ*)' should not be feared. On the contrary, it should

55. *Tattvārtha Sūtra* 8.2. Contrary to this view, the Buddha internalized and 'mentalized' *kamma*. *Kamma* was conceived as volition (*cetanā*) (A III 414); a mental attitude and not a physical matter. From that followed the view that the power to eliminate bad *kamma* and the *āsava*s is a mental power.

56. E.g., M I 454 where the Buddha refers to sensual pleasure (*kāma-sukha*) as filthy, ordinary and ignoble pleasure (*mīhasukhaṃ puthujjanasukhaṃ anariyasukhaṃ*). See also other places where the Buddha states that *kāma* is a primary fetter: M I 305–306; M I 508; M II 261–262; S IV 330–331; Sn 50–51, 768, 771–773, 823, 945, 948, 1071.

57. Note that although *kāma* is the first to be described in the different defilement lists, the commentaries understood clinging to sensual pleasures (*kāma-upādāna*) as a defilement which is abandoned by the path of arahantship while the other three 'types of clinging': clinging to views (*diṭṭhi-upādāna*), clinging to rules and vows (*sīlabbata-upādāna*), clinging to a doctrine of self (*attavāda-upādāna*) are abandoned by the path of stream entry. See Ps II 16.

58. Note, however, that at M II 225, the Buddha permits the practice of asceticism for a certain purpose. But when this purpose is achieved, one should not continue to exert oneself in what is painful. M II 225: *bhikkhu atthāya dukkhāya attānaṃ padaheyya, svāssa attho abhinipphanho hoti. Tasmā na aparena samayena dukkhāya attānaṃ padahati.*

be cultivated: '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 (*na bhāyitabbam*).'⁵⁹ (M III 233–234; see also M I 454; D III 131–132).

In this statement, the Buddha makes an important distinction: there are various types of pleasure; some pleasures should be renounced and feared and some should be cultivated and seen as aids to purify the mind. This distinction points out that different types of pleasures (mental and physical) impact the mind in different ways. The path to awakening, according to the Buddha's own spiritual journey, goes through these types of physical and mental pleasures, presumably having the power to transform and liberate the mind. This was Gotama's breakthrough when he realized that the first *jhāna* leads the way to awakening (*bodhi*; M I 246). According to D III 131–132, this unique understanding — that specific types of pleasure and joy help lead to liberation — incited accusations that the followers of Gotama are addicted to life of devotion to pleasure. However, the Buddha did not hesitate to announce that the end of the spiritual path will be gained through pleasure, not pain, meaning a specific kind of (bodily) pleasure and (mental) joy.

In the context of Indian ascetic practices, this was no trivial realization. Other ascetic traditions considered any kind of pleasure as something that should be avoided, yet after performing painful practices (*tapas*),⁵⁹ the Buddha discovered that pleasure — a specific kind of pleasure — is an important mental and physical factor for purifying and liberating the mind from attachment and clinging. There is pleasure and happiness which operate as a tool for purification. This, however, is not the 'bliss of liberation' (*ānanda*) described in various Indian spiritual texts (i.e., the fruit of liberation) but pleasure attained while one is still 'walking the path'. This realization was a counter understanding to ascetic worldviews about pleasure and pain in the spiritual path.

The *Cūḷadukkhaḥkhandha Sutta* describes an encounter between the Buddha and a number of Nigaṇṭhas, who are presented as those who advocated 'severe, painful, racking, piercing feeling' (*opakkamikā dukkha tippā kharā kaṭukā vedanā vedayanti*) as the way to achieve liberation (M I 93; M II 214; A I 220). At M I 94 the Nigaṇṭhas explain the rationale behind their view:

Pleasure is not to be gained by pleasure; pleasure is to be gained by pain (*sukhena sukhaṃ adhigantabbam, dukkheṇa kho sukhaṃ adhigantabbam*). For were pleasure to be gained through pleasure, then King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha would gain pleasure, since he abides in greater pleasure than the Venerable Gotama. (M I 94, see also M II 36).

