

Developments in Buddhist Meditation Traditions

the interplay between
theory & practice

Bhikkhu Anālayo



Developments in Buddhist Meditation Traditions

Endorsements

Venerable Bhikkhu Anālayo is undoubtedly one of the most prolific scholarly writers on early Buddhism. His contribution to our understanding of the Buddha's teachings is significant and unique inasmuch as he writes on Buddhist mediative doctrines, as in this book, not just as a competent scholar, but also a committed practitioner. The present work, in which Bhikkhu Anālayo offers his insight into the "dynamic interplay between theory and practice" and skillfully correlates northern sources with the teachings of the Pāli Canon, is yet another demonstration of his immensely admirable combination of scholarship and meditative expertise.

Bhikkhu KL Dhammajoti

In Developments in Buddhist Meditation Traditions: The Interplay Between Theory and Practice, Bhikkhu Anālayo explores the evolution of understanding and practice in early Buddhism. It grounds us in the earliest teachings and then investigates the various ways these teachings were put into practice and transformed over the succeeding centuries. Anālayo's deep scholarship and meditative experience illuminate the development of various views, many of which still engage practitioners today. This is a deeply thoughtful work that will stimulate one's own meditative inquiries.

Joseph Goldstein

A wonderful book for understanding the roots of important early Buddhist teaching and how these teachings and practices have evolved, starting in the first centuries after Buddha's life,

through the millennia since and now in modern times. Ven. Anālayo combines brilliant scholarship with open minded inquiry and offers us a wise perspective on these core teachings and the gradual development of how these practices have been taught and used.

Jack Kornfield

Bhikkhu Anālayo, building upon extensive prior studies, provides us with a rich overview—to my mind, unmatched in modern scholarship—of the unfolding of Buddhist practices over history. He starts with accounts of meditation in the *Āgamas*, extends to Abhidharma works, and reaches to even include parallels with later developments in Tibetan and East Asian Buddhism. Rare is the scholar who embodies this breadth of erudition in the languages and traditions of Buddhism, who is at the same time so deeply steeped in the practices that he examines. The end result is a work that will be warmly appreciated by practitioners and scholars alike.

A. Charles Muller

Venerable Anālayo is an exceptional scholar who combines a practitioner's viewpoint with philological rigor. Based on meticulous comparisons of relevant passages from the Pāli and Chinese Buddhist scriptures on meditation, he suggests that there was cross-fertilization between texts and practice. Not only did textual development affect practice; practitioners' experiences also exerted influence on the texts. This is a significant suggestion that will surely attract the attention of scholars interested in Buddhist practice.

Nobuyoshi Yamabe

Also by Bhikkhu Anālayo:

Bhikkhunī Ordination from Ancient India to Contemporary Sri Lanka

Buddhapada and the Bodhisattva Path

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The Scripture on the Monk Nāgasena

Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions

Vinaya Studies

**Developments in Buddhist
Meditation Traditions
The Interplay Between
Theory and Practice**

Bhikkhu Anālayo

Published by
Barre Center for Buddhist Studies
Barre, Massachusetts
USA

www.bcbsdharma.org

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Title: Developments in Buddhist Meditation Traditions: The
Interplay Between Theory and Practice.

ISBN: 979-8-78-196279-2

As an act of *dhammadāna*, Bhikkhu Anālayo has waved royalty
payments for this book.

Cover image by William and Jordyn

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Acknowledgement

I am indebted to Bhikkhu Brahmāli, Chris Burke, Adam Clarke, Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā, Linda Grace, Stephen Jenkins, Dawn P. Neal, Bhikkhu Pāladhammika, Michael Radich, Lambert Schmithausen, Daniel M. Stuart, and Joseph Walser for commenting on all or part of the material compiled in this book and to the staff, board members, and supporters of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies for providing me with the facilities needed to do my practice and writing.

Introduction

The present book serves as a complement to my *Early Buddhist Meditation Studies*, which in four chapters explored the topics of mindfulness, the path (to awakening), absorption, and *brahmavihāra*. The present book takes up the same or closely related topics, but from the diachronic perspective of their historical development. In other words, whereas in the previous book my main concern was to delineate the early Buddhist position, in the present study I proceed from exploring that to discerning changes and reinterpretations that appear to have taken place in the course of Buddhism's long history.

Apart from this different focus, my procedure is closely similar, in that I have put together revised shorter or longer extracts from previously published articles that are relevant to my main topics and combined these with some new material.¹ The main topics are: the trajectory that led from the detailed instructions on mindfulness of breathing in sixteen distinct steps to the practice of exclusively focusing just on the breath; the notion of the mind's intrinsic luminosity as a key element in conceptions that no longer give a prominent place to the idea of a meditative progress along a path; a reevaluation of the significance of absorption attainment as indispensable for progress to the first stage of awakening and at times even inherently liberating in itself; and the arising of the notion that the immeasurable or boundless state of compassion should be meditatively directed toward oneself.

¹ The relevant publications are Anālayo 2012b, 2015b, 2017c, 2019d, 2020a, and 2021f.

With all of these trajectories, my intention is not to posit what is early as right and what comes later as wrong. In fact, some of the developments surveyed here have yielded intriguing new perspectives that have won widespread appeal. In full acknowledgment of that, my aim is only to provide a text-historical perspective, in particular with a view to highlighting a dynamic interplay between theory and practice. I attempt to show how changes during textual transmission led to new perspectives on meditation practices, whose outcome in turn influenced textual accounts. Discerning such developments reveals a fascinating cross-fertilization between the texts and meditation practices, similar in kind to a cross-fertilization that can be observed between the texts and ancient Indian art.²

From a practice-related viewpoint, my presentation is meant to enable meditators to position the teachings and practices they follow within a historical perspective. Such a perspective can help to accommodate different traditions within its purview as equally justified articulations of meditative cultivation of the mind, being the result of a dynamic interplay between actual practice and its theoretical, social, and cultural embedding. In other words, my exploration intends to invite applying the principles of conditionality and not self (in the sense of non-identification) to meditation teachings and lineages themselves, viewing them as the product of conditions, without appropriating them with clinging.

In the end, any meditation technique or practice is best viewed as a raft, which has only an instrumental purpose in leading onward on the path to freedom.

² See Anālayo 2012d and 2017a.

Mindfulness of Breathing

Introduction

In the first chapter of *Early Buddhist Meditation Studies*, I explored the early Buddhist conception of mindfulness in relation to memory as well as to the body, briefly taking up mindfulness of breathing from the viewpoint of its relation to *sati-paṭṭhāna* meditation. In what follows I examine the instructions for mindfulness of breathing in more detail. My exploration begins by surveying the instructions on the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing, followed by examining a process of gradual reduction of this meditative progression until eventually the task becomes just focusing on the breath to the exclusion of everything else.

A central question in this chapter is whether indications can be found that explain why in later times counting the breath and associated techniques became increasingly prominent, whereas earlier the sixteen steps were apparently seen as sufficient in themselves, without a need for additional tools.¹

The Preliminaries to the Sixteen Steps

Instructions on mindfulness of breathing in the early discourses take the form of sixteen distinct steps of practice. Besides

¹ As already noted by Dhammadīpa 2009: 574: “now the question arises why there is no factor system [i.e., counting and related methods] mentioned in the early canon and early Abhidhamma/Abhidharma, but then later it becomes so important for the technique of *ānāpānasati/smṛti*? This is another complicated issue that would require a detailed study before it could be answered fully.”

being the theme of the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* and its parallels,² such instructions are also found in a section in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and the *Samyukta-āgama* dedicated to the topic of mindfulness of breathing. My exploration begins by surveying these instructions in detail. Readers interested mainly in the gradual reduction of these instructions may prefer to turn directly to the bottom of page 26 below.

The actual instructions for mindfulness of breathing are preceded by a description of preliminaries, which proceeds as follows (translating first the Pāli version and then its Chinese parallel):³

Gone to a forest, or gone to the root of a tree, or gone to an empty dwelling one sits down, having folded the legs crosswise, keeping the body erect and, having established mindfulness to the fore, mindful one breathes in and mindful one breathes out (SN 54.1).

One enters into a forest [or] an empty dwelling, [or goes to] the root of a tree or a vacant open ground. Seated properly with straight body and keeping mindfulness to the fore, one abandons lustful cravings in the world and becomes puri-

² For a comparative study of MN 118 see Anālayo 2011b: 664–673.

³ SN 54.1 at SN V 311,10: *araññagato vā rukkhamūlagato vā suññā-gāragato vā nisīdati pallaṅkaṃ ābhujitvā ujum kāyaṃ pañidhāya parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā; so sato va assasati, sato va* (C^e and S^e without *va*) *passasati* and SĀ 803 at T II 206a22: 或入林中, 閑房, 樹下, 或空露地. 端身正坐, 繫念面前, 斷世貪愛, 離欲清淨, 瞋恚, 睡眠, 掉悔, 疑斷, 度諸疑惑, 於諸善法心得決定, 遠離五蓋煩惱於心, 令慧力羸, 為障礙分, 不趣涅槃. 念於內息, 繫念善學, 念於外息, 繫念善學. As part of an attempt at gender-sensitive writing, here and elsewhere I tend to leave out the standard reference to a *bhikkhu*/比丘 found at the outset of such meditation instructions.

fied by removing sensuality, and one abandons ill will, sloth-and-torpor, restlessness-and-worry, and doubt, and by crossing over any perplexity the mind gains certainty in wholesome states and is far removed from the five hindrances that afflict the mind, that cause a weakening of the power of wisdom, that partake of being obstructive, and that do not lead to Nirvana.

One is mindful of breathing in, training well to keep being mindful of it, and one is mindful breathing out, training well to keep being mindful of it (SĀ 803).

Both versions of the preliminaries present a secluded place as the appropriate setting for practicing meditation on the breath. The description shows that the ensuing instructions are about formal meditation in seclusion rather than being something done in daily life alongside various other activities.

Next one should sit down with the body kept straight and establish mindfulness to the fore, an expression that could also be rendered as “in front.” Theravāda Abhidharma exegesis of this passage considers this expression to point to a specific physical location where the breath should be observed, namely the area of the upper lip or the nose tip.⁴ This interpretation remains uncertain, as other Pāli discourses use the same expression in relation to meditation practices that have no relation to the breath.⁵ In such cases, attending to the nose tip would not make much sense.

This in turn implies that the instruction given at this juncture need not be seen as requiring a narrow focus on the physical

⁴ Vibh 252,14; on my reasons for considering the usage of the term Theravāda quite appropriate see Anālayo 2013b.

⁵ See Anālayo 2003: 128f.

sensations of the breath only. In fact, the reference to establishing mindfulness to the fore is preceded by the injunction to keep the body straight, something that is of continuous relevance to the remainder of the practice. At least a marginal degree of awareness of the torso would be helpful to recognize when the body starts to slouch. From this viewpoint, the idea of bringing mindfulness to the fore need not be taken to imply an all-out focus on the upper lip or the nose tip to the complete exclusion of anything else. Instead, if the upper lip or the nose tip is chosen as the point for noting the breath moving in and out, this could conveniently be combined with at least a minimal degree of mindfulness of the upper body in the sitting posture.

The *Samyukta-āgama* version offers additional details on the type of inner seclusion appropriate for such practice, by way of listing the mental states that should be removed prior to turning to the breath. These correspond to the five hindrances, a set recurrently mentioned in the early discourses as mental states that *hinder* the proper functioning of the mind and hence are obstructive to meditation and progress to liberation.

Although the Pāli version does not explicitly mention the hindrances, their temporal removal appears to some extent to be taken for granted, as the ensuing instructions lead up to a concentrated mind without ever mentioning the hindrances. Since successfully concentrating the mind requires the absence of the hindrances, it seems fair to assume that what the Chinese version states explicitly should be understood to be implicit in the Pāli version.

Based on a condition of the mind that is at least temporarily free from the hindrances and with mindfulness well established, one then becomes aware of the breath moving in and out. This is the main target of practice at this juncture, namely a clear discerning of the difference between inhalations and exhalations.

tions. Such clear discernment forms a background to the remainder of the instructions, which cover sixteen distinct steps of practice. These instructions can conveniently be surveyed by taking them up in four tetrads, each comprising four steps.

The First Tetrad

The first tetrad of four steps proceeds as follows:⁶

Breathing in long, one understands: ‘I breathe in long’; or breathing out long, one understands: ‘I breathe out long’; or breathing in short, one understands: ‘I breathe in short’; or breathing out short, one understands: ‘I breathe out short.’ One trains: experiencing the whole body I shall breathe in, one trains: experiencing the whole body I shall breathe out; one trains: calming bodily activity I shall breathe in; one trains: calming bodily activity I shall breathe out (SN 54.1).

Breathing long ... breathing short ... experiencing the whole body when breathing in, one trains well [to experience] the whole body when breathing in; experiencing the whole body when breathing out, one trains well [to experi-

⁶ SN 54.1 at SN V 311,14: *dīghaṃ vā assasanto dīghaṃ assasāmī ti pajānāti, dīghaṃ vā passasanto dīghaṃ passasāmī ti pajānāti; rassaṃ vā assasanto rassaṃ assasāmī ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā passasanto rassaṃ passasāmī ti pajānāti; sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ assasissāmī ti sikkhati, passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ passasissāmī ti sikkhati* (throughout, B° doubles the initial consonant of °*paṭisaṃvedī*) and SĀ 803 at T II 206a28: 息長, 息短, 覺知一切身入息, 於一切身入息善學, 覺知一切身出息, 於一切身出息善學, 覺知一切身行息入息, 於一切身行息入息善學, 覺知一切身行息出息, 於一切身行息出息善學 (a reference to 於一心 has been emended to read 於一切).

ence] the whole body when breathing out. Experiencing a calming of all bodily activity when breathing in, one trains well [to experience] a calming of all bodily activity when breathing in; experiencing a calming of all bodily activity when breathing out, one trains well [to experience] a calming of all bodily activity when breathing out (SĀ 803).

The instructions in the two versions are similar, even though the first two steps are abbreviated in the Chinese version. The overall progression can be summarized as follows:

know long breaths,
know short breaths,
experience whole body,
calm bodily activities.

The first two steps require some degree of focused attention. Only by attending closely to the breath will it be possible to know if it is long or short.

According to the *Visuddhimagga*, a central manual of Theravāda exegesis, executing the instruction for the third step, which involves experiencing the whole body, requires clearly discerning the beginning, middle, and end of the breath.⁷ In other words, the “body” is here understood as a reference to the breath only.

An alternative explanation of this step can be found in the **Śāriputrābhidharma*, an Abhidharma treatise quite probably representing the Dharmaguptaka tradition.⁸ This work illus-

⁷ Vism 273,23: *sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī ... sakalassa assāsakāyassa ādimajjhapariyosānaṃ viditaṃ karonto.*

⁸ See Bareau 1950.

trates the relationship between the body becoming internally empty of air after an exhalation and the subsequent taking of an inhalation with the example of an empty bag that had earlier been deflated.⁹ In order to let air in, one opens the mouth of that bag. The description clearly takes the reference to the body (*kāya*/身) in this third step to intend the physical body.

The different perspectives that emerge in this way involve somewhat dissimilar approaches to the practice. On following the *Visuddhimagga*, the third step is concerned with the breath only. In contrast, on adopting the perspective offered in the **Śāriputrābhidharma*, the third step involves a broadening of awareness from the length of the breath, observed in the previous two steps, to the whole physical body. This offers a more compelling explanation, as the progression through the entire set of sixteen steps regularly introduces new perspectives. Such is not the case when the third step is considered to concern only the whole breath, as the same has already been the object of the first two steps. Without experiencing the whole breath, it would be impossible to know whether it is short or long. As already pointed out by Thich Nhat Hanh (1990: 43):

the practice of being mindful of the whole ‘breath body’ was already dealt with in the ... exercise: “breathing in a long breath, he knows, ‘I am breathing in a long breath.’” Breathing out a short breath, he knows, ‘I am breathing out a short breath.’” Why then do we need to repeat this exercise?

It seems indeed meaningful to assume that, once the whole of the breath has been explored with the previous two steps, the third step could be intending an awareness of the whole physi-

⁹ T 1548 at T XXVIII 706a22; see also Dhammajoti 2008: 268.

cal body. If this much is granted, the third step could then be seen as implying a shift of attention from a narrower degree of focus during the first two steps to a broadening of awareness that encompasses the whole physical body alongside the breath.

The fourth step of calming bodily activity would then imply a calming of the whole body. According to the Pāli commentarial tradition, however, the fourth step should be understood to entail the attainment of the fourth absorption.¹⁰ From this viewpoint, as expressed by Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro (2012: 99), “the first tetrad ... describes the progress of breath meditation up through the fourth *jhāna*.”

Such an interpretation is not particularly convincing, since according to other early discourses the breath is no longer experienced in the fourth absorption.¹¹ Yet, the instructions require that, alongside calming bodily activity, one is aware of inhalations and exhalations. This is in fact a continuous feature of the progression of practice in the remainder of the scheme, namely that implementation of each meditative step takes place alongside mindfulness of inhalations and exhalations.

The Second Tetrad

The second tetrad proceeds in this way:¹²

¹⁰ Ps I 249,1.

¹¹ SN 36.15 at SN IV 220,15 (supplemented from SN IV 217,8) and SĀ 474 at T II 121b4. The same problem applies to the proposal by Vimalaramsi 1995/2006 that the second tetrad corresponds to progress through the four absorptions and the fourth tetrad to progress through the immaterial spheres up to the attainment of cessation. The proposed correlations fail to do justice to the actual instructions.

¹² SN 54.1 at SN V 312,1: *pītipaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, pītipaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; sukhapaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī*

One trains: experiencing joy I shall breathe in; one trains: experiencing joy I shall breathe out; one trains: experiencing happiness I shall breathe in; one trains: experiencing happiness I shall breathe out; one trains: experiencing mental activity I shall breathe in; one trains: experiencing mental activity I shall breathe out; one trains: calming mental activity I shall breathe in; one trains: calming mental activity I shall breathe out (SN 54.1).

Experiencing joy ... experiencing happiness ... experiencing mental activity ... experiencing a calming of mental activity when breathing in, one trains well to experience a calming of mental activity when breathing in; experiencing a calming of mental activity when breathing out, one trains well to experience a calming of mental activity when breathing out (SĀ 803).

The instructions in the two parallel versions are closely similar, involving the following four steps:

- experience joy,
- experience happiness,
- experience mental activity,
- calm mental activity.

ti sikkhati, sukhaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; cittaṣaṅkhārapaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, cittaṣaṅkhārapaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; passambhayaṃ cittaṣaṅkhāraṃ assasissāmī ti sikkhati, passambhayaṃ cittaṣaṅkhāraṃ passasissāmī ti sikkhati and SĀ 803 at T II 206b3: 覺知喜, 覺知樂, 覺知心行, 覺知心行息入息, 於覺知心行息入息善學, 覺知心行息出息, 於覺知心行息出息善學 (a reference to 身行, presumably a copyist error influenced by the previous tetrad, has been emended to read 心行).

The present set of four steps does not involve focused attention only. Instead, it requires breadth of mind in order to accommodate for two different tasks to be performed jointly. One task is to proceed through the four steps listed above, and the other task is to remain mindful of whether the breath is presently coming in or going out.

The progression of the four steps in this tetrad is of further interest, as it reflects a skillful employment of the experiences of joy and happiness leading to a calming of mental activity. This conforms with a meditative dynamic evident elsewhere in the early discourses, where the arising of joy leads to tranquility of the mind, to be discussed further below (see page 44).

The Third Tetrad

Here are the instructions for the third tetrad:¹³

One trains: experiencing the mind I shall breathe in; one trains: experiencing the mind I shall breathe out; one trains: gladdening the mind I shall breathe in; one trains: gladdening the mind I shall breathe out; one trains: concentrating the mind I shall breathe in; one trains: concentrating the mind I shall breathe out; one trains: liberating the mind I shall breathe in; one trains: liberating the mind I shall breathe out (SN 54.1).

¹³ SN 54.1 at SN V 312,7: *cittapaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, cittapaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; abhippamodayaṃ cittaṃ assasissāmī ti sikkhati, abhippamodayaṃ cittaṃ passasissāmī ti sikkhati; samādahaṃ cittaṃ assasissāmī ti sikkhati, samādahaṃ cittaṃ passasissāmī ti sikkhati; vimocayaṃ cittaṃ assasissāmī ti sikkhati, vimocayaṃ cittaṃ passasissāmī ti sikkhati* and SĀ 803 at T II 206b4: 覺知心, 覺知心悅, 覺知心定, 覺知心解脫入息, 於覺知心解脫入息善學, 覺知心解脫出息, 於覺知心解脫出息善學.

Experiencing the mind ... experiencing a gladdening of the mind ... experiencing a concentrating of the mind ... experiencing a liberating of the mind when breathing in, one trains well to experience a liberating of the mind when breathing in; experiencing a liberating of the mind when breathing out, one trains well to experience a liberating of the mind when breathing out (SĀ 803).

The instructions in the two parallels are again closely similar, covering the following four steps:

experience the mind,
gladden the mind,
concentrate the mind,
liberate the mind.

As in the case of the previous tetrad, here, too, the meditative quality necessary to execute these four steps is not just focused attention. Instead, breadth of mind is required to combine these steps with a continuous knowing of inhalations and exhalations.

In line with a basic pattern evident in the previous tetrad, the skillful employment of a wholesome type of pleasant experience, which in this tetrad takes the form of gladness, leads to concentrating the mind. The experiences of joy, happiness, and gladness exert a natural attraction on the mind and thereby counter its ingrained tendency to wander off.¹⁴ In conjunction with the previous tetrad, the meditative progression here makes it clear why mindfulness of breathing features regularly in the discourses as a practice that can overcome mental distraction.¹⁵

¹⁴ See the discussion in Brewer et al. 2013.

¹⁵ E.g., AN 9.3 at AN IV 358,16 and its parallel MĀ 56 at T I 491c16.

The Fourth Tetrad

The fourth tetrad proceeds as follows:¹⁶

One trains: contemplating impermanence I shall breathe in; one trains: contemplating impermanence I shall breathe out; one trains: contemplating dispassion I shall breathe in; one trains: contemplating dispassion I shall breathe out; one trains: contemplating cessation I shall breathe in; one trains: contemplating cessation I shall breathe out; one trains: contemplating letting go I shall breathe in; one trains: contemplating letting go I shall breathe out (SN 54.1).

Contemplating impermanence ... contemplating abandoning ... contemplating dispassion ... contemplating cessation when breathing in, one trains well to contemplate cessation when breathing in; contemplating cessation when breathing out, one trains well to contemplate cessation when breathing out (SĀ 803).

In this case the parallels differ. Both take off from contemplation of impermanence, but then proceed in different ways. This can be seen from the survey below, which has the terminology employed in the *Samyutta-nikāya* version to the left side and its counterparts found in the *Samyukta-āgama* parallel to the right:

¹⁶ SN 54.1 at SN V 312,15: *aniccānupassī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, aniccānupassī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; virāgānupassī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, virāgānupassī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; nirodhānupassī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, nirodhānupassī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; paṭinissaggānupassī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, paṭinissaggānupassī passasissāmī ti sikkhati* and SĀ 803 at T II 206b9: 觀察無常, 觀察斷, 觀察無欲, 觀察滅入息, 於觀察滅入息善學, 觀察滅出息, 於觀察滅出息善學.

impermanence	impermanence,
dispassion	abandoning,
cessation	dispassion,
letting go	cessation.

Despite such differences, however, the two versions agree in combining insight-related contemplations with continuous mindfulness of inhalations and exhalations. This in turn implies that, similar to the case of the preceding two tetrads, here again the task is not one of focused attention alone. Instead, breadth of the attentional field is required in order to combine contemplation of the progressive insight themes with the discernment of the breath as coming in or going out.

Taking into consideration the instructions as a whole, the sixteen steps show relatively few variations.¹⁷ Deleanu (1992: 49) rightly comments:

I think we can agree that the sixteen bases of the mindfulness of breathing are a practice peculiar to Buddhism and that they belong to the earliest Buddhist stratum.

The above survey of the sixteen steps of practice shows that the majority of these require breadth of attention. Focus clearly has its place, but this appears to be predominantly in relation to the first two steps. How far the same holds for the third and fourth steps seems doubtful, as this involves interpretations that do not seem particularly convincing. But for the remainder of the scheme, the situation is clear-cut: the quality required for cultivating these steps of mindfulness of breathing is breadth of attention.

¹⁷ See Dhammajoti 2008 (also Anālayo 2013c: 231–233).

In sum, instead of an exclusive approach, the mode of practice described in the early discourses is rather inclusive, as it involves a mindful monitoring that is able to combine awareness of inhalations and exhalations with a range of other meditative topics or themes.

In contrast, an emphasis on breadth of attention and mindful monitoring does not characterize the way mindfulness of breathing is usually taught in contemporary Buddhist traditions, which often place considerable emphasis on focused attention on the breath itself to the exclusion of anything else. Often such exclusive focus comes combined with instructions on counting the breath as a way to avoid distraction.

Instructions that emphasize such focused attention and a counting of the breaths certainly have their practical benefits and the following is not meant to dismiss such an approach. However, the practice surveyed above has a better claim to being reckoned *mindfulness* of breathing compared to a mere focus on just the touch sensation of the breath.

Concentration on Mindfulness of Breathing

The chief purpose of the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing, as indicated in the early discourses, is to serve as an implementation of the four establishments of mindfulness in order to cultivate the seven awakening factors so as to result in knowledge and liberation.¹⁸ In this context, concentration features as the eleventh step in the sixteen-step scheme and as the sixth of the seven awakening factors. Evidently, concentration is an

¹⁸ For example, SN 54.13 at SN V 329,1 and its parallel SĀ 810 at T II 208a11. On my reasons for preferring to render *bodhi* in its early Buddhist usage as “awakening” rather than as “enlightenment” see Anālayo 2021d: 831f and 2021a (in reply to Bodhi 2020).

important factor in the meditative cultivation described, but at the same time it is not the central concern of mindfulness of breathing, let alone its final aim.

According to a Pāli discourse and its Chinese *Āgama* parallel, concentration as an awakening factor arises based on happiness.¹⁹ The same basic principle obtains for the progression through the sixteen steps. In the second tetrad, joy (step 5) and happiness (step 6) lead to calming mental activity (step 8). In the third tetrad, gladdening the mind (step 10) furnishes the foundation for concentrating the mind (step 11). For ease of reference, here is a summary of the first three tetrads:

- 1 breathing in/out long,
- 2 breathing in/out short,
- 3 experiencing the whole body & breathing in/out,
- 4 calming bodily activity & breathing in/out.

- 5 experiencing joy & breathing in/out,
- 6 experiencing happiness & breathing in/out,
- 7 experiencing mental activity & breathing in/out,
- 8 calming mental activity & breathing in/out.

- 9 experiencing the mind & breathing in/out,
- 10 gladdening the mind & breathing in/out,
- 11 concentrating the mind & breathing in/out,
- 12 liberating the mind & breathing in/out.

The overall progression up to the eleventh step of concentrating the mind begins with an initial cultivation of focus in the

¹⁹ SN 54.13 at SN V 332,20: *sukhino cittaṃ samādhiyati*: and its parallel SĀ 810 at T II 208b25: 身心樂已, 得三昧 (with the slight difference that SĀ 810 explicitly indicates that such happiness extends to body and mind).

first two steps, when the length of the breath has to be discerned as either long or short. The remainder of the progression, however, no longer involves such an exclusive focus. The steps in the second and third tetrad require combining mindfulness of breathing in and out with other meditative tasks, such as experiencing certain mental conditions or even actively developing them.

In this way, based on an initial deployment of focus, a progression through the sixteen steps requires in particular the cultivation of mindfulness. The open and receptive stance of mindfulness enables monitoring different things taking place, such as the continuity of breathing and the carrying out of various other meditative tasks. For this reason, the meditation practice described here is called *mindfulness* of breathing in and out.

There is, however, an alternative expression found in several discourses and in later exegesis, which combines “mindfulness of breathing” with “concentration” to form the compound *ānāpānasati-samādhi*. This term requires an examination.

The first occurrence of this expression in the *Ānāpānasati-samyutta*, the collection with discourses on mindfulness of breathing, is of particular interest here. In this first discourse, the Buddha reportedly draws the attention of the assembled monastics to a monastic who sits in meditation quietly and without any fidgeting around. The others confirm that they had also noticed this quality of that monastic. The Buddha then explains that the reason for this quiet behavior is the type of *samādhi* this monastic was practicing.

In this context, the term *samādhi* seems to carry a broader sense than its usual rendering of “concentration” and could perhaps best be captured by translating it as “meditation.” This broader sense of the term *samādhi* is evident also elsewhere in

the early discourses.²⁰ Nevertheless, in order not to influence my presentation, in what follows I employ the term *samādhi* rather than an English translation when rendering the Pāli and Chinese versions of the Buddha's explanation:²¹

Monastics, and by the cultivation and frequent practice of what *samādhi* will there be neither moving around and quivering of the body nor moving around and quivering of the mind?

Monastics, by the cultivation and frequent practice of the *samādhi* of mindfulness of breathing there will be neither moving around and quivering of the body nor moving around and quivering of the mind.

Monastics, and by the cultivation and frequent practice of what kind of *samādhi* of mindfulness of breathing will there be neither moving around and quivering of the body nor moving around and quivering of the mind?

²⁰ On different nuances of *samādhi* see Anālayo 2006b.

²¹ SN 54.7 at SN V 316,8: *katamassa ca, bhikkhave, samādhissa bhāvitattā bahulīkatattā n' eva kāyassa iñjitattaṃ vā hoti phanditattaṃ vā, na cittaṃ iñjitattaṃ vā hoti phanditattaṃ vā? ānāpānasatisamādhissa* (B^e and S^e: *ānāpānassatisamādhissa*, throughout with a doubling of the -s-), *bhikkhave, bhāvitattā bahulīkatattā n' eva kāyassa iñjitattaṃ vā hoti phanditattaṃ vā, na cittaṃ iñjitattaṃ vā hoti phanditattaṃ vā. kathaṃ bhāvite ca* (S^e: *kho* instead of *ca*), *bhikkhave, ānāpānasatisamādhimhi kathaṃ bahulīkate n' eva kāyassa iñjitattaṃ vā hoti phanditattaṃ vā, na cittaṃ iñjitattaṃ vā hoti phanditattaṃ vā? idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu araṇṇagato vā rukkhamūlagato vā suñṇāgāragato vā nisīdati ...* (the editions differ in the degree to which they abbreviate) *paṭinissaggānupassī passasissāmī ti sikkhati. evaṃ bhāvite ca* (C^e and S^e without *ca*) *kho, bhikkhave, ānāpānasatisamādhimhi evaṃ bahulīkate n' eva kāyassa iñjitattaṃ vā hoti phanditattaṃ vā, na cittaṃ iñjitattaṃ vā hoti phanditattaṃ vā ti.*

Here, monastics, gone to a forest or gone to the root of a tree or gone to an empty hut, a monastic sits down ... and trains: ‘I shall breathe out contemplating letting go.’

Monastics, and by the cultivation and frequent practice of the *samādhi* of mindfulness of breathing like this there will be neither moving around and quivering of the body nor moving around and quivering of the mind (SN 54.7).

Here is the Chinese counterpart in the *Samyukta-āgama*, which differs insofar as the monastics in the audience pose the question to which the Buddha then provides the reply:²²

The monastics said to the Buddha: “What is the *samādhi* that the monastic has attained such *samādhi*, with body and mind immovable, dwelling in the most excellent dwelling?”

The Buddha said to the monastics: “Suppose a monastic dwells in dependence on a hamlet or town. Having put on the robes in the morning, taken the bowl, and entered the village to beg for food, and having returned to the lodgings, put away robes and bowl, and washed the feet, [the monastic] enters into a forest or an empty hut or [goes to] open [ground] to sit down and attend with collected mindfulness ... *up to* ... well trains to contemplate cessation when breathing [out].

“This is called the *samādhi* which, if a monastic is seated properly with attention to it, body and mind are immovable and one dwells in the most excellent dwelling” (SĀ 806).

²² SĀ 806 at T II 206c29: 諸比丘白佛: 何等三昧, 比丘得此三昧, 身心不動, 住勝妙住? 佛告諸比丘: 若比丘依止聚落. 晨朝著衣, 持鉢, 入村乞食已, 還精舍, 舉衣鉢, 洗足已, 入林中, 若閑房, 露坐, 思惟繫念, 乃至息滅觀察善學. 是名三昧, 若比丘端坐思惟, 身心不動, 住勝妙住.

On comparing the two passages, it is noteworthy that in the *Saṃyukta-āgama* discourse the term *samādhi* occurs throughout on its own. This is only the case for the first occurrence in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* version, whereas the remaining three occurrences instead involve the compound *ānāpānasati-samādhi*.

The same compound *ānāpānasati-samādhi* recurs repeatedly in the remainder of the *Ānāpāna-saṃyutta*, but only in discourses that follow the present one in the collection, not in those that precede it. In each case, the *Saṃyukta-āgama* counterparts do not have such a combination of the term *samādhi* with mindfulness of breathing.

This makes it quite possible that this combination is the result of an error during oral transmission. Prior to this apparent error, the formulation in the Pāli version could just have been a question and its answer in this form:

Monastics, and by the cultivation and frequent practice of what *samādhi* will there be neither moving around and quivering of the body nor moving around and quivering of the mind?

Monastics, by the cultivation and frequent practice of mindfulness of breathing there will be neither moving around and quivering of the body nor moving around and quivering of the mind.

Due to the repetitive nature of the texts, time and again a term found in a previous sentence makes its way into the next, where it originally did not belong. This type of recurrent transmission error could have led to “mindfulness of breathing” becoming “*samādhi* of mindfulness of breathing,” an expression that, starting from the present occurrence, would then have affected the subsequent discourses in the Pāli collection.

One of these subsequent discourses reports the well-known story of a mass suicide by monastics due to developing exces-

sive disgust with their own bodies.²³ On being informed of what had happened, the Buddha is on record for giving instructions on mindfulness of breathing. In addition to being found in the *Samyukta-āgama* and *Samyutta-nikāya* collections, this episode is also reported in several *Vinayas*.

The Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* agrees with the Theravāda *Vinaya* in qualifying mindfulness of breathing as a *samādhi*.²⁴ Parallels in the Mahāsāṅghika, Mahīśāsaka, and Sarvāstivāda *Vinayas*, however, just speak of “mindfulness of breathing,” without adding a reference to “concentration.”²⁵ This gives the impression that the suggested error during oral transmission, which in the Pāli tradition influenced the wording of subsequent discourses in this part of the *Samyutta-nikāya*, would have happened at a time after the emergence of distinct reciter lineages transmitting the above three *Vinayas* but before the separation of the two lineages which we now refer to as the Dharmaguptaka and Theravāda traditions.

Mindfulness of Breathing and Body Contemplation

In addition to the standard exposition of sixteen steps, the process of breathing features in a few other contexts as an object

²³ For a comparative study of this episode see Anālayo 2014b.

²⁴ T 1428 at T XXII 576b7: 阿那般那三昧 and Vin III 70,19: *ānāpānasatisamādhi*.

²⁵ The Mahāsāṅghika *Vinaya*, T 1425 at T XXII 254c7: 阿那般那念, (which is preceded by a question after the type of *samādhi*, 何等三昧?, here in the original sense of “meditation” also relevant in SĀ 806), the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya*, T 1421 at T XXII 7c6, 安般念, and the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1435 at T XXIII 8a13: 阿那般那念. The Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* does not relate the mass suicide to instructions on mindfulness of breathing and for this reason is not relevant to the present issue.

of meditation. One usage involves the breath as a means to recollect death.²⁶ This takes the form of turning awareness to the fact that the present breath could in principle be one's last.

Another relevant instance involves a monastic who had developed his own individual approach to meditation on the breath. Notably, on hearing him report his practice, the Buddha is on record for first of all expressing his approval. Only after that did he present the sixteen steps as a preferable mode of meditating on the breath. According to the *Samyukta-āgama* account, the sixteen steps are “more excellent,” “go beyond,” and are “superior” to what this monastic was doing.²⁷ The parallel in the *Samyutta-nikāya* qualifies the sixteen steps as “perfect in every detail.”²⁸ Although employing different expressions, the two versions clearly agree on the completeness or superiority of the sixteen steps, which were apparently not seen as requiring any additional tools or props in order to be implemented.

Yet another type of occurrence can be found in expositions of contemplation of the body, given in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta*, together with their parallels in the *Madhyama-āgama*. In order to make the most of the potential of comparing parallel discourses, in what follows I take up the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, which in addition to a *Madhyama-āgama* parallel has another parallel preserved in the *Ekottarika-āgama*.

This *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel is in fact of particular importance, as it does not contain any instructions on mindful-

²⁶ AN 6.19 at AN III 306,7 and AN 8.73 at AN IV 319,24, with a parallel in EĀ 40.8 at T II 742a25; see also Anālayo 2016b: 200–207 and 2018b: 90–95.

²⁷ SĀ 805 at T II 206c8: 勝妙, 過其, 上者.

²⁸ SN 54.6 at SN V 315,9: *vithārena paripuṇṇā*.

ness of breathing. Its survey of the first establishment of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna*) begins with contemplation of the anatomical parts of the body, listing such parts as hairs, nails, teeth, bones, etc. A similar exercise is found also in the two parallels.

Next the *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse presents contemplation of the body as made up of the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind. This is another exercise shared with its two parallels. A difference manifests in the *Madhyama-āgama* version, which speaks of six elements, adding space and consciousness to the list. This is in line with a general tendency of this version to go beyond the actual topic of body contemplation, where a reference to the element of consciousness is out of place.

The subsequent exercise in the *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse concerns the impure liquids that come out of the body's orifices. This type of practice is not found in the other versions. The last body contemplation in the *Ekottarika-āgama* version describes a corpse in different stages of decay, another exercise common to the three parallels.

Here and elsewhere, exercises found in only one version are probably later additions. From a comparative perspective, contemplation of the anatomical parts, the elements, and of a corpse appear to reflect an early formulation of the first *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna*.²⁹ From this perspective, instructions on mindfulness of breathing appear to be a later addition to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel.

Now the *Ekottarika-āgama* in general needs to be handled with care in the context of comparative studies. There is clear evidence of a reworking of the collection in China and the in-

²⁹ See in more detail Anālayo 2013c: 39–62.

trusion of extraneous material.³⁰ As rightly pointed out by Bhikkhu Dhammajoti (2015: 27f) in a different context, regarding the *Ekottarika-āgama*:

It is therefore risky to put too much weight on the content or form of a given *sūtra* in this collection in arguing for its being the “original form” of a canonical discourse, on the basis of its often briefer description or absence of a particular list.

However, in the present case the *Ekottarika-āgama*’s presentation receives support from early Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma works. The *Vibhaṅga* has only contemplation of the anatomical parts for contemplation of the body as a *sati-paṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna*, and the *Dharmaskandha* mentions just contemplation of the anatomical parts and the elements.³¹ This makes it safe to conclude that in this respect the *Ekottarika-āgama* version points to an early description of body contemplation, resulting in three exercises common to the discourse parallels. The concerns of these three would then be deconstructing perceptions of the body as sensually alluring, as a solid entity, and as (despite knowing otherwise) not really subject to death.

The *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse appears to have followed the basic trajectory of the first of these three by adding another exercise that also deconstructs the body’s attractiveness. The other two versions take a broader approach, including various

³⁰ For the addition of an entire discourse that must have happened in China see Anālayo 2013d; on several cases testifying to an apparent tendency to rework early discourse material see Anālayo 2014/2015 and 2015d.

³¹ Vibh 193,¹⁷ and T 1537 at T XXVI 476a7; see also Bronkhorst 1985.

exercises related to the general theme of the body. In fact, the *Madhyama-āgama* version has been expanded to such an extent that some of its exercises no longer have a relationship to the physical body at all, as already evident in its inclusion of the sixth element of consciousness under the heading of contemplation of the elements of the body. Such instances can with a fair degree of confidence be considered later accretions.³²

The *Madhyama-āgama* version begins with contemplation of the postures of the body (sitting, standing, etc.) and clear knowing of bodily activities, two exercises also found in the Pāli discourse. After that come two exercises peculiar to the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse. One of these instructs to rectify the mind when unwholesome thoughts arise by recollecting what is wholesome, whereas the other recommends achieving the same aim by forceful mind control. It is after these practices that the *Madhyama-āgama* version presents instructions on mindfulness of breathing:³³

One is mindful of breathing in and knows to be breathing in mindfully; one is mindful of breathing out and knows to be breathing out mindfully.

