Reinterpreting the Jhānas, by Roderick S. Bucknell

Reinterpreting the *Jhānas*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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2. Griffiths 59-60; Stuart-Fox 81-82 and *passim*.
3. For a typical example of that conception, see Bhikkhu Buddhadasa, *Ānāpānasati* (Mindfulness of Breathing), trans. Bhikkhu Nagasena, (Bangkok: Sublime Life Mission, 1976). The first 153 pages of Buddhadasa’s book are devoted to the practicalities of attaining the first *jhāna*.
4. Some of the methodological issues raised in this paragraph are noted briefly by Stuart-Fox 94-96. The field of Buddhist Studies will eventually have to come to terms with such issues if it is ever to do justice to meditation.
jhānas (called, in the Abhidhamma and Visuddhimagga, rūpa-jhānas, “material jhānas”) and the four āruppas (arūpa-jhānas, “non-material jhānas”). For convenience, the separate jhānas are henceforth referred to as “jhāna 1,” “jhāna 2,” and so on up to “jhāna 8” (neva sañña nāsaññāyatana). The Nikāya account is examined first, followed by Buddhaghosa’s more elaborate version. The two are then considered in the light of meditative experience. Finally, conclusions are drawn regarding the relationship between the two versions, and regarding the identities of the various stages in terms of meditative practices and attainments. These conclusions are seen as indicating a need to revise some long-established ideas about the jhānas.

Analysis of the Nikāya Account
The often repeated jhāna formula or “pericope” may be provisionally, and rather literally, translated as follows.

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


7. The Pāli reads: 1) viviccave kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkam savicāram vivekajam pitsukham paṭhamam jhānam upasampajja viharati. 2) vitakkavicārānaṁ vupasamā ajjhattam sampasadānanam cetasokodihhāvam avitakkam avicāram samādhijam pitsukham dutiyam jhānam upasampajja viharati. 3) pitiyā ca virāgā upekhako ca viharati sato ca sampajāñno sukhaṁ ca kāye ṣaṭṭhasāmsāsanaṁ adukkham āsukhaṁ upekhāsatipārisuddhiṁ catuttham jhānam upasampajja viharati. 4) sukhassa ca dukkhasa ca pahānaṁ pubbeva somanassa-sadomanassanāṁ atthagāṁ adukkham āsukhaṁ upekhāsatipārisuddhiṁ catuttham jhānam upasampajja viharati. 5) sabbaṁ rupe saññānaṁ samatikkamaṁ paṭīghasānānaṁ atthagāṁ nānaṭṭhasaññanāṁ amanassikārā ananto ākāsā ti ākāsānaṁ cattatthānaṁ viharati. 6) sabbaṁ atthagāṁ suññānaṁ cattatthānaṁ samatikkammā nanantaṁ viññāṇam ananto viññāṇānaṁ viharati. 7) sabbaṁ viññāṇānaṁ cattatthānaṁ samatikkammaṁ nanthaṁ kiñci ti kiñcaḥ cattatthānaṁ viharati. 8) sabbaṁ atthagāṁ suññānaṁ cattatthānaṁ samatikkammaṁ neva saññaṁ cattatthānaṁ viharati.
Jhāna 1: Quite separated from sense desires, separated from unwhole-some mental states, he [the meditator] attains and abides in the first jhāna, in which are present initial thought (vitakka), sustained thought (vicāra), and separation-born zest (piti) and pleasure (sukha).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This translation is tentative and subject to later revision, particularly in respect of the major technical terms. Some of the renderings adopted are based simply on common western usage, for want of more adequate criteria at this early stage in the investigation. For example, piti is provisionally given as “zest” because that word is often preferred in English translations. There are also some syntactic ambiguities in the Pāli, which will be addressed as the analysis proceeds.
The above standard description of the jhānas will now be examined critically within a purely linguistic-textual-doctrinal framework, i.e. without at this stage making any attempt to link it to meditative practice. Since it is the Nikāya description that is in question, the later interpretations and explanations found in the Abhidhamma and the Visuddhimagga will be referred to only sparingly and with caution. Attention focuses first on the four rūpa-jhānas (jhānas 1 to 4).