This statement indicates that the Nigaṇṭhas classified 'pleasure' (*sukha*) into only two types: first, the pleasure of the senses (*kāma*), which is the kind of pleasure that a wealthy king experiences quite frequently. This type of pleasure should be feared and avoided. The second type of pleasure is pleasure gained at the end of the spiritual path, the pleasure that the Buddha himself described as one of

59. I agree with Wynne's observation that there were different early Brahminic and Jain notions of the spiritual path, and that the meditation of the early *Upanisads* and *Mokṣadharmas* were not part of the extreme asceticism of Jain (and the *Ājīvika*) practices. However, in the above examples (and in the Buddha's own spiritual journey), it is clear that in the Buddha's spiritual milieu, these ascetic notions and practices were not marginal but quite central. Thus, his own teaching was a rejection of asceticism, and also of other ideas and practices, such as the ones taught by Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta (Wynne 2007, 111–113).

the characteristics of *nibbāna*.⁶⁰ For the Nigaṇṭhas, the only acceptable pleasure is the 'ultimate pleasure', the pleasure experienced at the end of the spiritual path. This is the only pleasure which is worthy of seeking, since in their view, there is no pleasure which can be conducive (or necessary) for attaining liberation.

At this point we are still left with two important questions. The first one is what kind of pleasure and happiness is conducive to *nibbāna*, and the second is how does it work? The latter will be addressed shortly, but the former has a straightforward answer given in the *Pāsādika Sutta*. In this *sutta*, the Buddha stated that if wanderers of other sects say that the followers of Gotama are addicted to life of devotion to pleasure, one should answer them that there are four kinds of pleasure which are conducive to *nibbāna*. These are the four *jhānas*:

These (four *jhānas*) are the four kinds of life devoted to pleasure (*sukhallikānuyogā*) which are entirely conducive to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to tranquility, to special knowledge, to full awakening, to *nibbāna*. (D III 131–132)

Most important, however, is the Buddha's statement that one needs 'to know how to define pleasure and knowing that, one should pursue pleasure within oneself'.⁶¹ In this statement, there is a hidden criticism against other traditions that were not able to discern the differences among types of pleasure and joy correctly, with their different qualities and effects on the mind.⁶² *Jhānic pīti* and *sukha*, are states of (mental) joy and (bodily) pleasure which aid the process of purification and liberation (see also M I 464).

The phenomenology of *jhānic pīti* and *sukha*

The *Nikāyas* enumerate three types of *sukha* and *pīti*:⁶³ (1) carnal (*sāmisā*) *sukha* and *pīti*, which are pleasure and happiness that arise in dependence of the five cords of sensual pleasure (the *kāma-guṇas*); (2) spiritual (*nirāmisā*) *sukha* and *pīti*, which are the pleasure and happiness experienced in the *jhānas*; and (3) *sukha*

60. E.g., M I 341: *so anattantapo aparantapo diṭṭheva dhamma nicchāto nibbuto sūtibhuto sukhappaṭisaṃvedī brahmabhūtena attanā*. This description occurs in various places in the *Nikāyas*, see for example M I 413; D III 233; A I 197; A I 181; A II 206. At A IV 14 *sukhappaṭisaṃvedī* is also connected to *nibbāna*.

61. M III 234: '*sukhavinicchayaṃ jaññā, sukhavinicchayaṃ ñatvā ajiḥhattaṃ sukhamanuyuñjeyyā*'ti. The pleasure which needs to be cultivated is the pleasure of the *jhānas*, which are 'the pleasure of renunciation, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of solitude, the pleasure of awakening (*nekkhammasukhaṃ pavivekasukhaṃ upasamasukhaṃ sambodhisukhaṃ*)' (M III 233).

62. The *Kīṭāgiri Sutta* gives further elucidation of the role of certain kinds of feelings in the process of liberation and purification of mind. In this *sutta* the Buddha declares that 'when someone feels a certain kind of pleasant feeling, unwholesome states increase in him and wholesome states diminish; but when someone feels another kind of pleasant feeling, unwholesome states diminish in him and wholesome states increase'. After this statement, the Buddha encourages his disciples to 'enter upon and abide in such a kind of *sukha vedanā*'. M I 475–476: *idhekaccassa evarūpaṃ sukhaṃ vedanaṃ vediyato akusalā dhammā abhivaḍḍhanti. Kusalā dhammā parihāyanti. Idha panehaccassa evarūpaṃ sukhaṃ vedanaṃ vediyato akusalā dhammā parihāyanti. Kusalā dhammā abhivaḍḍhanti ... Tasmāhaṃ evarūpaṃ sukhaṃ vedanaṃ upasampajja viharathā*'ti vadāmi.