Breathing in long, one knows to be breathing in long; breathing out long, one knows to be breathing out long; breathing in short, one knows to be breathing in short; and breathing out short, one knows to be breathing out short. One

³² See Anālayo 2013c: 41–45, *pace* Kuan 2008.

³³ MĀ 98 at T I 582c13: 念入息即知念入息, 念出息即知念出息, 入息長即知入息長, 出息長即知出息長, 入息短即知入息短, 出息短即知出息短; 學一切身息入, 學一切身息出, 學止身行息入, 學止身行息出; adopting an emendation given in the CBETA edition of 覺 to 學, and emending an occurrence of 口行 to read 身行, each of these instances can safely be reckoned as copyist errors.

trains [in experiencing] the whole body when breathing in; one trains [in experiencing] the whole body when breathing out; one trains in calming bodily activity when breathing in; and one trains in calming bodily activity when breathing out (MĀ 98).

Next the *Madhyama-āgama* turns to the bodily experience of the four absorptions, followed by a cultivation of the perception of light and of the sign of examination. None of these are found in the parallels. The last three exercises in this version are contemplation of the anatomical parts, the elements, and a corpse in decay, which are shared with its two parallels.

The *Majjhima-nikāya* discourse places mindfulness of the breath right at its outset, followed by the postures, bodily activities, anatomical parts, elements, and contemplating a corpse in different stages of decay. The instructions on mindfulness of breathing are as follows:³⁴

Gone to a forest, or gone to the root of a tree, or gone to an empty hut, one sits down, having folded the legs crosswise, keeping the body erect and, having established mindfulness to the fore, mindful one breathes in and mindful one breathes out.

³⁴ MN 10 at MN I 56,12: *araññagato vā rukkhāmūlagato vā suññāgāragato vā nisīdati, pallaṅkaṃ ābhujitvā, ujum kāyaṃ pañidhāya, parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā; so sato va assasati, sato va (C^e and S^e without va) passasati. dīghaṃ vā assasanto dīghaṃ assasāmī ti pajānāti, dīghaṃ vā passasanto dīghaṃ passasāmī ti pajānāti; rassaṃ vā assasanto rassaṃ assasāmī ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā passasanto rassaṃ passasāmī ti pajānāti; sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ assasissāmī ti sikkhati, passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ passasissāmī ti sikkhati.*

Breathing in long, one understands: I breathe in long; or breathing out long, one understands: I breathe out long; or breathing in short, one understands: I breathe in short; or breathing out short, one understands: I breathe out short. One trains: experiencing the whole body I shall breathe in; one trains: experiencing the whole body I shall breathe out; one trains: calming bodily activity I shall breathe in; one trains: calming bodily activity I shall breathe out (MN 10).

These instructions are followed by a simile that describes a turner at work on a lathe. I will examine this simile in relation to other similes for body contemplation in the next section of this chapter (see below page 46).

From a comparative perspective, it is noteworthy that the *Majjhima-nikāya* discourse also covers the preliminary description of retiring to a secluded place, unlike the *Madhyama-āgama* version. Given that these preliminaries are placed at the outset of the descriptions of the first of the body contemplations in the Pāli version, this can in fact give the misleading impression that it applies to all of them.³⁵ Closer inspection shows that this is not the case. The very next contemplation instructs “when walking, one understands: I am walking; or when standing, one understands: I am standing.”³⁶ This shows that the

³⁵ In a study of internal and external *satipaṭṭhāna*, Ditrich 2016: 136f comments that “in the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* it is said: ‘having gone to the forest or to the foot of a tree, or to an empty place’, which indicates that there would be no other people to observe.” Apparently, she takes this specification to qualify the practice of all four *satipaṭṭhānas* and to imply that these are to be practiced in the absence of any other people. For critical replies see Anālayo 2017b: 37f and 2020b: 1640.

³⁶ MN 10 at MN I 56,36: *gacchanto vā gacchāmī ti pajānāti, ṭhito vā ṭhito ’mhī ti pajānāti*.

sitting down, described in the preliminaries to mindfulness of breathing, no longer applies. The subsequent contemplation requires that “when wearing the outer robe and [other] robes and [carrying] the bowl, one acts clearly knowing.”³⁷ This description is relevant to occasions outside of seclusion.

Besides, the inclusion of the preliminaries to mindfulness of breathing in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* is also unexpected, as according to the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* these are not part of contemplation of the body. The latter discourse provides a correlation of the instructions on the sixteen steps with the four *satipaṭṭhānas/smr̥tyupasthānas*, according to which the first four steps, from understanding the long breath to calming bodily activity, correspond to the first establishment of mindfulness, which is contemplation of the body.³⁸ It must have been this thematic connection that motivated the inclusion of the first tetrad under the header of contemplation of the body in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel. Yet, in doing so it would have been more natural to take only the first tetrad without the preliminaries, as is indeed the case in the account of body contemplation given in the *Madhyama-āgama* version.

As a net result of the development evident in this way in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, considered in the light of its parallels, the first tetrad of mindfulness of breathing features as a form

³⁷ MN 10 at MN I 57,7: *saṅghāṭṭipattacīvaradhāraṇe sampajānakārī hoti.*

³⁸ MN 118 at MN III 83,21. Although the same correlation in the *Saṃyukta-āgama* includes the previously mentioned practice of just being aware of inhalations and exhalations, it also does not include the preliminaries of withdrawing into seclusion; see SĀ 810 at T II 208a23 and Anālayo 2019e: 199.

of meditation on its own, alongside other stand-alone exercises like contemplation of the body's anatomical constitution, contemplation of the four elements, and contemplation of a dead body in various stages of decay.

The role assumed in this way by the first tetrad results in a loss of the transition to the next tetrads in the scheme of sixteen steps, in particular to those steps, discussed above, that serve to bring about concentration of the mind.

Only Three Steps from the Scheme of Sixteen

A further stage of reduction can be seen in two discourses in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, in which only the first three steps of mindfulness of breathing are found. Here is the relevant part from the first of these two *Ekottarika-āgama* discourses, of which no parallel is known:³⁹

One sits down cross-legged with straight body and straight intention, with collected mindfulness to the fore and, without having other perceptions, focuses mindfulness on the breathing, namely on the breath.

If the breath is long, then one should also contemplate and know: 'I now have a long breath'; again, if the breath is short, one should also contemplate and know: 'I now have a short breath.'

³⁹ EĀ 3.8 at T II 556a29: 正身正意結跏趺坐，繫念在前，無有他想，專精念安般，所謂安般者。若息長時，亦當觀知我今息長；若復息短，亦當觀知我今息短。若息極冷，亦當觀知我今息冷；若復息熱，亦當觀知我今息熱。具觀身體，從頭至足皆當觀知。若復息有長短，亦當觀息有長有短。用心持身，知息長短，皆悉知之，尋息出入，分別曉了。若心持身知息長短，亦復知之，數息長短，分別曉了。 A full translation of EĀ 3.8 and EĀ 17.1 can be found in Anālayo 2019e: 228–239.

If the breath is quite cold, one should also contemplate and know: ‘I now have a cold breath’; again, if the breath is warm, one should also contemplate and know: ‘I now have a warm breath.’

One fully contemplates the physical body, from the head to the feet; one should contemplate and know it all. Again, if the breath is long or short, one should also contemplate the breath as being long or being short. Using the mind to hold the body [in awareness], one knows the breath to be long or short, knowing it completely. One investigates the breath going out and coming in, discerning and understanding it. If the mind holds the body [in awareness] to know the breath to be long or short, one also further knows it. Repeatedly breathing in long or short, one discerns and understands it.

Here, knowing the long and short breaths and experiencing the whole body are the only elements in common with the sixteen steps. These three steps occur in combination with attention given to other aspects of the breath, such as noting its coolness or warmth. The emergence of such additional tools is understandable, as with a reduction of mindfulness of breathing to only three steps (or even only four) the actual practice has no longer the same potential to bring about a stilling of distracting thoughts, a potential mentioned in several discourses.⁴⁰

Here is the relevant part from the other *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse, which parallels an exposition of the sixteen steps in a Pāli discourse:⁴¹

⁴⁰ In addition to AN 9.3 and its parallel MĀ 56, already mentioned above in note 15, similar indications in other *Āgamas* can be found, e.g., in SĀ 804 at T II 206b16 or EĀ 2.8 at T II 553b8.

⁴¹ EĀ 17.1 at T II 582a14: 樂於閑靜無人之處，便正身正意，結跏趺坐，無他異念，繫意鼻頭。出息長知息長，入息長亦知息長；出息短亦知

One delights in secluded places without people and in turn sits down cross-legged with straight body and straight mind, collecting the mind at the tip of the nose without thinking of anything else.

Breathing out long, one knows the breath to be long; breathing in long, one also knows the breath to be long; breathing out short, one also knows the breath to be short; and breathing in short, one also knows the breath to be short.

Breathing out cool, one also knows the breath to be cool; breathing in cool, one also knows the breath to be cool; breathing out warm, one also knows the breath to be warm; breathing in warm, one also knows the breath to be warm.

Completely contemplating the physical body one breathes in and breathes out; one comes to know it all.

At a time when there is breath, one also further knows it to be there; at a time when there is no breath, one also further knows it to be absent. If one is breathing out from the heart, one also further knows to be breathing out from the heart; if one is breathing in from the heart, one also further knows to be breathing in from the heart.

Once again, knowing the long and short breaths and experiencing the whole body are the only elements in common with the sixteen steps.

The above descriptions in these two *Ekottarika-āgama* discourses are interesting not only in pointing to a process where only the first three of the sixteen steps remain; they are also re-

息短, 入息短亦知息短; 出息冷亦知息冷, 入息冷亦知息冷; 出息暖亦知息暖, 入息暖亦知息暖. 盡觀身體入息, 出息, 皆悉知之. 有時有息亦復知有, 有時無息亦復知無. 若息從心出亦復知從心出. 若息從心入亦復知從心入 (adopting the variant 有 instead of 又). The Pāli parallel is MN 62 at MN I 425,3.

markable in that they seem to attest to the repercussions of the tendency to reduction on actual meditation practice.

In fact, even though the developments surveyed above appear to stem predominantly from the dynamics of textual transmission, highlighting these is certainly not meant to propose a unilateral relationship where texts change and then impact the practice. Instead, the process under discussion is probably best visualized as a constant negotiation and cross-fertilization between textual descriptions and the successes and failures these create for actual practice, which in turn impact existing textual descriptions or result in new ones. Moreover, such patterns of cross-fertilization are situated within a particular historical, cultural, and social setting, which at times can exert considerable influence on these processes. In other words, my focus on textual developments is not meant to encourage a monocausal conception of the developments under discussion but is simply due to the fact that texts are the main source material available for studying early Buddhism.

A new element in the two *Ekottarika-āgama* versions appears to be the distinction between warm and cold breaths, which comes right after the instructions concerning its length. Viewed from the perspective of a reduction of the standard instruction to three steps only, it would be unsurprising if during actual practice a need arises for attending to other aspects of the breath in what has by now become a fairly unsophisticated practice, at least when compared to the full scheme of sixteen steps.

After discerning the inhalations and exhalations as long or short, it seems only natural to investigate the breath further, leading to the idea of noting differences in its temperature as an additional tool for keeping the mind interested in, and thereby focused on, the breath. In fact, a commentary on the *Ekottarika-āgama* notes that inhalations and exhalations differ

in temperature, confirming the close relationship between being aware of the distinction between the inward and outward movements of the breaths and their respective temperature.⁴²

A discerning of the difference between warm and cold breaths will be easier in a situation when inhalations and exhalations are indeed of noticeably distinct temperatures, such as during the cold season. In contrast, on a hot summer day such a discerning will be considerably more difficult for the average meditator. This dependency on the impact of variable outer conditions may well be a reason why the distinction between cold and warm breaths does not seem to have won the widespread appeal that the employment of counting gained as a strategy to help keeping the mind free from distraction and anchoring it on the breath.

The purpose of such noting in supporting the mind in becoming still, rather than being lost in distracting thought, has its counterpart in the entire scheme of sixteen steps, found in the Pāli parallel to the above *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse, in the fifth and sixth step of cultivating the experience of joy and happiness and in the tenth step of gladdening the mind.

The relevance of joy can be seen in a *Samyutta-nikāya* discourse which, in agreement with its parallels, explains that due to sense-restraint the mind will not be impaired (*abyāsitta*), whereupon joy arises.⁴³ The *Samyutta-nikāya* discourse con-

⁴² T 1507 at XXV 49c2: 知冷暖: 入息爲冷, 出息爲暖; see also T 614 at T XV 275a11: 出息暖, 入息冷. On the nature of T 1507 as a commentary on T 125 see Palumbo 2013.

⁴³ SN 35.97 at SN IV 78,28. A Sanskrit fragment parallel, SHT VI 1226.12Vf, Bechert and Wille 1989: 27, has preserved a reference to [*cjittam na vyāsadyati*] as a result of restraint at the eye sense-door. The parallel SĀ 277 at T II 75c26 relates the arising of joy to

tinues by describing how such joy then leads on to tranquility and concentration.⁴⁴ This type of progression is a recurrent theme in other discourses, so much so that it forms an integral part of the description of the spheres of liberation (*vimuttāyatana/vimuktyāyatana*).⁴⁵ A discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* and its parallel in the *Madhyama-āgama* even go so far as to state that the very purpose of joy is to lead to tranquility (which in turn serves the purpose of leading to concentration).⁴⁶

The function of joy to foster tranquility is also evident in its role in what is sometimes referred to as “transcendental dependent arising” (in the sense of transcending *dukkha/duḥkha*), which proceeds beyond the final link of the standard formula of the dependent arising of *dukkha/duḥkha* in twelve links.⁴⁷ In keeping with the same pattern, joy as an awakening factor leads on to tranquility and concentration.⁴⁸

the mind not being “defiled by attachment,” 染著, due to sense-restraint. Another parallel, T 107 at T II 502b24, qualifies the mind that leads to the arising of joy due to sense-restraint as “not dissipated,” 不洩, which comes closer to the Pāli and Sanskrit terminology.

⁴⁴ SĀ 277 at T II 75c27 and T 107 at T II 502b25 proceed directly from joy to concentration, without explicitly mentioning tranquility.

⁴⁵ DN 33 at DN III 241,9 and its parallels in Sanskrit fragments, Stache-Rosen 1968: 149, and in DĀ 9 at T I 51c7 and T 12 at T I 230c13; on the five spheres of liberation see also Collins 1992, 126f, Anālayo 2009d, Pāsādika 2017, and Dhammadinnā 2021: 116f.

⁴⁶ AN 10.1 at AN V 1,15 and MĀ 42 at T I 485a23.

⁴⁷ SN 12.23 at SN II 31,31 and its parallels MĀ 55 at T I 491a7 and Up 2005 at D 4094 *ju* 50a6 or P 5595 *tu* 54b4; for a study of SN 12.23 see Bodhi 1980 and Jones 2019.

⁴⁸ Whereas SN 46.52 at SN V 111,12 differentiates between joy that is with the two mental factors that characterize the first absorption (*vitakka* and *vicāra*), or else without these two, the parallel SĀ 713

All these passages point to the important function of joy in leading to tranquility, which in the case of the sixteen steps takes the form of a stilling of mental activity, the eighth step. This potential of wholesome types of joy (and happiness or gladness) is no longer evident once the sixteen-step scheme is reduced to its first tetrad or even just to its first three steps.

Similes Illustrating Contemplation of the Body

For appreciating the tendency to reduction, the turner simile in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* is of further relevance. By way of setting a background to an appreciation of this simile, in what follows I first survey the other similes employed in the three versions to illustrate various body contemplations. Of particular interest in this survey is the degree to which the respective simile illustrates the whole of the meditative practice or only a part of it.

The only practice illustrated in all three versions with a simile is contemplation of the elements. This simile takes the following forms in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, *Madhyama-āgama*, and *Majjhima-nikāya* respectively:⁴⁹

It is just like a capable cow butcher or the apprentice of a cow butcher who divides a cow [into pieces by cutting

at T II 191c2 just speaks of joy and its establishing; see also Anālayo 2013c: 209–212.

⁴⁹ EĀ 12.1 at T II 568a26: 猶如巧能屠牛之士，若屠牛弟子，解牛節解，而自觀見：此是脚，此是心，此是節，此是頭，MĀ 98 at T I 583b19: 猶如屠兒殺牛，剝皮布於地上，分作六段，and MN 10 at MN I 58,1: *seyyathā pi ... dakkho goghātako vā goghātakantevāsī vā gāvīṃ vadhītva catummahāpathe* (B^c: *catumahāpathe*) *bilaso paṭivibhajitvā* (B^c: *vibhajitvā*) *nisinno assa*; for other references to a cow butcher see Schmithausen 2020: 145 note 785.

through] its tendons and, while dividing it, contemplates and personally sees that ‘these are the feet,’ ‘this is the heart,’ ‘these are the tendons,’ and ‘this is the head’ (EĀ 12.1).

It is just as a butcher who, on having slaughtered and skinned a cow, divides it into six parts and spreads them on the ground [for sale] (MĀ 98).⁵⁰

It is just as a skilled butcher or a butcher’s apprentice who, having killed a cow, were to be seated at a crossroads with it cut up into pieces (MN 10).

With varying degrees of detail, the parallel versions illustrate the purpose of contemplating the elements of the body. Just like cutting up a cow into different parts, so the body is to be mentally cut up into its material elements. The concern of the exercise is not with only some of the elements, but with all of them together as making up the body.

Contemplation of the anatomical parts comes with a simile in the *Madhyama-āgama* and *Majjhima-nikāya* versions:⁵¹

It is just as a clear-sighted person who, on seeing a vessel full of various seeds, clearly distinguishes them all, that is: ‘Rice, millet seed, turnip seed, or mustard seed’ (MĀ 98).

⁵⁰ In line with its presentation of six elements instead of four, the *Madhyama-āgama* speaks of six parts of the cow.

⁵¹ MĀ 98 at T I 583b9: 猶如器盛若干種子，有目之士，悉見分明，謂稻，粟種，蔓菁，芥子， and MN 10 at MN I 57,20: *seyyathā pi ... ubhatomukhā mūtoḷī* (B^e: *putoḷī*; E^e: *mutoḷī*) *pūrā nānāvihitassa dhaññassa, seyyathidaṃ* (B^e: *seyyathidaṃ*): *sālīnaṃ vīhīnaṃ muggānaṃ māsānaṃ tilānaṃ taṇḍulānaṃ. tam enaṃ cakkhumā puriso muñcivā paccavekkheyya: ime sālī ime vīhī ime muggā ime māsā ime tilā ime taṇḍulā ti.*

It is just as a person with good eyes who, having opened a double-mouthed bag full of different sorts of grain, such as hill rice, red rice, beans, peas, millet, and white rice, would examine it: ‘This is hill rice, this is red rice, these are beans, these are peas, this is millet, and this is white rice’ (MN 10).

Just as the practitioner is aware of hair, nails, teeth, bones, etc., so in this simile the person is aware of different grains. Here, too, the simile illustrates the whole of the exercise. It is the vision of all the grains together that conveys the practice, rather than seeing a single type of grain to the exclusion of others.

The remaining similes occur only in one of the three versions. In the case of the *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse, the contemplation of the bodily orifices comes with the following illustration:

It is just as a person who, contemplating a bamboo garden, contemplates clumps of reeds (EĀ 12.1).⁵²

The illustration, which presumably illustrates the hollow nature of the bodily orifices with the example of bamboo reeds, conveys the gist of the whole exercise.

The *Madhyama-āgama* has two separate similes that I present here together. These illustrate overcoming unwholesome states by recollecting what is wholesome or else by forceful mind control:⁵³

It is just as a carpenter or a carpenter’s apprentice who might apply an inked string to a piece of wood [to mark a

⁵² EĀ 12.1 at T II 568b2: 猶如彼人觀竹園, 若觀葦叢。

⁵³ MĀ 98 at T I 582c2: 猶木工師, 木工弟子, 彼持墨繩, 用拏於木, 則以利斧斫治令直 and T I 582c8: 猶二力士捉一羸人, 處處捉旋, 自在打鍛。

straight line] and then cut the wood with a sharp adze to make it straight ...

It is just as two strong men who might grab one weak man and, turning him this way and that way, might beat him up as they wish (MĀ 98).

Both similes serve to convey the sense of the whole contemplation. The same *Madhyama-āgama* version also has similes to illustrate the experience of each of the four absorptions:⁵⁴

It is just as a bath attendant who, having filled a vessel with bathing powder, mixes it with water and kneads it, so that there is no part [of the powder] that is not completely drenched and pervaded with water ...

It is just as a mountain spring that is full and overflowing with clear and clean water, so that water coming from any of the four directions cannot enter it, with the spring water welling up from the bottom on its own, flowing out and flooding the surroundings, completely drenching every part of the mountain so that there is no part that is not pervaded by it

It is just as a blue, red, or white lotus, being born in the water and having come to growth in the water, remains submerged in water, with every part of its roots, stem, flower, and leaves completely drenched and pervaded [by water], so that there is no part that is not pervaded by it ...

⁵⁴ MĀ 98 at T I 582c22: 猶工浴人器盛澡豆，水和成搏水漬潤澤，普遍充滿無處不周，T I 582c29: 猶如山泉，清淨不濁，充滿流溢，四方水來無緣得入，即彼泉底水自涌出，流溢於外，漬山潤澤，普遍充滿無處不周，T I 582a9: 青蓮華，紅赤，白蓮，水生，水長，在於水底，彼根莖華葉悉漬潤澤，普遍充滿無處不周，and T I 582a17: 猶有一人，被七肘衣或八肘衣，從頭至足，於其身體無處不覆。

It is just as a person covered from head to foot with a cloth measuring seven or eight units, so that no part of the body is not covered (MĀ 98).

Each of these depictions illustrates the experience of the corresponding level of absorption; none concerns just a part of such experience. Yet another simile in the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse is concerned with the sign of examination.⁵⁵

It is just as a person who being seated contemplates another person who is lying down or lying down contemplates another person who is seated (MĀ 98).

In line with the similes surveyed so far, the above depiction also illustrates the whole exercise.

A simile found only in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* concerns a turner at his lathe. This is the simile directly relevant to my main topic, as its purpose is to illustrate the practice of the four steps of mindfulness of breathing:⁵⁶

It is just as a skilled turner or a turner's apprentice who understands, when making a long turn: 'I make a long turn'; understands, when making a short turn: 'I make a short turn' (MN 10).

The turner simile only illustrates the first two of the four steps given in the actual instructions. It corresponds to knowing that one is breathing in or out long and breathing in or out short. It has no evident relation to training in the third step of experiencing the whole body or the fourth step of calming bodily activity.

⁵⁵ MĀ 98 at T I 583a29: 猶如有人坐觀臥人, 臥觀坐人.

⁵⁶ MN 10 at MN I 56,22: *seyyathā pi ... dakkho bhamakāro vā bhama-kārantevāsī vā dīghaṃ vā añchanto dīghaṃ añchāmī ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā añchanto rassaṃ añchāmī ti pajānāti.*

Working on a lathe requires a strong focus, as the turner must observe carefully what is happening in order to make sure that just the right amount of material is being taken off at exactly the right place. In this way, with the turner simile the need for focus on the breath receives considerable emphasis. The image of the contact between the lathe and the wood at the same time also conveys the idea of paying attention to a relatively small area, such as by focusing on the sensation of the breath at its entry point.

Even though the discourse still gives the four steps, the simile conveys an interest in the first two of these only, together with an emphasis on an exclusive focus. This points to a tendency toward further reduction of the instructions on mindfulness of breathing.

Unlike the reduction to the first four steps, apparently the result of integrating mindfulness of breathing in the descriptions offered in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, the turner simile does not seem to be the result of textual developments. Instead, it can more convincingly be considered to reflect an impact of practice experiences on textual descriptions, similar to the case of the additional instructions evident in the two *Ekottarika-āgama* discourses examined above.

In the present case, when faced with a practice of just the first four steps, combined with the idea that the third step is about experiencing the whole breath (and hence the fourth about calming the breath itself), from a practical viewpoint the main practice is indeed to be found in the first two steps. In other words, it seems fair to assume that the choice of the turner simile reflects the influence of a form of practice in which the first two steps have come to be of particular importance.

In relation to this suggestion, it is significant that the turner simile is found only in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. It does not occur

in the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta*, which otherwise has all the similes that are found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. This in turn implies that the turner simile would have become part of the instructions in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* only at a relatively advanced stage in the transmission of the *Majjhima-nikāya* collection, or else it would have been added also to the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta* in the same collection, which otherwise contains identical instructions on mindfulness of breathing.⁵⁷

As mentioned earlier, according to the *Visuddhimagga* the third step of experiencing the whole body concerns just the breath (rather than the physical body). Allowing for the possibility that some of the ideas eventually compiled in this work may have had a fairly long history before being taken up by Buddhaghosa, perhaps some ancient predecessor to this interpretation of the third step could have been in circulation already at the time when the turner simile came to be part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. From that perspective, the first two steps of mindfulness of breathing can easily be seen as particularly important, to which the ensuing third step of discerning the beginning, middle, and end of a breath only adds some refinement.

Just the Breath

The tendency toward reduction, apparent in the passages surveyed so far, becomes further evident with the exposition of *smṛtyupasthāna* in the **Śāriputrābhidharma*. For the case of mindfulness of breathing, which features as one of the practices given in this work under the rubric of contemplations of the body, the instructions take the following form:⁵⁸

⁵⁷ MN 119 at MN III 89,9.

⁵⁸ T 1548 at T XXVIII 613b7: 出息長知長, 入息長知長, 出息短知短, 入息短知短。如旋師挽繩, 繩長知長, 繩短知短, 乃至是名內身觀身行。

Breathing out long one knows it to be long, and breathing in long one knows it to be long; breathing out short one knows it to be short, and breathing in short one knows it to be short.

It is like a master turner who pulls the cord; pulling it long [the turner] knows it to be long and pulling it short [the turner] knows it to be short ... *up to* ... this is called practicing contemplation of the body in relation to the internal body.

In this way, the **Śāriputrābhidharma* confirms what the presentation in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* already hints at: a reduction of the practice to the first two steps. At this stage, the third and fourth step are not even mentioned any longer; the whole of the practice is by now just discerning long and short breaths, aptly illustrated with the turner simile.

A trajectory of increasing emphasis on just focusing on the breath is also evident in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (a Theravāda exegetical work found in the fifth *Nikāya*). This work no longer mentions the turner simile and instead presents a simile of a saw. In the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, this is the only metaphor employed for illustrating the practice of mindfulness of breathing. This simile, whose choice may again be expressing an impact of practical experiences on textual descriptions, takes the following form:⁵⁹

It is like a tree trunk placed on even ground and a person were to cut it with a saw. The person's mindfulness is established on account of the wood being touched by the teeth

⁵⁹ Paṭis I 171,7: *seyyathā pi rukkho same bhūmibhāge nikkhitto, tam enaṃ puriso kakacena chindeyya. rukkhe phuṭṭhakakacadantānaṃ vasena purisassa sati upaṭṭhitā hoti; na āgate vā gate vā kakacadante manasikaroti.*

of the saw, without paying attention to the approaching and receding of the teeth of the saw.

The same replacement of the turner simile with the description of a person sawing, to illustrate the cultivation of mindfulness of breathing, can also be seen in the *Vimuttimaggā* (a Theravāda path manual extant in Chinese):⁶⁰

It is like a person who cuts wood by means of the edge of a saw and strength, without paying attention to perceptions of the approaching and receding of the saw.

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is one of the chief sources for the discussion of mindfulness of breathing in the *Visuddhimaggā*, hence it is no surprise to find the simile of sawing wood in its discussion of mindfulness of breathing.⁶¹

The *Visuddhimaggā* in fact presents essentially the same main idea with its interpretation of the third step of experiencing the whole body as intending the whole breath. Given that the Pāli commentarial tradition understands the fourth step of calming bodily activity to imply a progression up to the attainment of the fourth absorption,⁶² all that is available now for reaching this lofty attainment is focusing on the breath in its whole length. Such an understanding, based on a literalist interpretation of the respective instructions, would have further authenticated the adoption of a reductive perspective on mindfulness of breathing.

Now, the turner simile still reflects a concern with the length of the breath. For the turner at the lathe, it makes quite

⁶⁰ T 1648 at T XXXII 430a13: 如人解材以緣鋸力, 亦不作意鋸去來想; adopting the variant 解 instead of 觸.

⁶¹ Vism 281,25.

⁶² Ps I 249,1.

a difference whether a short or a long turn is taken. Once the illustration shifts to sawing wood, however, short or long is no longer of comparable relevance. What matters now is just the place where the saw touches, where it cuts into the wood. It does not really matter if the forward and backward motions of the saw are long or short; what matters is that it keeps cutting the wood at the same place. The worker's attention is continuously at the point where the teeth of the saw cut the wood, without attending to other parts of the saw as they move forward and backward. All that counts is to cut as deeply as possible into the wood at the point of contact.

As mentioned above, the choice of the turner simile in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* suggests the impact of a type of practice with an emphasis on the first two steps, and the presentation in the **Śāriputrābhidharma* can be read to confirm the same trajectory more explicitly by just mentioning these two steps. In the same vein, the simile of a saw can again be taken to reflect the influence of a particular approach to practice, which by now is an exclusive focus on the breath as such, an influence manifesting in the choice of a corresponding illustration in textual depiction. The coming into existence of this simile can safely be assumed to have in turn further reinforced, confirmed, and validated such exclusive focusing.

In this way, even the length of the breaths eventually becomes unimportant and is replaced by a focus on the touch sensation of the breaths as the most important aspect of the meditation. The practitioner should focus exclusively on the point where the breath touches, without attending to any other aspects of the breaths as they move inward and outward.

As the final result of the development surveyed here, the main concern of meditating on the breath becomes just to focus on the place where the breath touches. Although this is of

course a viable form of meditation, just focusing on the breath to the exclusion of everything else is substantially different from the dynamic type of practice that proceeds through all of the sixteen steps.

From the viewpoint of my main concern in this book, the sources under discussion provide a fascinating testimony to a process of ongoing negotiations and cross-fertilizations between textual descriptions and actual practice, each influencing the other.

The general attitude resulting from this interplay can be conveniently exemplified with a statement by Ledi Sayādaw (1999/2011: 40), according to whom “the first tetrad is the main and essential stage.” This shows the degree to which the whole practice of the sixteen steps can come to be subsumed under what is just its first tetrad. Such a tendency to reduction continues even though there is clear awareness of the existence of the full sixteen-step scheme.

As a result of such reduction, it is not surprising that other techniques had to be relied on to enable meditators to stay with the breath. An obvious example is the method of counting the breaths so as to avoid distraction. Counting is in fact the one factor common to different approaches to mindfulness of breathing in later texts.⁶³

Cousins (2015: 4) reasons that “one may suspect that from an early date some kind of counting was employed in the initial two stages.” The gradual reduction of the sixteen steps to the first tetrad and eventually to the first two steps, concerned only with the length of the breath, must indeed have set the stage for employing counting the breaths and eventually for

⁶³ See the detailed survey by Dhammajoti 2009.

other related techniques in an attempt to boost the potential of mindfulness of breathing to counter distraction.

To achieve this aim, the *Visuddhimagga* recommends counting between five and ten breaths. First one should count when each breath is complete; later, one counts as soon as each one starts.⁶⁴ A meditation manual by Kumārajīva, extant in Chinese, also recommends counting up to ten. With increasing expertise, one should make sure to count exactly when the breath ends and start all over again if one has miscounted.⁶⁵

Mindfulness is a rather versatile quality that can be combined with a range of other mental qualities. Hence, it can of course also coexist with focused attention. In fact, the first two steps in the full scheme of mindfulness of breathing clearly do involve focus. At the same time, however, mindfulness and focused attention are not just identical.

As pointed out by Ridderinkhof et al. (2017: 262) “a mindfulness exercise with focus on the breath does not fully capture the mindfulness construct.” At least from the viewpoint of early Buddhist thought, mindfulness on its own rather appears to have a nuance of breadth of mind.⁶⁶ This nuance seems to be indeed relevant to most of the meditative progression in the sixteen steps.

In this way, in the course of the development surveyed in this chapter, detailed instructions for the cultivation of *mindfulness* of breathing in sixteen steps appear to have gradually changed into eventually becoming just a *focusing* on the breath at the exclusion of anything else. The process of transformation evident in this way can be viewed as the result of an ongo-

⁶⁴ Vism 278,14.

⁶⁵ T 614 at T XV 273a13.

⁶⁶ See in more detail Anālayo 2019c.

ing negotiation between textual description-cum-prescriptions and their corresponding enactments in meditation practice.

The Luminous Mind

Introduction

In the second chapter of my *Early Buddhist Meditation Studies*, I examined descriptions of the gradual path to awakening, arguing that variations in detail need not be taken to imply substantially different positions on how progress to liberation will be achieved.¹

The present chapter is dedicated to a development that indeed contributed to a different position on progress to awakening. In fact, the final result of the taking of this position has at times been to assert that there is no longer any need for such progress, since the goal is already immanent in the nature of the mind and thus all that is required is to recognize that one is already awakened. A significant factor in this development is the notion of the luminosity of the mind.

Fire and Light Imagery

My exploration of the developments that appear to have contributed to the shift of perspective on the nature of the path stands in some degree of continuity with an article in which I examined fire miracles attributed to the Buddha in several discourses.² Closer study brought to light instances of such miracles that can be identified as subsequent developments, quite probably resulting from metaphorical references to fire being interpreted literally.

¹ On the same topic see also Anālayo 2018a, 2019f: 153–156, and 2021b.

² See Anālayo 2015a.

One example is the *Pāṭika-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*, which depicts the Buddha departing by levitation after having attained the fire element, emanating a flame as high as seven palm trees. No reference to such attainment or the manifestation of a flame is found in the parallels.³

Another instance of the Buddha emanating fire occurs during a visit to a Brahmā, reported in the *Samyutta-nikāya*. Here, too, a manifestation of fire is not part of the description of his visit in the parallels.⁴ A close study of these two instances makes it fairly probable that these fiery effects are additions to the Theravāda versions of the respective discourses.

The same holds for another example in a Dharmaguptaka discourse from the *Dīrgha-āgama* extant in Chinese, paralleling the *Sakkapañha-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*. The *Dīrgha-āgama* discourse depicts the Buddha, on the occasion of a visit paid by the ruler of the Heaven of the Thirty-three, seated in “concentration on fire” such that the whole surrounding mountain appears to be burning.⁵ In the *Sakkapañha-sutta* and its other discourse parallels, the meditative abiding of the Buddha does not result in any externally visible fiery effect.

Another instance, in what is probably a Dharmaguptaka discourse, leads me from the topic of fire miracles to luminosity, a theme that will occupy me in the remainder of this chapter. This instance concerns a depiction of a footprint of the Buddha in a range of early discourses. A Gāndhārī fragment version of this depiction, which can with considerable probability be assigned to a Dharmaguptaka line of textual transmission,⁶ im-

³ DN 24 at DN III 27,12; see Anālayo 2015a: 23ff.

⁴ SN 6.5 at SN I 144,17; see Anālayo 2015a: 20f.

⁵ DĀ 14 at T I 62c12: 入火焰三昧; see Anālayo 2015a: 13ff.

⁶ See Salomon 1999: 172f and 2014: 13, as well as Cox 2014: 36–39.

bues this footprint with luminescence.⁷ It differs in this respect from its various discourse parallels.

Again, a description of the wheel-mark on the feet of the previous Buddha Vipaśyin in a discourse in the Dharmaguptaka *Dīrgha-āgama* differs from its Pāli and Sanskrit fragment parallels by endowing this mark with luminescence.⁸ Similar to the cases surveyed above, closer inspection makes it fairly probable that attributing luminescence to a footprint of the present Buddha or to the wheel-mark on the feet of the previous Buddha are subsequent developments of the respective texts in the Dharmaguptaka reciter tradition.

These instances point to a fascination among Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka reciters with fire imagery and luminosity, leading to the intrusion of such elements in early discourse passages transmitted by these reciters.⁹ In what follows I continue studying this apparent tendency in relation to the notion of luminosity of the mind or meditative practices.¹⁰

⁷ Reconstructed by Allon 2001: 124: *aceata prabh(*a)śp(*a)ra*; see Anālayo 2017a: 24f.

⁸ DĀ 1 at T I 5a29: 足下相輪, 千輻成就, 光光相照 (radiance is also mentioned, however, in an Uighur fragment parallel, Shōgaito 1998: 374 line 2); see Anālayo 2017a: 84f.

⁹ Needless to say, highlighting such a tendency in these two traditions does not imply that at times such propensity might not manifest in texts transmitted by other traditions. For example, a recollection of the Buddha in SĀ 1158 at T II 308b28 (from a Mūlasarvāstivāda discourse collection) and SĀ² 81 at T II 401c27 describes the Buddha as endowed with a halo, something not mentioned in the parallel SN 7.1 at SN I 160,10.

¹⁰ A relationship to wisdom in particular can be found in AN 4.141 at AN II 139,16, according to which wisdom (*paññā*) is superior in luminosity (*pabhā*) to the moon, the sun, and fire. A comparable statement occurs in the otherwise unrelated MĀ 141 at T I 647c23:

Luminous Consciousness (1): Baka Brahmā

An emphasis on imagery related to luminosity among Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka reciter traditions can be seen in two references to a particular type of consciousness. In the Theravāda discourse collections these two references occur in the *Brahmanimantaṇika-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* and the *Kevaddha-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*.¹¹ Both discourses have parallels, enabling a comparative study.

The one of these two instances that is found in the *Brahmanimantaṇika-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* has as its narrative setting a contest between a Brahmā named Baka and the Buddha. The episode as a whole reflects a tendency to mock the claim that Brahmā is all-knowing.¹²

The *Brahmanimantaṇika-sutta* begins with the Buddha challenging Baka Brahmā's mistaken belief that his heavenly realm is permanent. A debate ensues, in which both the Bud-

諸光明，慧光明爲第一， according to which the luminosity of wisdom is foremost of all luminosities (although here the moon, sun, and fire are not mentioned explicitly). Another occurrence relates to the Buddha more specifically: SN 1.26 at SN I 15,¹² reckons the Buddha to be endowed with splendor (*ābhā*) superior to the sun, the moon, and fire; a comparison found also in the two parallels SĀ 1310 at T II 360b²⁹ and SĀ² 309 at T II 478c²⁷ (which employ 光明 or just 明 respectively). Langer 2000: 54 notes a parallelism to *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.6, according to which the light (*jyotiḥ*) of the *ātman* is superior to the sun, the moon, and fire (as well as to speech). This parallelism leaves open the possibility that the type of presentation found in SN 1.26 and AN 4.141, as well as their parallels, could be responding to such imagery by way of replacing self-conceptions with either the Awakened One or else wisdom.

¹¹ Alternatively titled *Kevaddha-sutta* or *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*.

¹² See in more detail Anālayo 2011a: 12–15.

dha and Baka delineate the compass of their respective knowledge. This leads up to a warning by Baka Brahmā that the Buddha will not be able to sustain his claim. Next comes the reference with which I am concerned here, after the delivery of which Baka Brahmā attempts to vanish from the Buddha's sight as a way of proving his superiority.

The reference in question describes an “invisible/non-manifesting consciousness,” *viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ*, that is “infinite,” *anantaṃ*, and also “luminous in every way,” *sabbato pabham*.¹³ My slightly cumbersome rendering of the first epithet as “invisible/non-manifesting” is meant to enable keeping in mind both of the two alternative meanings of the term.¹⁴

The Pāli commentary attributes the reference to the consciousness that is invisible/non-manifesting, infinite, and luminous to the Buddha.¹⁵ Thus, from the commentarial viewpoint, the narrative denouement is as follows: In reply to Baka Brahmā's warning that the Buddha will be unable to sustain

¹³ MN 49 at MN I 329,30.

¹⁴ The rendering as “invisible” follows Cone 2010: 560: “(what is) invisible; (what is) not accessible to sight,” alternative to the more commonly used “non-manifestative” or “non-manifesting”; for a survey of various translations of the term *anidarśana/anidassana* see Martini 2011: 145 note 20. The nuance of invisibility is also evident in the following comment on MN 49 in Ps II 413,10, which offers this gloss (in addition to referring to Nirvana): *cakkhuvīññāṇassa āpāthaṃ anupagamanato anidassanaṃ nāma*, “it is called *anidassana* because it does not come within the range of eye-consciousness.” See also the gloss with similar implications in Spk III 112,10: *cakkhuvīññāṇena apassitabbattā anidassanaṃ*, which serves as a comment on *anidassana* as an epithet of Nirvana in SN 43.22 at SN IV 370,8.