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

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

8. Buddhaghosa suggests that viveka-ja can be seen as qualifying either pitisukham or jhānam (Vism 145). I follow the former interpretation, as do Nānamoli and many others. See Bhikkhu Nānamoli, trans., The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga) (Berkeley & London: Shambhala, 1976) 151. (Nānamoli's translation is hereafter denoted Path.)
therefore, in (a) the elimination of sense desires and other unwholesome states, and (b) the arising of zest and pleasure.9

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

First usage:
- sukhā: physical and mental pleasure
- dukkha: physical and mental pain

Second usage:
- sukhā: physical pleasure
- dukkha: physical pain
- somanassa: mental pleasure (happiness)
- domanassa: mental pain (sorrow)

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

In the final string of adjectives describing jhāna 4, the pair asukham adukkham (without pleasure, without pain) is followed by upekkhā-sati-
parisuddhiṃ (having purity of equanimity and mindfulness).\textsuperscript{14} Since upekkha and sati were already present in the preceding jhāna, the addition of the word parisuddhiṃ ("purity") evidently signifies that upekkha and sati are now no longer associated with sukha; that is, parisuddhi signifies absence of sukha, just as (in jhāna 3) upekkha signifies absence of piti.

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

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

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

\textsuperscript{14} This seems more likely to be the meaning of the compound than "having mindfulness purified by equanimity," because upekkha (equanimity) was already present in jhāna 3. However, cf. Path 174; Vism 167-168; Vibh 261.
Another characteristic evident in Table 1 is that the composition of the rūpa-jhānas is specified in terms of three implicit categories. This has been emphasized by providing the three relevant columns with headings: "Thought," "Conation," and "Feeling" (i.e. hedonic tone).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

17. In the suttas it appears (with ekaggatā included) at M i 294, M iii 25-29, S iv 263. See Stuart-Fox 85 ff.
of sense perception. However, in the present context it clearly has a wider scope, justifying the usual translation “material perceptions” or “perceptions of matter.” (Buddaghosa explains it as perceptions of the rūpa-jhānas and of their objects—presumably the kasīna disks, the breathing, etc.)

This ambiguity of rūpa-saññā corresponds to an ambiguity in the word rūpa: rūpa is sometimes “visible form” (the object of visual perception) and sometimes “matter, materiality” (as when contrasted with nāma or with arūpa). In the present context, then, rūpa-saññā covers all but the sixth class of saññā, i.e. all but dhamma-saññā, the type that has mental images (dhammas) as its objects.

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

18. The six are: rūpa-saññā, sadda-, gandha-, rasa-, phoṭhabba-, dhamma- saññā. See D ii 309 and S iii 60.
19. See Path 356, and many other translations of the jhāna description.
20. Vism 328; Path 356-357.
22. Vibh 261. See also Vibh 6 and D ii 62, where paṭigha-samphassa is contrasted with adhvivacana-samphassa “verbal (or conceptual, i.e. mental) impression.” (Definition from Nyanatiloka, Buddhist Dictionary [Colombo: Frewin and Co., 1972] 142.) The Vibhaṅga’s explanations of rūpa-saññā and nānatta-saññā are uninformative.
23. In such a succession of parallel terms we may expect either that all have the same meaning (appositional relationship) or that all have different meanings (additive relationship). Clearly the former applies here. (An example of the latter occurs at the beginning of the jhāna 4 formula.) Buddhaghosa’s support for this interpretation of nānatta-saññā comes in the following statement. “‘Through the disappearance of impact-perceptions, through non-attention to variety-perceptions’: by this is meant the relinquishing of and non-attention to all sense-sphere consciousness and its concomitants” (Vism 331). Buddhaghosa implausibly also states that such perceptions were already abandoned in jhāna 1 (Vism 329-330)—evidently in an attempt to reconcile the Nikāya account of the jhānas (which he professes to be explicating) with the Abhidhamma understanding of jhāna 1.
We therefore have here a thrice uttered statement that the transition from *jhāna* 4 to *jhāna* 5 entails the cessation of physical sense perceptions. It is appropriate that this cessation of physical or material perception (*ruṇa-śaṇṭhāmaśānātā-saṇṇā*) coincides with the transition out of the physical or material (*ruṇa*) *jhānas*. The first *arūpa-jhāna* (*jhāna* 5) can, therefore, be readily incorporated into the condensed table of the *jhānas* by adding a further column, headed “Sense Perception” (see Table 4).