63. The *Visuddhimagga* (IV 99) enumerates five kinds of *pīti*. When the five types of *pīti* mature there is bodily and mental tranquillity. When this is matured it perfects the threefold concentration – momentary (*khaṇika samādhi*), access (*upacāra samādhi*) and absorption (*appanā samādhi/jhāna*). For a detailed discussion of *pīti* in the commentarial tradition see Cousins 1973, 120–121.

and *pīti* which are more spiritual than the spiritual (*nirāmisā nirāmisataraṃ*). The latter is explained in this way:

When a bhikkhu whose taints are destroyed reviews his mind liberated from lust (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*), there arises joy. This is called joy more spiritual than the spiritual. (S IV 237; the same is then said about *nirāmisā nirāmisataraṃ sukha*)

This last type of joy and pleasure seems to refer to the same type of pleasure the Nigaṇṭhas accept as worthy. However, it is not relevant to our discussion, since it describes the happiness attained *after* liberation, when the liberated person reviews his mind and realizes that his mind is now liberated.⁶⁴ What is relevant here are spiritual (*nirāmisā*) *sukha* and *pīti*, which are the pleasure and joy experienced in the *jhānas*, and before one attains liberation.

At M II 203–204 the Buddha uses a simile of a fire for describing two types of *pīti*. He asks the brahmin student Subha:

Which of these two fires would have a better flame, colour and radiance — a fire that might burn in dependence on fuel, such as grass and woods, or a fire that might burn independent of fuel such as grass and wood?

Subha of course answers that the one which burns independent on fuel such as grass and wood is better. The Buddha then explains that *pīti* of the first two *jhānas* is like the fire that burns independent of fuel, while *pīti* that depends on the five cords of sensual pleasure is like fire that burns in dependence on fuel (it seems reasonable to assume that this characterization applies to the two types of *sukha* as well). But what does it mean that *jhānic pīti* (and *sukha*) are not dependent on the five cords of sensual pleasure? What does it mean not being dependent on desirable sense experiences, while not being cut off from them?

I believe that the preceding paragraph from the same *sutta* can elucidate this point. In this paragraph, the Buddha explains how the brahmin Pokkharasāti relates to the five cords of sensual pleasure (which produce the unwholesome *pīti*). According to the Buddha:

The brahmin Pokkharasāti is enslaved to these five cords of sensual pleasure, having desire for them, infatuated with them and utterly committed to them, since he enjoys them without seeing the danger in them or understanding the escape from them. (M II 203)

The problem, according to the Buddha, is ignorance regarding the dangers of desiring sense pleasures. Since an ignorant person does not understand the true nature of sensual pleasures, he or she superimposes qualities onto these experi-

64. In the Theravāda view this will be an *arahant*'s experience of *lokuttara jhāna*. While the *jhānas* in the *Nikāyas* are quite clearly a part of the *path* to liberation (before one attains *nibbāna*), for the Abhidhamma and the commentaries the *lokuttara jhānas* are actually seen as occurring in the moment the mind experiences *nibbāna* at the time of becoming a stream-enterer, once returner, non-returner or *arahant*. Brahmāli Bhikkhu, in his paper on this topic, states that 'when *jhāna* or *samādhi* occur in the *suttas*, the commentaries decide whether "ordinary" *jhāna* is meant or *lokuttara-jjhāna*' (2007, 81). He further concludes (2007, 90) that 'the commentaries' redefinition of *jhāna/samādhi* in terms of *lokuttara-jjhāna* has the effect of shifting the reality of *jhāna* from being a factor of the path to becoming a result of the practice of the path. Thus, the *suttas*' insistence on the centrality of *jhāna/samādhi* as a path factor is undermined, an undermining which only serves to seriously distort the timeless message of the Buddha.'

ences which are not true, and thus the happiness that arises in dependence on these experiences is not 'noble' or conducive to liberation. According to Buddhist theory, it creates more desire and perpetuates delusion. However, *jhānic pīti* (and *sukha*) are independent of the five cords of sensual pleasure (but not cut off from sense experience) since they arise due to clear seeing of the danger of sense gratification. When one sees the danger and true nature of sense pleasures, one can enjoy experience without any unwholesome mental states such as clinging, aversion and so forth.⁶⁵

It may be deduced that sense contact can occur without desire, lust and aversion, even before the attainment of awakening, and for prolonged period of time (that is, not as a momentary experience). I would contend that this occurs during the experience of the *jhāna*-states. Experiencing phenomena without these corruptions of mind allows the mind to find delight, not in sense pleasures, but from seeing the true nature of phenomena.⁶⁶

Leading on from this, the next question is whether *jhānic pīti* and *sukha* have a certain purpose in the path to liberation? They arise from clear seeing, but do they bring benefits that clear seeing alone does not bring?