¹⁵ Ps II 413,6.

his claim, the Buddha responds by describing the invisible/non-manifesting and luminous consciousness. In response to that description, Baka Brahmā announces that he will now disappear.

However, the Ceylonese, PTS, and Siamese edition read as if the reference to the invisible/non-manifesting and luminous consciousness was spoken by Baka Brahmā, as they lack the quotative *iti* before and after the passage in question.¹⁶

Without the quotative *iti* demarcating a change of speaker, the invisible/non-manifesting and luminous consciousness appears as if it were part of the continuous speech delivered by Baka Brahmā. On this reading, Baka Brahmā would support his warning regarding the vanity of the Buddha's claim by referring to this kind of consciousness. Then he would try to prove the worth of his declaration on this consciousness by attempting to disappear.

The Burmese edition has the quotative *iti* before the reference to the invisible/non-manifesting and luminous consciousness, but even this edition lacks a quotative after it. Thus here, too, the reference to this type of consciousness is not fully demarcated as text spoken by the Buddha.

Given the variations that emerge in this way, it remains to be seen how far the content of the proclamation can help to identify its speaker. Regarding the qualification of this consciousness as "invisible/non-manifesting," *anidassana*, this term

¹⁶ Chalmers 1926: 237 and Horner 1967: 392 translate it as part of Brahmā's speech; similarly Nakamura 1955: 78 takes the present passage "to have been addressed to the Buddha by Brahmā." According to Bodhi in Ñāṇamoli 1995/2005: 1249 note 512, the Sinhalese Buddha Jayanti (= Ceylonese) edition has *iti*, but in the printed edition at my disposal this is not the case.

occurs elsewhere in a description of space, which is said to be immaterial, *arūpa*, and invisible, *anidassana*, a context where the two terms seem to function as near synonyms.¹⁷ The sense of invisibility would fit the *Brahmanimantanika-sutta* well, as it is in line with Baka Brahmā's attempt to prove his superiority by becoming invisible himself.

The *Mahānidāna-sutta* and its parallels, as part of an analysis of notions of a self, recognize the designation of a self that is material and infinite, *rūpa* and *ananta*.¹⁸ A belief in such a

¹⁷ MN 21 at MN I 127,36: *ākāso arūpī anidassano* and its parallel MĀ 193 at T I 745c16: “this empty space is immaterial, invisible, and without resistance,” 此虛空非色，不可見，無對。Here 不可見 could well be a rendering of an original *anidarśana/anidassana*.

¹⁸ DN 15 at DN II 64,4, with parallels in DĀ 13 at T I 62a18 (which seems to involve a mistranslation of *ānantya/ananta* by way of providing a contrast to *paritta/paritta*, 少, with the term 多), T 14 at T I 244b5, and MĀ 97 at T I 580c4. Already Frauwallner 1953: 236 notes the similarity between the luminous nature of ancient Indian *ātmā* conceptions and the notion of a luminous consciousness that is invisible and infinite. Vetter 1988: 65 comments on the description of consciousness in MN 49 that “this statement corresponds to some descriptions of the great self or the Brahman in the Upaniṣads.” Needless to say, noting such parallelism is only meant to support the suggestion that the statement in MN 49 could indeed be placed into the mouth of Brahmā, without going so far as to consider the entire trajectory discussed here as solely the result of Brahmanical influence. As pointed out by Ruegg 1989: 51f in relation to the luminous mind, it will not do to consider such ideas as entirely “foreign imports at some point in the history of Buddhism under the overwhelming influence of Hinduism and/or Brahmanical philosophy. The problem of the natural luminosity of Mind, the ‘buddhomorphic’ Ground of Awakening and the relation between it and buddhahood as the Fruit of Awakening is in fact too deeply embedded in Buddhist thought, and it is too significant religiously

type of self could indeed be held by Baka Brahmā, the ruler of a fine-material heavenly world considered by him to be supreme and eternal.

In other words, the statement in the *Brahmanimantaṇika-sutta* could indeed be attributed to Baka Brahmā in as much as neither “invisible/non-manifesting,” *anidassana*, nor “infinite,” *ananta*, make it certain that the Buddha must be the speaker. The same is all the more the case for “luminous,” *pabha*. As pointed out by Bhikkhu Brahmāli (2009: 44f) in a discussion of the two discourse references to this particular type of consciousness:

due to the qualifiers *ananta* and *pabhā* (sic), *anidassana viññāṇa* is described in a way that resembles the description of certain states of *samādhi* ... it seems plausible, perhaps even likely, that *anidassana viññāṇa* refers to a state of *samādhi*.¹⁹

In sum, an invisible/non-manifesting, infinite, and luminous consciousness need not be expressing a realization of Nirvana but could also be a claim voiced by someone who has not reached awakening, such as a Baka Brahmā.²⁰

and philosophically, for such an explanation to be wholly satisfactory.”

¹⁹ From the viewpoint of attributing this reference to consciousness to Baka, it could be noted that MN 128 at MN III 157,³¹ and its parallels MĀ 72 at T I 536c₂₀ and Up 5020 at D 4094 *ju* 276a₄ or P 5595 *thu* 20a₆ relate inner experiences of light to a stage of *samādhi* bordering on the first absorption. This in turn implies that the possibility of forming the notion of a luminous state of mind would have been within the range of experiences to be expected of Baka, in the way he is depicted in the discourse.

²⁰ As already noted by Harvey 1995: 200 and Langer 2000: 52, *anidassana* features as one of the epithets of *nibbāna* in the *Asaṅkhata-*

On attributing this claim to Baka Brahmā, the discussion in the *Brahmanimantaṇika* would proceed as follows: The Buddha clarifies that he knows realms that are beyond the ken of Baka Brahmā and then proclaims that, as he knows what does not partake of the earthiness of earth (etc.), he does not appropriate or identify with earth (etc.).²¹ In reply, Baka Brahmā warns the Buddha that this claim will turn out to be empty. By way of illustrating this warning, Baka Brahmā refers to a particular type of consciousness, presumably thereby intending to substantiate his belief in being supreme.²² In order to prove his

saṃyutta, SN 43.22 at SN IV 370,7. The counterpart SĀ 890 at T II 224b7 does not include *anidassana/anidarśana* in its corresponding listing. The only term related at all to *dassana/darśana* is 難見, “difficult to see,” which probably goes back to an original *durdṛśa/duddasa*. This leaves open the possibility, although falling short of certainty, that the occurrence of *anidassana* in the list in SN 43.22 may reflect a later development, in line with the commentarial understandings of the passages in DN 11 and MN 49 (for a critical examination of which see Nāṇananda 2004: 39–42).

²¹ This part of the discourse is similar to an exposition in the *Mūlapariyāya-sutta*, MN 1 at MN I 5,34, and its parallel EĀ 44.6 at T II 766b11, translated in Pāsādika 2008: 145.

²² MN 49 at MN I 329,36 follows the reference to this type of consciousness with a depiction of not partaking of various items, which includes the heavenly realms about whose existence the Buddha had just informed Brahmā. On the assumption that the statement on consciousness was made by Brahmā, he would then presumably repeat in his claim the items that the Buddha had listed, as a way of affirming his superiority. Alternatively, on attributing the statement under discussion to the Buddha, the latter would be drawing out its implications in terms of a transcendence of all the items listed. This particular passage has no counterpart in the parallel MĀ 78, where Brahmā’s claim only proceeds up to a mention of the Brahmā world in general (at T I 548b13), in keeping with the

superiority, Baka then unsuccessfully tries to demonstrate invisibility by vanishing from the Buddha's sight.

In this way, although it may seem more natural to attribute the remark on the invisible/non-manifesting and luminous consciousness to the Buddha, a coherent reading of the episode in the *Brahmanimantāṇika-sutta* is possible with the same reference being attributed to Baka Brahmā instead.

In the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, probably reflecting a Sarvāstivāda lineage of textual transmission,²³ the passage in question is indeed spoken by Brahmā.²⁴ His actual proclamation differs, however, reading:²⁵

Because I am conscious of infinite objects, have infinite knowledge, infinite vision, infinite discrimination, I know each and every thing distinctly.

fact that in this version he is the first to list different realms, to which the Buddha then responds with his declaration of non-identification (the corresponding declaration in MN 49 at MN I 329,12 comes before the reference to the particular type of consciousness). In MN 49 the proclamation of the invisible/non-manifesting, infinite, and luminous consciousness itself comes without any reference to the absence of appropriation or identification. As to be free from appropriation and identification is the result of liberating insight, such a reference would indeed only be appropriate for a statement made by the Buddha.

²³ See Anālayo 2012c: 516–521 (in reply to Chung and Fukita 2011) and Anālayo 2017e (in reply to Chung 2014 and 2017), and on Sarvāstivāda and Mūlasarvāstivāda as distinct *Āgama* transmission lineages Anālayo 2020e (in reply to Enomoto 2000 and Hartmann 2020).

²⁴ Although it needs to be noted that a subsequent passage, which has to be attributed to the Buddha, is also presented as if it were spoken by Brahmā; see MĀ 78 at T I 548c2.

²⁵ MĀ 78 at T I 548b11: 以識無量境界故, 無量知, 無量見, 無量種別, 我各各知別.

The Buddha then rebuts Brahmā's claim by pointing out that anyone who still has notions of a self does not really know:²⁶

Brahmā, if a recluse or brahmin in regard to earth has a perception of earth as 'earth is me,' 'earth is mine,' 'I belong to earth,' having reckoned earth as self, that [recluse or brahmin] in turn does not [truly] know earth.

Regarding the actual statement under discussion, the notion of an infinite consciousness (corresponding to the idea of being conscious of infinite objects) is common to the two parallel versions. The qualifications of consciousness as "invisible/non-manifesting" and "luminous," however, are not found at all in the parallel from the *Madhyama-āgama*.

Of particular interest to my main topic is the absence of any reference to luminosity in this part of the Chinese version. Luminosity does feature in the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel at a later point, however, when the Buddha and Brahmā engage in a celestial hide-and-seek. According to both versions, although Brahmā was unable to disappear from the Buddha's vision, the Buddha successfully accomplished this feat. In fact, he was able to make himself heard while at the same time remaining invisible to Brahmā and his assembly. Whereas the account in the *Brahmanimantanika-sutta* does not specify how the Buddha managed to remain invisible, according to the *Madhyama-āgama* version what happened was as follows:²⁷

[The Buddha] sent forth an extremely bright luminosity, illuminating the entire Brahmā [realm] while in turn remain-

²⁶ MĀ 78 at T I 548b13: 梵天, 若有沙門梵志於地有地想, 地是我, 地是我所, 我是地所; 彼計地是我已, 便不知地。

²⁷ MĀ 78 at T I 548c14: 放極妙光明, 照一切梵天, 便自隱住, 使諸梵天及梵天眷屬但聞其聲, 而不見其形。

ing hidden himself, causing Brahmā and Brahmā's retinue to hear his voice only, without seeing his appearance.

When viewed from its narrative context, the element of luminosity in the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse serves to explain how the Buddha performed his feat. This is not clear in the Pāli version, which only describes the effect achieved, without indicating how this was accomplished.

In contrast to the function of luminosity in the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse as part of a supernormal feat, the description of a type of consciousness that is invisible/non-manifesting, *anidassana*, and at the same time also luminous is less self-evident, at least when considered from an early Buddhist viewpoint. If something is actually *invisible*, it is not natural for it to manifest luminosity at the same time, at least as long as such luminescence is understood as something visible to others. The same holds even more when consciousness is understood to be *non-manifesting*, as then it should not manifest even a metaphorically understood luminosity, in the sense of in some way revealing or disclosing what is cognized. To do so would be a way of making things manifest and thereby conflict with the qualification of being non-manifesting. This makes it possible, although not certain, that the element of luminosity was originally related to the feat performed by the Buddha.

Regarding the relationship between consciousness and luminosity, Thompson (2015: xxi) proposes that,

according to Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, the definition of consciousness is that which is luminous and knowing. Luminosity means the ability of consciousness to reveal or disclose.

Yet, in the early discourses the role of consciousness is to be receptively aware, rather than actively illuminate, hence lumi-

nosity is not part of a general function of consciousness. An exception to this pattern, if it is one at all, occurs in a passage in the *Madhyama-āgama* that describes the objects of the mind being illuminated by light:²⁸

Mind-consciousness comes to arise if the internal mind-sphere is intact, external mind objects are in turn illuminated by light, and there is in turn awareness.

This formulation appears to result from a transmission or copying error, due to which the description appropriate for the objects of the eyes has been applied to the other sense-doors as well and thereby also to the mind.²⁹ Thus, here illumination by light even serves to enable the ear to hear, for example, or the nose to smell. Apart from this obvious error, however, at least in early Buddhist thought an illumination of an object is only required for what is seen, not for what is experienced through the other sense doors, including the mind.

From the viewpoint of my main topic, it seems fair to conclude that the speaker of the reference to a luminous consciousness in the *Brahmanimantaṇika-sutta* is uncertain, with considerable evidence not in agreement with the commentarial standpoint that the proclamation should be attributed to the Buddha. Moreover, the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel does not qualify consciousness as luminous. In other words, in the case of this discourse the motif of a luminous type of consciousness is only attested in the Theravāda version.

²⁸ MĀ 30 at T I 467a13: 若內意處不壞者, 外法便爲光明所照, 而便有念, 意識得生.

²⁹ The corresponding description for the eye occurs in MĀ 30 at T I 467a4: 若內眼處不壞者, 外色便爲光明所照, 而便有念, 眼識得生; see also Anālayo 2011b: 197 note 277.

Luminous Consciousness (2): Kevaḍḍha

The other of the two references to be discussed in this part of my exploration occurs in the *Kevaḍḍha-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*. The discourse takes its title from the name of the householder to whom the Buddha delivers the teaching that contains the reference under discussion.

In this case, the relevant passage is clearly spoken by the Buddha and the narrative context does seem to concern an experience related to awakening. Whereas in the case of the *Brahmanimantaṇika-sutta* the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel does not qualify consciousness as invisible/non-manifesting, in the case of the *Kevaḍḍha-sutta* the parallels agree in this respect. This leaves open the possibility, again without implying any certainty, that the reading in the *Brahmanimantaṇika-sutta* (and the corresponding commentarial gloss) might have been influenced by the passage in the *Kevaḍḍha-sutta* (and its commentary). In fact, the episode in the *Kevaḍḍha-sutta* also mocks the claim that Brahmā is all-knowing, a thematic similarity that would facilitate an influence of one discourse on the other (or of one commentary on the other) during the prolonged period of oral transmission.

The suggestion of some possible influence between these two discourses finds support in the fact that a Sanskrit fragment parallel to the *Kevaḍḍha-sutta* has a brief reference to not partaking of the earthiness of earth as part of its proclamation of the invisible/non-manifesting consciousness.³⁰ The topic of not partaking of the earthiness of earth, as well as of the suchness of various other things, is taken up in detail in the

³⁰ Fragment 389v7, Zhou 2008: 9: *taṃ pṛthivīpṛthatvena anabhibhūtaṃ*.

Brahmanimantanika-sutta and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, which clearly is its appropriate context.

Be that as it may, the main plot in the *Kevaḍḍha-sutta* involves a monk who proceeds through various heavenly realms up to that of Mahābrahmā with the question of where the four elements cease without remainder. His persistent enquiries force Mahābrahmā to admit his inability to answer the question and to direct the monk to the Buddha for a reply.

The Buddha reformulates the question such that attention shifts from a particular location where the four elements cease to the type of subjective experience in which the four elements no longer find a footing, and where concepts based on the experience of these four (such as the distinction between beauty and ugliness, etc.) and name-and-form cease.

The reply given by the Buddha in a parallel found in the Dharmaguptaka *Dīrgha-āgama* is as follows:³¹

Consciousness that is invisible/non-manifesting,
 Infinite, and self-luminous:
 This ceasing, the four elements cease,
 Coarse and subtle, pretty and ugly cease.

³¹ DĀ 24 at T I 102c17: 識無形，無量自有光，此滅四大滅，羸細好醜滅，於此名色滅，識滅餘亦滅； parallel to DN 11 at DN I 223,12. For a translation of DĀ 24 see Meisig 1995. DiSimone 2016: 155 quotes Karashima to the effect that in the translation of the *Dīrgha-āgama* the character 滅 at times renders *prahāṇa*; see also Hirakawa 1997: 738. On such an understanding, the passage in DĀ 24 could be interpreted to relate consciousness to both *pabham* (光) and *pahaṃ* (滅). A reference to cessation (*'gog pa*) is also found in the Tibetan parallel, Up 2027 at D 4094 *ju* 65a3 or P 5595 *tu* 72a8, which here occurs just before its version of the line on the invisible consciousness. This need not be of direct relevance to the present issue.

Here name-and-form ceases:

Consciousness ceasing, the remainder [i.e., name-and-form] also ceases.

The Pāli editions of the corresponding passage in the *Kevaḍḍha-sutta* are divided on the issue of luminosity; they agree with the passage translated above in mentioning the “invisible/non-manifesting consciousness,” *viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ*, which is “infinite,” *anantaṃ*. The Ceylonese and PTS editions have the reading *pahaṃ* instead of *pabhaṃ*, “luminous.”³² In a detailed study of this passage in the *Kevaḍḍha-sutta* and of its commentarial exegesis, Norman (1987: 29) argues for an original reading *pahaṃ*,³³ reasoning:

it is likely that when the canonical texts were translated or transformed into the language of the Theravādin canon, which we call Pāli, the redactors thought that *-paha* was inappropriate to the dialect and they wished to translate it. This caused difficulties, because they had to decide between the three different forms: *-pabha*, *-papha*, and *pabhū*.

Rhys Davids and Stede (1921/1993: 448) s. v. *paha* comment:

it is not at all improbable to take *pahaṃ* as ppr. of *pajahati* (as contracted fr. *pajahaṃ* like *pahatvāna* for *pajahitvāna* at Sn 639), thus meaning ‘giving up entirely.’

³² The reading *pahaṃ* is adopted by Rhys Davids 1899: 283, Neumann 1906/2004: 157, Franke 1913: 166, and Harvey 1995: 199.

³³ In regard to the presently found variant *pahaṃ*, however, Norman 1987: 30 comments: “I do not think that this is a trace of the original pre-Pāli reading. It seems rather to be an error in the Sinhalese scribal tradition, where *ha* and *bha* are very similar and easily confused.”

Discourse parallels to the *Kevaḍḍha-sutta* extant in Sanskrit and Tibetan do not qualify the invisible/non-manifesting consciousness as luminous.³⁴ The same holds for a discourse quotation in the **Mahāvibhāṣā*.³⁵ A reference to the present passage in the *Ratnāvalī* also does not mention any luminosity.³⁶

³⁴ Fragment 389v7f, Zhou 2008: 9: *vijñāyānīdarśanam anantaṃ sarva<ta>ḥ pṛthuṃ* and Up 2027 at D 4094 *ju* 65a3 or P 5595 *tu* 72a8: *rnam par shes pa bstan du med pa mtha' yas pa thams cad du khyab cing khyab pa de 'byung bar mi 'gyur gyi*. Here the readings *pṛthuṃ*, “expansive,” and *khyab*, “pervasive,” correspond to a sense of *pahaṃ* rendered by Rhys Davids 1899: 283 as “accessible,” based on the commentary’s gloss of the term as conveying the sense of a ford, *tittha*; see Sv II 393,18. Regarding the expression *vijñāyānīdarśanam* in the Sanskrit fragment, it is perhaps worthy of note that, according to the commentarial gloss on the expression *viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ*, consciousness here expresses the sense “should be cognized”; see Sv II 393,14: *viññātabbaṃ ti viññāṇaṃ*. This shifts emphasis from consciousness as endowed with certain attributes to the need to experience *anidassana* (in Sn 137 *nidas-sana* functions as a noun, hence there is no reason why *anidassana* could not function similarly in the present context). Together with the reading *pahaṃ*, this would help reduce the apparent conflict between the first line of the proclamation in DN 11 at DN I 223,12 and the reference in its last line to the cessation of consciousness.

³⁵ T 1545 at T XXVII 671a17: 識不見無邊，周遍廣大性；the sense conveyed by 廣大 is similar to the Sanskrit and Tibetan terms mentioned in the previous note.

³⁶ T 1656 at T XXXII 495b15: 如識處無形，無邊遍一切 and D 4158 *ge* 110a7 or P 5658 *nge* 133a8: *rnam shes bstan med mtha' yas pa, kun du bdag po de la ni*. Here *bdag po* conveys a sense of lordship, corresponding to the sense of *pabhū* identified by Norman 1987: 29 as one of the possible ways in which *pahaṃ* was eventually transformed in Pāli. The Chinese 遍, “pervasive,” seems to be similar to the renderings discussed in the two previous notes. Another passage perhaps of relevance occurs in a listing of different

In fact, once consciousness is qualified as invisible/non-manifesting, it is not natural for it to manifest at the same time luminosity, as already mentioned above.

To summarize, in the passage from the *Kevalāḍḍha-sutta* the original reading might well have been *pahaṃ*; the notion of luminosity would then be a later development. Understood along the lines of the suggestion by Rhys Davids and Stede, the verse might have been a pointer to consciousness “given up in every way,” *sabbato pa(ja)haṃ*, as the condition for the four elements to cease.³⁷ Such an interpretation would better concord with the final line of the same poem in the *Kevalāḍḍha-sutta*, which concludes that “through the cessation of consciousness,” *viññāṇassa nirodhena*, name-and-form (as well as concepts related to the experience of the four elements) comes to cease.³⁸

types of mental states in the *Daśabhūmika-sūtra*, Rahder 1926: 74,3, where the relevant qualifications (of *citta*) are *ānantyasarvataḥprabhūtatām* and *prabhāsvaratām*. The context of listing different items does not suggest a relationship between the infinite mind that is abundant in every way and the luminosity of the mind.

³⁷ Levman 2014: 387 argues that this would align this last qualification with the preceding two, as “of the three epithets for *viññāṇaṃ*, all are negative compounds (*anidassanaṃ*, *anantaṃ*) except the last (*sabbato-pahaṃ*). Yet the overall sense of this verse is really a description of *nibbāna* as an absence of consciousness ... therefore it makes more sense to take the third compound as a privative as well.”

³⁸ The understanding of the expression *nirodhena* by Falk 1943/2006: 68 as “the immobilization of” consciousness and the consequent interpretation of the whole phrase as referring to “the transformation of the consciousness-stream into the transcendent, radiant, universal *viññāṇa*” (sic) is unconvincing and clearly influenced by the agenda, evident throughout her work, to argue the thesis that “the transcendent Dharma=Nirvāṇa was conceived in precanonical Buddhism as radiant all-consciousness.”

The passage as a whole could then be understood to express poetically the cessation mode of dependent arising, according to which name-and-form ceases with the cessation of consciousness.

From the viewpoint of my main topic, it seems safe to conclude that the poem in the *Kevaḍḍha-sutta* originally need not have been concerned with luminosity. In keeping with the passages surveyed at the outset of this chapter in relation to fire miracles or the luminosity of the feet of a Buddha, and also in keeping with the case of the *Brahmanimantaṇika-sutta*, a comparative study of the *Kevaḍḍha-sutta* shows that here, too, the notion of luminosity manifests only in (some editions of) the Theravāda and the Dharmaguptaka versions of the discourse.

Luminous Meditation Practices

From the qualification *pabha*, in what follows I turn to occurrences which relate the similar term *pabhassara* to the mind or to meditative qualities or practices.³⁹

One such passage, found in a Pāli discourse, involves the Buddha himself and thereby stands in relation to his fire miracles and footprint, mentioned in the first part of this chapter. The passage in question describes an iron ball that has been heated all day such that it becomes more light, soft, workable, and luminous. Similar to the condition of such a heated iron ball, as a result of engaging in a certain meditation practice the Buddha's body becomes more light, soft, workable, and lumi-

³⁹ Although the two terms differ etymologically, the former derived from *bhā* and the latter from *bhās*, for ease of presentation I translate both as “luminous”; in fact Turner 1966/1989: 537 and 540 gives the same translation “shine” for both *bhā* and *bhās*.

nous.⁴⁰ No parallel to this discourse appears to be known, wherefore nothing further can be said about it from a comparative perspective.

Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of my main topic I would like to note that for the Buddha's body to become "more luminous," *pabhassarataro*, at least as long as the term is understood in a visible sense,⁴¹ seems less straightforward than for the same to be said of a heated iron ball. This is not to deny that in describing the mind a metaphor has its place or that meditation practice can have visible effects on the body. My point is only that when iron is heated up, it will indeed emit light, whereas for a comparable effect occurring with the human body of someone immersed in meditation is considerably less self-evident (keeping in mind that the idea of investing the Buddha with a halo is a later development not yet evident in the Pāli discourses).

Luminosity occurs again in the context of a description of concentration in the *Saṅgīti-sutta*. The passage in question concerns one out of four modes of concentration, where atten-

⁴⁰ SN 51.22 at SN V 283,11: *tathāgatassa kāyo lahutaro ceva hoti mudutaro ca kammaniyyataro ca pabhassarataro ca*; on the description of the meditation practice that has this effect see also Bodhi 2000: 1947 note 277. For a detailed and informative study of the image of a heated iron ball see Marino 2019.

⁴¹ A visible sense carried by the term *pabhassara* can be seen, for example, in MN 93 at MN II 152,14, where it serves to qualify the flame of a fire. Here a visible form of luminosity or radiance is clearly implied. The parallel MĀ 151 at T I 663a23 reads 有光, which employs the Chinese character 光 used elsewhere in this collection to render *prabhāsvara/pabhassara* (another parallel, T 71, does not have the comparison to the appearance of a fire; see Anālayo 2011b: 553).

tion to the perception of light (*āloka*) leads to cultivating a mind endowed with luminescence (*sappabhāsa*).⁴² The same type of concentration is also mentioned in Sanskrit fragments of the *Saṅgīti-sūtra*, although these do not give a full exposition of the topic. A full exposition can be found only in the *Saṅgītiparyāya*, an early Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma work that is based on the *Saṅgīti-sūtra* and contains a wealth of discourse quotations.⁴³ The relevant passage does not relate perception of light to the mind being endowed with luminescence.⁴⁴

Luminous Equanimity

Another passage of relevance occurs in the *Dhātuvibhaṅga-sutta*, where a detailed analysis of the elements and of the dependent arising of feeling tones (*vedanā*) leads to a profound level of meditative equanimity. The equanimity that has been reached finds illustration in the condition of gold that has been

⁴² DN 33 at DN III 223,4: *ālokaśāññaṃ manasikaroti ... sappabhāsaṃ cittaṃ bhāveti*; see also AN 4.41 at AN II 45,11 and AN 6.29 at AN III 323,17 (no discourse parallel appears to be known for either of these two). The expression *sappabhāsa* occurs also in SN 51.11 at SN V 263,27 (etc.), SN 51.12 at SN V 267,14 (etc.), SN 51.14 at SN V 271,15, SN 51.20 at SN V 277,4 (etc.), SN 51.21 at SN V 281,19 (etc.), SN 51.31 at SN V 288,17 (etc.), and SN 51.32 at SN V 289,18 (etc.); for none of these discourses does a parallel appear to be known. In the case of yet another occurrence in AN 7.58 at AN IV 86,24, the parallels MĀ 83 at T I 559c23 and T 47 at T I 837a28 do not have a corresponding passage on the cultivation of *ālokaśāñña*.

⁴³ See Anālayo 2014a: 86f.

⁴⁴ T 1536 at T XXVI 395c18: 於光明想俱行心一境性，若習若修堅作常作精勤修習; see also Stache-Rosen 1968: 113. The Chinese parallels to DN 33 do not mention this set of four types of concentration and are thus of no further help.

heated and refined by a goldsmith, such that it becomes well and thoroughly refined, faultless, rid of dross, soft, workable, and luminous, ready to be fashioned into any kind of ornament. Similarly, the equanimity reached at this point is pure, bright, soft, workable, and luminous.⁴⁵

A parallel in the *Madhyama-āgama* also has the example of gold that has been refined by a goldsmith such that it has become pure, extremely malleable, and luminous.⁴⁶ The same discourse does not, however, qualify the condition of equanimity as luminous.⁴⁷ The same holds for two further parallels extant as an individual translation in Chinese and a discourse quotation in Tibetan, found in the *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā*; in fact, these two versions do not even qualify the gold as luminous.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ MN 140 at MN III 243,11: *athāparaṃ upekkhā* (E^c: *upekhā*) *yeva avasissati parisuddhā pariyodātā mudu ca kammaññā ca pabhasarā ca*.

⁴⁶ MĀ 162 at T I 691c12: 令淨, 極使柔軟而有光明.

⁴⁷ MĀ 162 keeps referring to “this pure equanimity,” 此清淨捨, without employing any other qualification; see T I 691c6+8+17+19+22+25. Although in Chinese translations the terms “pure” and “luminous” are not necessarily clearly distinguished (see the discussion in Silk 2015: 135–140), in the present context 清淨 corresponds to *parisuddha* (or *pariyodāta*) in MN 140 and is not a rendering of *prabhāsvara/pabhassara*. This can be confirmed by consulting the same passage in the Tibetan parallel, Up 1041 at D 4094 *ju* 39b6 and P 5595 *tu* 43a6, which reads: *tshong ba btang snyoms 'di ltar yongs su dag cing byang bas*. Here the relevant term is *yongs su dag*, “pure.” The same holds for the corresponding passage in the *Saddharmasmṛtyupsthāna-sūtra*, Stuart 2015: 272 (§4.1.6): *etām upekṣām, evaṃ pariśuddhāṃ evaṃ paryavadātām*.

⁴⁸ T 511 at T XIV 780c5 and Up 1041 at D 4094 *ju* 39b4 and P 5595 *tu* 43a4.

From a comparative perspective, the fact that the Pāli version stands alone in attributing luminosity to equanimity makes it less probable that this difference should be interpreted as a loss, or even intentional deletion, on the side of the reciter traditions responsible for the transmission of the other three versions, which otherwise are sufficiently different from each other as to make it clear that they do not stem from the same reciter lineage.⁴⁹ A more straightforward explanation would be the assumption that an addition to the *Dhātuvibhaṅga-sutta* has taken place, as this requires a change to occur only in a single reciter lineage.

Nevertheless, before drawing a firm conclusion it seems wise to explore the matter further. Regarding the option of an intentional deletion, another discourse in the *Madhyama-āgama* and another discourse quotation in the *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā* agree with their Pāli parallel, the *Upakkilesa-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, in describing inner light or luminescence experienced during meditation.⁵⁰ In the passage in question, the Buddha reports his own experiences as part of his prolonged struggle to overcome various mental obstructions to the gaining of the first absorption.

His account serves as a way of giving instructions to a group of monastics, headed by Anuruddha/Aniruddha, who

⁴⁹ Nattier 2008: 165 note 6 points out that T 511 contains additional material not found in either MN 140 or MĀ 162.

⁵⁰ MĀ 72 at T I 536c20 uses 光明, the same expression as in MĀ 162 (see above note 46 or below note 51). MN 128 at MN III 157,31 employs the term *obhāsa*, from the same root *bhās* as *pabhassara*. The discourse quotation in the *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā*, Up 5020 at D 4094 *ju* 276a4 or P 5595 *thu* 20a6, which only parallels this part of the discourse, has *snang ba*.

had similar meditative visions during their struggle to gain the first absorption. This makes it safe to set aside the idea that the reciters of the *Madhyama-āgama* or of the discourses now found as quotations in the *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā* would have had a problem in principle with such descriptions and therefore a wish to eliminate such a reference intentionally in their versions of the *Dhātuvibhaṅga-sutta*.

Examining the possibility of textual loss, the parallels to the *Dhātuvibhaṅga-sutta* show no evident signs of having lost text at this juncture. By way of illustration, here is the relevant part in the *Madhyama-āgama* version:⁵¹

This gold has been heated and refined in various ways by the goldsmith so that it has become pure, extremely malleable, and luminous. That goldsmith accordingly fashions it into embroidery to adorn a new garment, or a finger ring, an arm bracelet, a necklace, or a jeweled hair ornament, working it according to his wishes.

Monastic, in the same way that monastic reflects: “With this pure equanimity of mine, I could proceed to enter the sphere of infinite space ...”

Turning to the option of an addition on the side of the Pāli tradition, a closer inspection of the *Dhātuvibhaṅga-sutta* brings to light an irregularity in the description of the state of equanimity reached, which is qualified as follows:

parisuddhā pariyodātā mudu ca kammaññā ca pabhassarā ca,
pure, bright, and soft, and workable, and luminous.

⁵¹ MĀ 162 at T I 691c13: 此金者，於金師以數數足火熟煉令淨，極使柔軟而有光明已。彼金師者，隨所施設，或繒繒綵，嚴飾新衣，指環，臂釧，瓔珞，寶鬘，隨意所作。如是，比丘，彼比丘作是念：我此清淨捨移入無量空處。

My overly literal translation is on purpose, in order to reflect the fact that the first two qualities “pure” and “bright” follow each other directly. In contrast, the qualities “soft,” “workable,” and “luminous” are related to each other with the conjunction “and,” *ca*. Such irregularity is a fairly certain marker of the fact that two lists have been merged.⁵² In the *Dhātvibhaṅga-sutta* such merging holds not only for the description of equanimity, but also for the gold simile, where the three qualities “soft,” “workable,” and “luminous” come with the conjunction *ca*, whereas the preceding qualities are without it.⁵³

In the section on the cultivation of the sphere of infinite space, based on such equanimity, however, the *Dhātvibhaṅga-sutta* uses only the two qualities “pure” and “bright.”⁵⁴ This confirms that the original description of the equanimity was only concerned with these two qualities, which in the passage given above follow each other without the conjunction *ca*. In contrast, the other three qualities must be later additions.

The overall picture that emerges from the above examination is as follows: at some stage the entire description of equanimity would have been without a reference to luminosity. This stage is still reflected in the individual translation and the *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā*. In the *Madhyama-āgama* version, an addition of the quality of luminosity to the gold simile did

⁵² For a similar case of addition to a list, evident from the irregular use of *ca*, see Anālayo 2014a: 101f.

⁵³ MN 140 at MN III 243,18: *dhantaṃ sudhantaṃ* (E^c: *suddhantaṃ*) *niddhantaṃ* (all three terms not in S^e) *nīhaṭaṃ* (S^c: *nīhaṭaṃ*) *nin-nūtakasāvaṃ* (C^c: *nīhaṭakasāvaṃ*) *muḍu ca kammaññaṃ ca pabhas-saraṃ ca*.

⁵⁴ MN 140 at MN III 243,25: *imaṃ ce ahaṃ upekkhaṃ* (E^c: *upekhaṃ*) *evaṃ parisuddhaṃ evaṃ pariyodātaṃ ākāsānañcāyatanaṃ upa-saṃhareyyaṃ*.

not spill over into the description of equanimity. In the case of the *Dhātuvibhaṅga-sutta*, however, not only the gold, but also the equanimity came to be qualified as luminous.

Whereas the application of the quality “luminous” to gold simply draws out another facet of its condition, once it has been thoroughly refined, the same does not hold equally for equanimity. At least I do not find it easy to see in what sense equanimity itself can be considered luminous, as long as this qualification refers to the same externally visible luminosity that can be perceived on seeing refined gold.

The present instance is thereby similar to the case of the Buddha’s body, mentioned earlier, where the qualification “more luminous” fits a heated iron ball more naturally than a human body. This does not imply that both descriptions could not be taken in a metaphorical sense by the reciters of these passages and their respective audiences. My point is only that to qualify heated iron or purified gold as luminous is more straightforward and thus more probably the point of origin for this qualification.

In this way, these two examples give the impression that an apparent fascination among Theravāda reciters with fire and light imagery also found expression in a tendency to relate luminosity to the mind or meditation, a tendency also evident in the same tradition’s version of the *Saṅgīti-sutta*, discussed above.

To explore this possibility further, another three Pāli discourses can be examined, which also compare the mind to gold that is “soft,” “workable,” and “luminous.”⁵⁵ In each of these three cases, this set of three qualities comes with the con-

⁵⁵ SN 46.33 at SN V 92,3, AN 3.100.11–15 at AN I 257,25, and AN 5.23 at AN III 16,4.

junction “and,” *ca*. Unlike the *Dhātuviḥaṅga-sutta*, however, these three are not preceded by other qualities, so that no comparable irregularity in the pattern of listing could manifest and then be discerned.⁵⁶

Only one of these Pāli discourses has a parallel, which is found in the *Samyukta-āgama*, probably transmitted within a Mūlasarvāstivāda reciter lineage.⁵⁷ In agreement with the Pāli version, this *Samyukta-āgama* discourse compares training in the higher mind (*adhicitta*) to a goldsmith who refines gold. The Pāli version, which in some editions comprises two distinct and consecutive discourses, applies the set of qualities “soft, workable, and luminous” to the refined gold and to the cultivated mind.⁵⁸ The *Samyukta-āgama* parallel also uses these qualifications for the gold. It does not, however, apply them to the mind.⁵⁹ As a result, in the *Samyukta-āgama* discourse the mind is not qualified as “luminous.”

This confirms the impression that there is a recurrent pattern among Pāli discourses to apply a qualification appropriate

⁵⁶ The set of three is followed by noting that the gold and the mind are not *pabhaṅgu*, “brittle,” where the conjunction “and,” *ca*, also occurs. This is another quality more natural in a description of gold than in qualifying the mind.

⁵⁷ See Anālayo 2019a and 2020e.

⁵⁸ AN 3.100.2 at AN I 254,7: *taṃ hoti jātarūpaṃ ... muduñ* (B^e and C^e: *mudu*, S^e: *muduṃ*) *ca hoti kammaniyañ* (E^e: *kammanīyañ*) *ca pabhassarañ ca* (again at AN 3.100.13 at AN I 257,24) and AN 3.100.12 at AN I 257,6: *taṃ hoti cittaṃ muduñ ca kammaniyañ* (C^e: *kammaññañ*, E^e: *kammanīyañ*) *ca pabhassarañ ca*.

⁵⁹ SĀ 1246 at T II 341c23 describes the gold as “soft, not brittle, luminous, and workable according to one’s wish,” 輕軟, 不斷, 光澤, 屈伸隨意; for a counterpart in the *Yogācārabhūmi* see Delhey 2009: 225 and 387 (§4.2.10.1.1) and T 1579 at T XXX 343c19.

for heated iron or gold to the Buddha's body, concentration, equanimity, and the mind. Such application is in line with the pattern mentioned earlier, in that Theravāda (and Dharmaguptaka) reciters appear to have had a predilection for fiery and luminous effects.

In the Theravāda tradition(s), this predilection seems to have led to qualifying concentration, equanimity, and the mind as luminous. Whenever a parallel can be consulted, the qualification "luminous" is not applied to concentration, equanimity, or the mind. In the case of the *Dhātuvibhaṅga-sutta*, closer inspection makes it quite certain that the Pāli version has undergone an expansion by incorporating additional qualities in its description of equanimity, one of which is precisely its "luminous" quality.

The Luminous Mind in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*

The perspective that has emerged so far provides a helpful background for assessing another reference to the luminous mind, found in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. This reference involves consecutive passages placed at the transition from chapter 5 to chapter 6 of the Ones in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. No parallels to these passages are extant from other discourse collections.

The two chapters, in which these passages occur, assemble various short sayings, where it is not always easy to determine at what point exactly a particular teaching or discourse ends and another begins. The first passage in question proclaims that the mind is luminous and defiled by adventitious defilements, followed by the next passage stating that the mind is luminous and freed from adventitious defilements.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ AN 1.5.9–10 at AN I 10,5.

The expression “defiled by defilements,” *upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhaṃ*, occurs in two of the three Pāli discourses mentioned above that compare the luminous condition of the mind to refined gold, thereby providing an indirect relationship to the passages now under discussion.⁶¹

Although in the present instance the image of the refined gold is no longer mentioned, the notion of the luminosity of the mind and the qualification of the defilements as “adventitious,” *āgantuka*, seem to be inspired by the gold simile, given that this lists iron, copper, tin, lead, and silver as defilements of gold.⁶² These can be considered adventitious in the sense of

⁶¹ SN 46.33 at SN V 92,22 and AN 5.23 at AN III 16,18. A similar usage can be found in AN 4.50 at AN II 53,14, where recluses and brahmins are described as *upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhā*, a predicament illustrated through a comparison with the moon and the sun. The application of the expression *upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhaṃ* to the mind, however, seems to be specific to the comparison with refined gold found in SN 46.33 and AN 5.23, as well as in the passage under discussion in AN 1.5.9–10 and AN 1.6.1–2.