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

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

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

25. *Udāna* 80. *atthi bhikkhave tad āyatanaṃ yattha neva paṭhavi na āpo na tejo na váyo na ākāsānañcāyatanam na viśīnāñcāyatanam na akiñcāñnāyatanam na nevasaṅgāñsāyatanam ...* See the *Vibhaṅga* analysis of *jhāna* 5, which explains that *ākāsa* is “untouched by the four primary elements, *asamphuttham catūhi mahābhūtehi*” (*Vibh* 262).
That is itself a daunting problem, discussion of which will be deferred until later in the paper.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

27. The summary is based on *Vism* 118-155; *Path* 122-161. Also, cf. *Vimuttimagga* (Ehara et al.) 71-92.
Much the same procedure applies for each of the remaining jhānas in turn. Thus, for every one of the jhānas, rūpa and arūpa, the meditator passes through the same series of sub-stages: concentration on the chosen physical object (parikamma-nimitta), development of the acquired sign (uggaha-nimitta), development of the counterpart sign (patibhāga-nimitta), access concentration (upacāra-samādhi), and finally fixed concentration (appanā-samādhi). On each occasion, the perfection of appanā-samādhi marks attainment of the relevant jhāna.

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

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

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

29. Regarding these practical details, I am drawing particularly on a series of verbal communications with the late Chaokhun Rajasiddhimuni, formerly meditation master at Khana 5, Wat Mahathat, Bangkok. Though the style of meditation he taught was purported to be vipassanā-bhāvanā, insight meditation (in the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition), it entailed a large component of samatha-bhāvanā, concentration meditation.
ance.\textsuperscript{30} That \textit{kasina} disks are rarely if ever used nowadays is unimportant, because the sequence is largely the same, whether the concentration object is a clay disk, a chanted mantra, or the sensation of the breath at the nostril. (Details are given in the next section.) Buddhaghosa’s account therefore deserves acceptance as a reliable description of the stages in \textit{jhāna} practice as far as the attainment of what he calls “the first \textit{jhāna}.”

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

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

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

\textsuperscript{31} On the question whether \textit{ekaggatā} was worth mentioning as a factor in \textit{jhāna} 1, see the suggestions by Gunaratana, 67 and 84, and the refutation of them by Stuart-Fox, 88.
Another problem with Buddhaghosa’s account is that such details as the uggaha- and patibhāga-nimittas, and upacāra- and appanā-samā- dhi are nowhere explicitly mentioned in the Nikāyas. There is not even any indication in the Nikāyas that attainment of jhāna 1 entails a lengthy sequence of sub-stages such as Buddhaghosa describes. This raises questions concerning the transmission of the teaching. If this very basic information is genuine, why was it not recorded in the Nikāyas? And how did commentators like Upatissa and Buddhaghosa manage to come by it?

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

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

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

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

32. For relevant textual sources, see Bhikkhu Ānāgamoli, Mindfulness of Breathing (Anāpānasati), (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1973). For a very detailed discussion of the practice, see Buddhadasa, op. cit. Buddhadasa’s monastery (Suan Mok, near Chaiya in southern Thailand) is one of the main centers at which ānāpāna-sati is currently taught and practiced on a large scale.
lifting topic. Thus prepared, he or she then closes the eyes and begins concentrating on the breathing.

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

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

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

Following this advice, the meditator finds that the strange movements do soon cease, and facility in concentration improves accordingly. But now a new effect appears, in the form of various delightful bodily feelings: a feeling of lightness as if the body were floating some distance above the seat, or a pervading warmth as if the body were glowing.
A meditator may find it possible to bring about an intensification of these effects; however, the master warns against this. The pleasant feelings are once again unimportant by-products of the practice; the meditator must merely acknowledge their existence and return to the concentration object.