The first *jhāna* as a middle path

In the *Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, the lay disciple Mahānāma asks the Buddha why — even though he understood the *Dhamma* taught by the Blessed One that greed, hatred and delusion are imperfections that defile the mind — at times these unwholesome states still invade his mind and remain. Mahānāma further wonders what (mental) state (*dhamma*) is still un-abandoned by him internally (*ajjhataṃ*), owing to which these defilements still invade his mind (M I 91). The Buddha explains that since he had not abandoned one thing internally, he still enjoys the home life and the gratification born from sensual experiences. He explains that

Even though a noble disciple has clearly seen, as it is, with proper wisdom, how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering (*appassādā kāmā*

65. See also the *Pīti Sutta* where the Buddha stated that when one dwells in the 'pīti of solitude' (*paṇḍitaṃ pītiṃ*) which presumably is *pīti* of the first *jhāna* (also according to Mp III 303), on that occasion, there are no: physical or mental pain (*dukkhaṃ domanassaṃ*) or pleasure (*sukhaṃ somanassaṃ*) associated with desire for sense pleasures (*kāmaṃ upasamhitam*); physical or mental pain associated with the unwholesome (*akusala*); physical or mental pleasure associated with the unwholesome; and physical or mental pain associated with the wholesome (A III 207).

66. It is interesting to mention A IV 415 where Udāyin asks Sāriputta what is pleasure which is not felt (*sukhaṃ yadettha natthi vedayitam*). As an explanation, Sāriputta describes a situation in which one attains the first *jhāna* but is beset by attention and perception accompanied by sensual desire. This seems to contradict the various references which describe the attainment of the first *jhāna* as a state devoid of these very mental states. It seems that this is an 'unworthy *jhāna*', since in a 'worthy *jhāna*' there is no perception (*saññā*) of *kāma*, *byāpāda* and *vihiṃsa*. Peter Harvey, in a private correspondence, suggested that perhaps an 'unworthy *jhāna*' is an unstable state in which the mind is still flipping in and out of *jhāna*. For the former possibility see D I 182 which states that: 'quite secluded from *kāma* and unwholesome states (probably perceptions of ill will and cruelty), he enters and abides in the first *jhāna* ... and whatever perceptions of *kāma* that he previously had disappeared' (so *vivicca kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekaṃ pītisukhaṃ paṭhamam jhānam upasampajja viharati. Tassa yā purimā kāmasaññā sā nirujjhati*).

bahudukkhā) 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 (*aññatreva kāmehi*), other than unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that,⁶⁷ he may still be enticed by sensual pleasures (*anāvaṭṭi kāmesu*). (M I 91)

This explanation is interesting and its implication important. First, it is clear from this answer that the internal mental state Mahānāma did not abandon is *kāma*. Mahānāma's question, together with the Buddha's answer is also significant because it touches upon the relationship between insight and liberation: between the ability to 'see clearly as it is with proper wisdom' (*yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya sudiṭṭhaṃ hoti*) and the purification of mind from the defilements. Mahānāma, though an advanced practitioner who understood that greed, hatred and delusion are imperfections of the mind, wonders why this insight into the *Dhamma* did not eradicate these defilements. This time, the Buddha's answer is surprising: even though a noble disciple has insight into the true nature of sensual pleasures, this insight is not enough for the mind to become disillusioned and disenchanted with sense gratification (and abandon aversion to their passing away or absence). This is a surprising statement. A common perception of Buddhist theory of liberation is that knowing how things really are is enough for attaining liberation.⁶⁸ However, it seems that even though the cause for our attachments is partly cognitive and associated with our distorted perception, according to this *sutta* (and other *suttas* which will be discussed below), this cognitive capacity is not enough for uprooting the tendencies of desire (or for attaining complete liberation). That is, 'wisdom' (*paññā*) and 'clear seeing' (*sudiṭṭhaṃ*) of (experience) 'as it is' (*yathābhūtaṃ*) cannot transform the mind completely. Something else is required for abandoning the attraction and desire for sense pleasures.