⁶² According to Westerhoff 2018: 187, the present passage “can be understood as saying that luminosity is an inner or intrinsic property of the mind, to the extent that it illuminates or makes known the objects that are before the mind”; see also Bodhi 2012: 1598 note 46. A problem with such an interpretation is that AN 1.5.9–10 and AN 1.6.1–2 use the term *citta*, whereas to refer to the cognition of objects the Pāli discourses much rather use “consciousness,” *viññāṇa*. Although the two terms can in certain respects function as near-synonyms, in other respects their usage is quite distinct; see, e.g., Johansson 1965, Hamilton 1995: 82–114, Somaratne 2005, and Brahmāli 2009, 49–54. The general pattern in the Pāli discourses is to use *citta* for the mind that is defiled or undefiled, and that is to be cultivated, rather than *viññāṇa*; conversely the term to be used for sense cognition is *viññāṇa* and not *citta*. Thus, besides the problem that the idea of non-visual sense objects

being extraneous and needing to be removed for the gold to become refined and luminous.

The statement on the luminous mind recurs in the immediately ensuing section of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* with additional specifications. The whole passage reads as follows:⁶³

This mind is luminous, monastics, and it is defiled by adventitious defilements; an unlearned worldling does not understand that as it really is. I declare that therefore there is no cultivation of the mind for an unlearned worldling.

This mind is luminous, monastics, and it is freed from adventitious defilements; a learned noble disciple understands that as it really is. I declare that therefore there is cultivation of the mind for a learned noble disciple.

In view of what a comparative study of other references to the luminous mind has brought to light, it seems fair to propose, as a working hypothesis, that the present passage could be an instance of the same tendency of Pāli discourses to apply a qualification originating from a simile about gold to the mind. The present passage in fact takes this qualification considerably

requiring some form of illumination appears to be a later development (see above page 71), to express the idea of a cognition of objects (be this with or without an illumination) the present passage should have employed *viññāṇa*.

⁶³ AN 1.6.1–2 at AN I 10,10: *pabhassaram idaṃ, bhikkhave, cittaṃ, tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhaṃ. taṃ assutavā puthujjano yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti. tasmā assutavato puthujjanassa cittaabhāvanā natthī ti vadāmī ti* (B^e adds *pathamaṃ*). *pabhassaram idaṃ, bhikkhave, cittaṃ, tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi vippamuttaṃ. taṃ sutavā ariyasāvako yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti. tasmā sutavato ariyasāvakassa cittaabhāvanā atthī ti vadāmī ti* (B^e adds *dutiyaṃ*).

further than the other Pāli discourses examined so far, as it singles out the luminosity of the mind for special attention and no longer mentions other qualities such as softness and workability.⁶⁴ In order to explore this working hypothesis further, the implications of the above proclamation need to be examined against the background of the type of thought and doctrine reflected in other discourses.

Luminosity and Defilements

Notable here is the qualification of the defilements as “adventitious,” *āgantuka*. In the context of the gold simile, such a qualification would indeed be meaningful. As mentioned above, defilements like iron, copper, tin, lead, and silver can be considered “adventitious” to gold in the sense that they are extrinsic to it and can exist independently of it. The same does not hold in a comparable way for mental defilements, however, inasmuch as these cannot exist independently of the mind.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Interestingly, these qualities are mentioned in a preceding passage, where they occur without a reference to luminosity; see AN 1.5.7 at AN I 9,32: *cittaṃ, bhikkhave, bhāvitaṃ bahulikataṃ muduñ* (B^e, C^e, and E^e: *mudu*) *ca hoti kammaniyañ* (B^e, C^e, and E^e: *kammaññañ*) *ca*. Unlike AN 1.5.9–10, AN 1.5.7 has a parallel in Sanskrit fragments; see Tripāthī 1995: 121 (§2.3): (*ci*)*ttam hi bhikṣavaḥ subhāvitaṃ mṛ(du bhavati karmaṇyaṃ)*. This makes it possible, although not certain, that the apparent tendency in Theravāda discourses to add luminosity to such descriptions has in this case led to an adjacent passage on its own, instead of becoming part of AN 1.5.7 itself.

⁶⁵ Sferra 1999: 88 summarizes criticism raised in texts of late Indian Buddhism as follows: “impurities, like everything else, do not possess an independent reality ... they could not exist if there were no mind. The adventitious nature of attachment, and so forth, exists in relation to the mind. After all, it is the mind that becomes attached.”

Yet, this is what the qualification “adventitious,” *āgantuka*, to some extent conveys, as it employs a term which in its usage elsewhere in the *Vinaya* and other Pāli discourses expresses the sense of a recently arrived visitor.⁶⁶ From the viewpoint of this usage, it could even seem as if the luminous mind was somehow in existence earlier and the defilements are a sort of visitor that came later.⁶⁷ The idea that a mental defilement could in some way be set apart from the mind in which it occurs is to my knowledge not attested anywhere else in the early discourses.

Luminosity makes its appearance in a Buddhist evolution myth, if it can indeed be called such, or a parable, found in the *Aggañña-sutta* and its parallels. The tale describes how, during one of the cyclic destructions of the material world, sentient beings are reborn in a higher heaven, corresponding to the second absorption. They live in a self-luminous condition (*sayam-pabhā*) in that heaven until the material world reappears again and they are in turn reborn on earth.⁶⁸ Due to greed, these self-

⁶⁶ See, e.g., Vin II 210,11ff, where monastics arriving for a visit are qualified as *āgantuka* to distinguish them from resident monastics. A similar usage can be seen, e.g., in MN 67 at MN I 456,16. The motif of visitors occurs also in a simile of a guesthouse to illustrate the arising of various feeling tones in the body; see SN 36.14 at SN IV 219,9 and its parallel SĀ 472 at T II 120c9. Note that both versions do not apply the qualification *āgantuka*/客 to feeling tones themselves. On the guest/host motif in Chán (禪) see, e.g., Berger 2015: 145–147.

⁶⁷ This finds reflection in a comment on the *pabhassara citta* in AN 1.6.1–2 by Amaro 2003: 72 to the effect that “the things that appear to defile this purity are only visitors passing through, just wandering or drifting by.”

⁶⁸ See, e.g., DN 27 at DN III 84,29 and its parallels DĀ 5 at T I 37c1, T 10 at T I 218b17, MĀ 154 at T I 674b18, and Up 3104 at D 4094

luminous beings gradually degenerate, lose their luminosity, and eventually materialize as human beings. The arising of greed shows that these self-luminous beings were not free from defilements.

Again, a discourse in the *Dīrgha-āgama* depicts how, during a great conflagration that consumes the entire earth, the flames reach up to this particular celestial realm such that several of its inhabitants become afraid.⁶⁹ Fear is one of the “defilements,” *upakkilesa*, listed in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallel as obstructing the development of concentration.⁷⁰ The arising of fear confirms that these self-luminous beings were not reckoned to be free from defilements.

The same conclusion emerges also from a passage in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, according to which some inhabitants of this celestial realm could even be reborn in hell, as animals, or as hungry ghosts.⁷¹ Such rebirth would not be possible if the self-luminous beings had been free from defilements. Hence, the notion of an originally luminous mind that in some form was in existence before defilements manifested could not be a reflection of the above evolution myth or parable. Instead, it seems to be the result of a literal application of the gold simile to the mind.

ju 192b2 or P 5595 *tu* 219b5. The luminous condition of celestial realms recurs elsewhere in the early discourses; see also, e.g., MN 50 at MN I 337,26 and its parallels MĀ 131 at T I 622b10, T 66 at T I 866b7, and T 67 at T I 868c4, or SN 6.5 at SN I 145,24 and its parallels SĀ 1196 at T II 325a18 and SĀ² 109 at T II 413a9.

⁶⁹ DĀ 30 at T I 138b25.

⁷⁰ MN 128 at MN III 158,25 and MĀ 72 at T I 537c16.

⁷¹ AN 4.123 at AN II 127,10. This discourse does not seem to have a parallel properly speaking; the distantly related MĀ 168 at T I 700c17 only describes rebirth in this celestial realm but does not broach the topic of what happens subsequently.

The Nature of the Mind and Defilements

For any of these beings in the *Aggañña-sutta*'s evolution myth or parable to be reborn at all, be it as humans or in lower realms, implies that they are not free from craving for existence. Of such craving for existence, no beginning point can be discerned, before which there was no craving for existence.⁷² The same holds for the faring on in the round of rebirths, which extends so far back into the past that a beginning point cannot be determined.⁷³ In other words, according to early Buddhist cosmology it would not be possible to identify a time in the past at which a supposedly luminous mind was already in existence and only after which it came to be defiled by craving.

Once a time in the past when craving and defilements have not been present in the mind is not discernible, there seems little scope to postulate that the mind is naturally pure. Instead, one might even propose that it is naturally defiled. But since defilements are conditioned phenomena, they can be removed. That is, purity and freedom from defilements is a potentiality of the mind that requires being brought about by way of meditative cultivation, rather than being a return to an already existing inherent nature.

⁷² AN 10.62 at AN V 116,15 and its parallels MĀ 52 at T I 487c27 and T 36 at T I 819c23.

⁷³ See, e.g., SN 15.3 at SN II 179,21 and its parallels SĀ 938 at T II 240c26 and SĀ² 331 at T II 486a19, part of a corresponding statement has been preserved in Sanskrit fragment SHT 1.167 R3, Waldschmidt, Clawiter, and Holzmann 1965: 95. Another parallel, EĀ 51.1 at T II 814a28, has no counterpart to the introductory statement, although the rest of the discourse makes it clear that the same basic principle holds.

Of relevance here is also a distinction drawn in a Pāli discourse between the three periods of time, in terms of the applicability of the expression that something “was,” “is,” or “will be.”⁷⁴ The basic idea behind this presentation could perhaps be summarized by considering ‘time’ to be predominantly a conceptualization of the fact of change.⁷⁵ Hence, the three times (past, present, future), even though they share being expressions of the nature of impermanence, can be clearly distinguished from each other. For example, what is past and has disappeared, no longer deserves to be reckoned as “it is” or “it will be.” What has not yet happened, in turn, should not be referred to as “it was” or “it is.”

An example employed in the early discourses that illustrates the need to apply such clear distinctions describes how milk changes to cream, then to butter, and then to ghee, each of which is a distinct stage and should not be confused with the others.⁷⁶ The parallel versions agree that once this process has resulted in ghee, this is no longer milk. Conversely, before this process, the milk is not yet ghee; it is just milk. For a proper understanding of the process of transformation from milk to ghee, there is no need to assume that the future ghee must already in some form be pre-existent in the present milk. In other words, a process of transformation does not require being anticipated already at its beginning.

This perspective changes in later times, in particular with the affirmation of the existence of past and future in the pre-

⁷⁴ SN 22.62 at SN II 71,15; quoted in Kv 150,25 in a debate with Sarvāstivādins on the question of time.

⁷⁵ See also Anālayo 2019g.

⁷⁶ DN 9 at DN I 201,25, a Sanskrit fragment parallel in Melzer 2006: 282 (36.94), and DĀ 28 at T I 112b1.

sent moment, a notion upheld in the Sarvāstivāda traditions.⁷⁷ From the perspective of such a position, it could be assumed that the future event of awakening needs to be to some extent already present now.

Such a sense could indeed be read into the description in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage under discussion, which identifies cultivation of the mind with knowing its luminous condition.

Purification of the Mind

In the early discourses in general, the task is to purify the mind gradually through various practices, which are to be cultivated by avoiding the two extremes of excessive striving and undue laxity. The present passage, however, could give the impression that recognition of luminosity is what really matters for “cultivation of the mind,” *cittabhāvanā*. Although this is just a nuance in the passage under discussion, later tradition will articulate this more fully, in that cultivation of the mind comes to be concerned with recognition of its allegedly innate purity. I will return to this below.

The *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels list various mental states for mindful contemplation, distinguishing between, for

⁷⁷ Cox 1995: 136 reports an argument advanced in support of this doctrine as follows: “A given instance of perceptual consciousness is said to arise only in dependence upon two conditions: the sense organ and its corresponding object-field. This implies that perceptual consciousness arises only in conjunction with an appropriate and existent object; perceptual consciousness of a nonexistent object or without an object is, therefore, impossible. Since mental perceptual consciousness of past and future factors does indeed occur, in order to preclude the absurdity of perceptual consciousness without an object-field, these past and future factors too must be acknowledged to exist.” See also Dhammadinnā 2019: 8–14.

example, a mind with lust, *sarāgaṃ cittaṃ*, and a mind without lust, *vītarāgaṃ cittaṃ*.⁷⁸ The contrast between “with lust” and “without lust” made in this way shows that early Buddhist analysis was able to express the possibility of mental purification and freedom from defilements without needing to postulate an essential nature of the mind that is in principle unaffected by defilements.

By way of providing another illustration, just as for fruit to ripen there is no need to postulate that the ripe fruit already exists in the corresponding flower that has just blossomed on a tree, so for a mind to become purified there is no need to postulate that an intrinsic purity already exists in its present defiled state. Instead of creating a contrast between an allegedly inherent nature of the mind and its defilements, set apart as something adventitious, in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and other early discourses the mind is simply viewed as an impermanent and conditioned process that can occur either “with” or else “without” defilements. Here the “mind,” *citta*, simply refers to a contingent mental state.

Moreover, a state of mind with lust or any other such defilement would not be luminous. According to the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallels, the presence of any out of a range of defilements (*upakkilesa*) results in a loss of whatever inner light or luminescence (*obhāsa*) has been experienced during meditation.⁷⁹ This confirms that, from the perspective reflected in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallels, a mind defiled by defile-

⁷⁸ MN 10 at MN I 59,30, MĀ 98 at T I 584a6, and EĀ 21.1 at T II 568c22.

⁷⁹ MN 128 at MN III 158,4, MĀ 72 at T I 536c28, and a parallel to this part of the discourse in Up 5020 at D 4094 *ju* 276b1 or P 5595 *thu* 20b2.

ments does not remain in a condition of luminosity.⁸⁰ In other words, the mind can be expected to lose its luminous condition as soon as a defilement manifests in it.⁸¹

The *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallels provide a good example for showing that early Buddhist thought does recognize meditative experience of light or luminescence. However, these are meditative visions rather than an intrinsic quality of the mind. In fact, references to mental experiences of luminosity or numinosity are cross-cultural phenomena, thus my exploration is certainly not meant to deny the validity of such experiences. My intention is only to discern developments in the interpretation of these experiences. From the viewpoint of the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallels, it seems clear that inner experiences of luminosity come into being through the successful cultivation of concentration and the temporary absence of defilements, but with the arising of defilements and the consequent loss of concentration they disappear.

⁸⁰ Commenting on the formulation in AN 1.5.9–10 and AN 1.6.1–2, the *Atthasālinī*, As 140,²⁷ argues that the luminous mind is pure even when in an unwholesome condition, just as a tributary is similar to the river. The simile does not seem to be successful in resolving the problem of how to account for the coexistence of luminosity and defilement.

⁸¹ An objection along these lines can be found in the **Mahāvibhāṣā*, T 1545 at T XXVII 140b24, or else in the so-called Spitzer fragment, rendered by Franco 2000: 95f as: “what is luminous cannot be defiled” and “at the time when it is defiled it is not luminous ... nor are the defiled and the non-defiled apprehended at the same time ... therefore, how could it be known that a luminous consciousness is defiled?” Keenan 1982: 11 formulates the same problem from the viewpoint of early Yogācāra as follows: “If the mind is originally pure, then how is one to account for empirical defilement?”

The simile of refining gold in two Pāli discourses, mentioned earlier,⁸² confirms the presentation in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallels. According to both of these Pāli discourses, when in a defiled condition the mind is not luminous and comparable to defiled gold that is not fit for work; such a defiled mind does not become rightly concentrated.⁸³ In other words, here luminosity of the mind reflects the successful achievement of concentration.

In the statement on the luminous mind in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* passage translated above, the indication that there is “cultivation of the mind” for one who understands this luminous nature may have been intended to convey a similar sense. Certainly, this reference to luminosity does not imply a form of awakening.⁸⁴ As pointed out by Karunaratne (1999: 219):

what is meant by lustrous and pure mind (*pabhassara/prakṛtipariśuddha*) is not a state of mind which is absolutely pure, nor the pure mind which is synonymous with emancipation. It may be explained as pure only in the sense, and to the extent, that it is not disturbed or influenced by external stimuli.

⁸² See above note 55 (as part of a set of three Pāli discourses).

⁸³ SN 46.33 at SN V 92,23 and AN 5.23 at AN III 16,20 present the gain of concentration by a mind free from being defiled by any of the five hindrances as instrumental for progress to the destruction of the influxes.

⁸⁴ Such implications are sometimes read into the passage; see, e.g., Dutt 1960/1971: 285, who assumes that the description in AN 1.6.1–2 points to “the original pure state of mind, to which the perfect reverts after thoroughly purifying his mind of all impurities.” The formulation in AN 1.6.1–2 provides no basis for such suggestions (note that in its usage in the early discourses, the expression “noble disciple” is not confined to those who have attained a level of awakening, let alone the highest one).

Similarly, Shih Ru-nien (2009: 168) explains that

the Pali texts only emphasize the knowledge of the innate purity of the mind as a prerequisite step in the cultivation of the mind and the restoration of the purity of the mind is not the end of religious practices. As a matter of fact, after the removal of the defilements, the mind is not only pure, tranquil, and luminous but also soft, pliant, and adaptable. It then becomes suitable for the destruction of all the *āsavas* or the cultivation of the seven limbs of wisdom, and the like.

This means that the tranquil, luminous, and pliable mind is just the basis for further religious practices.

Knowing the Nature of the Mind

Another point worth further exploration is the contrast, drawn in the passage from the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* under discussion, between the unlearned worldling and the noble disciple in relation to cultivation of the mind. The unlearned worldling does not know the luminous condition of the *defiled* mind as it really is, whereas the noble disciple knows the luminous condition of the *undefiled* mind as it really is.

Here, the worldling fails at something that would seem rather difficult. How could a worldling be expected to know that the mind is luminous when it is in a defiled condition? In contrast, the noble disciple faces what appears to be a much easier task, namely recognition of the luminous mind when it is not defiled, as a result of which its luminosity can openly manifest and therefore can much easier be discerned.

Such unequal treatment is unusual. Other Pāli discourses that also draw a contrast between the unlearned worldling and the noble disciple, in regard to knowing something as it really

is, concern the same task.⁸⁵ This is indeed what one would expect, in that the difference between the two should manifest in relation to the same requirement. Applied to the present context, a proposal in line with the procedure adopted elsewhere in the discourses would be that the unlearned worldling and the noble disciple differ in their ability to distinguish between a defiled mind and a mind that is not defiled. Whereas the worldling is not able to recognize this crucial difference, the noble disciple does recognize it. Such a contrast could be expressed in a statement of this type:

This mind is defiled by defilements, monastics; an unlearned worldling does not understand that as it really is. I declare that therefore there is no cultivation of the mind for an unlearned worldling.

This mind is freed from defilements, monastics; a learned noble disciple understands that as it really is. I declare that therefore there is cultivation of the mind for a learned noble disciple.

A statement of this type would be fully in line with the position taken in other early discourses. Lack of understanding of what defiles the mind will make it indeed impossible for the worldling to cultivate it. In contrast, understanding what defiles the mind enables the noble disciple to free the mind from these defilements and then to lead it into deeper concentration. It is only once the qualification “luminous” is applied to the mind and the defilements consequently become “adventitious” that the tasks faced by the worldling and the noble disciple come to differ substantially.

⁸⁵ See, e.g., MN 64 at MN I 433,22 or else a series of consecutive discourse, SN 22.126–134 at SN III 171,6.

The various points explored so far make it, in my view, safe to conclude that the working hypothesis mentioned earlier is indeed correct. In other words, the present passage in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* does seem to be distinctly late. It builds on and further expands a notion resulting from a description of gold that led to the addition of a qualification of the mind as “luminous.” At the time of the coming into being of this apparent addition, the resultant phrasing in the passage in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* need not have carried any special implications. In line with other instances surveyed earlier, it can be assumed to have been just another instance where the fascination exerted by the imagery of luminous gold and its potential as a metaphor influenced the wording of a description that was previously not concerned with any luminosity of the mind.

Given that the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallels describe inner experiences of light during meditation, a qualification of the mind as luminous is not in itself problematic. Even though the use of the same qualification is less straightforward when applied to equanimity or the body of the Buddha, allowing for a more metaphorical understanding could still accommodate such instances. What does make the above *Āṅguttara-nikāya* passage significant, however, is the formulation that results from this apparent addition, as this can be read in ways that reify the ‘real’ mind as naturally pure and luminous, rather than being simply a series of different states, none of which is more real or natural than the other.

Such a reading would in turn have invested the actual formulation resulting from the introduction of the motif of luminosity in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* passage with increased significance. Once the imagery of luminescence designates a nature of the mind considered to be unaffected by defilements and hence intrinsically pure, inner-light experiences of the type de-

scribed in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallels could easily have come to be invested with an increased degree of importance. Instead of being just a reflection of having achieved some degree of concentration, they can be perceived as rather profound realizations, authenticating a practitioner as having become a truly noble disciple acquainted with what it takes to cultivate the mind.

From this perspective, whereas the formulation in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage under discussion reflects the impact of fascination with light-related imagery and the vagaries of oral transmission, the importance accorded to this passage in later times can safely be assumed to reflect the impact of concerns related to actual meditation practice.

Another and also rather significant stimulant for an increasing interest in the mode of description, found in the above passage from the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, would be related to doctrinal concerns, in particular the coming into vogue of the theory of momentariness.⁸⁶ Once the mind is conceptualized as a series of discrete mind-moments that pass away as soon as they arise, something has to be found to explain continuity, in order to account for memory, identity, and rebirth. A search in this direction would naturally have led to an increased interest in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage's description of a mind that apparently remains in a condition of luminosity independent of the arising and passing away of any defilements.

Faced with the problems resulting from the theory of momentariness, the Theravāda commentarial tradition relied on the notion of the *bhavaṅga* to explain continuity alongside rap-

⁸⁶ On the emergence and early stages of this theory see von Rospatt 1995 (for a succinct presentation see also von Rospatt 1998).

idly arising and disappearing mind-moments.⁸⁷ The commentary on the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage under discussion indeed identifies the *bhavaṅga* with the luminous mind.⁸⁸ This shows that the apparent application of the gold imagery to the present passage came to carry remarkable implications in later tradition.

In line with the shared interest between Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka discourses in imagery related to fire and luminosity, a parallel to the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage under discussion can be found in the **Śāriputrābhidharma* which, as mentioned earlier, quite probably represents the viewpoint of the Dharmaguptaka tradition. The relevant part proceeds as follows:⁸⁹

⁸⁷ According to Gethin 1994: 29, “the notion of *bhavaṅga* is, in part at least, intended to provide some account of why I am me and why I continue to behave like me; it is surely intended to give some theoretical basis for observed consistency in behaviour patterns, character traits and the habitual mental states of a given individual.” In sum, in the words of Gethin 1994: 31, the “notion of *bhavaṅga* as explicitly expounded in the Theravādin Abhidhamma seems certainly intended to provide some account of psychological continuity.”

⁸⁸ Mp I 60,10; on which Gethin 1994: 34 comments that this commentarial identification “seems to raise more questions than it answers. For example, in the case of beings reborn in the ‘descents’ where *bhavaṅga* is always unwholesome resultant, how can it be said to be defiled in name only and not truly defiled? In what sense is it pure, clear or radiant?”

⁸⁹ T 1548 at T XXVIII 697b18: 心性清淨，爲客塵染。凡夫未聞故，不能如實知見亦無修心。聖人聞故，如實知見亦有修心。心性清淨，離客塵垢。凡夫未聞故，不能如實知見亦無修心。聖人聞故，能如實知見亦有修心; the first part of this passage has already been translated by Silk 2015: 121. The quoted text occurs at the outset of the Chapter on the Mind (心品) and is not explicitly marked as a discourse quotation. Nevertheless, it may well go back to a no longer extant Dharmaguptaka discourse parallel to AN 1.6.1–2.

The mind is by nature pure; it is defiled by adventitious defilements. Because of being unlearned, a worldling is unable to know and see it as it really is and does not cultivate the mind. Because of being learned, a noble disciple is able to know and see it as it really is and cultivates the mind.

The mind is by nature pure; it is freed from adventitious defilements. Because of being unlearned, a worldling is unable to know and see it as it really is and does not cultivate the mind. Because of being learned, a noble disciple is able to know and see it as it really is and cultivates the mind.

The use of the qualification “pure” would more naturally reflect an original reading like *(vi)śuddhi/(vi)suddhi*, although due to the uncertainties involved with translation into Chinese it is also possible that the original had instead a term corresponding to *prabhāsvara/pabhassara*. In later traditions, both notions occur similarly and manifest in a range of texts.

These two notions often come together with a specification also found in the **Śāriputrābhidharma*, namely the qualification “by nature,” 性 (*prakṛti*). The mind is “by nature” or “intrinsicly” pure or luminous. This makes explicit an understanding of the luminous or pure mind and its relation to cultivation of the mind that in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage is not yet articulated, although it can easily be read into it. The true nature of the mind is to be pure and/or luminous, and a recognition of this nature becomes the object of knowing and seeing, and hence of cultivation of the mind.

The presentation in the **Śāriputrābhidharma* of the contrast between the noble disciple and the worldling also evens out a problem in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage, discussed above, where the worldling’s lack of knowledge relates only to the defiled luminous mind and the noble disciple’s insight only to

the undefiled luminous mind. In the passage in the **Śāriputrābhidharma* the worldling is ignorant of the luminous mind with and without defilements, whereas the noble disciple understands both of these conditions. This is a more meaningful presentation, which in turn makes it reasonable to assume that the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* passage would reflect an interim stage when the “luminosity” of the mind and the “adventitious” nature of defilements have recently been combined with the contrast between the worldling’s and the noble disciple’s cultivation of the mind, and the results of this move have not yet been fully smoothed out.

Luminosity in Later Traditions

The contrast between the luminous nature of the mind and the adventitious character of its defilements has had considerable impact on later tradition.⁹⁰ The notion of a luminous mind defiled by adventitious defilement became a tenet upheld also by the Mahāsāṅghikas and the Vibhajyavādins.⁹¹

The same impact can also be seen in a range of texts and forms of practice, a comprehensive survey of which is not possible within the scope of this chapter. Hence, in what follows I merely take up a few snapshots, chosen somewhat at random, in order to exemplify some of the trends that appear to have been influenced in one way or another by the powerful notion of the luminous mind, in itself apparently a derivative of the simile of purifying gold.

⁹⁰ For surveys of relevant passages see Ruegg 1969: 411–454 and Radich 2016: 268–279.

⁹¹ Bareau 1955: 67f and 175; see also Lamotte 1962: 53. For the Mahāsāṅghika position, Frauwallner 1951: 152 refers to T 2031 at T XXXXIX 15c27: 心性本淨客隨煩惱之所雜染.

A highlighting of the mind as luminous by nature occurs, for example, in a quote in the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, according to which “the mind is by nature luminous, it is defiled by adventitious defilements.”⁹² A reference to the luminous mind in the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* occurs in close proximity to an allusion to the splendor of gold.⁹³ Although the two are not directly related, it seems fair enough to take this as a reflection of the relationship between the luminous mind and the simile of refined gold, attested in the Pāli discourses surveyed above.⁹⁴

Given that the contrast between the worldling and the noble disciple is of less relevance once the aspiration to Buddhahood has taken center stage, it is only natural that the *Sāgaramati-paripṛcchā*, as quoted in the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, considers a distinct vision of the luminous condition of the mind to be a quality of bodhisattvas:⁹⁵

⁹² Nakamura 1961: 87,13: *prakṛtiprabhāsvaraṃ cittam āgantukair upakleśair upakliśyata iti*; with the Tibetan counterpart in Nakamura 1967: 87,10: *sems kyi rang bzhin ni 'od gsal ba ste, glo bur gyi nyon mongs pas nyon mongs pa'o*, and the Chinese version in T 1611 at T XXXI 833a29: 自性清淨心, 客塵煩惱染。

⁹³ Nanjio 1923: 358,5, where a reference to the *prakṛtiprabhāsvaraṃ cittam* is followed in the next verse two lines below by illustrating the *ālaya* with the example of the splendor of gold, *kāntir yathā suvarṇasya jātarūpaṃ*; see also, e.g., T 672 at T XVI 637c1+3.

⁹⁴ On the gold simile in later traditions see Goméz 1987/1991.

⁹⁵ Nakamura 1961: 95,22: *bodhisattvaḥ sattvānāṃ prakṛtiprabhāsvaratām cittasya prajānāti, tām punar āgantukopakleśopakliṣṭām paśyati*; Nakamura 1967: 95,15: *byang chub sems dpa' sems can rnam s kyi sems rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal bar rab tu shes te, 'on kyang glo bur gyi nye ba'i nyon mongs pas nyon mongs par mthong ngo*, and T 1611 at T XXXI 834b5: 菩薩摩訶薩亦復如是, 如實知見一切眾生自性清淨光明淨心, 而為客塵煩惱所染。The source of the quote would be D 152 *pha* 85a6 or P 819 *pu* 91a4: *byang chub sems dpa'*

The bodhisattva understands the by nature luminous mind of beings and furthermore sees that it is defiled by adventitious defilements.

A passage in the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* proposes that the luminous mind is neither conjoined with lust, aversion, and delusion, nor disjoined from these.⁹⁶ This sets a contrast to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels, mentioned above. In these texts, the mind can be conjoined with lust, aversion, or delusion, or disjoined from them. The parallels do not conceive of a mind as apart from these two alternatives.

Another quote in the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* proclaims that this intrinsic nature of the mind is without causes and conditions and hence also beyond arising and cessation.⁹⁷ The *Anūnatvā-pūrṇatvanirdeśaparivarta* provides an additional example for

yang sems can thams cad kyi sems rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal bar rab tu shes la de yang zlo bur gyi nye ba'i nyon mongs pas nyon mongs pa can du byas par mthong ngo and T 400 at T XIII 511a14: 菩薩亦復如是，了知眾生心之自性，本來清淨明澈潔白，但為客塵煩惱之所覆蔽。

⁹⁶ Dutt 1934: 121,15: *śāriputra āha: kā punar āyusman subhūte cittasya prabhāsvaratā? subhūtir āha: yad āyusman śāriputra cittaṃ na rāgena saṃyuktaṃ na viṣaṃyuktaṃ, na dveṣena (saṃyuktaṃ na viṣaṃyuktaṃ), na mohena (saṃyuktaṃ na viṣaṃyuktaṃ) ... iyaṃ śāriputra cittasya prabhāsvaratā* (the elided passage lists also other items, such as the underlying tendencies, fetters, etc.); see also T 223 at T XIII 233c23: 舍利弗語須菩提：云何名心相常淨？須菩提言：若菩薩知是心相與姪怒癡不合不離 ... 舍利弗，是名菩薩心相常淨。

⁹⁷ Nakamura 1961: 87,17: *yā punaḥ sā prakṛtis tasyā na hetur na prat-yayo na sāmagrī notpādo na nirodhaḥ*; Nakamura 1967: 87,13: *rang bzhin gang yin pa de ni rgyu med pa, rkyen med pa, tshogs pa med pa, skye ba med pa, 'gag pa med pa'o* and T 1611 at T XXXI 833b3: 彼自性清淨心無因無緣故，無和合不生不滅。

the powerful influence of the notion of a mind that is by nature pure. In the words of Silk (2015: 40),

ultimately the intrinsically pure mind is identified with the *dharmadhātu* itself ... this mind which is so fouled by defilements is actually pure and luminous just as is the *dharmadhātu*, the pure ground of being itself, virtually identical with Buddhahood ... the initial and innate state of the mind is equivalent to awakening, and realizing this means that no further practice is necessary.

The Path of Meditative Recognition

The idea that no further practice is necessary, together with the emphasis on the need to realize the true nature of the mind, has had considerable impact on how cultivation of the mind came to be conceptualized in various practice lineages. Needless to say, this type of development is of particular interest to my overall concern in this book with the interplay between theory and practice.

Before surveying a few selected examples that illustrate the relevance of the development, surveyed above, to conceptualizations of actual meditation practice, I would like to clarify that my purpose here is decidedly not to debunk various meditation traditions or to pretend that these are not based on, or conducive to, genuinely transformative experiences. Nor do I intend to present the textual development examined in this chapter as the sole factor in leading to such conceptualizations of meditation practice. Instead, what I have surveyed here is only one in a range of different causes and conditions impacting the evolution of such conceptions.

In fact, although the idea that the mind is already awakened differs from early Buddhist thought on the nature of defilements

and the mind, the resultant type of meditation practice as such can serve as a skillful means to wean a practitioner from excessive goal-orientation and obsession with having gained (or not) a particular level of realization. For this reason, my aim in what follows is only to explore the degree to which the powerful imagery of the luminous and/or pure nature of the mind continues to influence the discourse on meditation practice and experience in various practice traditions, in line with my overall interest in cross-fertilizations between textual and meditative developments.

The first topic in my survey is *rdzogs chen*, the Great Perfection. Hatchell (2014: 52) comments on the historically early stages in the development of this particular approach to mental cultivation as follows:

the earliest stratum of the Great Perfection ... presents a blend of radical emptiness and speculation on the agency of a luminous awareness in the universe ... it also shows a disinterest in specifying any kind of structured practices ... rather, the tradition argues, there is nothing to do and nothing to strive for, so the reality ... will manifest in its immediacy just by relaxing and letting go.

According to a *mahāmudrā* text by the eleventh-century *mahāsiddha* Maitrīpa.⁹⁸

The naturally luminous jewel [of this] nature of mind, which is self-awareness, is bright, pure and unobstructed. Natural luminosity is not found through [any] conceptual [state of] meditation or non-meditation: It is the uncontrived, undistracted ease in undistracted non-meditation.

⁹⁸ Mathes 2016: 277 (§I.20f) and 291 (§II.40).

Not to conceptualize anything, not to intend anything, not to grasp anything, devoid of conceptual analysis, and nothing that needs to be done, this is self-luminous awareness, the ornament of natural liberation without having to correct or modify [anything].

Ten centuries later the late Tibetan master Namkhai Norbu explains (1989: 78):

In Dzogchen the way one behaves in the state of presence is the Fruit, and there is nothing else to obtain. When one has this knowledge, one discovers that everything was always already accomplished from the very beginning. The self-perfected state is the inherent quality of the condition of ‘what is’; there is nothing to be perfected, and all one needs to do is to have real knowledge of this condition.

With what follows I turn from *rdzogs chen* to the Chán (禪) traditions. Sharf (2014: 939) explains:

early Chan documents employ a variety of related analogies to illustrate the nature and inherent purity of mind: the mind is like a mirror covered by dust; one must focus on the innate luminosity of the mirror rather than the fleeting images that appear within it ... in meditation, one attends to the abiding luminosity of mind or consciousness, which is to realize one’s inherent buddha-nature.

In twelfth-century China, master Hóngzhì (宏智) offered the following instructions:⁹⁹

Completely and silently be at ease. In true thusness separate yourself from all causes and conditions. Brightly luminous

⁹⁹ McRae 2003: 137.

without defilements, you directly penetrate and are liberated. You have from the beginning been in this place; it is not something that is new to you today. From the time before the vast eon when you dwelled in your old [original] home, everything is completely clear, unobscured, numinous, and singularly bright.

At about the same time, Korean master Jinul (知訥) clarified:¹⁰⁰

the true mind is like space, for it neither ends nor changes. Therefore it is said, “These hundred bones will crumble and return to fire and wind. But One Thing is eternally numinous and covers heaven and earth” ... The nature of the mind is unstained; it is originally whole and complete in itself ...

In the case of a person who has had an awakening, although he still has adventitious defilements, these have all been purified into cream.

In Japan in the eighteenth century, master Hakuin Ekaku expressed such awakening in poetic form:¹⁰¹

He who bears witness to the nature of the Self as Originating Essence,

To such an one singing and dancing are alike the voice of the Law.

He has opened the gate of the Absolute Undifferentiated Nature,

When that happens what is there to seek?

Whether one goes or returns there is no ‘elsewhere.’

The very body he has is indeed Buddha.

¹⁰⁰ Buswell 1983: 140f and 149.

¹⁰¹ Shaw 1963: 183.

In order to communicate to others how to realize this intrinsic and already present original nature of the mind, some practice traditions employ specific means for this purpose, be this cryptic sayings in order to point to the luminous and/or pure nature of the mind or else other ways of jolting the practitioner in one way or another to its successful recognition. Well-known in this respect is the employment of the *kōan*, a Japanese term corresponding to the *gōng'àn* (公案) in Chinese, a “public case” that involves a “key phrase” or “head word,” *huàtóu* (話頭). The late Chinese master Sheng Yen (2009: 4) explains:

In Chan, a *gong'an* is an episode or case in the life of a Chan master, an episode that often bears directly upon the enlightenment of that master ... the early Chan masters would extract the essential point or the critical phrase or word from a *gong'an* and use it as a tool for practice. A *huatou* may consists of a fragment—a question or a word—derived from a *gong'an* ... to practice *huatou* the practitioner recites the sentence or fragment in a questioning manner but without theorizing or analyzing in order to find an answer ... to investigate the *huatou* means to examine that which occurs before thoughts arise. But what is that which lies before thoughts arise? What does the *huatou* point to? Our original, liberated mind.

In line with notions evident in the passages quoted above, master Sheng Yen (2009: 158) points out:

from the perspective of pure mind, there is no such thing as defiled mind. Pure mind is simply the fundamental, original state of being that has always been there. Furthermore, it is not something that is gained after some time of practice—it has been there all the time ... therefore, the point of practice is not to acquire this pure mind or to gain enlightenment; it

is rather more like restoring the mind's original state of purity ... the mind realizes its natural state of purity.

Sung Bae Park (2009: 49) clarifies:

attaining enlightenment requires nothing other than giving up the search for it. At the moment we stop seeking, enlightenment is there. What is enlightenment? It means returning to our original nature.

According to the prolific writer and Zen teacher D. T. Suzuki (1950/1994: 25 and 29), such enlightenment, *satori*, has the following characteristics:

The *satori* experience is thus always characterized by irrationality, inexplicability, and incommunicability ... [it is] an inner perception, which takes place in the most interior part of consciousness ... though the *satori* experience is sometimes expressed in negative terms, it is essentially an affirmative attitude towards all things that exist; it accepts them as they come regardless of their moral values ... [it] essentially consists in doing away with the opposition of two terms in whatsoever sense.

Regarding the relationship drawn in this quote between *satori* and consciousness, it is of interest to note that, according to an explanation by Hakuin, what in later tradition is considered the eighth consciousness, the *ālaya-vijñāna*, is to be transformed by the experience of *satori*.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Waddel 2009: 131: "each of us is endowed with eight consciousnesses ... the eighth or 'storehouse' consciousness exists in a passive state of utter blankness, dull and unknowing, like a vast pool of still clear water, without any movement whatever ... if a student pursues his religious practice diligently and is able to break

The appeal of the luminous or pure mind has exerted its attraction not only among Mahāyāna traditions. As pointed out by Gethin (1994: 32),

the fact that the Theravādin commentarial tradition unequivocally states that the radiant mind of the *Aṅguttara* passage is *bhavaṅga-citta* ... adds weight to the suggestion that the notions of *bhavaṅga-citta* and *ālaya-vijñāna* have some sort of common ancestry within the history of Buddhist thought.

A position held by some members of the Theravāda tradition in Thailand stands in continuity with the passages surveyed above, as evident in the following statements by Ajahn Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno:¹⁰³

where is the real substance behind the shadows of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*? Drive on further! Their real substance is in the *citta* ... the *citta* by its very nature is *amata*—Undying—even when it still has *kilesas* ...

the *kilesas* can't destroy the *citta* ... this nature is unassailable, absolute and permanent ... this nature is complete, perfect and immaculately pure.

Conclusion

A reference to an invisible/non-manifesting and luminous consciousness in the *Brahmanimantaṅika-sutta* could be a proclamation attributable to Brahmā; moreover, in the Chinese parallel this proclamation does not qualify consciousness as

through this dark cavern of the mind, it suddenly transforms into a great perfect mirror wisdom shining forth with perfect brilliance in the attainment of enlightenment.”