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

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

The meditator continues practicing in this way, until one day, without warning, the abstract image suddenly disappears. Thus deprived of the only content of consciousness, the meditator has the sense of confronting an infinite black vacuum. This strange experience may lead to a loss of composure, with a consequent abrupt return to normal consciousness. However, the master gives reassurance and advises the student to cultivate this state of mental emptiness, entering it at every opportunity. In addition, the master advocates prolonging its duration by making a resolution to that effect at the beginning of each meditation session. Following these instructions, the meditator finds that the state of emptiness stabilizes and, as promised, lasts progressively longer.
In this state of emptiness, as at all previous stages of the practice, the meditator remains conscious of the condition, retaining a detached awareness of the state of zero mental content. However, there eventually comes a time when even this residual consciousness abruptly ceases. The effect is as if the meditator had suddenly gone under total anesthetic, or fallen into deep dreamless sleep. It cannot be said of this state that the meditator experiences it; rather, he or she infers it after the event, perhaps by referring to a clock or some other indicator of the passage of time.

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

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

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

Practice based on a visual object or a mantra therefore differs from practice based on the types of object described earlier (e.g. the breathing) in having a distinct extra stage, that in which the original object is replaced by a mental replica. However, this difference is perhaps more apparent than real. It may well be that concentration on the breathing
does actually give rise to a mental replica of the original tactile sensation; for such a mental replica would naturally be masked by the original sensation, which itself continues. With a visual object, the original sensation can be terminated at any time by shutting the eyes, which makes the replica image clearly distinguishable from it; but one cannot simply stop breathing at will, whence the apparent skipping of one stage. It is the fuller sequence of stages that is presented by Buddhaghosa in his account of the kasiṇa practice.

**Correlating Doctrine and Practice**

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

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

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

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33. Vism 143-144; Path 149-150. Mahasi Sayadaw, *Practical Insight Meditation* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971) 21, gives the following brief description: “There arises also in him rapture [piṭi], causing ‘goose-flesh,’ falling of tears, tremor in the limbs. It produces in him a subtle thrill and exhilaration. He feels as if on a swing. He even wonders whether he is just giddy.”
Another potentially useful landmark for correlating meditative stages with jhānas is provided by the classification of the jhānas into two categories: rūpa and arūpa, material and non-material. Common sense indicates that this classification would appropriately be applied to the meditative stages as follows: Those stages in which attention is directed to a physical object—the actual kasīṇa disk, the breathing, a chanted mantra, etc.—are rūpa, material; and those in which it is directed to a mental image, or in which there is no specifiable object at all, are arūpa, non-material. On this basis, the arising of the mental replica of the meditation object would mark the transition from jhāna 4 (the last rūpa-jhāna) to jhāna 5 (the first arūpa-jhāna).

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

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

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

**MEDITATIVE STAGES**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**JHĀNAS**

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

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

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

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

**Jhāna 5:** Rūpa-çatta-samajñāna ceases. There comes the awareness that ākāsa is endless.

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

**Jhāna 7:** Endless viññāna is transcended and there comes the awareness that nothing whatever exists.
Stage 8: Even the sense of experiencing mental emptiness ceases, as total unconsciousness supervenes; however, the meditator is aware of this only in retrospect.

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

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

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

35. Pali-English Dictionary 620, vitakka; and 615, vicāra.
36. For details see Bucknell, “Experiments . . .” 103-104. The verbalizing or “inner speech” aspect of the thought-stream is stressed in the textual explanation of vitakka as vaci-sānkhāra, “speech-activity,” or the precursor of actual physical speech (M i 301). It is also recognized in the equating of jhāna 2 with “ariyan silence” (S ii 273). Reinterpretation of “vitakka-vicāra” as some kind of focused attention was one of the ad hoc adjustments that became necessary once ekaggatā had been attributed to jhāna 1. For an example of the inconsistencies to which this reinterpretation continues to give rise, see Phra Khanti-palo, ed., A Treasury of the Buddha’s Discourses from the Majjhima-nikāya (Middle Collection), vol. 2 (Bangkok: Mahamakut Rajavi-dyalaya Press, n. d.) 62 (translation of Dantabhūmi-sutta). There vitakka is translated “thoughts” in one sentence (“Do not think thoughts. . .”), and “initial application” in the next sentence (a description of jhāna). The editor acknowledges the inconsistency (note 4), but claims it is unavoidable.
altered state of consciousness, a most satisfying and encouraging attainment.