A similar point of view is presented in the *Kosambī Sutta* (S II 117–118) regarding the attainment of *nibbāna*. In this *sutta*, the venerable Saviṭṭha asks the venerable Nārada if he has personal knowledge⁶⁹ of the twelve links of Dependent Origination in their arising and cessation modes. Nārada's answer is that he knows and sees (*ahametaṃ jānāmi ahametaṃ passāmi*) the twelve links of Dependent Origination in their arising and cessation modes. Then Saviṭṭha also asks Nārada if he has personal knowledge (*paccattameva ñāṇaṃ*) that '*nibbāna* is the cessation of existence' (*bhavanirodho nibbānaṃ*). Nārada answers that he does know and see *nibbāna* as the cessation of existence. At this point of the investigation, Saviṭṭha concludes that Nārada must be 'an *arahant* whose taints are destroyed' (*nārado arahantaṃ khīṇāsava*). However, Nārada's response is quite unexpected. He says that even though he has clearly seen (*sudiṭṭhaṃ*) as it is (*yathābhūtaṃ*) with correct wisdom

67. It seems that something more peaceful than (mental) joy and (bodily) pleasure, and non-sensual pleasures (i.e., *jhānic pīti* and *sukha*) is the attainment of liberation. It is not probable that the Buddha refers here to the *arūpa samāpatti* since they are mostly referred to as 'those peaceful liberations that transcends forms, the formless attainments' (*te santā vimokkhā atikkamma rūpe āruppā*). See for example S II 123.

68. See for example Sue Hamilton's argument (2000, 122–123) that 'knowing and seeing this process as it really is enable one to "uproot" the binding continuity tendencies of desires coupled with ignorance — both aspect of bondage'.

69. S II 117: *aññatreva āvuso nārada, saddhāya aññatra ruciya aññatra anussavaññatra ākārāparivittakā aññatra diṭṭhinijjhānakkhantiya atthāyasmato nāradaṃ paccattameva ñāṇaṃ*.

(*sammappaññāya*) (similar phrasing to the *Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta*) that *nibbāna* is the cessation of existence, he is not an *arahant* whose taints are destroyed (*na camhi khīṇāsavo*), (unlike *Musīla*, who knows the links of Dependent Origination and is an *arahant*). Nārada explains his statement by a simile of a thirsty traveller, who can see the water in the well, but because there were no rope or a bucket, he could not quench his thirst since he ‘was not able to dwell having touched (the water) with the body’ (*na ca kāyena phusitvā vihareyya*; S II 118).

The *Sekha Sutta* of the *Samyutta-nikāya* (S V 229) is another *sutta* that presents this notion. It explains that a ‘stream-enterer’, a ‘once returner’ and a ‘non-returner’, have seen phenomena as they are⁷⁰ and penetrated with wisdom (*paññā*) the Four Nobles’ Truths, however, since they did not yet ‘dwell having touched with the body’ in the final goal (*kāyena phusitvā viharati*), they are not fully liberated, and thus are still trainees.

These two *suttas* from the *Samyutta-nikāya* elucidate the difference between ‘seeing clearly with proper wisdom’, that is to say, the cognitive insight that arises through seeing the nature of experience (which a *sekha* has achieved), and the actual experience of full freedom (which only *arahants* attain). Although the *Samyutta-nikāya suttas* discuss the nature of *nibbāna* while the *Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta* discusses the eradication of *kāma*, the principle is the same: cognitive understanding cannot transform the mind completely, although it is an important step in the transformation.⁷¹ To quench a thirst, just as to become an *arahant*, one needs more than seeing the way out clearly; one has to experience this quenching reality directly, which these two *suttas* describe as ‘touching with the body’. In just the same way, only by experiencing a different type of bodily and mental pleasure can one actually let go of the rooted desire for sensual pleasures.⁷² The cognitive understanding that these pleasures are impermanent can be the impetus for the spiritual path, but cannot transform completely rooted tendencies. For a deeper change — for the transformation of ordinary, recurrent patterns — a different *embodied* reality must be experienced.⁷³

70. I wish to make clear that translating the term *yathābhūtaṃ* as ‘things as they are’, does not refer to knowledge about the ontology of reality or reality in the scientific sense but to knowledge about how *dukkha* arises and ceases; knowledge about the nature of experience which can liberate the mind from clinging.