¹⁰³ Mahā Boowa (no date) pages 93 and 78.

luminous. In the case of another reference to an invisible/non-manifesting consciousness in the *Kevaḍḍha-sutta*, here expressing an experience related to awakening, an element of luminosity in the same reference could well be the result of a later development.

A comparative study of passages that compare the condition of a mind free from defilements to the luminosity of refined gold reveals that a quality, originally applied to gold, appears to have been attributed to the mind as well. The resultant notion of the mind's luminosity would in turn have inspired a proclamation in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* on cultivation of the mind requiring a recognition of its luminous nature, which stands in contrast to the adventitious nature of defilements. In several respects this proclamation does not sit easily with early Buddhist thought in the way this is reflected in other discourses. Although apparently only attested in a Theravāda discourse collection, in keeping with a predilection for light imagery shared by the Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka reciter traditions, a passage in the **Śāriputrābhidharma* makes it clear that this proclamation was also known and accepted in Dharmaguptaka thought.

The attraction exerted by the resultant presentation seems to have been of continuous influence in later traditions, both Mahāyāna and Theravāda. Further developments of the notion of an original purity eventually became part of approaches to cultivation of the mind informed by an emphasis on the recognition of its true nature as equaling awakening.

As a case study of the interplay between theory and practice, it is noteworthy that the development surveyed in the present chapter does not have its starting point in an actual meditation instruction, unlike the case surveyed in the previous chapter. The reduction of the sixteen steps of mindfulness of

breathing begins with meditation instructions reportedly given by the Buddha, who elsewhere is on record for having himself had a predilection for this type of practice.¹⁰⁴ In other words, the scheme of sixteen steps was seen as a record of the Buddha's own meditation practice and resultant instructions. A cross-fertilization between theory and practice then appears to have led to a gradual reduction, until eventually only a focus on the breath remained.

In the present case, the starting point appears to be rather a fascination with fire and light imagery (often but not exclusively related to the Buddha), combined with literalism, which together appear to have influenced a key passage during oral transmission in such a way that it ended up implicitly presenting a novel perspective on the nature of the mind. It is only at this stage that practice-related concerns appear to have taken on a prominent role, by way of appropriating this description as part of a process that involved a substantial reconceptualization of the role of meditation practice in relation to awakening.

¹⁰⁴ See Anālayo 2017d, 61–67.

Absorption

Introduction

With the third chapter of my *Early Buddhist Meditation Studies*, I had examined various debated dimensions of absorption. My main conclusions were that, in the early discourses, absorption attainment does not function as an independent avenue to liberation, which is particularly evident in passages that expose potential drawbacks of absorption attainment, nor is insight meditation undertaken while being in absorption,¹ a mental condition of deep tranquility requiring considerable meditative mastery.

In what follows I continue this previous examination by studying definitions of right concentration in early Buddhist discourse from a comparative perspective, in order to discern stages in their development. Based on the historical-critical perspective established in this way, my main proposal is that the definition of right concentration by way of listing the four absorptions appears to reflect a later stage in textual evolution.

This definition of right concentration is not the only instance where an increasing emphasis on the importance of absorption can be identified as the result of textual developments. The reevaluation that emerges in this way puts into perspective the view that the ability to attain absorption forms a necessary condition for progress to stream-entry. In the remainder of the present chapter (which due to the complexity of the topic has become by far the longest chapter in this book), I trace the re-

¹ Regarding MN 111, already discussed in Anālayo 2017b: 117–123; see also Anālayo 2020g: 25–30.

percussions of this view, contrasting a text-historical perspective on the insight knowledges with their reconceptualization as forms of absorption by the proponents of dry insight. Such reinterpretation in turn had its own, probably unintended, repercussions in stimulating the arising of a variety of perspectives and ideas on the implication and significance of absorption attainment, which emerge as the final result of a remarkable interplay between doctrinal (and even at times polemical) concerns and their impact on meditation practice.

The Four Absorptions as Right Concentration

The implications of right concentration as the eighth factor of the noble eightfold path have been and still are a matter of considerable concern and continuous discussion. Simply stated, the question is to what degree the ability to attain absorption, either the first or all four of them, is required for reaching stream-entry or higher stages along the path to full awakening. Such discussions often take as their point of departure the definition of right concentration by way of listing the four absorptions.

Based on a search among the Pāli discourses, however, it appears that this definition is only found in three instances. In contrast, four instances define right concentration without any reference to the four absorptions. In addition to such definitions, of relevance are also passages that describe the cultivation of right concentration, which at times mention the four absorptions together with a form of meditative examination. My survey in what follows begins with definitions of right concentration (with and without reference to the four absorptions) and then turns to instances regarding its cultivation.

The first of the three instances that define right concentration by listing the four absorptions occurs in a discourse in the

Dīgha-nikāya, the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. The relevant part proceeds in this manner:²

And what, monastics, is right concentration? Monastics, here secluded from sensual desires and secluded from unwholesome states, with application and with sustaining, with joy and happiness born of seclusion, one dwells having attained the first absorption.

With the stilling of application and sustaining, being without application and without sustaining, with inner confidence, unification of the mind, and joy and happiness born of concentration, one dwells having attained the second absorption.

And with the fading away of joy one dwells equipoised, mindful, clearly knowing and, experiencing happiness through the body, one dwells having attained the third absorption, being one whom noble ones designate as ‘one who dwells happily with equipoise and mindfulness.’

² DN 22 at DN II 313,12: *katamo ca, bhikkhave, sammāsamādhi? idha, bhikkhave, ... vivicc’ eva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekaṃ pītisukhaṃ paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ* (E^c: *paṭhamajjhānaṃ*) *upasampajja viharati. vitakkavicārānaṃ vūpasamā ajjhattaṃ sampasādanaṃ cetaso ekodibhāvaṃ avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ samādhijaṃ pītisukhaṃ dutiyaṃ jhānaṃ* (E^c: *dutiya-jjhānaṃ*) *upasampajja viharati. pūtiyā ca virāgā upekkhako ca viharati, sato ca sampajāno, sukhañ ca kāyena paṭisaṃvedeti, yaṃ* (C^e and E^c: *yaṃ*; S^e abbreviates) *taṃ ariyā ācikkhanti: upekkhako satimā sukhavihārī ti* (C^e adds: *taṃ*) *tatiyaṃ jhānaṃ* (E^c: *tatiya-jjhānaṃ*) *upasampajja viharati. sukhasa ca pahānā dukkhassa ca pahānā pubb’ eva somanassadomanassānaṃ atthaṅgamā* (E^c: *atthagamā*) *adukkhamasukhaṃ upekkhāsatipārisuddhiṃ catutthaṃ jhānaṃ* (E^c: *catutthajjhānaṃ*) *upasampajja viharati. ayaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, sammāsamādhi. On vitakka/vicāra as absorption factors see Anālayo 2017b: 123–128 (also 2019h: 2345–2348).*

With the abandoning of happiness and the abandoning of pain and with the previous disappearance of pleasure and displeasure, with neutrality and purity of equipoise and mindfulness, one dwells having attained the fourth absorption. Monastics, this is called right concentration.

This definition of right concentration occurs in a section of the discourse that can confidently be identified as a later addition.³ It forms part of a detailed analysis of the four noble truths that is an obvious instance of Abhidharma thought appearing in later portions of the early discourses. The Burmese and Siamese editions add this whole section to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* as well.⁴ The Chinese parallels to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (and thereby also to the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta*) do not have a contemplation of the four noble truths at all. Comparative study makes it safe to conclude that the appearance of this topic is already a late element. The detailed exposition that includes the definition of right concentration by way of the four absorptions is in turn a subsequent stage of textual evolution.

The second instance where a Pāli discourse defines right concentration by listing the four absorptions occurs in the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*.⁵ This Pāli discourse has three parallels extant in Chinese, which are found in the *Madhyama-āgama*, the *Ekottarika-āgama*, and in the form of an individual translation. Out of these three, the version found in the *Ekottarika-āgama* simply mentions “right

³ See, e.g., Winternitz 1920/1968: 51, Bapat 1926: 11, Thomas 1927/2003: 252, Barua 1971/2003: 369–371, and Anālayo 2014a: 91–100.

⁴ See Anālayo 2011b: 90 note 328.

⁵ MN 141 at MN III 252,10.

concentration” as a factor of the eightfold path, without providing any further explanation.⁶ The *Madhyama-āgama* discourse, however, offers a detailed exposition:⁷

What is right concentration? It is reckoned to be when a noble disciple is mindful of *duḥkha* as ‘this is *duḥkha*,’ of its arising as ‘this is its arising,’ of its cessation as ‘this is its cessation,’ [or] when being mindful of the path as ‘this is the path’; or else on contemplating what was done formerly, or training to be mindful of all formations, or seeing the danger in all formations, or seeing Nirvana as peace, or when being free from attachment and mindfully contemplating a wholesome liberation of the mind.

Herein, if the mind is established, established in absorption, established accordingly, being without distraction, without being scattered, being collected, stilled, and rightly concentrated, this is called right concentration.

The above passage mentions “absorption” in general, which here features among various synonyms for an undistracted state of mind and thus does not serve as the sole modality for achieving right concentration. The individual translation presents a comparable definition of right concentration that also gives a listing of synonyms for a non-distracted mental condition when cultivating some form of insight.⁸

⁶ EĀ 27.1 at T II 643b24: 正定。

⁷ MĀ 31 at T I 469b24: 云何正定？謂聖弟子念苦是苦時，習是習，滅是滅，念道是道時，或觀本所作，或學念諸行，或見諸行災患，或見涅槃止息，或無著念觀善心解脫時。於中若心住，禪住，順住，不亂，不散，攝，止，正定，是名正定。

⁸ T 32 at T I 816c14: 何等爲，賢者，直正定？若，賢者，道德弟子，苦爲念苦，習爲念習，盡爲念盡，道爲念道，意止故，不動，不走，已攝止故意念在一，是名爲直正定；亦觀持宿命，亦從得解意念，見世間

In this way, these two versions agree in considering right concentration from the viewpoint of the quality of collectedness of the mind during specific times of meditative contemplation, in particular in relation to the cultivation of insight. In other words, their concern is not so much with achieving a particular depth of concentration, such as attaining one or all of the four absorptions based on an object not necessarily related to insight such as, for example, a *kasīṇa*. Instead, the concern in these two versions is much rather with how concentration should be employed, namely for the purpose of cultivating insight. This is what, in these definitions, appears to make such concentration (be it just the absence of distraction or full absorption) become of the “right” type.

When considered in conjunction with the *Ekottarika-āgama* version, it becomes evident that none of the parallels to the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta* defines right concentration by just equating it with the attainment of the four absorptions.

The third instance where a listing of the four absorptions can be identified among Pāli discourses as a way of defining right concentration occurs in the *Vibhaṅga-sutta*, found in the *Samyutta-nikāya*.⁹ The *Vibhaṅga-sutta* has a parallel in the *Samyukta-āgama* and in an individual translation. The relevant part in the *Samyukta-āgama* version offers this definition:¹⁰

What is right concentration? It is reckoned to be the establishing of the mind in the absence of distraction, it being firm, collected, tranquil, concentrated, and mentally unified.

行悔，攝，止，度世，無爲，見可如，得無所著，從解脫因緣意向觀所
意止，正安一，不惑，不走，攝止，念定在二念，是名爲正直定。

⁹ SN 45.8 at SN V 10,5.

¹⁰ SĀ 784 at T II 203a15: 何等爲正定？謂住心不亂，堅固，攝持，寂止，三昧，一心。

The individual translation also lists qualities of a concentrated mind.¹¹ In these two versions the spotlight is mainly on the collected quality of the mind, expressed with a series of synonyms. This thereby differs from the definitions provided in the parallels to the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta*, found in the *Madhyama-āgama* and in an individual translation, as the definitions provided here do not relate concentration to meditative contemplation of the four noble truths. As a result, with this type of definition the relationship to the four noble truths is no longer self-evident.

Similar to the case of the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta*, however, in the present case, too, the parallels to the *Vibhaṅga-sutta* do not have a listing of the four absorptions. In this way, none of the three occurrences in Pāli discourses that define right concentration by equation with the four absorptions finds support in a similar listing in the extant parallel versions. This is both unexpected and consequential.

Right Concentration and the Other Path Factors

In contrast to the three instances surveyed above, four Pāli discourses define right concentration without referring to the four absorptions. The definition in these four instances stipulates the other seven path factors as necessary equipments of right concentration.

One such occurrence is the *Janavasabha-sutta*, found in the *Dīgha-nikāya*, which reads as follows:¹²

¹¹ T 112 at T II 505a20: 第八諦定爲何等? 生死意合, 念止, 相止, 護已止, 聚止, 不可爲, 不作所有罪, 不墮中庭, 是名爲諦定。

¹² DN 18 at DN II 216,33: *sammādiṭṭhi, sammāsaṅkappo, sammāvācā, sammākammanto, sammā-ājīvo, sammāvāyāmo, sammāsati, yā kho, bho, imehi sattah'* (C^c: *sattahi*, E^c: *satta*) *aṅgehi cittass' ekaggatā*

[The seven factors are] right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness. Sirs, when unification of the mind is endowed with these seven factors, then, sirs, it is called noble right concentration that is ‘with its supports’ and ‘with its endowments.’

This description of right concentration features in a listing of inspiring and praiseworthy qualities and teachings of the Buddha. The above passage serves as an exemplification of his teaching abilities, here in particular in relation to right concentration. The *Janavasabha-sutta* has parallels in the *Dīrgha-āgama* and in an individual translation. The *Dīrgha-āgama* version proceeds in this way:¹³

The Tathāgata is well able to teach analytically the seven endowments of concentration. What are the seven? [They are] right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness. These are the seven endowments of concentration which the Tathāgata is well able to teach analytically.

The individual translation differs insofar as it lists all eight path factors, including right concentration itself, as endowments of concentration.¹⁴ Neither of the two parallels qualifies

parikkhatā, ayaṃ vuccati, bho, ariyo sammāsamādhi sa-upaniso iti pi saparikkhāro iti pi.

¹³ DĀ 4 at T I 36a5: 如來善能分別說七定具。何等爲七？正見，正志，正語，正業，正命，正方便，正念。是爲如來善能分別說七定具。

¹⁴ T 9 at T I 216a14: 有八正道法，彼佛，如來，應供，正等正覺，悉知，悉見。何等爲八？謂正見，正思惟，正語，正業，正命，正精進，正念，正定。如是八正道，即是三摩地受用法。 Note that, although the listing of path factors mentions “right concentration” (正定), the

concentration as “noble.” Moreover, the *Dīrgha-āgama* version does not refer to “right” concentration. Another difference is that the Pāli version stands alone in glossing concentration with “unification of the mind,” *cittassekaggatā*.

I will return later to a tendency for the qualification “noble” to be added in various contexts (see below page 137). As far as the absence of the qualification “right” is concerned, the context shows that the same would nevertheless be implicit. Concentration endowed with the other seven path factors, each of which is qualified as “right,” can be assumed to be also of the “right” type, even when this is not explicitly stated.

The other difference, the Pāli version’s employment of “unification of the mind” alongside “concentration,” does not appear to carry much significance, as in the present context the two terms can be understood to convey the same basic meaning.

The second occurrence of this type of definition can be observed in the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta*, where the corresponding statement (formulated in the same way as in the passage from the *Janavasabha-sutta*, translated above) serves as the theme of the whole discourse.¹⁵ The *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta* has two parallels, which are found in the *Madhyama-āgama* and in a quotation in Śamathadeva’s *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā*. The *Madhyama-āgama* version begins by announcing noble right concentration with its seven factors, followed by giving this explanation:¹⁶

term being defined is just *samādhi* (三摩地), which is not explicitly qualified as being “right.”

¹⁵ MN 117 at MN III 71,16.

¹⁶ MĀ 189 at T I 735c4: 云何爲七? 正見, 正志, 正語, 正業, 正命, 正方便, 正念. 若有以此七支習, 助, 具, 善趣向心得一者, 是謂聖正定, 有習, 有助, 亦復有具.

What are its seven [factors]? [They are] right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness. If, based on arousing these seven factors, on being supported by them, and on being endowed with them, the mind progresses well and attains unification, then this is reckoned noble right concentration with its arousal, with its supports, and with its endowments.

The quotation in the *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā* proceeds similarly, with the difference that it does not qualify such right concentration to be “noble,” a qualification it only applies to the eightfold path.¹⁷ Thus the parallel versions, although differing in their use of the qualification “noble,” agree in defining right concentration by listing the other seven path factors.

Of further interest is the remainder of the two parallels to the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta*. Both differ from the Pāli discourse in providing yet another definition of right concentration in the later part of their expositions, which the context shows to be a later addition.¹⁸ Here the *Madhyama-āgama* lists the four ab-

¹⁷ Up 6080 at D 4094 *nyu* 44a2 or P 5595 *thu* 83b2: *bdun gang zhe na? 'di lta ste yang dag pa'i lta ba dang yang dag pa'i rtog pa dang yang dag pa'i ngag dang yang dag pa'i las kyi mtha' dang yang dag pa'i 'tsho ba dang yang dag pa'i rtsol ba dang yang dag pa'i dran pa ste. dge slong dag 'phags pa'i lam yan lag bdun* (G adds *po*) *'di rnams kyis yongs su sbyangs shing yongs su sbyang ba byas pas sems rtse gcig par gyur pa 'di ni yang dag pa'i ting nge 'dzin zhes bya'o.*

¹⁸ Anālayo 2011b: 661: “in all versions right concentration has already been defined as one-pointedness of the mind endowed with the other seven path factors, while right effort and right mindfulness have been defined as the effort and the mindfulness required for establishing the right manifestations of the other path factors. Hence, it seems redundant to treat these path factors once more.

sorptions,¹⁹ whereas the *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā* quotation provides a series of synonyms for concentration.²⁰ It is worthy of note that this passage in the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta* is the only instance I have been able to locate in the four main Chinese *Āgamas* where right concentration is defined by listing the four absorptions.²¹

Moreover, whereas in regard to the earlier path factors the Chinese and Tibetan versions invariably conclude each treatment by highlighting the cooperative action of right view, right effort, and right mindfulness, the same is absent from their exposition of the remaining three path factors. Nor do they provide a contrast to wrong manifestations of these path factors. The Chinese and Tibetan versions also differ in the definitions they employ ... [all of] this makes it highly probable that the additional treatment of these three path factors was added during the process of transmission, with the reciter(s) supplying the ‘missing’ parts, perhaps even unintentionally, from the standard treatment of this subject found elsewhere in the discourses.”

¹⁹ MĀ 189 at T I 736b16: 云何正定? 比丘者離欲, 離惡不善之法至得第四禪成就遊; 是謂正定.

²⁰ Up 6080 at D 4094 *nyu* 46a7 or P 5595 *thu* 86a5: *yang dag pa'i ting nge 'dzin gang zhe na? gang yang sems* (G, N, and P add *can*) *gnas pa dang rab tu gnas pa dang mngon par gnas pa dang rang bzhin du gnas pa dang mi g.yeng ba dang yang dag par sdud pa dang zhi gnas dang ting nge 'dzin dang sems rtse gcig pa ste. 'di ni yang dag pa'i ting nge 'dzin zhes bya'o*. A set of synonyms for concentration in the context of a definition of mundane right concentration can also be found in SĀ 785 at T II 204a8 (comparable but not identical to the definition of right concentration in SĀ 784, quoted above in note 10). SĀ 785 shares with MN 117 the distinction of path factors into mundane and supramundane types; see in more detail Anālayo 2014a: 136–140.

²¹ However, such identification does occur in an individual translation paralleling the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*; see T 6 at T I 187c16.

The remaining two occurrences, where Pāli discourses define the path factor of right concentration by referring to unification of the mind equipped with the other seven path factors, are discourses in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, of which no parallels appear to be known.²² It follows that nothing further can be said from a comparative perspective.

In principle, the absence of parallels weakens the strength of the claim such discourses can make to being representative of early Buddhist thought. Such a claim would be stronger if parallels agree with their presentation. At the same time, however, this does not completely undermine their value. Due to the differing distributions of discourses over the four main collections in various reciter traditions, the absence of parallels is a natural occurrence and does not in itself imply that the discourse in question must be late. This holds for discourses from other recitation lineages that lack a Pāli counterpart,²³ and it conversely holds for Pāli discourses for which no parallel is otherwise known.

The Four Absorptions and Examination

As mentioned above, besides definitions of right concentration, of relevance are also descriptions of ways of cultivating right concentration. One such instance in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* does mention the four absorptions, followed by presenting the sign of examination (*paccavekkhaṇānimitta*) as another instance of right concentration (here additionally qualified as “noble”):²⁴

²² SN 45.28 at SN V 21,12 and AN 7.42 at AN IV 40,21.

²³ See Skilling 2020: 337–339 and Anālayo 2019b and 2022.

²⁴ AN 5.28 at AN III 27,16: *seyyathā pi, bhikkhave, añño va* (C^e and S^e: *vā aññaṃ paccavekkheyya, ṭhito vā nisinnaṃ paccavekkheyya, nisinnō vā nipannaṃ paccavekkheyya, evam evaṃ kho, bhikkhave, bhik-*

Monastics, it is just as if someone were to examine another; standing were to examine one who is sitting, or sitting were to examine one who is lying down. Monastics, in the same way the sign of examination is well grasped by a monastic, well given attention to, well taken up, well penetrated with wisdom. Monastics, this is the fifth cultivation of noble five-factored right concentration.

Although the precise implications of the reference to the “sign of examination” are not spelled out in the discourse itself, it does not seem to correspond to the attainment of one of the four absorptions listed earlier, otherwise it would not have been introduced as a fifth modality of cultivating *samādhi*.

The comparison with someone observing another person in a particular bodily posture conveys the impression that the type of *samādhi* described here need not be considered to be of the absorptive type. Instead, it could just intend a form of meditative examination undertaken based on the degree of absence of distraction required to be able to observe closely the way another person behaves on the physical level. Such a suggestion would concord with the employment of the same type of contemplative activity in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, according to which one examines (*paccavekkhati*) the human body (one’s own or that of others) from the viewpoint of it being made up of anatomical parts or of the four elements.²⁵ This is clearly a

khuno paccavekkhaṇānimittaṃ sugghataṃ hoti sumanasikataṃ sūpadhāritaṃ suppaṭividdhaṃ paññāya. ariyassa, bhikkhave, pañcaṅgikassa sammāsamādhissa ayaṃ pañcamā (C^o: pañcamī) bhāvanā.

²⁵ MN 10 at MN I 57,15 and 57,36. Vibh 334,6 considers a reference to the sign of examination in DN 34 (see below note 27) to stand for a form of reviewing undertaken after emerging from absorption attainment. Yet, in view of the range of possible meditative objects of *pac-*

mindfulness practice that does not depend on mastery of absorption (see also MĀ 98, translated above page 50).

This *Āṅguttara-nikāya* discourse has a parallel in a Sanskrit fragment, which has preserved parts of the description of the four absorptions and their bodily experience. It also has preserved the designation of the fourth absorption as the fourth instance of a five-factored concentration, and it has a remnant of the description of the fifth type of *samādhi*, corresponding to the sign of examination in the Pāli discourse.²⁶ The most noteworthy difference that emerges from the fragments, to the extent to which these have preserved the discourse, is that in this version the topic of discussion appears to be just “concentration” in general, rather than “right concentration.” As the context does not provide an indication that this should be understood to be implicit, it seems as if this five-fold listing need indeed not be about “right concentration.”

Although no other direct parallels to this *Āṅguttara-nikāya* discourse appear to be known, the topic of the sign of examination in relation to right concentration can be explored further with the help of the *Dasuttara-sutta* and its parallels.

A bare reference to the sign of examination occurs as the fifth item in a reference to five-factored right concentration in the *Dasuttara-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*. The actual listing includes, besides the sign of examination, concentration that is suffused by joy (*pīti*), happiness (*sukha*), the mind (*ceto*), and

cavekkhati, it seems reasonable to consider the sign of examination to be relevant to insight in general.

²⁶ Waldschmidt et al. 1971: 253, SHT III 990R7: (*pariśuddhena cittena parya*)*vadātena āryasya paṃcāṅgikasya samādh*-*evaṃ cat(urthā bhāvanā)*, and SHT III 990R8: *bhavati sumanasikṛtaṃ sujuṣṭaṃ supratividdhaṃ*.

light (*āloka*).²⁷ In this way, although absorption abilities appear to be implicit, this reference to “right concentration” comes without being overtly related to the set of four absorptions.

In a subsequent section, the *Dasuttara-sutta* also describes a fivefold knowledge in relation to right concentration. Under this heading, the discourse lists a *samādhi* that is happy now and has happy results, a *samādhi* that is noble and unworldly, a *samādhi* that is not practiced by the unworthy, a *samādhi* that is peaceful, etc., and finally a *samādhi* attained to and emerged from with mindfulness and clear knowledge.²⁸ This reference to “right concentration” also does not explicitly list the four absorptions.

The *Dasuttara-sutta* has parallels in Sanskrit fragments, a discourse in the Chinese *Dīrgha-āgama*, and an individual Chinese translation. The Sanskrit fragments have preserved parts of a similar description of a fivefold knowledge related to right concentration, additionally qualified as “noble.” This description also covers a *samādhi* that is happy now and in future, etc., although it differs from the *Dasuttara-sutta* in the sequence in which these are listed.²⁹ Thus this version also does not list the four absorptions.

The *Dīrgha-āgama* parallel has a counterpart to fivefold knowledge in relation to concentration, which is also qualified

²⁷ DN 34 at DN III 277,25: *pañcaṅgiko sammāsamādhi: pītipharaṇatā, sukpharaṇatā, cetopharaṇatā, ālokapharaṇatā, paccavekkhaṇa-nimittam* (S^c: *paccavekkhaṇānimittam*).

²⁸ DN 34 at DN III 278,24, which is introduced as *pañcañāṇiko sammāsamādhi*.

²⁹ Mittal 1957: 69, introduced as *āryaḥ pañcajñānikaḥ sam(yaksa-mā)dhi(h)*. Here the qualification “right” is found in a part supplemented by the editor.

as “noble.”³⁰ The description corresponds to the *Dasuttara-sutta* and its Sanskrit fragment parallel, in the sense of listing a *samādhi* that is happy now and in future, etc., with the notable difference that such concentration is not explicitly reckoned to be of the “right” type (nor does such qualification seem to be implicit in the context). In line with its parallels, this version also does not mention the four absorptions.

The parallel extant as an individual translation just lists five types of concentration. Four of these are the bodily experiences of the four absorptions, wherefore this is the only parallel to the *Dasuttara-sutta* that corresponds in content to the above-translated passage from the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourse. The fifth type of concentration in this version is also closely similar to the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourse, even to the extent of comparing the practice of the sign of examination (相思惟) to a standing person who contemplates someone seated or a seated person who contemplates someone lying down.³¹ The passage in question differs from the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourse translated above insofar as it describes types of “concentration,” not types of “right concentration.”

This thereby concords with the Sanskrit fragment parallel to this *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourse, mentioned above, in that the description of the four absorptions together with a *samādhi* related to the sign of examination comes without any explicit qualification that these types of concentration are “right.” Since such rightness is also not implicit in the context, this *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourse is yet another instance where a

³⁰ DĀ 10 at T I 53c24, introduced as 賢聖五智定.

³¹ T 13 at T I 234c20: 譬如住人觀坐人, 坐人觀臥人, 道弟子行如是, 受行相思惟熟受, 以熟受, 熟念, 熟事, 熟受, 道弟子是五種定, 是爲五行。

Pāli version that provides a relationship between the four absorptions and right concentration (even though in this case not an exclusive one, as a fifth type of concentration is also included) finds no support in the relevant parallels.

In the case of the earlier surveyed three Pāli occurrences that define right concentration by equation with the four absorptions, the extant parallel versions do not bring in the four absorptions. In the present case, the direct parallel extant in Sanskrit fragments and a similar description found in an individual translation paralleling the *Dasuttara-sutta* do mention the four absorptions, but then they do not reckon their exposition to provide a definition of “right” concentration.

Although the qualification “right” could easily have been added or lost during oral transmission, the context does not require concentration to be qualified as “right” (or as “noble”). The four absorptions and the sign of examination would fit a listing of five types of *samādhi* cultivation as such. This makes it more probable, although not certain, that the additional qualifications, found only in the Pāli version, are the less reliable reading.

Insight Meditation and Right Concentration

Another passage of relevance to exploring the cultivation of right concentration can be found in the *Mahāsaḷāyatanika-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, which has a parallel in the *Samyukta-āgama* and another parallel in a discourse quotation found in the *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā*. The main topic of the discourse is the cultivation of knowledge and vision in relation to the six sense-spheres. Once such knowledge and vision have been established, the practitioner can be considered as endowed

with five path factors, including right concentration. The relevant passage in the *Mahāsaḷāyatanika-sutta* reads:³²

The view of one [who knows and sees] as it truly is, that is one's right view; the intention of one [who knows and sees] as it truly is, that is one's right intention; the effort of one [who knows and sees] as it truly is, that is one's right effort; the mindfulness of one [who knows and sees] as it truly is, that is one's right mindfulness; and the concentration of one [who knows and sees] as it truly is, that is one's right concentration.

The *Mahāsaḷāyatanika-sutta* explains that the three path factors of right speech, action, and livelihood had been developed earlier. Its *Samyukta-āgama* parallel presents the matter similarly:³³

One who practices knowledge in this way and vision in this way is called one who cultivates the fulfillment of right view, right intention, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The quotation in the *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā* proceeds likewise, with the difference that it also includes right speech among the path factors that come into being through such knowledge and vision in relation to the six sense-spheres.³⁴

³² MN 149 at MN III 289,2: *yā tathābhūtaṃ svaṃ (E° throughout yathābhūtaṃ) diṭṭhiṃ sā 'ssa hoti sammādiṭṭhi; yo tathābhūtaṃ saṅkappo svāssa hoti sammāsaṅkappo; yo tathābhūtaṃ vāyāmo svāssa hoti sammāvāyāmo; yā tathābhūtaṃ sati sā 'ssa hoti sammāsati; yo tathābhūtaṃ samādhiṃ svāssa hoti sammāsamādhi.*

³³ SĀ 305 at T II 87b29: 作如是知, 如是見者, 名爲正見修習滿足, 正志, 正方便, 正念, 正定.

³⁴ Up 4006 at D 4094 *ju* 205a1 or P 5595 *tu* 233b8: *de de ltar shes shing de ltar mthong na 'phags pa'i lam yan lag brgyad sgom* (here

This mode of presentation is clearly not confined to absorption attainment; in fact, its reference point for the rightness of all of the path factors relevant to meditative practice is the cultivation of knowledge and insight.

A presentation that is at least to some extent comparable to what emerges from the *Mahāsaḷāyatanika-sutta* and its parallels, insofar as it also involves a reference to right concentration in the context of insight meditation, can be found in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. This discourse, of which no parallel is known, describes contemplating with right wisdom any instance of the five aggregates as not self, a form of practice explicitly related to right concentration.³⁵

Another discourse without a known parallel, found in the same *Aṅguttara-nikāya* collection, indicates that being able to endure the objects of the five senses enables establishing right

and below *bsgom* in G, N, and P) *pa yongs su rdzogs par 'gyur te. yang dag pa'i lta ba sgom pa yongs su rdzogs par 'gyur zhing, yang dag pa'i rtog pa dang yang dag pa'i ngag dang yang dag pa'i rtsol ba dang yang dag pa'i dran pa dang yang dag pa'i ting nge 'dzin sgom pa yongs su rdzogs par 'gyur te*; see also Anālayo 2011b: 842 note 112.

³⁵ AN 4.196 at AN II 202,10: *sammāsamādhi, sālha* (C^e: *sālha*), *ariyasāvako yaṃ* (S^e: *yaṃ*) *kiñci rūpaṃ atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ ajjhataṃ vā bahiddhā vā oḷārikaṃ vā sukhumaṃ vā hīnaṃ vā paṇītaṃ vā yaṃ dūre santike vā, sabbhaṃ rūpaṃ n'etaṃ mama, n' eso 'ham asmi, na m' eso attā ti evaṃ etaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaṇṇāya passati, yā kāci vedanā, yā kāci saññā, ye keci saṅkhārā, yaṃ* (S^e: *yaṃ*) *kiñci viññānaṃ atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ ajjhataṃ vā bahiddhā vā oḷārikaṃ vā sukhumaṃ vā hīnaṃ vā paṇītaṃ vā yaṃ dūre santike vā, sabbhaṃ viññānaṃ n' etaṃ mama, n' eso 'ham asmi, na m' eso attā ti evaṃ etaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaṇṇāya passati.*

concentration.³⁶ This passage gives the impression of taking as its starting point a notion of right concentration that is not confined to an actual attainment of the four absorptions. These two *Āṅguttara-nikāya* discourses thus seem to align with what emerges from the *Mahāsaḷāyatanika-sutta* and its parallels.

The same holds for a discourse in the *Madhyama-āgama*, according to which hearing the teachings attentively can lead to gaining right concentration, which in turn enables attaining liberation.³⁷ This discourse has an *Āṅguttara-nikāya* parallel, which does not explicitly mention concentration, let alone right concentration, in its description of progress from hearing to liberation (the last, however, is qualified as “right”).³⁸ This difference substantially undermines the strength of the passage in the *Madhyama-āgama*. It is nevertheless worth mention here, as it shows that references to right concentration in contexts that do not have an evident relationship to absorption (in line with what has emerged from the *Mahāsaḷāyatanika-sutta* and its parallels) are not a feature of *Āṅguttara-nikāya* discourses

³⁶ AN 5.113 at AN III 138,1: *bhikkhu khamo hoti rūpānaṃ, khamo saddānaṃ, khamo gandhānaṃ, khamo rasānaṃ, khamo phoṭṭhabbānaṃ. imehi kho, bhikkhave, pañcahi dhammehi samannāgato bhikkhu bhabbo sammāsamādhiṃ upasampajja viharitun ti.*

³⁷ MĀ 119 at T I 609a18: 賢聖弟子兩耳一心聽法。彼兩耳一心聽法已，斷一法，修一法，一法作證。彼斷一法，修一法，一法作證已，便得正定。賢聖弟子心得正定已，便斷一切姪，怒，癡；賢聖弟子如是得心解脫。

³⁸ AN 3.67 at AN I 198,27: *ohitasoto (E^c: ahītasoto) sa-upaniso hoti. so sa-upaniso samāno abhijānāti ekaṃ dhammaṃ, pari jānāti ekaṃ dhammaṃ, pajahati ekaṃ dhammaṃ, sacchikaroti ekaṃ dhammaṃ. so abhijānanto ekaṃ dhammaṃ, pari jānanto ekaṃ dhammaṃ, pajahanto ekaṃ dhammaṃ, sacchikaronto ekaṃ dhammaṃ sammāvimuttiṃ phusati.*

only. In fact, in the present case it is precisely the version in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* that does not have such a presentation.

Bare Listings of the Path Factors

Based on the above survey of passages, it seems possible to reconstruct an outline of the apparent historical development in conceptions of right concentration. For such reconstruction, a convenient starting point is the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta*.

In general terms, the *Ekottarika-āgama* collection extant in Chinese translation combines early and late material.³⁹ The present case seems to fall into the category of early material, evident in particular in a distinctly archaic feature of this discourse: it does not qualify the four truths as “noble,” instead only using this qualification in relation to the eightfold path.

This feature can be evaluated in the light of a suggestion by Norman (1982/1984: 386), made in the context of his study of formulations employed to describe the four noble truths in the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*. According to his assessment, in some contexts either the compound *ariya-saccāni* or just the qualification *ariya* were added during oral transmission. Comparative study in general confirms an apparent proliferation of the qualification “noble,” which seems to have made its way into various contexts,⁴⁰ a tendency evident also in some of the passages surveyed above.

From the viewpoint of the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta*, it seems that at an earlier stage the discourse might indeed have just given a bare listing of the path factors. Needless to say, titles of Pāli discourses can be rather

³⁹ See above page 34f.

⁴⁰ See Anālayo 2006a.

late, and the same holds for their allocation to a particular Pāli *Nikāya*.⁴¹ Therefore it is quite possible that the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta* received the title of being an “analysis of the truth” and that it was considered to be a discourse of medium length only after it had undergone some development and was for this reason allocated to the *Majjhima-nikāya*.

The assumption that conceptions of the eightfold path at an early stage just involved references to right concentration without further elaborations would explain why many early discourses just mention the eight path factors without offering definitions of what they stand for. An example in case is the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* just mentioned, which according to the traditional account was the first teaching delivered by the Buddha after his awakening. The discourse reports that its delivery led to the stream-entry of Koṇḍañña, one of the five listeners present on that occasion. Gombrich (2009: 103f) comments on the discourse itself:

the ‘first sermon’ that has come down to us is chock full of metaphors and technical terms which the Buddha at that stage had not yet explained ... the disciples who made up

⁴¹ Anālayo 2011b: 106: “title variations occur with considerable frequency not only between Pāli and Chinese versions of a discourse, but even between Pāli versions of the same discourse found in different *Nikāyas*, or between different Pāli editions of the same discourse. This suggests that the title of a discourse was relatively open to change at least during the early stages of transmission.” The comparatively late nature of allocation to a collection is evident from differences in the distribution of parallel versions to Pāli discourses in the *Āgamas*. This can be seen, for example, in surveys of parallels to *Majjhima-nikāya/Madhyama-āgama* discourses; see Anālayo 2011b: 1038–1055 and Bucknell 2017.

the original audience could have had no idea what the Buddha was talking about when he used these terms.

At the same time, however, at least the basic teaching of the four truths must have been considered readily intelligible in the ancient Indian setting, otherwise it would have made no sense for the parallel versions of this discourse to report that Koṇḍañña attained stream-entry on just hearing it.⁴²

Now, the formulation of the four truths appears to reflect an ancient Indian scheme of medical diagnosis.⁴³ This much would thus indeed have been intelligible, without further exposition. In fact, the adoption of a medical scheme of diagnosis to express a religious truth may well be expected to create quite an effect in the minds of the audience.

In other words, it seems fair to assume that at least the core teaching would have been comprehensible to someone in the ancient Indian setting who had as yet no familiarity with early Buddhist doctrine. The effect created by this teaching could thus be envisaged as serving as the trigger for Koṇḍañña's insight leading to his attainment of stream-entry.

As the fourth truth, a bare listing of the path factors then functions as the actual medical prescription for treating the affliction of *dukkha/duḥkha*. This much is also meaningful on its own. The bare listing conveys the basic notion that the path of practice involves eight factors which are to be cultivated in conjunction.

In this way, the bare enumeration of the path factors found frequently in the discourses could have originally functioned

⁴² SN 56.11 at SN V 421,13; for translations and a study of the Chinese parallels see Anālayo 2012a and 2013a.

⁴³ Anālayo 2011c.

as a self-sufficient pointer to the path of practice as the fourth truth. Here, the first two path factors of view and intention are informed by the basic diagnostic perspective of the four truths, thereby providing the needed directive for ethical conduct in the form of speech, action, and livelihood. The same diagnostic perspective stands in the background of cultivation of the mind, which takes the form of making an effort, establishing mindfulness, and cultivating concentration. In this setting, right concentration emerges quite naturally as an integral component of the path of practice.

Contextualizing Right Concentration

On the assumption that a bare listing of the eight path factors would have been an intelligible way of presentation that conveyed in particular the need for right concentration to be cultivated in collaboration with the other path factors, it would be hardly surprising if this same need at times found a more explicit expression. This would explain the definitions of right concentration on which the parallel versions agree, for which reason they can be considered earlier than those which are not supported by parallels.

This quality of comparative earliness would hold for the definition of right concentration found in the *Janavasabhasutta* and its parallels (where the rightness of such concentration is implied by the context, even if not mentioned explicitly) as well as for the definition of right concentration that forms the main theme of the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta* and its parallels, stated at the outset of their respective expositions. Judging from these discourses, such an ostensibly early way of providing a definition just stipulates the need for a cultivation of the seven other path factors as setting the required context for concentration to become “right.”

The qualification of concentration endowed in this way as “noble,” found in only some of these versions, may reflect a slightly more evolved stage of this type of definition, in line with a general tendency in the discourses to add this qualification in various contexts. In the present setting, this addition seems to foreshadow a concern with concentration at the moment of deep insight and realization that becomes evident in some of the other definitions surveyed earlier.