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-jhāna:</th>
<th>jhāna 1:</th>
<th>jhāna 2:</th>
<th>jhāna 3:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sense desires and unwholesome states</td>
<td>separation-born piti</td>
<td>concentration-born piti</td>
<td>equanimous mindfulness and self-possession</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

37. On these two types, cf. Buddhadasa 157, 159.
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controlled physical movements. With practice, meditators learn to diminish the intensity of the attentive focusing, yielding a state of equilibrium which, because it entails no wasteful loss of energy, can be maintained for long periods.\(^\text{38}\)

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

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

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

\(^{38}\). If one may invoke a simile worthy of Buddhaghosa, it is like cooking a stew. The cook at first turns the gas up high in order to bring the contents of the pot to boiling point. If, being inexperienced, he leaves the flame high after that point has been reached, the pot boils over. He then learns to turn down the flame to a level just sufficient to maintain a steady simmer. The flame in these three situations corresponds to separation-born \textit{pīti} in \textit{\textit{jhāna}} 1, concentration-born \textit{pīti} in \textit{\textit{jhāna}} 2, and \textit{sati} in \textit{\textit{jhāna}} 3.
from the five physical sense organs (rūpa-saḷāṇāl paṭigha-saḷāṇāl nānattā-
saḷāṇā) has ceased. For the meditator in this state there exists only the
replica image (dhamma-saḷāṇā). Here it is well to recall that ākāsa is not
emptiness or nothingness, a fact emphasized by the contrast with the
“realm of nothingness” (jhāna 7).

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

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

39. For an example of such research, see Rune E. A. Johansson, “Citta,
Mano, Viṇṇāṇa—a Psychosemantic Investigation,” University of Ceylon
40. Vism 436-437; Path 480.
41. The six classes of viṇṇāṇa are: cakkhu-viṇṇāṇa, sota-, ghāna-, jivhā-
kaśyā-, mano-viṇṇāṇa. See D ii 308, S iii 61; and cf. the corresponding six
classes of saṇṇā at note 18. In many contexts the words viṇṇāṇa and saṇṇā
appear to be used loosely and almost interchangeably to denote a general,
non-specific awareness or consciousness. Examples are the usage of viṇṇāṇa
at M i 293 (cited by Johansson 196), and the seeming interchangeability of
viṇṇāṇa, saṇṇā, and vedanā at M i 293 (Johansson 202). Nevertheless, it is
clearly appropriate to focus on the distinction between saṇṇā and viṇṇāṇa in
the case of jhānas 5 and 6, where the two stand contrasted.
scious of the condition. This is, therefore, an accurate description of the meditative state in which, following the disappearance of the abstract image, consciousness is empty of all content and the meditator is left only with a sense of an endless void.  

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


43. Vism 337; Path 367.  

44. The four expressions effectively cover all four mental khandhas: vedanā, saññā, sañkhāra (citta), and viññāna (phassa). In any case, we have the fact (see note 41) that saññā is sometimes used in a very loose sense to refer to any consciousness. Also cf. Nyanaponika 164: “Saññā stands sometimes for consciousness in its entirety, e. g., in neva saññā-nāsaññā’ ayatana . . .”
to non-Indian minds this is philosophical hair-splitting; by generally accepted standards of logicality and phenomenological accuracy, the final meditative stage would be quite correctly described as a state of total unconsciousness. It is therefore noteworthy that there does exist (in the Potthapāda-sutta, belonging to the earliest stratum of the Nikāyas) a single variant version of the account of the eight jhānas in which the eighth stage is described straight-forwardly in terms of cessation of saññā (saññā nirujjhangi)\textsuperscript{45}.