71. The *Kosambī Sutta* was interpreted in different ways. Louis La Vallée Poussin, for example, has argued that *Musīla* represents those who know and thereby reach the goal (he identifies *Musīla* as a *Sāṃkhya*), while Nārada, strives to reach the goal through direct experience (and therefore he is a *yogin*, as defined in the *Bhagavad Gītā*). La Vallée Poussin has also contended that insight without meditation is possible and accessible to more than just a few. See Bronkhorst’s summary of his argument (1993, 101–102). Richard Gombrich has suggested (2002, 129) that Nārada interprets *paññā* in the narrow sense of intellection without a deeper realization. In a more recent article Bhikkhu Bodhi (2003, 62) has demonstrated that the *Kosambī Sutta* does not present a tension between two competing visions — the cognitivists and promeditative view of the path — but between a *sekha* and the *arahant*. Bodhi points out that ‘by denying that he (i.e. Nārada) is an *arahant* he is insinuating that an *arahant* has not only directly cognized *nibbāna* but is capable of experiencing it in a meditative state so powerful that one seems to be making bodily contact with it.’ See also Eliade 1969, 175–176.

72. Note that the *Māgandiya Sutta* presents a similar view and elucidates further the liberative role of *jhānic pīti* and *sukha* (M I 504–505).

73. Note that at M II 15–16, the Buddha describes the four *jhānas* elaborately, and explains that the various *jhāna* factors should be experienced in such a way that they pervade the whole body. With reference to the first *jhāna*, the Buddha says that ‘there is no part of the whole

Recalling the question with which we concluded the last section — do *jhānic pīti* and *sukha* have a certain purpose on the path to liberation additional to the contribution of clear seeing? — we find that the *Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta* (and the *Māgandiya Sutta*) provide an answer: *jhānic pīti* and *sukha*, the result of clear seeing, also have a significant liberative role in the path of purification (as *sammā samādhi*). By experiencing *jhānic pīti* and *sukha*, the practitioner can let go of ‘coarse’ attachments, such as the desire for sensual and divine pleasures. Furthermore, I would also observe that *jhānic sukha* — as a pleasurable wholesome physical factor⁷⁴ — is important for the mind to relax, let go and see experience clearly. When one does not experience bodily pain, bodily pleasure arises and allows the mind to become steady for seeing experience as it is:

Which nine things greatly help? Nine conditions rooted in wise attention: when a monk practises wise attention, gladness arises in him; being glad, joy arises. From his feeling joy, his body is calmed; as a result of his calming the body he feels pleasure. From his feeling pleasure, his mind becomes steadied; with his mind thus steadied, he knows and sees (things) as they really are. With his thus knowing and seeing (things) as they really are he becomes disenchanted; with disenchantment he becomes dispassionate, and by dispassion he is liberated.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Given the above, I would like to offer the following final reflection. We all experience moments of ‘spiritual’ pleasure and joy, that is, happiness independent of sense gratification, which may be similar to *jhānic pīti* and *sukha*.⁷⁶ However, these moments are usually brief, and therefore not able to loosen our attachment to sense pleasures. In other words, since this ‘spiritual’ pleasure is so brief, the ordinary mind cannot become familiar enough with it to abandon desire for sense gratification; it is a deep tendency of the human mind. What I would like to suggest is that the power of the *jhānas*, and the experience of *jhānic pīti* and *sukha*, lie in the description of the *jhānas* as attainments in which one ‘enters into and abides in’ (*upasampajja viharati*).⁷⁷ The verb *viharati* indicates that the practitioner

body un-pervaded by the joy and pleasure born of discernment (*nāssa kiñci sabbāvato kāyassa vivekajena pītisukhena apphūtaṃ hoti*).

74. I believe that in the context of the *jhānas*, *sukha* refers specifically to the bodily pleasure. First *sukha* is also present in the third *jhāna* where it is explicitly described as a quality felt in the body (*sukhañca kāyena paṭisaṃvedeti*; M I 174). Furthermore, in the description of the fourth *jhāna*, *somanassa* and *domanassa* are mentioned as well. When *dukkha* and *sukha* are coupled with *somanassa* and *domanassa* they refer specifically to bodily pleasure and bodily pain while *somanassa* and *domanassa* designate happiness and grief respectively (S V 210.)