Already with the Pāli version of this type of definition, another feature becomes discernible which also acquires more prominence subsequently, namely the employment of near-synonyms for concentration. At this point, however, such employment just involves the single notion of “unification of the mind.”

Analytical Approaches to Right Concentration

A subsequent stage of development appears to be reflected in the listing of the four absorptions as equivalent to right concentration. This can safely be considered a more evolved stage in conceptualizations of right concentration, given that none of the cases containing just this listing finds confirmation in the parallels. Moreover, one such instance in a Pāli discourse, namely the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, and another such instance in a *Madhyama-āgama* discourse, namely the parallel to the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta*, are indubitably late additions to the texts in question. The same would also hold for the case of the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta*, at least as long as it is granted that, as argued above, its *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel probably reflects an earlier stage in textual development.

The idea of providing a more detailed analysis of right concentration is fully in line with a general tendency in Buddhist thought to make things ever more explicit and offer increas-

ingly meticulous explanations. The four absorptions occur regularly in the discourses and their formulation embodies a basic principle of early Buddhist mental analysis. Eschewing any tendency to metaphysical speculation in relation to the experience of deep absorption, the chief principle in such mental analysis is to draw attention to the specific mental factors that are responsible for particular concentrative experiences. This analytical undercurrent, with its highlight on the conditionality of absorption, would have made the standard description of the four absorptions an obvious choice for fleshing out the significance of right concentration. From that viewpoint, what makes concentration become “right” is insight into its conditioned nature, as exemplified by awareness of the specific conditions required for its attainment, listed in the standard description of the four absorptions.

Moreover, detailed expositions of the other path factors for the most part involve sets of three or four items (right livelihood being the only exception). With the precedent set by the *four* truths as right view, the *three* right intentions, the *four* right types of speech, the *three* right modes of action, the *four* right efforts, and the *four* establishments of mindfulness, the *four* absorptions are a natural fit in such a context.

The appeal of this type of understanding of right concentration can be seen in later exegesis. The *Vibhaṅga* employs the list of the four absorptions in its exposition of the fourth truth (*sacca*) and again later in its exposition of the same topic under the heading of the path (*magga*).⁴⁴ Here the ‘*Vibhaṅga*’ quite naturally follows the lead of the ‘*Saccavibhaṅga*’-*sutta*

⁴⁴ Vibh 105,28 and 236,8 (both definitions are according to the methodology of the discourses, *suttantabhājanīya*, as distinct from the methodology of the *Abhidharma*).

and of the ‘*Vibhaṅga*’-*sutta* found in the ‘*Magga*’-*saṃyutta*. The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* similarly adopts the list of the four absorptions in its exposition of the fourth truth.⁴⁵ These passages would explain the tendency to default to this particular definition in later Theravāda traditions.

In addition, an increasing interest in the relationship of the path factors to the moment of awakening could easily have led to reading the qualification “noble,” applied in Pāli discourses to alternative definitions of right concentration, as conveying supramundane nuances.⁴⁶ On such a reading, the definition of right concentration by way of attainment of the four absorptions could naturally appear to be the one relevant for the path of progress toward the breakthrough to awakening, whereas the definition by way of concentration cultivated in conjunction with the other seven path factors could appear to be mainly relevant to the consummation of such progress.

Another trend in the evolving analyses of right concentration would have found its expression in detailed listings of various synonyms. An example is the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta*, which applies such a listing of synonyms to specific times of insight-related contemplation, including insight into each of the four truths.

Other examples would be the *Samyukta-āgama* parallel to the *Vibhaṅga-sutta* and the later part of the quotation in the *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā* that is one of the two parallels to the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta*. Particularly noticeable is that the relationship of right concentration to the other seven path factors and to the four truths no longer finds explicit mention (which also holds for listings of the four absorptions). The

⁴⁵ Paṭis I 41,34.

⁴⁶ See in more detail Brahmāli 2007.

Samyukta-āgama parallel to the *Vibhaṅga-sutta* does not mention the four truths at all, as its exposition of right view rather takes the alternative form of affirming the value of giving and the law of karma, etc.⁴⁷ Perhaps the perspective of the four truths was so much taken for granted at this stage that a definition of right concentration could be given by just providing a register of synonyms for *samādhi*.

Implications for the Progress to Awakening

The development suggested above implies that the equation of right concentration with the four absorptions reflects a more evolved stage in the development of definitions of the eighth path factor. This certainly does not in any way imply a devaluation of the cultivation of absorption as such.

At least as far as stream-entry is concerned, however, it seems as if the ability to attain absorption need not be required.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ SĀ 784 at T II 203a4: 何等爲正見? 謂說有施, 有說, 有齋, 有善行, 有惡行, 有善惡行果報, 有此世, 有他世, 有父母, 有眾生, 有阿羅漢善到, 善向, 有此世他世自知作證具足住: 我生已盡, 梵行已立, 所作已作, 自知不受後有。

⁴⁸ A passage that could give such an impression occurs in DN 29 at DN III 132,14, according to which the four fruits to be expected from cultivating the four absorptions are stream-entry, once-return, non-return, and full awakening. Two parallels instead speak of seven fruits, which are full awakening and different types of non-return; see *Prāsādika-sūtra* fragment 284v, DiSimone 2020: 198, and DĀ 17 at T I 75a28. That is, the role of absorption attainment here is to facilitate progress from the two lower to the two higher levels of awakening, rather than being a requirement already for attaining the lower two. The context in all versions is a hypothetical debate with non-Buddhists, which would explain the terse presentation that does not fully reflect the range of practices and qualities required for progress to awakening.

Nevertheless, a requirement would be that the mind is free from the hindrances. Two Pāli discourses without parallels indicate that the presence of the hindrances will prevent the mind from becoming “rightly concentrated” and hence make it impossible to gain the destruction of the influxes.⁴⁹ Although these discourses speak of the destruction of the influxes (*āsava*, *āsrava*, *āśrava*), and thus of full awakening, the same requirement would apply already to stream-entry, given that the standard account of its attainment indicates that the person in question had a mind free from the hindrances.⁵⁰

In this way, inasmuch as stream-entry stands for entry into the “stream” of the noble eightfold path,⁵¹ it seems reasonable to propose that this can involve forms of right concentration that fall short of absorption attainment, as long as the hindrances

⁴⁹ SN 46.33 at SN V 92,24 states, in relation to a state of mind in which a hindrance is present: *na ca sammā samādhiyati āsavānaṃ khayāya*; see also AN 5.23 at AN III 16,20. A comparable expression can be found in SĀ 1247 at T II 342a9: 不得正定，盡諸有漏，in which case the parallel AN 3.100.4 at AN I 254,29 speaks just of *samādhi* (in its treatment of the positive case when obstructions have been overcome). AN 3.100.4 and SĀ 1247 share with SN 46.33 and AN 5.23 a description of refining gold to illustrate cultivation of the mind (on which see above page 84), so that the passage in SĀ 1247 is distantly related to SN 46.33 and AN 5.23. In DN 18 at DN II 216,13 the cultivation of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* leads to the mind becoming rightly concentrated, *sammā samādhiyati*, but the corresponding part in the parallel DĀ 4 at T I 36a2 does not refer to right concentration (T 9 proceeds differently here and is therefore not directly relevant to this point; see also Anālayo 2013c: 18 note 26).

⁵⁰ See, e.g., MN 56 at MN I 380,1: *vinīvaraṇacittam* and its parallel MĀ 133 at T I 630c5: 無蓋心.

⁵¹ SN 55.5 at SN V 347,26: *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo soto*, and its parallel SĀ 843 at T II 215b18: 流者謂八聖道.

are kept at bay. That the fulfillment of right concentration is not a question of mastering a particular level of absorption is in fact fairly evident in the *Mahāsaḷāyatanika-sutta* and its parallels, discussed above. These agree that insight meditation in relation to the six sense-spheres forms sufficient ground for considering the concentration thus cultivated to be of the right type. Here “right concentration” is not a matter of attaining absorption but has a more general sense that is in line with the broad compass of the meaning of the term *samādhi* in the early discourses.⁵² In fact, some reports of the attainment of stream-entry in the early texts give the impression of involving individuals who may not have meditated at all previously, let alone been proficient in attaining absorption.⁵³

Hence there seems to be a need for a revision of the position taken by Bhikkhu Thanissaro (1996/1999: 248), for example, that “evidence from the canon supports ... that the attainment of at least the first level of jhana is essential for all four levels of Awakening.”

Another problem to be considered is that the attainment of absorption on its own hardly suffices for being qualified as “right” concentration.⁵⁴ As suggested above, the original rationale for defining right concentration by way of the four ab-

⁵² See Anālayo 2006b.

⁵³ See Anālayo 2003: 80 note 63. In evaluating such passages, it needs to be kept in mind that the notion of absorption evident in the early discourses appears to refer to rather profound and deep meditative experiences that require considerable expertise; see Anālayo 2017b: 109–175.

⁵⁴ The suggestion by Arbel 2017: 200 that *jhāna* “attainments mark the moment when a practitioner becomes ‘noble’ (*ariya*), although not necessarily an arahant” is not an accurate reflection of early Buddhist thought. See also the discussion below pages 189–197.

sorptions may have been a concern with the analytical approach their description conveys rather than just with the levels of concentrative depth required for their attainment.

The two teachers of the Buddha, Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, proponents of the third and fourth immaterial sphere respectively,⁵⁵ must have been quite proficient in absorption attainment.⁵⁶ Yet, due to a lack of right view, such concentrative mastery would probably not suffice for being reckoned “right” concentration. Again, the *Brahmajāla-sutta* and its parallels survey various speculative views, a considerable number of which have their source in meditative experiences related to absorption attainment.⁵⁷ Such attainments could hardly be instances of “right” concentration.

In this way, the key requirement for concentration to fulfill its function as the eighth path factor in leading to stream-entry lies in it being cultivated in conjunction with the other path factors. The same understanding also underlies passages that depict a sequential build-up of the eight path factors, with the preceding seven leading up to right concentration. An example in case is the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta* and its parallels. The version in the *Madhyama-āgama* presents the matter as follows:

⁵⁵ MN 26 MN I 163,31 and MĀ 204 at T I 776b8; see also Anālayo 2011a and 2017d: 32–50. At the very least, this holds for Āḷāra Kālāma, who is on record for having himself realized the third immaterial sphere. Since Uddaka apparently taught what only his father had realized (see Skilling 1981), his case is less certain, although the narrative context makes it probable that he was also an accomplished practitioner.

⁵⁶ On the need to master the four absorptions in order to be able to attain the immaterial spheres see Anālayo 2020a: 574f.

⁵⁷ See Bodhi 1978/1992: 6–8 and for a comparative study that confirms this assessment Anālayo 2009c.

Right view gives rise to right intention, right intention gives rise to right speech, right speech gives rise to right action, right action gives rise to right livelihood, right livelihood gives rise to right effort, right effort gives rise to right mindfulness, and right mindfulness gives rise to right concentration.⁵⁸

The Pāli and Tibetan parallels proceed similarly.⁵⁹ As the three versions of this discourse also show the collaboration of right view, right effort, and right mindfulness in cultivating other path factors, the sequential listing given by them could hardly imply that the path factors have to be strictly developed one after the other, with concentration being their final aim. Instead, this listing is best understood to convey the same sense of collaboration and mutual interdependency of the eight path factors that also emerges from the definition of right concentration as being based on the other seven path factors.

In sum, for concentration to become “right,” it requires the diagnostic perspective afforded by right view.⁶⁰ Building on this diagnostic perspective and corresponding intentions,

⁵⁸ MĀ 189 at T I 735c8: 正見生正志, 正志生正語, 正語生正業, 正業生正命, 正命生正方便, 正方便生正念, 正念生正定.

⁵⁹ MN 117 at MN III 76,1: *sammādiṭṭhissa, bhikkhave, sammāsaṅkappo pahoti, sammāsaṅkappassa sammāvācā pahoti, sammāvācassa sammākammanto pahoti, sammākammantassa sammā-ājīvo pahoti, sammā-ājīvassa sammāvāyāmo pahoti, sammāvāyāmassa sammāsati pahoti, sammāsatissa sammāsamādhi pahoti*, and Up 6080 at D 4094 *nyu* 46b1 or P 5595 *thu* 86a6: *de la yang dag pa'i lta ba las yan dag pa'i rtog pa skye bar 'gyur zhing yang dag pa'i ngag dang yang dag pa'i las kyi mtha' dang yang dag pa'i 'tsho ba dang yang dag pa'i rtsol ba dang yang dag pa'i dran pa dang yang dag pa'i ting nge 'dzin 'byung bar 'gyur ro.*

⁶⁰ This is stated explicitly, e.g., in AN 5.21 at AN III 15,4.

ethical conduct in its three dimensions needs to be streamlined accordingly. Based on this foundation, the effort to emerge from what is unwholesome and cultivate what is wholesome needs to collaborate with the establishing of mindfulness in building the required environment for concentration to flourish. It is in this way that any concentration, no matter what level of strength it may have, can turn into right concentration.

Absorption as a Quality Pertinent to Awakening

The net result of the emergence of definitions of right concentration that equate absorption attainment with the last factor of the noble eightfold path is to endow such attainment with increasing importance for progress on the path to awakening. The same pattern can also be seen at work elsewhere; in this and the next section of the present chapter, I survey several examples of this tendency, followed by providing a summary of all textual developments before studying their repercussions.

Before embarking on a survey of such instances, I would like to put on record that my presentation in what follows is not meant to devalue the significance of absorption attainment as such. These are indubitably profound and beneficial experiences, and for this reason have been repeatedly commended in the early discourses. My concerns are more specifically with the idea that absorption attainment is indispensable for progress to stream-entry and the belief that such attainment is in itself liberative, in the sense of being productive of awakening on its own.

One example for a pattern of enhancing the importance of absorption by relating it more closely to the gaining of awakening concerns the “qualities pertinent to awakening” (*bodhipakkhiyā dhammā*, *bodhipāṅkṣika-dharmā*). The standard formulation of these qualities (which often do not yet employ the above-mentioned title) covers the following:

the four establishments of mindfulness,
 the four right endeavors,
 the four bases of success,
 the five faculties,
 the five powers,
 the seven awakening factors,
 the noble eightfold path.

The list reaches a count of altogether thirty-seven qualities pertinent to awakening.⁶¹ This count can safely be taken to be the standard way of listing these qualities.⁶²

An occurrence of such a listing in a discourse found in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and in its *Samyukta-āgama* parallel has a counterpart extant as a Gāndhārī fragment. This version shows an expansion of the list in the following manner (I have placed the expansion in italics for ease of reference):⁶³

⁶¹ According to Har Dayal 1932/1970: 82: “the formula, in its final form, includes ... thirty-seven dharmas.” Similarly, Gethin 1992: 14 comments that “the expression ‘thirty-seven *bodhi-pakkhiyā dhamma/bodhi-pāṅṣikā dharma*’ seems common to all traditions of Buddhism.” See also Anālayo 2020/2022.

⁶² The importance of this set of qualities even appears to be reflected symbolically in the construction of early *stūpas*; see Roth 1980: 187f for a relevant *Vinaya*-related text and Harvey 1984: 90 (figure 12) for an illustration of the resultant correspondences.

⁶³ Glass 2007: 142: *abhavidatv(a caḍoṇa spaḍoṭha)ṇaṇa caḍoṇa ṣamepaṣaṇaṇa caḍoṇa hīrdhaupaḍaṇa caḍoṇa jaṇaṇa paçaṇa idriaṇa paçaṇa bal(a)ṇ(a sataṇa beja)gaṇa ariasa aṭhagiasa maḡaṣa*, parallel to SN 22.101 at SN III 153,8: *abhāvitattā catunnaṃ satipaṭṭhānānaṃ, abhāvitattā catunnaṃ sammappadhānānaṃ, abhāvitattā catunnaṃ iddhipādānaṃ, abhāvitattā pañcannaṃ indriyānaṃ, abhāvitattā pañcannaṃ balānaṃ, abhāvitattā sattannaṃ bojjaṅgānaṃ, abhāvitattā ariyassa aṭṭhaṅgikassa maḡ-*

the four establishments of mindfulness, the four right endeavors, the four bases of success, *the four absorptions*, the five faculties, the five powers, the seven awakening factors, and the noble eightfold path.

An addition of the four absorptions can also be found in listings of the qualities pertinent to awakening in a discourse in the *Dīrgha-āgama* extant in Chinese translation, whose Pāli parallel just has the standard list without the absorptions.⁶⁴ The same type of expansion, by way of adding the four absorptions, can also be seen in a discourse translated individually into Chinese,⁶⁵ and in the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*.⁶⁶

The integration of the four absorptions in such listings could have been facilitated by the circumstance that the sections on Fours in the *Saṅgīti-sutta*, in its Sanskrit fragment parallel, and in its *Dīrgha-āgama* parallel mention the four absorptions after having listed the four establishments of mindfulness, the four right endeavors, and the four bases of success.⁶⁷ In the *Saṅgīti-sutta* and its parallels, this does not carry any doctrinal implication, as it is just part of a tendency to assemble different groups in sets of fours. Nevertheless, the

gassa and SĀ 263 at T II 67a29: 不修習念處, 正勤, 如意足, 根, 力, 覺, 道.

⁶⁴ DĀ 18 at T I 76c29: 四念處, 四正勤, 四神足, 四禪, 五根, 五力, 七覺意, 八賢聖道. DN 28 at DN III 102,12: *cattāro satipaṭṭhānā, cattāro sammappadhānā, cattāro iddhipādā, pañc' indriyāni, pañca balāni, satta bojjhaṅgā, ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*.

⁶⁵ T 6 at T I 181b8: 四志惟, 四意端, 四神足, 四禪行, 五根, 五力, 七覺, 八道諦; a case already noted by Warder 1970/1991: 77 note 1.

⁶⁶ T 1428 at T XXII 1013c1: 四念處, 四正勤, 四神足, 四禪, 五根, 五力, 七覺意, 八聖道; a case already noted by Glass 2007: 35 note 30.

⁶⁷ DN 33 at DN III 222,4, Stache-Rosen 1968: 94, and DĀ 9 at T I 50c18.

association this creates in the memory of the reciters between the qualities pertinent to awakening that come in fours and the four absorptions could easily have provided a starting point for the same sequence being applied elsewhere.

From the viewpoint of the evolved definition of right concentration, discussed above, the four absorptions could in fact be considered to be already part of the standard listing of the qualities pertinent to awakening, as they would have been implicit under the heading of the last factor of the noble eightfold path. From that perspective, for the four absorptions to find explicit inclusion in listings of the qualities and practices “pertinent to awakening” would not be such a major step to take.

Although a Dharmaguptaka discourse with this type of definition of right concentration does not appear to be extant, in the *Madhyama-āgama* an equation of right concentration with the four absorptions does occur (see above page 126f), and this collection has also an instance of promoting the importance of absorption along similar lines.⁶⁸ The body of the relevant discourse, which is without a parallel, combines different lists, and one of these is the standard list of the qualities pertinent to awakening. This list comes here together with a few additional items, one of which is precisely the four absorptions. The passage that results from this basic procedure of combining different listings and qualities then proposes the following:⁶⁹

One who wishes to abandon ignorance should cultivate the four absorptions.

This formulation results from the application of the pericope “one who wishes to abandon ignorance should cultivate” to the

⁶⁸ This has already been noted by Bronkhorst 1985: 306.

⁶⁹ MĀ 222 at T I 806b11: 欲斷無明者，當修四禪。

standard members in the listing of qualities pertinent to awakening. Once the four absorptions are added after this list, they automatically receive the same treatment. The result of this procedure could convey the impression that absorption attainment is in itself capable of abandoning ignorance.

The overall distinctly late nature of this discourse is evident from the fact that, if it were to be recited in full, without abbreviations, it would become more than twice as long as the whole of the *Madhyama-āgama* collection.⁷⁰ It can safely be assumed that this discourse was never recited in full but came into being in an abbreviated form. When it comes to actual listings of the qualities pertinent to awakening, other discourses in the same *Madhyama-āgama* collection have in fact only the basic list that has not yet integrated the four absorptions.

A comparable instance of the elevation of absorption to a quality that is in itself conducive to awakening can also be identified in the Pāli tradition. Although the Theravāda reciter tradition has kept the overall count at thirty-seven, an addition of the four absorptions can be seen in the *Samyutta-nikāya*. The final of the five main divisions of this collection, the *Magga-samyutta*, adopts the qualities pertinent to awakening as its basic scaffolding (although in a different sequence, as it begins with the arguably most important topic of the eightfold “path,” then has the “awakening factors,” followed by the “establishments of mindfulness,” etc.).

The *Magga-samyutta* also has a collection on absorption, the *Jhāna-samyutta* (SN 53). This collection lists the four absorptions once and then applies several stereotyped formulas to these four, formulas that have similarly been ap-

⁷⁰ See Anālayo 2014a: 46.

plied in the preceding coverage of items corresponding to the qualities pertinent to awakening, such as the eightfold path, the four establishments of mindfulness, and the seven awakening factors.

This entire *Jhāna-saṃyutta* has no known parallel in other transmission lineages. Particularly noteworthy here is that it not only lacks a counterpart in other extant reciter traditions, but it also has the same title, *Jhāna-saṃyutta*, as another collection of connected discourses, found in the same *Saṃyutta-nikāya*. This other *Jhāna-saṃyutta* (SN 34) does have a Chinese *Āgama* counterpart.⁷¹

From the viewpoint of oral transmission, the creation of two *saṃyuttas* with the same title is unexpected. In order to facilitate allocating discourses and keeping divisions in sequence, different titles would be an obvious choice. This makes it fairly probable that the creation of a second *saṃyutta* with the same title took place at a later time, when the requirements of memorization were no longer of central importance.

Out of these two *Jhāna-saṃyuttas*, the one that has a counterpart in other traditions (SN 34) describes various abilities required to deepen concentration. In contrast, the other *Jhāna-saṃyutta* (SN 53), extant only in the Pāli tradition, just combines repetition series found already in previous *saṃyuttas* with the standard description of the four absorptions. Although this combination merely reuses material found elsewhere, the very combination introduces a distinctly new perspective. This combination of textual pieces results in conveying the position

⁷¹ SN 34.1–55 at SN III 263,20 has a counterpart in SĀ 883 at T II 222c13. In this case, what is a whole *saṃyutta* in the Pāli tradition corresponds to a single discourse in its Chinese *Āgama* parallel, which is not in itself a particularly unusual occurrence.

that the mere cultivation of absorption makes the mind slant toward Nirvana.⁷²

Monastics, just as the river Ganges slants toward the east, slopes toward the east, and inclines toward the east, in the same way, monastics, a monastic who cultivates the four absorptions and makes much of the four absorptions slants toward Nirvana, slopes toward Nirvana, and inclines toward Nirvana.

In an oral setting, the application of an item found in several previous instances to the next instance can happen even quite accidentally. It does not take much effort to repeat once more what has been repeated several times earlier when reciting through this part of the *Samyutta-nikāya*. The net result of the apparent development, however, is the same doctrinal innovation already evident in the other examples surveyed above. By applying the stereotyped formulas that must have originated in expositions of qualities that are indeed pertinent to awakening, this *Jhāna-samyutta* results in proclaiming that mere absorption attainment makes the mind slant and incline to Nirvana.

A third instance of what appears to be a result of a textual error occurring during oral transmission can be seen in the *Mahāsakuludāyi-sutta*. In agreement with its parallel in the *Madhyama-āgama*, the Pāli discourse describes five qualities of the Buddha. The treatment of the fifth quality, which is much longer than the previous four in the *Mahāsakuludāyi-sutta*, comprises an extended list of meditative practices and

⁷² SN 53.1 at SN V 307,21: *seyyathā pi, bhikkhave, gaṅgā nadī pācīnaninnā pācīnaṇṇā pācīnapabbhārā; evam eva kho, bhikkhave, bhikkhu cattāro jhāne bhāvento cattāro jhāne bahulīkaronto nibbānaninno hoti nibbānaṇṇo nibbānapabbhāro.*

abilities. This covers over eleven pages in the Pāli text (of the PTS edition), compared to only two lines dedicated to the same topic in (the Taishō edition of) its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel.⁷³ The list in the Pāli discourse begins with the qualities pertinent to awakening, given in numerically ascending order. The later part of the listing, however, no longer follows such an order. Such inconsistency makes it fair to assume that a textual expansion has taken place.

As a result of this apparent development, the Pāli discourse has become rather long and could have received a more suitable placing in the *Dīgha-nikāya* rather than being allocated to the *Majjhima-nikāya*, where it is now found. This makes it probable that the suggested textual expansion would have taken place when the *Mahāsakuludāyi-sutta* had already been allotted to the collection of medium-length discourses.

The four absorptions occur as one of the items mentioned in the later part of the listing in the *Mahāsakuludāyi-sutta*. Due to the absorptions being accorded the same overall treatment as the qualities pertinent to awakening in the first part of the list, the *Mahāsakuludāyi-sutta* ends up making the following statement:⁷⁴

My disciples cultivate the four absorptions ... and many of my disciples thereby dwell having reached the consummation and perfection of direct knowledge.

⁷³ MN 77 at MN II 11,3 to 22,15 compared to MĀ 207 at T I 783b15 to 783b17. The other four qualities are described in MN 77 at MN II 9,14 to 11,2, requiring less than two pages.

⁷⁴ MN 77 at MN II 15,5: *me sāvaka cattāri jhānāni* (E^s: *cattāro jhāne*) *bhāventi ... tatra ca pana me sāvaka bahū abhiññāvosānapāramipattā viharanti.*

The part elided in the above extract offers the standard description of the four absorptions, together with similes illustrating their somatic effect. The commentary explains that the recurrent reference in the *Mahāsakuludāyi-sutta* to consummation and perfection of direct knowledge intends the attainment of full awakening.⁷⁵

In this way, the expanded part of the *Mahāsakuludāyi-sutta* once again elevates the four absorptions to the same rank as the qualities pertinent to awakening. In the present case, the suggested textual developments result in according the same rank also to other items in the later part of the list, such as, for example, the ten *kaṣiṇas*. Elsewhere the early discourses do not invest the cultivation of the ten *kaṣiṇas* with the potential of leading in themselves to full awakening. This confirms the impression that a textual expansion must be responsible for according awakening potential to the absorptions and *kaṣiṇas*.

The Importance of Absorption

Textual developments that result in investing absorption attainment with an increased importance can also take place without being in one way or another related to a listing of the qualities pertinent to awakening. The first of three examples for this alternative occurs in the *Mahāmāluṅkyaputta-sutta*. The discourse sets out with the Buddha querying if his disciples remember the five lower fetters. Māluṅkyaputta replies by listing them correctly but nevertheless incurs the Buddha's censure. The commentary explains that Māluṅkyaputta had mistakenly believed bondage to happen only when these states overtly manifest in the mind.⁷⁶ The Buddha clarifies that even

⁷⁵ Ps III 243,4: *abhiññāvosānapāramīpattā ti ... arahattaṃ pattā*.

⁷⁶ Ps III 144,7.

an infant already has these fetters, followed by illustrating the need to adopt the required path for eradicating these five fetters with the example of needing to cut the bark of a tree before being able to get at its heartwood.

The Pāli version proceeds from this simile to another one, which illustrates the inspiration to advance toward cessation with the strength of being able to swim across the Ganges. After this simile comes the relevant passage, which states the following:⁷⁷

And what, Ānanda, is the path, what is the way for abandoning the five lower fetters?

Here, Ānanda, through seclusion from attachments, abandonment of unwholesome states, and the complete appeasement of bodily inertia, being secluded from sensual desires and secluded from unwholesome states, with application and sustaining, with joy and happiness born of seclusion, one dwells having attained the first absorption.

Whatever there actually is pertaining to form, pertaining to feeling tone, pertaining to perception, pertaining to formations, and pertaining to consciousness, one contemplates these states as impermanent, as unsatisfactory, as a disease,

⁷⁷ MN 64 at MN I 435,26: *katamo c' ānanda maggo, katamā* (S^c: *ca*) *paṭipadā pañcannaṃ orambhāgiyānaṃ saṃyojanānaṃ* (C^e and S^c: *saññyojanānaṃ*) *pahānāya? idh' ānanda ... upadhivivekā akusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ pahānā sabbaso kāyaduṭṭhullānaṃ paṭippassaddhiyā vivicc' eva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekaṃ pītisukhaṃ paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati. so yad eva tattha hoti rūpagataṃ vedanā-gataṃ saññāgataṃ sañkhāragataṃ viññāṅagataṃ te dhamme aniccato dukkhato rogato gaṇḍato sallato aghato ābādhato para-to palokato suññato anattato samanupassati.*

as a boil, as a dart, as a misery, as an affliction, as alien, as disintegrating, as empty, and as not-self.

Having undertaken such contemplation, the practitioner then inclines the mind toward the deathless and eventually attains either full awakening or else non-return. The same mode of exposition applies to the remaining three absorptions and to the first three immaterial spheres, with the equal result of yielding arahantship or else at least non-return.

The exposition in each case concludes by indicating that this is the path for eradicating the five lower fetters. It follows that this much can already be achieved based on the first absorption, the other attainments listed being alternative approaches. The actual path is throughout the same contemplation of impermanence, etc.

Although the emphasis is clearly on such insight contemplation, the presentation does imply that one needs to attain at least the first absorption to be able to undertake such contemplation. Given the earlier indications that without the required path one will not be able to eradicate the five lower fetters, this would imply that someone unable to attain absorption will also be unable to attain non-return (or full awakening).⁷⁸

The *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, however, presents the matter in quite a different way:⁷⁹

⁷⁸ This is the conclusion I drew in *Anālayo* 2003: 82 (especially notes 69 and 72), in the context of a study based only on Pāli material. As noted in *Anālayo* 2017b: 174 note 137, this conclusion on the implications of MN 64 needs revision in view of the differences in the parallel versions.

⁷⁹ MĀ 205 at T I 779b12: 阿難, 依何道, 依何跡, 斷五下分結? 阿難, 或有一不爲欲所纏, 若生欲纏, 即知捨如真. 彼知捨如真已, 彼欲纏便滅.

Ānanda, in dependence on what path, in dependence on what way, are the five lower fetters abandoned?

Ānanda, suppose someone is not being entangled by sensual desire and, if the entanglement of sensual desire arises, [such a person] understands its forsaking as it really is. Having understood its forsaking as it really is, that person's entanglement in sensual desire in turn ceases.

The *Madhyama-āgama* discourse continues by offering a similar indication for the other four fetters and concludes that in this way the five lower fetters can be eradicated. This part of the exposition is also preserved in a discourse quotation in the *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-īkā*, extant in Tibetan, which proceeds similarly.⁸⁰

In the two parallels this exposition occurs right after the simile about a person in search of heartwood. In all versions, this simile illustrates the topic of abandoning the five lower fetters in the following way:

Without relying on the path, this is impossible;
just as getting heartwood without cutting bark is impossible;
similarly, without relying on the path, this is impossible.

Relying on the path, this is possible;
just as getting heartwood after cutting bark is possible;
similarly, relying on the path, this is possible.

This repetitive mode of presentation shows how closely the simile relates to the need for the correct path. Yet, right after this simile the Pāli version continues with the other simile about swimming across the Ganges. This illustrates the need to feel

⁸⁰ Up 5002 at D 4094 *ju* 261b5 or P 5595 *thu* 4a3.

inspired by the goal of cessation. It is only after the Ganges simile that the Pāli version takes up the question about the nature of the path, translated above, which then leads over to the exposition of insight contemplation and the absorptions.

This is contrary to the standard procedure in other early discourses, where a simile illustrating a particular topic will come together with the corresponding exposition. Moreover, in its current form the Pāli presentation results in a slight misfit because the question (as well as the concluding replies given after each exposition) is only concerned with the five lower fetters. As already pointed out by Schmithausen (1981: 224 note 88), this mode of presentation “does not appear to be adequate to the context because it neglects the primary result,” namely full awakening (with non-return only featuring as a secondary option).

In this way, the question seems to be out of place in two ways: It comes after a simile related to a different topic instead of after the relevant simile, and it leads on to an exposition of how to arrive at a realization that goes beyond the one it is concerned with. Although full awakening of course implies an eradication of the five fetters, it would be more in keeping with the style of presentation adopted in other discourses if the exposition on insightful contemplation of the absorptions were preceded by a question regarding the path to full awakening, corresponding to the abandoning of all ten fetters.

The resultant lack of complete coherence of the Pāli version, combined with the testimony provided by the parallels, makes it fair to assume that a shifting of textual material would have occurred, a type of error that can easily happen during the prolonged period of the oral transmission of the

discourses.⁸¹ Due to this error, the question about the path (“And what, Ānanda, is the path, what is the way for abandoning the five lower fetters?”) lost its natural connection to the relevant exposition of that path and instead ended up being after the Ganges simile.⁸² As a result, this question came to serve as an introduction to the instructions on absorption and insight. This then appears to have led to concluding statements after each instruction that repeat the same wording in an affirmative manner (“Ānanda, this is the path, this is the way for abandoning the five lower fetters”).

On this assumption, the basic pattern of the exposition, previous to the posited transmission error, could be reconstructed as follows:⁸³ After clarifying with the example of an infant that

⁸¹ See Anālayo 2011b: 873–877 and for a case study of a Pāli discourse that also involves a separation of a question from its corresponding exposition Anālayo 2009a.

⁸² The proposed placing of the question *katamo c’ ānanda maggo, katamā paṭipadā pañcannaṃ orambhāgiyānaṃ saṃyojanānaṃ pahānāya* would be right after the simile on the heartwood, at MN I 435,9, to be followed by the passage now found at MN I 434,6–24 as its corresponding reply (to be introduced by *idh’ ānanda*). This passage may have ended up in its present position due to its similarity in phrasing with the preceding description of the entanglement of the worldling (MN I 433,22 to 434,6). Such similarity could easily have led to an association error during recitation, as reciting the description of the worldling’s entanglement would naturally bring to mind the noble disciple’s lack of entanglement. With the question thereby left without a reply, it unsurprisingly shifted to its present position after the Ganges simile, with the ensuing exposition on absorption serving as a reply to the question.

⁸³ The Tibetan version is only a partial parallel and does not cover the part on the absorptions. MĀ 205 at T I 779c7 follows the Ganges similes with yet another simile about constructing a raft to

the fetters are already present even when they do not overtly manifest, the discourse elucidates that, without understanding the nature of a fetter, one will not be able to abandon it (which would also explain why Māluṅkyaputta incurred censure for his earlier reply). For such abandoning, the adoption of the required path is indispensable. Trying to do so without that path is comparable to trying to get heartwood without cutting the bark of the tree. In contrast, just like one who cuts the bark will be able to get heartwood, with the required path one will be able to abandon the fetters. So, what is that path? It is to be found in a proper understanding of the nature of a fetter, as this is the requirement for being able to remove it.

With this much clarified, the exposition moves on to the related topic of lacking inspiration for the final goal, illustrated with the simile of lacking the strength to swim across the Ganges. It is here that the absorptions and their insightful contemplation fall into place, as a way of illustrating the import of the Ganges simile. The main point would be to highlight the need to contemplate absorption experiences with insight. This is what serves to rouse inspiration for the final goal and endows the practitioner with the strength needed to reach it, that is, in terms of the simile, with the strength needed to swim across the Ganges. In fact, these instructions on insight are worded quite strongly in the Pāli version, requiring that an absorption experience is first broken down into its aggregate components (perhaps to dismantle its unitary appearance) and then consid-

cross a mountain stream; it also differs in recommending contemplation of the rise and fall of feeling tones in relation to each absorption and in envisaging just full awakening as the possible outcome, without a reference to non-return. For a more detailed comparative study of MN 64 see Anālayo 2011b: 355–358.

ered to be, among other things, like a disease, a boil, a dart, a misery, an affliction, and something alien. The purpose of such rather uncomplimentary evaluations would be to counter any possible attachment to absorption experiences.⁸⁴

In this way, comparative study gives the impression that the intention of this passage in the *Mahāmālunkyaputta-sutta* was not to stipulate the need to master absorption as such. Instead, its concern would rather have been the need to contemplate an absorption experience with insight in order to ensure that the mind inclines fully toward Nirvana.

The second example where the impact of textual proliferation during oral transmission appears to have led to an enhancement of the role of absorption in relation to progress to an experience of Nirvana can be seen in the following passage:⁸⁵

And what, monastics, is the path leading to the unconditioned? Concentration with application and sustaining, con-

⁸⁴ Another instance of the same insight contemplation occurs in AN 9.36 at AN IV 422,22 and its parallel Up 3020 at D 4081 *ju* 113b4 or P 5595 *tu* 130a7; see also additionally the *Abhidharmakośavyākhyā*, Wogihara 1932/1936: 273,14, and the **Tattvasiddhi*, T 1646 at T XXXII 338c25. AN 4.124 at AN II 128,13 applies the same insight contemplation just to the four absorptions as a path to rebirth in the Pure Abodes. AN 4.124 does not appear to have a parallel; the suggestion by Akanuma 1929/1990: 299 to consider MĀ 168 as a parallel is not convincing, as MĀ 168 is just a parallel to the preceding discourse AN 4.123.

⁸⁵ SN 43.3 at SN IV 360,11: *katamo ca, bhikkhave, asaṅkhatagāmi (C^e here and below: asaṅkhatagāmī) maggo? savitakko savicāro (B^e and S^e: savitakkasavicāro) samādhi, avitakko vicāramatto (B^e, E^e, and S^e: avitakkavicāramatto) samādhi, avitakko avicāro (B^e and S^e: avitakka-avicāro) samādhi, ayaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, asaṅkhatagā-mimaggo.*

centration without application and with a remainder of sustaining, and concentration without application and without sustaining, monastics, this is called the path leading to the unconditioned.

The present passage reflects an alternative mode of describing progress in absorption, different from the standard analysis into four levels that is found in most other early discourses.⁸⁶ Based on this alternative mode of description, the above passage proclaims that these different levels of concentration are the path to the unconditioned, without providing any explicit hint at the need to conjoin these in some way to insight.

The coming into being of this statement can best be appreciated by consulting the relevant *Samyukta-āgama* parallel. This agrees with the *Samyutta-nikāya* in making a statement of the above type for the noble eightfold path.⁸⁷ The two also agree in repeating the same exposition with various alternative terms that replace the reference to the “unconditioned.”⁸⁸ This much is thus their common ground.

Once the topic of the unconditioned allows for various alternatives, there is no reason in principle why the same could not also be applied to the path that leads to it. This appears to be the step taken at some point during the transmission of the

⁸⁶ On this threefold mode of presentation see Anālayo 2017d: 35–38 and 2019h: 2343f.

⁸⁷ SĀ 890 at T II 224b1: 云何無爲法? 謂貪欲永盡, 瞋恚, 愚癡永盡, 一切煩惱永盡, 是無爲法. 云何爲無爲道跡? 謂八聖道分, 正見, 正志, 正語, 正業, 正命, 正方便, 正念, 正定, 是名無爲道跡 (adopting the variant 志 instead of 智); parallel to SN 43.11 at SN IV 361,14, which does not list the path factors individually.

⁸⁸ For a survey of the epithets common to the two collections see Anālayo 2013c: 251.

Samyutta-nikāya, by way of applying the same basic presentation to other candidates for the path to the unconditioned (etc.). With the starting point provided by the noble eightfold path, obvious alternative candidates are the other qualities pertinent to awakening. In addition to these, the *Samyutta-nikāya* also mentions mindfulness of the body, tranquility and insight, as well as another set of three concentrations (on emptiness, signlessness, and desirelessness).

The last-mentioned set of three concentrations recurs in the *Saṅgīti-sutta* together with the three concentrations from the passage translated above.⁸⁹ This makes it possible that the intrusion in the present context of concentrations with or without the factors of the first absorption (application, *vitakka*, and sustaining, *vicāra*) could have happened due to a memory error. As explained by von Hinüber (1996/1997: 31), the nature of oral transmission is such that “pieces of texts known by heart may intrude into almost any context once there is a corresponding key word.” On this assumption, the correct presentation of the three concentrations on emptiness, signlessness, and desirelessness as a path leading to the unconditioned could have accidentally triggered the addition of the second set of three concentrations with or without the factors of the first absorption, even though these do not in themselves constitute a path to Nirvana comparable to the three concentrations on emptiness, signlessness, and desirelessness.