**Implications**

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

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

\textsuperscript{45} D i 184-5. According to this sutta, the monk who has attained the realm of nothingness recognizes that he is at the peak of saññā, but that to be without saññā would be a still higher attainment. He therefore practices further until he "touches cessation" (niruddha phusati). This phrase provides a link with a common variant of the jhāna description, according to which jhāna 8 is followed by a yet higher attainment wherein the meditator "touches cessation" (e. g. M i 455-456). As described in the texts, this ninth attainment, "cessation of perception and feeling" (saññā-vedayita-niruddha) or "attainment of cessation" (niruddha-samāppatti), tallies well with the state of total unconsciousness already identified with jhāna 8. For several good reasons, including its frequent anomalous association with "destruction of the āsavas" (e. g. M iii 28), this ninth attainment is under suspicion of being a later addition to what was already a complete list of the stages in concentration meditation—see Paul Griffiths, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-Body Problem* (La Salle, Ill.: Open court, 1986) 16-31; also Bronkhorst 77-78; and King 17. The evidence, particularly the existence of the Poṭṭhapāda version, suggests that the description of jhāna 8 and the description of niruddha-samāppatti, though usually made to follow each other in accounts of the jhānas, were in origin two alternative descriptions of one and the same meditative attainment. (The Chinese counterpart of the Pali Poṭṭhapāda-sutta [Taishō vol. 1, 110 b 12-16] does recognize a discrete ninth stage, its description being identical in wording with the above-mentioned descriptions of jhāna 8 followed by niruddha-samāppatti. This discrepancy between the Pali and Chinese versions of the Poṭṭhapāda is most readily explained on the premise that the unique Pali version preserves the "original," since the Chinese version can then be attributed to editing designed to yield conformity with the stereotype.)
tain of the *jhānas*. For example, Buddhaghosa's sub-stage characterized by the *paṭībhāga-nimitta* clearly corresponds to the meditative stage in which an abstract image becomes established; and that meditative stage has been shown to correspond also to *jhāna 6*. The first three of Buddhaghosa's sub-stages can be fairly positively equated with *jhānas* in this way, which points to the pattern of correspondences shown in Table 5. Thus, Buddhaghosa's series of sub-stages duplicates the series of *jhānas*. What Buddhaghosa portrays as steps on the way to the first *jhāna* (and to each subsequent *jhāna*) are in fact steps on the way to the last *jhāna*.

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

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

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

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

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


48. See D iii 219, D iii 274, where vitakka and vicāra are said to be lost successively; also cf. M i 294, M iii 25-29, S iv 263, where ekaggata is said to be present in the first jhāna.
One negative consequence of Buddhaghosa's complex account of jhāna was that mastery of the higher jhānas was made to seem a super-human attainment. With the entire series multiplied by itself, as it were, the total number of stages was greatly increased; and no genuine instructions were available for the attainment of any jhāna beyond the supposed first one. This effect continues to the present day. To most Buddhist meditators, even "the second jhāna" seems hardly a realistic goal, while "the arūpa-jhānas" appear impossibly remote. The present revised understanding of the jhānas should, therefore, give encouragement to practicing meditators. The path of concentration practice is not nearly as long and arduous as Buddhaghosa made it seem.
Table 2. Summary of *jhānas* 1 to 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jhana</th>
<th>Thought</th>
<th>Conation</th>
<th>Feeling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>vitakka-vicāra</td>
<td>piti</td>
<td>sukha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>ekodibhāva</td>
<td>piti</td>
<td>sukha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>ekodibhāva</td>
<td>upekkhā</td>
<td>sukha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>ekodibhāva</td>
<td>upekkhā</td>
<td>pārisuddhi</td>
</tr>
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</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jhana</th>
<th>Thought</th>
<th>Conation</th>
<th>Feeling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>vitakka-vicāra</td>
<td>piti</td>
<td>sukha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>piti</td>
<td>sukha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>---</td>
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<td>sukha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jhana</th>
<th>Thought</th>
<th>Conation</th>
<th>Feeling</th>
<th>Sense Perception</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>vitakka-vicāra</td>
<td>piti</td>
<td>sukha</td>
<td>rūpasaññā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>piti</td>
<td>sukha</td>
<td>rūpasaññā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>sukha</td>
<td>rūpasaññā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>rūpasaññā</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5. Equivalences between sub-stages and *jhānas*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUB-STAGE</th>
<th>JHĀNA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>parikamma-nimitta (preliminary sign)</td>
<td>1-4. <em>rūpa-jhānas</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uggaha-nimitta (acquired sign)</td>
<td>5. <em>ākāsānañcāyatana</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(endless space)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paññabhāga-nimitta (counterpart sign)</td>
<td>6. <em>viññānañcāyatana</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(endless consciousness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>? upacāra-samādhi (access concentration)</td>
<td>7. <em>ākiñcaññāyatana</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(nothingness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>? appanā-samādhi (fixed concentration)</td>
<td>8. <em>neva saññā nāsaññāyatana</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(neither perception nor non-perception)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>