75. D III 288: *Katame nava dhammā bahukārā? Nava yonisomanasikāramūlakā dhammā: yoniso manasikaroto pāmojjaṃ jāyati, pamuditassa pīti jāyati, pīti manassa kāyo passambhati, passaddhakāyo sukhaṃ vedeti, sukhino cittaṃ samādhīyati, samāhite citte yathābhūtaṃ jānāti. Yathābhūtaṃ jānaṃ passaṃ nibbindati, nibbindaṃ virajjati, virāgā vimuccati. Ime nava dhammā bahukārā.* See also S II 30.

76. The reason I refer to these moments as ‘similar’ to *jhānic pīti* and *sukha* is because *jhānic pīti* and *sukha* are part of a particular body-mind experience that includes specific mental factors and the absence of others. Only this unique configuration of factors can be characterized as *jhāna*. However, this does not mean that one cannot otherwise experience pleasure and happiness which are not connected to sense gratification. Yet, in the absence of the other *jhāna* factors, these *pīti* and *sukha* are perhaps similar to the *jhānic* one, but not identical.

77. See also A III 207.

dwells in, or better put, experiences ‘being in’ this attainment, for a period of time. This abiding enables one to be soaked by such spiritual joy and pleasure. Such a comprehensive experience allows the mind to experience fully and intimately a different mode of being, very different from ordinary experience. Knowing closely that there is a different type of pleasure — one which does not rely on pleasant sense experience — is the way to uproot our deep tendency to consider sense pleasures (*kāma*), as the most gratifying experiences.

It is noteworthy that according to S IV 209, each time a noble disciple does not seek delight in sense pleasure, through his close experience with a different type of pleasure and joy (in all probability the first two *jhānas*), the mind becomes pure. This is how a noble disciple does not create any new unwholesome underlying tendencies.⁷⁸ This is further strengthened by the *Cūlavedalla Sutta*, where the nun Dhammadinnā explains to Visākha that entering the *jhānas* is the way to abandon the underlying tendencies (*anusaya*; M I 303–304) and explains that in the first *jhāna* the underlying tendency to lust is absent which seems to be a catalyst for purifying the mind from these tendencies (she further states that in the next two *jhānas* one will abandon aversion and the underlying tendency to aversion is absent, and when one abides in the fourth *jhāna*, one abandons ignorance and the underlying tendency to ignorance is absent).

In other words, the *jhānas* cannot originate from lust, aversion and ignorance; they do not create any new tendencies. Thus, it is plausible to argue that these attainments are the actual fulfilment of the path of purification, while the first *jhāna* is the experiential actualization of a midpoint between asceticism⁷⁹ and indulgence, between sensual pleasure and bodily pain. This unique pleasurable experience allows the mind to let go of a rooted and basic tendency: the tendency to be attracted to sensual pleasures (*kāma*).

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78. S IV 209: *tassa kāmasukhaṃ nābhinandato yo sukhāya vedanāya rāgānusayo so nānuseti*. This transformative process, in which the mind is independent from pleasant sense experiences, is depicted in the *Salla Sutta*: ‘being contacted by a painful feeling, a noble disciple does not seek delight in the pleasures of the senses. For what reason? Because the instructed noble disciple knows of an escape from painful feeling other than sensual pleasures. Since he does not seek delight in the pleasures of the senses, the underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feeling does not lie behind this. He understands as it really is the origin and the passing away, the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the case of these feelings. (S IV 209).

79. E.g., M III 235–236. Note, that in the *Devadaha Sutta*, in which he criticizes the Niganthas, the Buddha explains that sometimes it is beneficial to exert oneself in what is painful (*dukkhāya pana me attānaṃ padahato akusalā dhammā parihāyanti*), however, he warns that after one achieves his goal (say, unwholesome states diminish), it is not advisable to continue this type of exertion. He continues with the description of the attainment of the four *jhānas*, which are fruitful exertion (*evampi bhikkhave saphalo upakkamo hoti saphalaṃ padhānaṃ*) (M II 226) and concludes with the attainment of liberation.

Abbreviations

(References to Pāli texts are to the Pāli Text Society editions)

A	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
D	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
Kv	<i>Kathāvatthu</i>
M	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Mp	<i>Manorathapūraṇī (Aṅguttara-nikāya-aṭṭhakathā)</i>
Ps	<i>Papañca-sūdanī (Majjhima-nikāya-aṭṭhakathā)</i>
PED	<i>Pali-English Dictionary</i>
S	<i>Saṃyutta-nikāya</i>
SA	<i>Sāratthappakāsinī</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>
Sn	<i>Suttanipāta</i>

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