Besides the introduction of alternatives to the noble eightfold path, the process of textual proliferation in this part of the *Samyutta-nikāya* appears to have continued further. A subsequent section repeats the same basic treatment, with the differ-

⁸⁹ DN 33 at DN III 219,19 lists the same two sets of three concentrations in the same order.

ence that the items already mentioned previously are now subdivided further. Thus, whereas in the earlier part the whole of the noble eightfold path served as the path to the unconditioned (etc.), now each of its eight factors is taken up individually as providing such a path. The application of the same process of subdivision to the earlier mentioned “tranquility and insight” then results in distinct treatments for each. As a result, the first of these makes the following proclamation:⁹⁰

Monastics, and what is the path leading to the unconditioned? Tranquility, monastics, this is called the path leading to the unconditioned.

This statement risks conveying the impression that cultivating tranquility on its own has the potential of leading to the experience of the unconditioned.

In the same vein, the *Samyutta-nikāya* continues by attributing the potential of leading to the unconditioned (etc.) to each of the three concentrations related to the presence or absence of the factors characteristic of the first absorption. Thus, concentration with both application and sustaining is a path to the unconditioned (etc.), just as is each of the other two types of concentration belonging to this set of three.

This mode of presentation is not confined to the promotion of absorption or tranquility, as it also presents each of the four right endeavors (*sammappadhāna*), for example, or each of the bases of success (*iddhipāda*) as on its own being a path leading to the unconditioned,⁹¹ hardly a convincing proposition.

⁹⁰ SN 43.12 at SN IV 362,9: *katamo ca, bhikkhave, asaṅkhatagāmi* (C^e here and below: *asaṅkhatagāmī*) *maggo? samatho, ayaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, asaṅkhatagāmimaggo.*

⁹¹ SN 43.12 at SN IV 364,7.

Textual proliferation appears to be responsible as well for a third example of promoting absorption, found in a section of the *Āṅguttara-nikāya*. The first relevant discourse describes a series of openings from confinement in a relative sense (*pariyāyena*), which are the four absorptions and the four immaterial spheres. An opening from confinement in the definite sense (*nippariyāyena*), however, is the attainment of cessation and the destruction of the influxes.⁹²

So far so good, but subsequent discourses in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* apply the same template by exchanging various other terms for the opening from confinement. Such replacement terms include Nirvana, final Nirvana (*parinibbāna*), and Nirvana here and now (*diṭṭhadhammanibbāna*). As the application of the template begins with the first absorption, the net result is that this first absorption (and subsequently the others) comes to be identified as being, in a relative sense, Nirvana, final Nirvana, and Nirvana here and now.⁹³

The same treatment also applies to three different persons: the body witness (*kāyasakkhin*), the one liberated by wisdom (*paññāvimutta*), and the one liberated both ways (*ubhatobhāgavimutta*). Each of these persons becomes such in the definite sense through having gained the attainment of cessation (based on previous attainment of the four absorptions and the four immaterial spheres) together with the destruction of the influxes.⁹⁴

⁹² AN 9.42 at AN IV 451,20; no parallel appears to be known to this and the ensuing discourses, taken up below.

⁹³ AN 9.48, AN 9.49, and AN 9.51 at AN IV 454,1+2+7.

⁹⁴ AN 9.43 at SN IV 452,13, AN 9.44 at SN IV 453,1, and AN 9.45 at AN IV 453,14. Each case, although with some minor differences in formulation, involves a progression through the immaterial spheres up to cessation attainment and the destruction of the influxes.

Yet, in its usage elsewhere the term body witness refers to someone who has not yet become an arahant, and the difference between an arahant liberated by wisdom and liberated both ways is precisely that the former has not gained mastery of the immaterial spheres.⁹⁵

In this way, although the absence of a parallel does not enable studying these discourses from a comparative perspective, the incoherent presentation of the three persons makes it fair to assume that a textual proliferation occurred. Hence, the idea that the absorptions can be referred to as a form of Nirvana, even if only in a relative sense, is quite probably the result of the same textual development.

Summary of Textual Developments

At this point I have completed my exploration of textual developments, and in the remainder of this chapter (after a short look at the insight knowledges) I will be exploring their repercussions in later times. Since the present chapter is rather long and the issue under discussion complex, it seems best at this point to provide a summary of what has emerged from the material covered thus far.

The central conclusion drawn on the basis of comparative study is that the definition of right concentration by way of listing the four absorptions does not appear to be the earliest such definition. Apart from the textual evidence, reflection on the purpose of this path factor makes it indeed meaningful to propose that what makes concentration become “right” is not so much its depth but rather the presence of right view as well as the context set by the other path factors.

⁹⁵ Anālayo 2011b: 379–381, see especially note 211.

Perhaps at an early time this was simply self-evident and not in need of being explicitly formulated. In fact, whereas the factors of the eightfold path are enumerated many times, definitions of their individual implications are surprisingly few. This gives the impression that for the most part it was enough to know that the eightfold path is one of the four noble truths, which ensures the appropriate orientation, and that progress on this path involves eight interrelated dimensions of practice.

Those few instances that provide more information and are supported by parallel versions, which for this reason can with considerable probability be reckoned relatively early, would then have drawn out explicitly this basic principle of needing to contextualize concentration within the all-important framework provided by the other path-factors, under the guiding principle of right view in the form of the four noble truths.

The importance of right view in this setting might have provided a starting point for the arising of an alternative definition that draws attention to a way of implementing such right view. This can take the form of avoiding any tendency to metaphysical speculation in relation to the experience of deep absorption experiences and instead directing attention to conditionality, in particular to the specific mental factors that are responsible for a particular level of absorption.

Whatever may be the final word on the reason for employing the standard description of the four absorptions when defining right concentration, quite naturally such a description would have been read in later times as implying that these four must be attained. This involves a shift in understanding, as the earlier-mentioned reference to unification of the mind can also accommodate a level of concentration corresponding to what later tradition refers to as “access concentration.” Such is no longer possible with this alternative definition, as at least the

first absorption, if not all four, need to be mastered. Inevitably, this shifts attention from the need to cultivate the noble eight-fold path as the appropriate setting to the need to achieve a particular depth of concentration.

This predictably results in attributing an increasing importance to absorption attainment as indispensable for progress to stream-entry. Other textual developments further supported such a perspective. These can for the most part be considered results of the vagaries of oral transmission, where the impact of lists and repetitions can lead to various textual proliferations.⁹⁶ In the present case, such textual proliferation appears to be responsible for the absorptions being integrated in the listing of qualities pertinent to awakening, serving as the nucleus for the creation of a *Jhāna-saṃyutta*, and being seen as leading in themselves to the perfection of direct knowledge, as indispensable for abandoning the five lower fetters, as the path to the unconditioned, and as Nirvana in a relative sense.

The range of examples evident in this way reflects the complexity of the process under discussion, even when staying just within the confines of textual evidence. It does seem to me that the definition of right concentration assumes a primary role, both in these developments and in later times. Nevertheless, it remains just one particularly strong condition operating within a network of other conditions. Although the equation of right concentration with the four absorptions may have facilitated the incorporation of these four in listings of the qualities pertinent to awakening, the latter is not just a result of the former. Instead, it is best considered an independent development. Again, even though this development has impacted various of

⁹⁶ See in more detail Anālayo 2022.

the instances surveyed above, be it directly or indirectly, some such instances do not show any evident relationship to the set of qualities pertinent to awakening. These patterns reconfirm a need, similarly evident in the topics surveyed in the previous chapters, to acknowledge complexity and avoid the adoption of monocausal explanations.

The influence of the increased importance of absorption, resulting from the textual developments surveyed thus far, can be seen in conceptions of Buddhist meditation in contemporary practice traditions, to which I turn next (after a brief survey of the insight knowledges).

By way of concluding my survey of textual developments, I would like to note that the above does not provide a balanced overview of the role of absorption in the early discourses. This is simply because the purpose of my exploration is much rather to place into perspective passages that overstate the importance of absorption. For this reason, I have not taken up the many passages that testify to absorption as an integral part of early Buddhist meditation with manifold benefits. As mentioned earlier, my presentation is not meant in any way to devalue the cultivation of absorption as such. My aim is only to query the supposed indispensability of absorption for progress to stream-entry and its identification with liberating insight as such.

The Insight Knowledges

The four absorptions being equated to right concentration and their supposed intrinsic awakening potential also emerging in other ways provide the background for the ongoing debate on the question to what degree absorption needs to be mastered in order to be able to progress to stream-entry.

Before turning to the actual debate on this topic, however, a brief detour is required to introduce a text-historical perspec-

tive on the insight knowledges, whose successful navigation serves as the standard model of progress toward stream-entry in Theravāda meditation traditions. My detour begins with the standard exposition of these insight knowledges and then explores earlier and less elaborate precedents.

The scheme of insight knowledges refers to key experiences to be encountered during the progress of insight meditation. A listing of these key experiences can be found in the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, probably compiled at some time during the 11th to 12th centuries.⁹⁷

Teaching the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* widely to lay people in Burma was a central concern of Ledi Sayādaw (1846–1923), and it is apparently as part of this mission of making such teachings available to a non-monastic audience that he also encouraged lay meditation.⁹⁸ The *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* lists altogether ten such insight knowledges:⁹⁹

1	comprehension	<i>sammasana</i>
2	rise and fall	<i>udayabbaya</i>
3	dissolution	<i>bhaṅga</i>
4	fear	<i>bhaya</i>
5	disadvantage	<i>ādīnava</i>
6	disenchantment	<i>nibbidā</i>
7	wish for deliverance	<i>muñcitukamyatā</i>
8	reflection	<i>paṭisaṅkhā</i>
9	equanimity toward formations	<i>saṅkhārupekkhā</i>
10	conformity	<i>anuloma</i>

⁹⁷ See, e.g., Bechert 1979: 26, Norman 1983: 151, and Malalasekera 1937/1995: 90.

⁹⁸ See Braun 2013.

⁹⁹ Abhs 9: 25, Bodhi 1993: 346.

A detailed exposition of these experiences is available in the *Visuddhimagga*, which places this set of ten within a broader context of the path of cultivating insight, as it also covers the insights to be developed previously as well as the actual breakthrough to liberation.¹⁰⁰

A shorter presentation of this series of experiences can be found in the *Vimuttimagga*. The *Vimuttimagga* predates the *Visuddhimagga*, and it seems quite probable that Buddhaghosa, the compiler of the *Visuddhimagga*, was aware of a version of the *Vimuttimagga*.¹⁰¹ This latter work thus can afford a perspective preceding the systematization of Theravāda thought provided by Buddhaghosa. The *Vimuttimagga*'s scheme of insight knowledges involves six main stages.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ The ten insight knowledges set in after the “knowledge of delimitating name-and-form” and the “knowledge of discerning conditions,” *nāmarūpapariccheda-ñāṇa* and *paccayapariggaha-ñāṇa*, have been developed; see the detailed description in *Vism* 587,1. Once progress through the ten insight knowledges leads up to the brink of stream-entry attainment, four more knowledges can be designated. These comprise *gotrabhū-ñāṇa*, “change-of-lineage” from a worldly to a noble person, and the realization of the “path” as well as the “fruit” of stream-entry, *magga-ñāṇa* and *phala-ñāṇa*; see *Vism* 672,1. These in turn lead on to “knowledge of reviewing,” *paccavekkhana-ñāṇa*. Due to taking into account these additional aspects, the account of the progress of insight covers altogether sixteen knowledges.

¹⁰¹ As noted by von Hinüber 1996/1997: 124, “contrary to the tradition, however, *Vism* had a predecessor, which is extant only in Chinese ... the *Vimuttimagga* by an otherwise unknown Upatissa.” Norman 1983: 120 concludes that “there seems no doubt that Buddhaghosa made use of this earlier text [i.e., the *Vimuttimagga*] when writing his own work.” See also Anālayo 2009b.

¹⁰² T 1648 at T XXXII 454a28.

1	comprehension	廣觀
2	rise and fall	起滅
3	dissolution	滅
4	fear & disadvantage & disenchantment	畏 & 過患 & 厭離
5	delight in deliverance & equanimity	樂解脫 & 捨
6	conformity	相似

The present case exemplifies the type of differences that can be found between the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Vimuttimagga* in their respective treatments of a particular doctrinal topic. At the same time, however, as noted by Cousins (2013/2014: 392), “it seems clear that both were drawing on a largely shared commentarial tradition.” In fact, a similar summary presentation of these experiences can be found in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, which depicts the progress of insight knowledge in five main stages.¹⁰³

1	comprehension	<i>sammasana</i>
2	rise and fall	<i>udayabbaya</i>
3	dissolution	<i>bhaṅga</i>
4	fear & disadvantage	<i>bhaya</i> & <i>ādīnava</i>
5	wish for deliverance & equanimity toward formations	<i>muñcitukamyatā</i> & <i>saṅkhārupekkhā</i>

The circumstance that the listings in the *Vimuttimagga* and the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* combine several insight knowledges that are treated separately in the tenfold scheme does not entail a

¹⁰³ Paṭis I 53,1.

substantial difference but is merely a matter of presentation. In fact, the *Visuddhimagga* explicitly indicates that the “wish for deliverance” (*muñcitukamyatā*), for example, and “reflection” (*paṭisaṅkhā*) are but two early stages of equanimity toward formations.¹⁰⁴ In other words, the more detailed scheme found in the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* and in the *Visuddhimagga* allows for summarization.

Following up this indication and attempting to get at the essentials described in these schemes, the insight knowledges could be summarized under the three characteristics. This would yield the following correlations for the standard scheme of the ten insight knowledges:

1	comprehension	all three
2	rise and fall	impermanence
3	dissolution	
4	fear	
5	disadvantage	<i>dukkha</i>
6	disenchantment	
7	wish for deliverance	
8	reflection	not self
9	equanimity	
10	conformity	

With knowledge 1 as the foundation, during the development of knowledges 2 and 3 the characteristic of impermanence is predominant in the form of contemplation of rise and fall and with the experience of dissolution. This leads to knowledges

¹⁰⁴ *Vism* 660,18: *saṅkhārupekkhāñāṇaṃ ekam eva tīṇi nāmāni labhati; heṭṭhā muñcitukamyatāñāṇaṃ nāma jātaṃ, majjhe paṭisaṅkhānupassanā ñāṇaṃ nāma, ante ca sikhāppattaṃ saṅkhārupekkhāñāṇaṃ nāma.*

4 to 7, from the onset of fear via seeing disadvantage and developing disenchantment to arousing the wish for deliverance, with which the unsatisfactory nature of reality becomes fully apparent. Once the inner transformation brought about through this deepening appreciation of *dukkha* has matured, the characteristic of not self becomes increasingly evident, resulting in the non-attachment of equanimity that leads up to the culmination point in the successful attainment of the path and the fruit.

The correlation outlined above is not intended to suggest that one or the other of the three characteristics is irrelevant at some of the stages in the progress of insight. Insight into all three is required already with “comprehension,” the starting point and foundation of the series, and all three are relevant throughout. Each characteristic, however, assumes prominence at different stages in the progression of insight.

The basic dynamic evident here occurs regularly in the early discourses, in the form of a progression from perception of impermanence, via perception of the unsatisfactory in what is impermanent, to perception of not self in what is unsatisfactory.¹⁰⁵ In this way, a penetrative awareness of impermanence leads over to insight into *dukkha*, which in turn issues in realization of not self, thereby paving the way for progress toward liberation. It seems fair to view the scheme of insight knowledges as drawing on this basic pattern.

¹⁰⁵ This basic progression can be seen, for example, in AN 7.46 at AN IV 46,21 (followed by a detailed explanation), DĀ 2 at T I 11c28, MĀ 86 at T I 563c17, SĀ 747 at T II 198a20, and EĀ 37.10 at T II 715b4; or else in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1453 at T XXIV 481c20, with its Sanskrit and Tibetan counterparts in Yamagiwa 2001: 132,1 and 133,1. See also von Rospatt 2004: 75.

The Need of Absorption for Insight Meditation

The debate on the perceived need of absorption attainment for being able to progress to awakening became particularly prominent with the widespread teaching of insight meditation, *vipassanā*, in the last century. The attempt to make such teachings available to lay practitioners at large naturally tended to focus on meditation practices that were perceived as more accessible to those encumbered by family life and by having to earn a living. This led to an emphasis on so-called “dry insight,” in the sense of meditation practices aimed entirely at the cultivation of insight, without the ‘moisture’ of experiencing the joy and happiness of concentrative absorption. Progress in dry insight is understood to be possible without a need to dedicate time and effort to the development of concentration on its own.

The spread of such dry insight meditation by the disciples of Mahāsi Sayādaw (1904–1982) met with considerable opposition from traditional Sri Lankan monastics, who found it doubtful that a meditation practice could lead to stream-entry without relying on the cultivation of absorption. Such opposition led to a sustained debate on the topic.¹⁰⁶

The equation of right concentration with the four absorptions was accepted by both sides in the debate as axiomatic, as was a distinction between normal absorption attainment, qualified as “worldly” (*lokiya*), and the absorbed condition of the mind at the moment of experiencing any of the four levels of awakening, qualified as “supramundane” (*lokuttara*). This distinction seems to emerge mainly in exegetical literature.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ See Kheminda and Nyanuttara 1966/1979.

¹⁰⁷ See Brahmāli 2007.

Expressing the debated issue in simple terms, without getting into its details, the question is: Does the degree of concentration that occurs at the moment of stream-entry suffice to fulfill the path factor of right concentration, without any need to have previously trained in mastery of ordinary or worldly absorption? From the viewpoint of proponents of dry insight, supramundane absorptive concentration suffices. However, the taking of this position led to counterarguments, reported by Mahāsi Sayādaw (1981/1998: 130) as follows:

Hanging on to this statement of ours, some say that Vipassanā can be developed only after achieving purification of [the] mind through attaining *jhānic* concentration. Without *jhānic* concentration, purification of the mind cannot be brought about. Consequently, Vipassanā cannot be developed.

The expression “purification of the mind” in this context refers to one stage in a series of seven purifications that form the scaffolding of the *Visuddhimagga*. The need to fulfill these stages is another doctrine held in common by both sides of the debate. The idea is that one has to accomplish each purification in order to be able to proceed to the next. Hence, without fulfilling the stage of purification of the mind, understood by opponents of dry insight to equal absorption attainment, it will not be possible to progress to the higher stages of purification that then lead on to stream-entry.

From this viewpoint, the argument that the actual experience of stream-entry itself will take care of the need to attain absorption falters. The counterargument, pointing to the need to fulfill purification of the mind first, demands that in some way the attainment of absorption occurs well before the breakthrough to stream-entry.

Insight Knowledges as Forms of Absorption

As part of an apparent attempt to counter such criticism, Mahāsi Sayādaw identified some of the stages of the insight meditation he taught with the four absorptions. This identification relies on the insight knowledges.

Now, my survey of these insight knowledges in the preceding section of this chapter would have shown that their overarching concern is with insight that progresses through the three characteristics, building on impermanence. This is hardly a natural fit for the four absorptions, whose attainment has no necessary relationship to insight into the three characteristics (as evident from the reports in the early discourses of mistaken conclusions drawn, based on such attainments, by non-Buddhist practitioners). Instead, the role of the absorptions in the context of the present debate could only be to fulfill the perceived need to master tranquility, corresponding to purification of the mind, as a foundation for then being able to cultivate insight.

The way the identification of insight knowledges with absorption works out can be seen from the following correspondences proposed by Mahāsi Sayādaw (1981/2006: 24), in order to bridge what in actual practice are two rather different modalities of meditation practice:

Insight meditation (*vipassanā*) and *jhāna* have some characteristics in common ... whenever the yogi observes any phenomena, his insight meditation is somewhat like the first *jhāna* and its five characteristics ... when the yogi gains insight knowledge of the arising and passing away of all phenomena ... his meditation is somewhat like the second *jhāna* ... an advance in the insight knowledge of the arising and passing away of phenomena ... shares the joy and the one-pointedness of mind that are characteristic of

the third *jhāna* ... the higher levels of insight knowledge ... are characterized by equanimity and one-pointedness of mind. The former is especially pronounced in the *saṅkhār-upekkhā nāṇa* [i.e., the insight knowledge that leads up to the breakthrough to stream-entry]. At this stage the insight meditation is akin to the fourth *jhāna*.

The correlations proposed in this way by Mahāsi Sayādaw are based on the fact that mental factors characteristic of absorption can already manifest at levels of concentration far below actual absorption attainment (the reference to “five characteristics” of the first absorption is to the five absorption factors). Identifying the presence of absorption factors during insight meditation thereby forms the basis for developing the idea of *vipassanā jhāna*, “insight absorption,”¹⁰⁸ a term whose implication Mahāsi Sayādaw (1981/1998: 132) understands in the following way:

Jhāna means closely observing an object with fixed attention. Concentrated attention given to a selected object of meditation such as respiration for tranquility concentration gives rise to *samatha jhāna* [tranquility-absorption]; whereas noting the characteristic nature of *rūpa*, *nāma* [form, name] and contemplating their impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality brings about *vipassanā jhāna* [insight-absorption]. We have given the following summarized note for easy memory:

1. Close observation with fixed attention is called *jhāna*.

¹⁰⁸ The compound *vipassanā-jhāna* as such is already found in the Pāli commentaries, although of course not yet in the sense of designating four successive phases in the cultivation of liberating insight; see, e.g., Paṭi-a I 167,6, Th-a I 192,26, and Vibh-a 119,1.

2. There are two types of *jhāna*: *samatha jhāna* and *vipassanā jhāna*.
3. Fixed attention to develop only tranquility is called *samatha jhāna*.
4. Contemplating on the three characteristics constitutes *vipassanā jhāna*.

From the viewpoint of debating strategies, this is a remarkably dexterous move. Given that the opponents insist that the four absorptions need to be covered prior to the attainment of stream-entry, to acquiesce to their demand in this way is quite effective. Since opponents of dry insight meditation, precisely because they doubt the efficacy of this approach, will not practice it and therefore cannot rely on personal meditation experience to verify this identification of stages of insight with levels of absorption, it becomes difficult for them to counter this claim.

The apparent success of this line of argument to promote dry insight meditation has led to its adoption by the disciples of Mahāsi Sayādaw. For example, Sayādaw U Paṇḍita (1992/1993: 180 and 186) reasons:

vipassanā jhāna allows the mind to move freely from object to object, staying focused on the characteristics of impermanence ... the *vipassanā jhānas* lead to wisdom, because they consist of direct, sustained contact with the ultimate realities.

The claim made in this way relates to what in exegetical literature is known as “access concentration,” a level below full absorption. Characteristic of access concentration is the absence of the five hindrances, which can become the way to ‘access’ actual absorption. Alternatively, access concentration can be employed for the cultivation of insight in a mind that has come to be aloof from the hindrances. Cousins (1973: 118) explains:

in the commentarial literature the abandoning of the five hindrances is regarded as synonymous with the attainment of the first stage of concentration (*samādhi*) known as access (*upacāra*) ... the concept of access is not known in the Pali Canon.

Mahāsi Sayādaw (1981/1998: 133) relates the commentarial notion of access concentration to his own presentation in the following manner:

vipassanā samādhi [insight concentration] is also called access concentration because it has the same characteristic of suppressing the hindrances as access concentration. When Vipassanā concentration becomes strongly developed, it can keep the mind well-tranquilized just like the absorption concentration. This has been clearly borne out by the personal experiences of the yogis practising Satipaṭṭhāna meditation.

Besides reflecting a reliance on the experiences of practicing meditators as a form of validation (of particular interest for my overall concern of the interplay between theory and practice), the passage presents the idea of *vipassanā samādhi* as corresponding to the notion of access concentration. It is during such access concentration, when the hindrances have been suppressed, that mental factors characteristic of actual absorption already occur, although in a much weaker form than when absorption is fully attained. Nevertheless, dimensions of access concentration can be matched with the four absorptions, if one focuses only on the presence or absence of selected absorption factors and disregards the depth of concentration required for actual absorption attainment. It is in this way that the four *vipassanā jhānas* have successfully entered the scene, inaugurating what by now has become a widespread tendency of identifying even shallow levels of concentration as being a form of “absorption.”

Reinterpretations of Absorption

The success of the strategic move of referring to stages of insight meditation as absorptions, in order to forestall criticism of dry-insight meditation, in the course of time seems to have spread well beyond the audience to which it was originally addressed. Once a famous scholar-monk and highly regarded meditation master freely employs the term “absorption” for meditation experiences not naturally associated with this term, there is no reason why others should not do the same. In this way, the tendency to reinterpret absorption that emerged during the debate on dry insight appears to have exerted a considerable influence on contemporary Western meditation circles, where an interest in absorption has been steadily gaining ground alongside insight meditation. Teachers of absorption differ considerably in their understanding of what this term entails, both theoretically and practically speaking.¹⁰⁹

The following examination of such positions is not meant to deny beneficial effects of the actual meditation practices undertaken under such premises. In fact, to some extent they provide a welcome counterbalance to the one-sidedness of dry insight, which gives little room to the intentional cultivation of concentration in its own right (and thereby little room to the type of inner integration that can come from tranquility meditation and serves as a foundation for being better able to handle the impact of insight-related practices). From that perspective, the appeal of these reinterpretation strategies clearly has its place, and this is not being contested here.

The point of the present analysis is thus only to clarify that the appropriation of the prestigious term “*jhāna*” by followers

¹⁰⁹ See Quli 2008.

of some contemporary meditation traditions can be identified as an authentication strategy, which has its antecedent in a dexterous move by the promoters of dry insight.

For appreciating such appropriation, it needs to be borne in mind that judging the depth of one's own concentration is a subjective matter and can therefore vary considerably, easily leading to overestimation. This must have happened throughout the history of Buddhism. The difference at present, however, is that due to the developments that appear to have originated from the strategy adopted by Mahāsi Sayādaw and his disciples, such tendencies to overestimation more easily receive sanction. In this way, new meditation traditions have come into existence that are quite independent of, and at times even explicitly opposed to, dry insight and Theravāda exegesis. The strategic move employed by the Mahāsi tradition seems to have encouraged the adoption of the idea of *jhānas* in general as states in which contemplation of impermanence takes place. Some proponents of such ideas even present absorption attainment as being in itself a form of insight. Others teach types of "absorption" that are within easy reach of the average practitioner, although not going so far as to consider these to be compatible with insight meditation or in themselves productive of liberating insight.

A rhetorical strategy adopted in several such approaches posits a substantial difference between descriptions of absorption in the early discourses and in later Theravāda exegesis. This can be seen in the position taken by Shankman (2008: 101), for example, who argues:

During the centuries between the composition of the suttas and Buddhaghosa's great work, the understanding of *jhāna* evolved from being a state of undistracted awareness and

profound insight into the nature of changing phenomena to states of extreme tranquillity in which the mind is utterly engrossed in the mental qualities of the *jhāna* itself.

There can be little doubt that the way of developing absorption meditation described in Theravāda exegesis, in particular in the *Visuddhimagga* by Buddhaghosa, employs vocabulary unknown in the early discourses. It does not necessarily follow, however, that the resultant experience must be substantially different from the type of absorption envisioned in the early discourses. The present case could just be comparable to the insight knowledges, where a new and rather detailed model is, from a practical viewpoint, not a wholesale innovation.

The assumption that the actual results of such practice differ substantially finds expression in contrasting the “*Visuddhimagga jhāna*,” referring to the type of absorption envisaged in Buddhaghosa’s writings, with the “*sutta jhāna*,” serving to indicate the type of absorption supposedly reflected in the Pāli discourses. This involves a change of terminology compared to the interpretation proposed by Mahāsi Sayādaw. What he designated as tranquility-absorption, *samatha jhāna*, now comes under the heading of *Visuddhimagga jhāna*.

Another and considerably more significant difference is that Mahāsi Sayādaw’s *vipassanā jhāna* designate the experience of insight meditation as clearly distinct from the type of absorption described in Theravāda exegesis (considered to be an accurate reflection of absorption attainment as reflected in the early discourses). The new notion of *sutta jhāna*, however, is now held to correspond to the type of absorption originally taught by the Buddha, which stands in contrast to the position taken in Theravāda exegesis (believed to be substantially different from absorption attainment as reflected in the early discourses).

The shift in the understanding of the nature of absorption that has emerged in this way can be seen reflected in the following reasoning by Brasington (2015: 165):¹¹⁰

It seems after the Buddha's death, the monks began a slow process of redefining just what constitutes these states ... When we look at the jhānas as described in the Abhidhamma, which was composed some one to two hundred or more years after the Buddha's death, what we find being described are states of much deeper absorption ... By the time of the *Visuddhimagga*, some eight hundred plus years after the Buddha's death, the jhānas had become redefined to such an extent that it was extremely difficult to learn them ... Since the number of people who could actually attain *Visuddhimagga*-style jhānas was quite small, the teaching of jhānas became more and more neglected in favor of 'dry insight'—insight meditation without the preliminary jhāna practice.

Brasington (2015: 167) proposes the following possible reasons for this development:

My best guess is that the forest monks in the generations after the Buddha's death basically had nothing much to do but sit around and meditate. With this deeply dedicated practice, some of them discovered these deeper states of absorption but failed to recognize them as not being what was talked about in the suttas ... All this has had the unfortunate side effects of not only failing to understand what

¹¹⁰ It is worthy of note that the title of Brasington 2015 is *Right Concentration, A Practical Guide to the jhānas*, which points to the continuous impact of the notion that right concentration equals the four absorptions.

the Buddha was experiencing and teaching, but also of re-defining jhānic concentration to such an extreme depth that almost no one could experience it or use it. The sutta jhānas, which far more people could attain and use, fell into disfavor and were mostly forgotten.

The position taken in this way would imply that the monastics who lived after the Buddha attained substantially deeper levels of concentration than the Buddha himself and his personal disciples had ever been able to reach or willing to teach. In other words, abilities in absorptive concentration increased gradually over the centuries, allowing for the posited development from the supposedly shallower levels of absorptive concentration described in the discourses to the much deeper absorptions described by Buddhaghosa.

Moreover, whereas the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallels, mentioned earlier, show that the Buddha and his accomplished monastic disciples (including Anuruddha, who later became foremost in the concentrative mastery of the divine eye) had to strive hard and gained the first of these supposedly shallow absorptions only after a sustained and prolonged struggle to overcome various mental obstructions, nowadays lay meditators achieve the same quite easily.¹¹¹

Such considerations should already suffice to reveal the unconvincing nature of the authentication strategy of positing the type of ‘*sutta-jhāna*’ taught nowadays as a return to the original.

¹¹¹ An example for a particularly easy approach to “*jhāna*” would be Bhikkhu Vimalaramsi’s “Tranquil Wisdom Insight Meditation,” about which Johnson 2017/2021: 65 reports that, during “a typical ten-to-fourteen-day TWIM retreat, most students will get to the 4th jhāna, and many of those will get into the higher *arūpa* (formless) bases or jhānas.”

The influence of the tendency to reinterpret absorption has also impacted scholarly writings, to a critical examination of which I turn next. In fact, the trajectory surveyed above in a way comes full circle with an argument proposed in support of considering the absorptions as forms of insight meditation by Polak (2016: 109), who finds confirmation for this position in U Paṇḍita Sayādaw’s description of the *vipassanā jhānas*. This description is taken to document the following:

the very existence of such forms of meditation at least shows the actual possibility of a state which can be simultaneously endowed with both insight and calm ... this fits pretty well with all the textual evidence we have about the four *jhāna*-s.

The problem here is not just that the proposed position fails to reflect “all the textual evidence we have.” In addition, it also does not take into account the historical context for the arising of the notion of *vipassanā jhānas*, thereby turning a move made within a debate setting into a testimony of actual meditation experience that supposedly confirms the debated position, evidently lacking awareness of the agenda that drove the invention of this notion in the first place.

Absorption as a Form of Insight on Its Own

The same tendency of reinterpreting and redefining *jhāna* can take the form of presenting absorption as in itself productive of liberating insight and therefore necessarily as a distinct discovery of the Buddha.

In line with Mahāsi Sayādaw’s identification of the highest levels of insight knowledge with the fourth *vipassanā jhāna*, Arbel (2017: 160) argues that “the fourth *jhāna* marks the realization and actualization of a mind that knows directly *aniccā*

(sic) and *anattā* with regard to all phenomena.” In this way, “the fourth *jhāna* should be recognized as the actualization of wisdom,” as it is through its attainment that one “might finally break ignorance completely and awaken the mind” (2017: 166 and 167).

In spite of an apparent similarity, this proposal differs from the strategy employed by Mahāsi Sayādaw, as his conception of the fourth *vipassanā jhāna* did not intend the regular type of fourth absorption described in the discourses. Yet, this is what Arbel (2017: 86) has in mind when arguing that “by progressing through the *jhānas*, insight (*vipassanā*) becomes deeper and reality is perceived more clearly.” Based on considering absorption to be intrinsically productive of insight, Arbel (2017: 147) reasons:

I would argue that the notion that the *jhānas* have delusive power is quite problematic. On the contrary, they seem to have the uttermost potential to eradicate delusion completely.

Such a proposition is difficult to reconcile with passages in the early discourses that highlight the potentially deluding nature of absorption experiences.¹¹² These are not compatible with the idea that absorption is in itself an actualization of liberating wisdom.

Besides being part of a trajectory to reinterpret absorption in various ways, the position taken by Arbel (2017) also reflects

¹¹² For a more detailed discussion see Anālayo 2017b: 112–116 and 2020a: 577f; as well as Anālayo 2016c for a critical reply to arguments already raised in Arbel 2015. The present discussion only takes up selected aspects relevant to my overall topic and does not intend to offer an exhaustive survey of what appear to me to be unconvincing conclusions in Arbel 2017.

the influence of some of the textual developments discussed in the first part of the present chapter. One such textual development is the statement in the *Jhāna-saṃyutta* (SN 53) that the mere cultivation of absorption makes the mind slant toward Nirvana. As discussed above (see page 154f), this passage appears to be the result of an application of a pericope originally relevant to the qualities pertinent to awakening. Arbel (2017: 178) quite understandably takes this statement at face value, followed by trying to buttress the same basic point with other passages supposedly documenting that the four absorptions were an innovation by the Buddha:

Most importantly, the four *jhānas* are delineated in the Ni-kāyas as the unique discovery of the Awakened One and as something only taught by him.

The last assertion is based on two Pāli discourses in which the householder Citta affirms his mastery of the four absorptions in front of non-Buddhist advocates of asceticism, who do not have such ability.¹¹³ Yet, it does not follow from these two instances that nobody else in the ancient Indian setting ever attained or taught absorption.

The first claim in turn is based on a Pāli verse, according to which the Buddha, in the words of Arbel (2017: 178), “awakened to the *jhānas*’ (*jhānambujjhā buddho*).” One of the two *Saṃyukta-āgama* parallels to this verse reports that the Bud-

¹¹³ The first of these two is Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta in SN 41.8 at SN IV 298,29, in which case the parallel SĀ 574 at T II 152c15 only mentions the second absorption. The second case is Acela Kassapa in SN 41.9 at SN IV 301,11, in which case the parallel SĀ 573 at T II 152b11 has no reference to absorption at all, as here Citta only proclaims his attainment of non-return.

dha realized what is to be realized in relation to absorption, whereas according to the other *Samyukta-āgama* parallel realization occurred to him when emerging from absorption.¹¹⁴

The formulation employed in the two parallels is not about the Buddha discovering absorption attainment as such. This way of reading the verse in fact receives additional support from a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, which quotes the present verse and then proceeds with an explanation of its import by Ānanda.¹¹⁵ According to this explanation, what the Buddha realized or awakened to is the confinement of sensuality and of each level of absorption. Although the first absorption offers an opening from the confinement of sensuality, at the same time those of its mental factors that need to be overcome to attain a higher absorption are its confinement. In this way, each of the four absorptions provides an opening that comes combined with a type of confinement that still needs to be overcome. In other words, the verse is meant to highlight the Buddha's insight into the potential as well as the drawbacks of each of the four absorptions. This is what he realized or awakened to, not their mere attainment as such.

Such a conclusion finds further support in references in the early discourses to pre-Buddhist absorption practices, which directly conflict with the assumption that absorption is a practice only discovered by the Buddha.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ SN 2.7 at SN I 48,31: *jhānam abuddhi*, B^c: *jhānam abujjhi*, C^c: *jhānam budhā*, new E^c ed. 1998: 110: *jhānam abudhā* (note that in all editions the term is in the singular), and the parallels SĀ 1305 at T II 358c3: 禪思覺所覺 and SĀ² 304 at T II 477a25: 從禪出覺了。

¹¹⁵ AN 9.42 at AN IV 449,8; no parallel appears to be known to this discourse (see also above note 92).

¹¹⁶ See Anālayo 2017b: 163–171 and 2020a: 571–575.

It is also worthy of note that the speaker of the verse is a celestial, so that the reference to some form of realization in relation to absorption is not attributed to the Buddha himself. In his reported reply, the Buddha does not mention absorption at all. Instead, he qualifies those who have acquired mindfulness as being well and rightly concentrated.¹¹⁷ The emphasis in the two parallels is similarly on mindfulness as the key factor.¹¹⁸

A reference to mindfulness as a way of becoming rightly concentrated would be in line with the definition of right concentration as requiring the other path factors. In an understandable attempt to harmonize this type of presentation with the definition by way of the four absorptions, Arbel (2017: 92) argues that “the four *jhānas* can only be attained by the development of the other seven path-factors.” Moreover, “the concept of *sammā-samādhi* contains within it the previous development of the *samādhi bojjhaṅga* together with the ... fulfillment of the other awakening factors” (p. 91). Conversely, “one cannot develop and fulfill the qualities of the seven *bojjhaṅgas*, as ‘factors of awakening,’ without attaining the *jhānas*” (p. 103). In fact, “the development of the *bojjhaṅgas* and the attainment of the *jhānas* are parallel models of spiritual ascension, different formulations of the same spiritual process” (p. 111).

The proposed reasoning appears to take its inspiration from an intriguing correlation between several awakening factors and aspects of absorption attainment provided by Gethin (1992: 170f). Yet, this presentation only implies that the rigid division between tranquility and insight, upheld in some later traditions,

¹¹⁷ SN 2.7 at SN I 48,34: *ye satim paccalatthamsu* (C: *paccalattthum-su*), *sammā te susamāhitā*.

¹¹⁸ SĀ 1305 at T II 358c6: 若得正繫念, 一心善正受 and SĀ² 304 at T II 477a29: 能具念力者, 由能專定故.

does not apply to the early discourses, where these two terms stand more for interrelated qualities. From this perspective, it is unsurprising to find that the awakening factors also cover the territory of tranquility. It does not follow, however, that their cultivation can be equated with absorption attainment.

Whereas three of the seven awakening factors have a calming effect on the mind (tranquility, concentration, and equanimity/equipoise),¹¹⁹ another three have the opposite effect, as they rather arouse the mind (investigation-of-dharmas, energy, and joy). The last three have in fact no proper counterpart in the standard description of the four absorptions.

Arbel (2017: 106 and 107) proposes to relate investigation-of-dharmas and energy to the task of establishing seclusion from sensuality and unwholesome states, that is, seclusion from the hindrances. The main problem with this proposal, which is anyway not without additional difficulties,¹²⁰ is that progress through the four absorptions requires the previous establishing of such seclusion. If these two awakening factors find no better match than in the context of such preliminary work, it follows that they lack a proper counterpart in the process of actually attaining the four absorptions.

Unlike these two, the quality of joy is explicitly mentioned in the standard description of the first and second absorptions. However, such joy needs to be left behind to progress further, as the attainment of the third absorption (and therewith of the fourth) has the discarding of joy as an indispensable condition.

¹¹⁹ SN 46.53 at SN V 112,23, SĀ 714 at T II 191c25, and Up 7003 at D 4094 *nyu* 52a5 or P 5595 *thu* 92b7.

¹²⁰ The proposed relationship between *dhammavicaya* and seclusion rests on an unconvincing interpretation of the Pāli term *viveka*; see Anālayo 2017b: 128–137.

In this way, proceeding through the absorptions at first cultivates joy but then forsakes it to proceed onwards.

The role of joy as an awakening factor takes the opposite form. During a preparatory stage of cultivating the awakening factors, in particular when the mind is already overly energetic or excited, it is not commendable to cultivate joy, as this tends to stir up the mind further. With progress of practice, however, and the achievement of balance of the mind, all seven awakening factors are to be cultivated in unison, including joy. In this way, the cultivation of the awakening factors requires at first an occasional forsaking of joy but at more advanced stages its continuous cultivation. It follows that the role of joy as an absorption factor differs from its role as an awakening factor.

Mindfulness as an awakening factor can arise not only from a cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness but also when hearing a Dharma talk.¹²¹ In the standard description of the four absorptions, mindfulness comes up for explicit mention in the third and fourth absorptions. Arbel (2017: 105f) understands this to convey that, even though mindfulness is already required previously, it takes on the role of an awakening factor only with the attainment of the higher two absorptions.

Yet, it is hardly meaningful to confine the four establishments of mindfulness, as a way of arousing the awakening factor of mindfulness, to the third and fourth absorptions, and the same is even less applicable to listening to a Dharma talk. Instead, mindfulness must also be taking on different roles in the contexts of cultivating the awakening factors and of progressing through the higher two absorptions.

¹²¹ SN 46.3 at SN V 68,1 and its parallels SHT I 533 V1+6, Bechert and Wille 1989: 215, and SĀ 724, where the relevant section is not fully preserved, for which see SĀ 723 at T II 195a16.

The above considerations make it rather unconvincing to consider the four absorptions and the seven awakening factors to represent “parallel models of spiritual ascension” or “different formulations of the same spiritual process.” Despite some overlap, these are different modalities of meditation practice. Moreover, unlike absorption attainment, the awakening factors feature as a unique discovery of the Buddha.¹²²

Throughout, of particular influence appears to have been the definition of right concentration by way of listing the four absorptions. The impact of this idea can be exemplified with the following reasoning in Arbel (2017: 162), regarding a reference to *samādhi* as the factor leading to knowledge and vision:

I suggest that the term *samādhi* [in this passage] ... refers to *sammā-samādhi* – namely, the attainment of the fourth and final *jhāna*. In other words, when the fourth *jhāna* is established and one fulfills *sammā-samādhi* as a path-factor, one arouses a ‘proximate cause’ (*upanisā*) for ‘seeing and knowing [experience] as it is’ (*yathābhūtañāṇadassanaṃ*).

The underlying thinking seems to be that, if the term *samādhi* occurs in a context that can safely be assumed to intend a commendable form of concentration, it can be read to intend the four absorptions. Although in view of the definition of right concentration by way of the four absorptions such a reasoning is understandable, it needs to be noted that, in its usage in the early discourses, the term *samādhi* has a much broader compass than just absorption attainment. For example, a Pāli discourse and its Chinese *Āgama* parallel speak of *samādhi*

¹²² SN 46.10 at SN V 77,17 (see also SN 46.9 at SN V 77,9) and SĀ 732 at T II 196b9 (see also SĀ 731 at T II 196b1); of relevance here are also SN 46.42 at SN V 99,9 and SĀ 721 at T II 194a8.

gained through walking meditation, which does not give the impression of intending absorption.¹²³ In other words, a reference to *samādhi*, even if it can be considered to involve a “right” form of concentration, does not invariably intend absorption. Moreover, as the first part of this chapter would have shown, even passages that explicitly speak of *sammā samādhi* are not necessarily about the four absorptions only.

Regarding the main thesis that absorption is a form of liberating insight in its own right, an actual occurrence of this idea can be found in a *Dīgha-nikāya* discourse. In this case, all extant parallels support this presentation. The actual proposition takes the form of considering each of the four absorptions to be equivalent to the attainment of Nirvana here and now, and here this is meant not just in a relative sense.

The Pāli discourse in question is the *Brahmajāla-sutta*. In agreement with its parallels, it attributes these four views to non-Buddhist practitioners.¹²⁴ Such ideas are deemed to be as mistaken as a fifth position, discussed in the same context in the *Brahmajāla-sutta* and its parallels, according to which the attainment of Nirvana here and now is to be found in the enjoyment of sensual objects. This clear-cut indication confirms the impression that an otherwise justified attempt by Arbel (2017) to step out of the rigid division between tranquility and insight, found in later traditions, has gone overboard and led to an even more unbalanced position, by way of subsuming everything else under the supposedly overarching importance of absorption.

¹²³ AN 5.29 at AN III 30,3 and EĀ² 20 at T II 879a8; see also Anālayo 2006b: 651.

¹²⁴ DN 1 at DN I 37,1 and its parallels DĀ 21 at T I 93b20, T 21 at T I 269c22, T 1548 at T XXVIII 660b24, Weller 1934: 58,3 (§191), and Up 3050 at D 4094 *ju* 152a4 or P 5595 *tu* 175a8.

Absorption and *satipaṭṭhāna*

Somewhat similar to the tendency of subsuming other practices under the cultivation of tranquility and absorption, Bhikkhu Sujato (2005: 113) argues as follows:

In the early teachings satipatthana was primarily associated not with vipassana but with samatha ... In later literature the vipassana element grew to predominate, to the extent of almost entirely usurping the place of samatha in satipatthana.

In fact, according to Sujato (2005: 154), the “prime role [of *satipaṭṭhāna*] is to support samadhi, that is, *jhana*.” This formulation reflects yet another tendency already mentioned, namely the equation of *samādhi* with *jhāna*. Such equation must be due to the pervasive influence of the definition of right concentration as corresponding to the attainment of the four absorptions.

The position taken by Sujato (2005) differs from Arbel (2017), however, as well as from Brasington (2015), Polak (2016), and Shankman (2008), as it does not involve a reinterpretation of absorption attainment in line with the precedent set by Mahāsi Sayādaw. Instead, the main influencing factor in the present case appear to be the type of textual developments surveyed in the first part of this chapter.

Regarding the actual claim, according to which the primary purpose of cultivating the establishments of mindfulness was mental tranquility and its prime role to support absorption, there can of course be no doubt that mindfulness has indeed an important function in leading to mental tranquility.¹²⁵ At the same time, however, the explicitly stated purpose of cultivating the four establishments of mindfulness in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-*

¹²⁵ See in more detail Anālayo 2019h.

sutta and its parallels, to be taken up below in more detail, does not mention either tranquility or absorption.

Regarding the formulation of this purpose with the help of the term *ekāyana magga*, literally a “one-going path,” Bhikkhu Sujato (2005: 186) reasons that, “as we have seen, the primary purpose of satipatthana is to lead to jhana, it seems not at all unlikely that the contextual meaning of *ekāyana* is ‘leading to unification (of mind)’.” He finds support for this conclusion in the introductory section of the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. The relevant part in that parallel takes the following form:¹²⁶

There is a one-going path for the purification of the actions of sentient beings, for removing worry and sorrow, for being without any vexation, for attaining great knowledge and wisdom, for accomplishing the realization of Nirvana, namely the five hindrances should be eradicated and the four establishments of mindfulness should be attended to.

What is the significance of ‘one-going’? That is, it is unification of the mind. This is reckoned to be ‘one-going.’ What is the ‘path’? That is, it is the noble eightfold path (EĀ 12.1).

In view of the evidence testifying to a reworking in China of the *Ekottarika-āgama* collection and the intrusion of extrane-

¹²⁶ EĀ 12.1 at T II 568a2: 有一入道, 淨眾生行, 除去愁憂, 無有諸惱, 得大智慧, 成泥洹證, 所謂當滅五蓋, 思惟四意止. 云何名爲一入? 所謂專一心, 是謂一入. 云何爲道? 所謂賢聖八品道. The employment of 四意止 follows a precedent set by Ān Shìgāo, which is based on rendering *sati/smṛti* with 意; see Vetter 2012: 117. The 止 can in turn be understood to convey literally the sense of a “stationing” of mindfulness.

ous material, mentioned above (see page 34–35), it remains possible that the addition of this gloss on the qualification *ekāyana* could have happened at that comparatively late time.

Be that as it may, an appreciation of this gloss requires reading it in conjunction with what comes before and after it. The reference to the eightfold path shows that such unification of the mind is relevant to all of its eight factors, not just to the last one. It thus concerns also right speech, right action, and right livelihood, for example, whose functions and purposes are considerably broader than just a concern with providing the conditions for the successful attainment of absorption. The preceding part in the *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse indicates that the purpose of *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* is “attaining great knowledge and wisdom” as well as “accomplishing the realization of Nirvana.” These do not result from mere absorption practice.

A to some extent related explanation can be found in the Pāli commentary, according to which the term *ekāyana* conveys the sense that one needs to travel this path in solitude, in the sense of having left behind associating with the crowd and instead being secluded and withdrawn.¹²⁷ Such are indeed the conditions regularly associated in the early discourses with the gaining of unification of the mind. However, the present proposition is the second of five alternative explanations offered by the Pāli commentary, and not necessarily the most compelling one. In particular the external dimension of the various exercises listed for *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* would involve contemplating others, making it less probable that the

¹²⁷ Ps I 229,23: *ekena ayitabbo ti ekāyano. ekenā ti gaṇasaṅgaṇikaṃ pahāya vūpakaṭṭhena* (following the *ṭikā* against *vavakaṭṭhena* in Ps) *pavivittena*.

idea of *ekāyana* was to establish a condition of complete solitude or to express a primary concern with absorption.¹²⁸

The expression *ekāyana* recurs once in a different context, namely in a simile in the *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta*, consultation of which helps to clarify its implications. The simile, which is also found in a partial parallel in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, describes a person walking on such a one-going path toward a particular destination, making it certain that this person is going to reach that location.¹²⁹ In this context, the qualification *ekāyana* conveys the sense of a path that leads straight to a certain place. The sense of a straight or direct path corresponds to the first of the five alternative explanations offered in the Pāli commentary.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the probable significance of external *satipaṭṭhāna/smrtyupasthāna* as involving the contemplation of others see Anālayo 2020b and 2020f (in reply to Lin 2019).

¹²⁹ MN 12 at MN I 76,30: *ekāyanena maggena* and EĀ 50.6 at T II 812a28: 一道 (the difference compared to the 一入道 found in EĀ 12.1 is in line with regular variations in translation terminology in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, often occurring within the same discourse and at times even for what in the Indic original must have been the same proper name); see also Anālayo 2013c: 9f.

¹³⁰ Ps I 229,21: *ekamaggo ... na dvedhāpathabhūto*. The third and fourth explanations are that this path is of the one, namely the Buddha, and that it is found only in Buddhism. Both fail to clarify why the Pāli discourses qualify only the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in this way, unlike other teachings and practices taught in Buddhism and similarly believed to stem from the Buddha. The fifth explanation is that it leads to only one goal, namely Nirvana. Although this appears to be indeed the primary purpose of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, their practice has important additional results, such as the gaining of concentration, already mentioned above; see also Anālayo 2013c: 10–12. The above considerations make these three explanations appear unconvincing.

Based on a detailed discussion of different possible interpretations of *ekāyana*, Gethin (1992: 65) concludes:

What is basically being said is that the four *satipaṭṭhānas* represent a path that leads straight and directly all the way to the final goal. As the opening formula of the (*Mahā-*) *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, this balances rather nicely with the concluding formula that states that what issues from the practice of the *satipaṭṭhānas* is one of two fruits, [namely final] knowledge or the state of non-return.

The nuance of a direct path, then, would convey that the cultivation of *satipaṭṭhāna/smrtyupasthāna* leads directly to the final goal. This could be contrasted with the standard accounts of the gradual path, for example, where arrival at the same destiny takes place via the acquisition of various supernormal abilities, based on mastery of the four absorptions. Another contrast would be the approach by way of the three higher knowledges (*tevijjā*) to full awakening, which involves developing recollection of past lives and the divine eye. Yet another option would be to proceed via the cultivation of the four formless spheres.

In this way, from the viewpoint of being qualified as a “direct path,” the four *satipaṭṭhānas/smrtyupasthānas* could be understood to have the potential of leading straight to non-return or full awakening, without involving a cultivation of the above additional attainments.

An overall concern with the final goal of liberation from defilements is indeed central in the introductory sections to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel:¹³¹

¹³¹ MN 10 at MN I 55,31: *ekāyano ayaṃ, bhikkhave, maggo sattānaṃ visuddhiyā, sokaparidevānaṃ* (C^e and E^e: *sokapariddavānaṃ*)

Monastics, this is the one-going path for the purification of sentient beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of suffering and discontent, for acquiring the true method, for the realization of Nirvana, namely, the four establishments of mindfulness (MN 10).

There is one path for the purification of sentient beings, for surmounting sorrow and fear, for removing suffering and vexation, for abandoning weeping and tears, for attaining the right Dharma, namely the four establishments of mindfulness (MĀ 94).

A similar perspective emerges from a discourse in the nearly fully preserved *Samyukta-āgama* (T 99), which parallels another occurrence of the “direct path” statement in a different Pāli discourse.¹³²

There is a one-vehicle path capable of purifying sentient beings, of surmounting sorrows and lamentations, of eradicating suffering and vexation, and of attaining the truth according to the Dharma, namely the four establishments of mindfulness (SĀ 1189).

The expression “one-vehicle path,” used here, appears to reflect a mistaking of “one-going” (*ekāyana*) for “one vehicle” (*ekayāna*).¹³³ The present discourse has parallels in both of the

samatikkamāya, dukkhadomanassānaṃ atthaṅgamāya (C^e and E^e: *atthagamāya*), *nāyassa adhiḅgamāya, nibbānassa sacchikiriyaṃ, yadidaṃ cattāro satipaṭṭhānā* and MĀ 98 at T I 582b9: 有一道淨眾生，度憂畏，滅苦惱，斷啼哭，得正法，謂四念處。

¹³² SĀ 1189 at T II 322b1: 有一乘道能淨眾生，度諸憂悲，滅除苦惱，得真如法，謂四念處；parallel to SN 47.18 at SN V 167,8.

¹³³ See the detailed discussion in Nattier 2007, which covers the other passages taken up here as well.

partially preserved *Samyukta-āgama* collections (T 100 and T 101). The relevant passages proceed as follows:¹³⁴

There is only one path capable of purifying sentient beings, making them become separated from suffering and vexation, and also capable of removing unwholesome and bad activities, obtaining the benefit of the right Dharma, of what is called the Dharma, namely the four establishments of mindfulness (SĀ² 102).

People practicing the path that is one-leading become practitioners who, from [being subject to] sorrow, resentment, suffering, and mental dissatisfaction, are capable of attaining their ceasing and of arriving at the right Dharma. What is [the one-leading path to] undertaking the right Dharma? It is undertaking the four establishments of mindfulness (SĀ³ 4).

The first of the two passages presents yet another understanding of the introductory phrase as signifying the “only one path.” This concurs with a rendering of *ekāyana magga* adopted by several translators and meditation teachers.¹³⁵ Clearly, the qualification of the four establishments of mindfulness as *ekāyana* has been understood in a range of different ways.

¹³⁴ SĀ² 102 at T II 410b12: 唯有一道, 能淨眾生, 使離苦惱, 亦能除滅不善惡業, 獲正法利, 所言法者, 即四念處 and SĀ³ 4 at T II 494a19: 人行道一擊令行者, 從憂懣苦不可意, 能得度滅亦致正法, 何等為正法? 為四意止。

¹³⁵ Examples are Chalmers 1926: 41: “but one way,” Goenka 1999: 20: “the one and only way,” Mahāsi 2016: 257: “the only way,” Nyanaponika 1962/1992: 139: “the sole way,” Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids 1910: 327: “the one and only path,” Soma 1941/1981: 1: “the only way,” Woodward 1930/1979: 119: “the sole way.”

Another occurrence of the phrase under discussion is found in an individual translation that parallels the *Janavasabha-sutta*. The relevant passage begins by describing, as one aspect of the Buddha's teaching, the four domains of body, feeling tone, mind, and dharmas, followed by stipulating that these can be contemplated internally and externally. These indications make it safe to conclude that its presentation must be concerned with the four *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthānas*, even though these are not explicitly mentioned. The part relevant to my present exploration proceeds as follows:¹³⁶

[Leading to] awakening, the one vehicle of the right Dharma makes sentient beings completely attain purification, be separated from sorrow, lamentation, suffering, and vexation, and realize the sublime principle of the Dharma (T 9).

¹³⁶ T 9 at T I 216a10: 菩提一乘正法令諸眾生咸得清淨, 離憂悲苦惱, 證妙法理, counterpart to a listing of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in DN 18 at DN II 216,9 and DĀ 4 at T I 35c26, though neither employs the qualification *ekāyana*; on this passage and its implications for external mindfulness see also Anālayo 2013c: 17f, 2020d: 89–91, and 2020f: 2654. The reference to 菩提, placed before the 一乘 (another instance of apparently mistaking “one-going” for “one vehicle”), is puzzling and would perhaps be more at home in a Mahāyāna text. Lin 2019: 340 translates 菩提一乘正法 as “the right *dharma* of one vehicle of *bodhi*.” My supplementation of “leading to” is an alternative attempt to make sense of the phrase, assuming that perhaps the occurrence of “awakening” here can be interpreted as a succinct reference to the overall aim of the practice under discussion, although to convey that sense a different placing would admittedly have been more appropriate. Another two occurrences of 一乘 in T 9 at T I 215c17 and 216a20 come without being preceded by a reference to 菩提; neither is about the four establishments of mindfulness.

In addition to the passages extant in Chinese and surveyed above, a Tibetan version of the same basic statement can be found in a discourse quoted in the *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā* (which also reflects the apparent confusion of “one-going” with “one vehicle”):¹³⁷

There is only one vehicle for the purification of sentient beings, for transcending sorrow and misfortune, for the disappearing of suffering and sadness, for realizing the Dharma of the right method, namely the four establishments of mindfulness.

The testimony provided by the above passages transmitted by a range of reciter traditions converges on presenting the primary objective of *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* to be final liberation. A reference to absorption or to tranquility does not feature in even one of these alternative formulations of the purposes of cultivating the four establishments of mindfulness.

Combined with the different perspective on the import of right concentration, evident from the material surveyed in the first part of this chapter, this makes the main claim presented by Bhikkhu Sujato (2005) appear unpersuasive.

In the course of taking that position, he makes several auxiliary arguments that in principle call for a critical reply, yet, this is not possible within the context of the present subsection

¹³⁷ Up 6029 at D 4094 *nyu* 13a3 or P 5595 *thu* 46a7: *sems can rnams yongs su dag par byed cing mya ngan dang yongs su 'tshes 'da' zhing sdug bsngal ba dang yid mi bde ba rnams nub nas rigs pa'i chos rtogs pa'i theg pa ni gcig kho na ste 'di lta ste dran pa nye bar gzhas pa bzhi'o*, parallel to SĀ 535 at T II 139a20 (the Pāli version, SN 52.2 at SN V 296, does not have the *ekāyana* statement); Up 6029 has already been translated by Dhammadinnā 2018: 25f, see also Dhammadinnā 2020: 561.

of a chapter. Nevertheless, a basic methodological problem of his study can be noted. His evaluation of the earliness or lateness of the relevant textual sources is based on a theory according to which the first three of the standard set of nine (or twelve) textual *aṅgas* served as an early organizing scheme for textual collections. This theory is unconvincing on several grounds,¹³⁸ which in turn implies that his proposed conclusions, based on an evaluation of textual sources in reliance on this theory,¹³⁹ are anyway in need of revision.

Unintended Consequences of Absorption Rhetoric

From an overall perspective, it is worthy of note that the various positions taken in the course of the development sketched above have had some unintended side effects. The firm position taken by traditional monastics in support of the need for absorption, in

¹³⁸ See Anālayo 2011b: 696–700, 2016a: 19–30, and Travagnin and Anālayo 2020: 983–997.

¹³⁹ This evaluation also does not appear to have been based on a personal examination of the *Āgama* originals, which becomes evident when Sujato 2005: 162 comments, in relation to EĀ 12.1, that “the translation available to me is not precise enough to be really clear” (this would intend Nhat Hanh 1990, mentioned in the bibliography in Sujato 2005: 349, although unexpectedly without giving the publication date, place, or publisher). A lack of clarity of that translation could have been solved by consulting the Chinese original, had this been possible at the time of writing the above comment. In fact, Sujato 2005: 186 note 314 provides a quote from EĀ 12.1 but in modern Chinese rather than in conformity with the original. This gives the impression of a failure to notice this difference due to an insufficient acquaintance with the language. Thus, it seems as if his presentation of *Āgama* material is mainly based on secondary sources, including unpublished research by others; see Bucknell 2017: 108–110 and Anālayo 2011b: 1 note 24.

their debate with the proponents of dry insight meditation, has elicited a response leading to an undermining of the very notion of what absorption entails. This has and still is of pervasive influence in contemporary meditation circles. As a result, even those sincerely interested in learning to cultivate absorption can be at a loss to know who teaches a reliable approach to genuine absorption attainment.

The promotion of the notion of insight-absorption to defend the validity of dry insight, despite its success in the debate, has unwittingly triggered the emergence of alternative approaches for teaching meditation to lay disciples. The prestigious label of “absorption,” the supposed intrinsic potential of absorption to produce insight, and the encouragement for meditators to cultivate concentrative types of joy and happiness from the outset, result in an attractive presentation that promoters of dry insight now have to compete with.

The identification of meditation experiences in which some absorption factors are weakly present as full-fledged absorption, in spite of its attraction among prospective disciples, has in turn the net result of potentially foreclosing meditative progress to actual absorption. This finds reflection in a practical advice offered by Catherine (2008: 155): “should you choose to apply the term *jhana* liberally to states lightly saturated by *jhana* factors, please don’t presume such states represent the full potential of *jhana*.” Such can be the drawbacks of the promotion of substantially different types of “absorption” constructs in current meditation circles, which appear to have emerged based on the trajectory of developments surveyed in this chapter, starting with the identification of right concentration with the four absorptions.

The present case differs in some respects from those examined in the two previous chapters, where a meditation instruc-

tion underwent a gradual reduction and a fascination with fire and light imagery led to a new perspective on the role of meditation, both cases being the result of an interplay between theory and practice.

In the present instance, the same interplay has a more strongly dogmatic and at times even polemic component, where an increase in the degree of importance attributed to absorption as a vehicle for progress to awakening has strongly impacted debates among Buddhist scholars and practitioners. These have in turn stimulated the arising of corresponding forms of meditation practice together with their respective authentication strategies.¹⁴⁰

The developments surveyed in this chapter thereby serves as a welcome reminder that the interplay between text and practice under discussion in this book takes place within a social setting and for this reason is open to a range of other influences and concerns. Even though the trajectory discussed here is not just reducible to polemics and authentication strategies, these can at times take on a prominent role and thereby contribute to shaping actual meditation practices in their form and orientation.

¹⁴⁰ For a poignant example of the employment of authentication strategies to promote a particular approach to insight meditation see Anālayo 2020c and 2021c.

Immeasurable/Boundless States

Introduction

In the fourth (and shortest) chapter of my *Early Buddhist Meditation Studies*, I studied the role of the *brahmavihāras* in early Buddhist thought, in particular from the viewpoint of their potential and limitations in regard to the overarching goal in early Buddhist soteriology of progressing to awakening

In the present chapter, which is also by far the shortest one in this book, I instead examine the meditative cultivation of the *brahmavihāras*, alternatively called *appamāṇas/apramāṇas*, “immeasurable” or “boundless” states. Similar to the case of mindfulness of breathing, discussed in the first chapter, in the case of the immeasurable or boundless states a fairly substantial shift in the actual meditation methods can be observed.

From the viewpoint of my overall concern with an interplay between theory and practice, a new element comes into play through the incorporation of the resultant new perspective into research in psychology concerned with self-compassion. In order to lead up to this topic, my presentation below concerns in particular compassion, the second of the four immeasurable or boundless states.

The Meditative Radiation

The early discourses describe the meditative practice of compassion and the other *brahmavihāras* as a radiation undertaken in all directions. The practitioner pervades one direction, then the other three, then above and below, with a mind imbued with compassion and the other three immeasurable or boundless states. A simile compares this type of meditation practice

to a conch-blower who is able to make the sound of the conch be heard in all directions.¹ This illustration aptly brings out the all-pervasive nature of the boundless radiation in all directions. A description of such a form of practice, extant in Pāli and Chinese, takes the following form:²

One dwells pervading one direction with a mind imbued with *mettā*, likewise the second [direction], likewise the third [direction], and likewise the fourth [direction], so above, below, and all around; one dwells pervading everywhere and in every way the entire world with a mind imbued with *mettā*, abundant, become great, boundless, without enmity, and without ill will (MN 97).

One dwells with a mind imbued with *maitrī*, accomplishing pervasion of one direction, and in the same way of the second [direction], the third [direction], and the fourth direction, the four intermediate [directions], above and below, completely and everywhere. Being without mental shackles, without resentment, without ill will, and without contention, with a mind imbued with *maitrī* that is supremely vast and great, boundless, and well developed, one dwells accomplishing pervasion of the entire world (MĀ 27).

¹ See, e.g., MN 99 at MN II 207,22 and its parallel MĀ 152 at T I 669c10.

² MN 97 at MN II 195,2: *mettāsahagatena cetasā ekaṃ disaṃ pharivā viharati, tathā dutiyaṃ, tathā tatiyaṃ, tathā catutthaṃ* (E^e: *catutthim*); *iti uddham adho tiriyaṃ sabbadhi sabbatthatāya* (B^e, C^e, and E^e: *sabbattatāya*) *sabbāvantaṃ lokaṃ mettāsahagatena cetasā vipulena mahaggatena appamāṇena averena abyāpajjhena* (B^e: *abyābajjhena*, E^e: *avyāpajjhena*) *pharivā viharati* and MĀ 27 at T I 458b2: 心與慈俱遍滿一方成就遊, 如是二三四方, 四維, 上下, 普周一切; 心與慈俱, 無結, 無怨, 無恚, 無諍, 極廣, 甚大, 無量, 善修, 遍滿一切世間成就遊。

The same instructions apply to the other three immeasurable or boundless states of compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. The passages translated above are taken from the *Dhānañjāni-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, respectively, where such instructions are given to a Brahmin who is on his deathbed and in much pain. As a result of receiving this teaching and evidently putting it into practice, this brahmin is reborn in the Brahmā world.³

The circumstances of this instruction, with the recipient being in much pain and about to pass away, make it fair to assume that this description does not intend to present this Brahmin's practice as a successful attainment of meditative absorption,⁴ an attainment the early discourses generally show to require considerable meditative expertise. Instead of invariably intending successful absorption attainment, the standard description of the radiation of the immeasurable or boundless states appears simply to describe how to undertake such practice. That is, one should generate a sentiment of *mettā* or compassion, etc., and then one should radiate this openly in all directions.

The type of meditative practice depicted in this way is a radiation of the respective *brahmavihāra* without any limit or restriction. Precisely this absence of any limit is one of the reasons why these are qualified as “immeasurable” or “boundless” mental states.⁵

³ MN 97 at MN II 195,22 and its parallel MĀ 27 at T I 458b13.

⁴ See in more detail Anālayo 2015c: 54–57.

⁵ The commentary on a discussion of the significance of the term “boundless” in MN 43, Ps II 353,19, explains that in relation to the *brahmavihāras* this qualification refers to the boundlessness of the pervasion, *pharaṇa-appamāṇatāya appamāṇā nāma*.

Individual Objects in Theravāda Works

With later tradition, the immeasurable or boundless aspect of the practice has to some extent moved to the background in descriptions of the meditative cultivation of the immeasurable or boundless states.

Sentient beings as the object of practice are not mentioned explicitly in the standard descriptions of the meditative cultivation of the *brahmavihāras* in discourses in the four main Pāli *Nikāyas* and their parallels. In view of the nature of the immeasurable or boundless states, however, a concern with other sentient beings is of course natural and can be taken to be implicit.

An instance where this becomes explicit is the famous simile of the saw. The Pāli version of this simile enjoins:⁶

Monastics, even if criminal bandits were to cut you apart, limb by limb, with a two-handled saw, one whose mind were to become hateful on that account would thereby not be carrying out my teaching. Herein, too, monastics, you should train thus:

“There will be no alteration in our mind and we will not utter evil words; we will dwell kind and compassionate, with a mind of *mettā*, without anger. We will dwell pervad-

⁶ MN 21 at MN I 129,15: *ubhatodaṇḍakena ce pi* (C^o and S^o: *pi ce*), *bhikkhave, kakacena corā ocarakā* (S^o: *vocarakā*) *aṅgamaṅgāni okanteyyūṃ, tatrā pi yo mano padūseyya, na me so tena sāsanakaro. tatrā pi vo* (E^o: *kho*), *bhikkhave, evaṃ sikkhitabbaṃ: na c’ eva no cittaṃ vipariṇataṃ bhavissati, na ca pāpikaṃ vācaṃ nicchāressāma, hitānukampī ca viharissāma mettacittā na dosantarā. tañ ca puggallaṃ mettāsahagatena cetasā pharivā viharissāma, tadārammaṇā ca sabbāvantaṃ lokaṃ mettāsahagatena cetasā vipulena mahagga-tena appamāṇena averena abyāpajjhena* (B^o: *abyābajjhena*) *pharivā viharissāmā ti.*

ing that person with a mind imbued with *mettā*, and from that base we will dwell pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with *mettā*, abundant, become great, boundless, without aversion, and without ill will.”

The dramatic depiction in this simile is probably best understood as referring to a situation where one is completely at the mercy of bandits, without any possibility of preventing them from their cruel deed. In other words, the description would not be meant to discourage one from trying one’s best to avoid being cut up by bandits or undergoing any other type of abuse. The simile appears to be only intended to illustrate, with the help of a rather drastic situation, that even under the most excruciating circumstances an implementation of the teachings of the Buddha requires not reacting with anger and abuse.

From the viewpoint of the meditative cultivation of *mettā*, it is of particular interest that the passage presents the bandit who is about to cut one apart as the object of the meditative pervasion, and this person-oriented approach then leads over to the boundless radiation in all directions. In this respect, however, the otherwise similar Chinese parallel differs:⁷

If bandits were to come and with a sharp saw cut you apart, limb by limb, there should be no alteration in your mind, and your mouth should not utter bad words toward those who are cutting you up.

In dependence on that, you should arouse a mental attitude of *maitrī* and compassion. With your mind imbued

⁷ MĀ 193 21 at T I 746a15: 若有賊來以利鋸刀節節解截，心不變易，口無惡言向割截人。緣彼起慈愍心；心與慈俱遍滿一方成就遊，如是二三四方，四維，上下，普周一切；心與慈俱，無結，無怨，無恚，無諍，極廣甚大，無量善修，遍滿一切世間成就遊。

with *maitrī* dwell accomplishing pervasion of one direction, and in the same way of the second [direction], the third [direction], and the fourth direction, the four intermediate [directions], above and below, completely and everywhere. Being without mental shackles, without resentment, without ill will, and without contention, with a mind imbued with *maitrī* that is supremely vast and great, boundless and well developed, dwell accomplishing pervasion of the entire world.

Besides not stipulating any pervasion of the bandit with *mettā/maitrī*, the *Madhyama-āgama* version of the simile of the saw also differs insofar as it proceeds from the boundless radiation of *mettā/maitrī* to the other three *brahmavihāras*, whose meditative cultivation is not mentioned at all in the Pāli discourse.

The reference to pervading the bandit with *mettā* in only one of the two passages translated above could in principle be explained in two ways: either this reference was added in the Pāli version, perhaps influenced by a growing tendency to concretize the objects of the boundless radiation practice of the *brahmavihāras*, or else it was lost in the Chinese discourse at some stage during its transmission.

In an attempt to evaluate these two alternatives, it seems to me that the suggestion to pervade with *mettā* someone who is at that very time cutting one's body apart with a saw is not easily executed. In such a situation, it does appear to be already quite demanding to keep the mind free from intentions of ill will and harming, which in early Buddhist thought are the exact opposite of *mettā/maitrī* and compassion.

If one in this way succeeds to establish equanimity, this could perhaps then lead over to being “compassionate and

kind, with a mind of *mettā*, without anger,” as required according to the Pāli version, or else to “arouse a mental attitude of *maitrī* and compassion,” as instructed in the Chinese version. This much is already challenging enough, but to expect that in such a situation one should directly implement an actual meditative pervasion of the bandit with *mettā* seems a bit out of proportion. Such considerations make it in my view more probable that the first of the two options considered above fits the case, in that the reference to an actual pervasion of the bandit could be a later addition in the Pāli version.

Be that as it may, another explicit reference to objects for the meditative radiation of the *brahmavihāras* occurs in a discourse in the *Sutta-nipāta*, which describes *mettā* directed toward all sentient beings.⁸ No parallel to this discourse is known.

In addition, a discourse in the *Itivuttaka* and its Chinese parallel mention a single person as the recipient of *mettā/maitrī*. This reference is part of a comparison, in that even *mettā/maitrī* directed to a single person is beneficial, what to say of directing it to all beings.⁹ A literal reading of this com-

⁸ Sn 147 and 149 present all living beings as the object of *mettā*, which then leads over to a description of the boundless radiation in Sn 150; see also It 1.27 quoted below note 9. Notably, Sn 149 begins by illustrating the attitude of one who cultivates the boundless radiation of *mettā* with the example of the protection a mother would afford to her only son (note that the main point of this imagery is a mother’s protection, not a mother’s love; see Maithrimurthi 1999: 53f and Anālayo 2015c: 29f). The present instance could also have inspired a more literal interpretation of what originally would have been meant as an example.

⁹ It 1.27 at It 21,8. Similar to the case of Vibh 273,35 (quoted below note 10), the present passage seems to function just as an illustra-

parison could easily have given rise to the idea that one should indeed take a single person as the object for the meditative cultivation of *mettā/maitrī*.

The *Vibhaṅga* of the Theravāda Abhidharma collection quotes the instruction on radiating compassion, given in the early discourses, and then explains how to achieve pervasion of one direction. This should be done “just as if,” *seyyathā pi*, one had seen a person in a miserable condition. In the same way, one pervades all sentient beings with compassion.¹⁰

The presentation in the *Vibhaṅga* refers to a single person by way of illustration. This is thus similar in kind to the presentation in the *Itivuttaka* and its Chinese parallel, where the reference to a single person also serves as an illustration and does as yet not imply that the actual practice should take an individual person as the object.

The *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* correlates the radiation of the four immeasurable or boundless states with various levels of ab-

tion of the boundless radiation, here in particular of its wholesome repercussions, instead of being meant as an actual instruction for the meditative practice of directing *mettā* to an individual. In fact, It 1.27 precedes the line on *mettā* toward a single person with a reference to boundless *mettā* and then continues by describing an attitude of *anukampā* directed toward all living beings (notably an instance where *anukampā* seems to refer to meditation practice). The parallel T 765 at T XVII 670b28 also refers to cultivating *maitrī* towards a single being, and then compares that to *maitrī* directed to all living beings. The same verse occurs also in AN 8.1 at AN IV 151,1, of which no parallel is known; a quotation of this verse, followed by exegesis, can be found in Peṭ 65,15.

¹⁰ Vibh 273,35: *seyyathā pi nāma ekaṃ puggalaṃ duggataṃ durupe-
taṃ disvā karuṇāyeyya, evam eva sabbe satte karuṇāya pharati.*

sorption.¹¹ The way in which the immeasurable or boundless states were fitted into the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*'s scheme, as part of an overall attempt to match states of mind and meditation subjects, could easily give the impression that the radiation practice refers predominantly or even exclusively to attaining absorption. In the early discourses, however, as already mentioned above (see page 213), the ability to dwell in such boundless abiding does not appear to be confined to absorption attainment.

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* provides more details on the actual practice by the time of its composition. One of the modes of practice proposed in this work takes as its object all women, all men, all noble ones, all who are not noble ones, all celestials, all humans, and all those who are in states of deprivation.¹² The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* then continues by showing how such

¹¹ Dhs 53,18, a presentation that seems to be due to the circumstance that the *brahmavihāras* are taken up in the context of a listing of states of mind that lead to rebirth in the form realm, *yasmim samaye rūpūpapattiyā maggaṃ bhāveti*. Frauwallner 1972: 104 comments: "im Kanon wird gelehrt, daß der mit ihnen [i.e., den *appamānas*] verbundene Geist nach allen Richtungen hin ausstrahlen soll. Das paßte scheinbar nicht in den Rahmen der übrigen Meditationsstufen, wie sie der *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* lehrt, bei denen es sich immer um Betrachtung eines Gegenstandes handelt." Frauwallner 1972: 127 then notes that the exposition of meditation in the *Visuddhimagga* is based on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*.

¹² Paṭis II 131,4: *sabbā itthiyo ... sabbe purisā ... sabbe ariyā, sabbe anariyā, sabbe devā, sabbe manussā, sabbe vinipātikā*. This passage describes the practice of *mettā*, which as the first of the four *appamānas* usually provides the template for the other three. Although the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* does not explicitly take up compassion, it can safely be assumed that the same mode of practice applies to all four immeasurable or boundless states.

distinctions can be fruitfully applied to each of the various directions of radiation described in the canonical instructions

The *Visuddhimagga*, summarizing the approach to meditation by the time of the fully developed commentarial tradition, instructs practitioners cultivating compassion to take as their object a person in a miserable condition, quoting the description given in the *Vibhaṅga*.¹³ What in the *Vibhaṅga* is mainly an example to illustrate the boundless radiation becomes much more of an actual object of meditation in the *Visuddhimagga*.

After having taken such a person as one's object, one then proceeds to do the same practice toward a friend, a neutral person, and an enemy.¹⁴ In each case the practice should be developed up to absorption level with the respective person as the object. This is the way the meditative practice of compassion and the other immeasurable or boundless states is nowadays taught in Theravāda meditation traditions, namely by taking as the object such categories of people.

Looking at this development within texts of the Pāli tradition, since the *Visuddhimagga* explicitly refers back to the *Vibhaṅga*, this work seems to have been particularly influential in the development of Buddhaghosa's description. At the very least, it served to provide the *Visuddhimagga* description with canonical authority.

Comparing the *Vibhaṅga* and the *Visuddhimagga* descriptions suggests a transition from what originally served as an illustration to the same being taken literally. As a result, the ex-

¹³ Vism 314,20.

¹⁴ Vism 315,12 proceeds from a miserable person (or alternatively an evil doer) to a friend, a neutral person, and an enemy, *evūpāyena piyapuggale, tato majjhatte, tato verimhī ti anukkamena karuṇā pavattetabbā*.

ample becomes the actual object of meditation. Such a transition would be a natural occurrence as part of a general tendency toward making meditation practice more concrete, combined with an increasing preoccupation with precise methodology and clearly defined objects, evident in exegetical works like the *Visuddhimagga*.

It would also be natural in view of a general tendency to literalism responsible for a range of developments in the history of Buddhist thought and practice. As Gombrich (1996: 21) has concisely pointed out: “unintentional literalism has been a major force for change in the early doctrinal history of Buddhism.”

This suggestion does not require that the *Vibhaṅga* itself must have been the source of such literalism in relation to the practice of the immeasurable or boundless states. Instead, it may only be testimony to a general development that need not have been confined to the Theravāda traditions.

A Sarvāstivāda Perspective

The mode of meditation that takes single persons as its object is indeed not confined to the Theravāda traditions, as it is also found in Sarvāstivāda exegesis. This makes it clear that the development in this direction would not be school specific.

The *Dharmaskandha* refers to taking particular groups of people as one’s object, such as parents, family members, and friends. The same work considers this to be a narrow form of practice, in contrast to a mode of practice that is boundless.¹⁵

¹⁵ T 1537 at T XXVI 486c9 introduces the distinction between compassion practiced in a narrow manner, 狹小, and practiced in a boundless manner, 無量, a distinction also preserved in the relevant Sanskrit fragment, Dietz 1984: 85,5: *parītaś cāpramāṇaś*. T

The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* then recommends that one who is unable to practice the boundless radiation, due to the presence of defilements, should proceed by taking a friend in a threefold manner, a neutral person (singly), and an enemy in a threefold manner as the objects of practice.¹⁶ The **Mahāvibhāṣā* explains that such a form of practice involves a distinction of friends and enemies into three grades: inferior, medium, and superior.¹⁷ The resulting mode of practice proceeds as follows:

very good friend,
 good friend,
 distant friend,

 neutral person,

 slightly hostile person,
 hostile person,
 very hostile person.

By distinguishing between single persons in terms of friends, neutral ones, and enemies, the mode of practice described in

1537 at T XXVI 486c12 and Dietz 1984: 85,11, then indicate that the narrow form of practice takes up one's parents, brothers, sisters, and other relatives and friends. According to T 1537 at T XXVI 487a3 and Dietz 1984: 87,2, such form of meditation can then become the basis for cultivating the boundless radiation.

¹⁶ Pradhan 1967: 454,7: *sa mitrapakṣam tridhā bhittvā 'dhimātre tat sukham adhimucyate ... tataḥ śatrupakṣam tridhā bhittvā ... tat sukham adhimucyate*. Whereas the description at this point is for *māitrī*, the same then applies to *karuṇā*, etc.; see Pradhan 1967: 454,13. For a detailed discussion of the practice of *māitrī* in Sarvāstivāda sources see Dhammajoti 2010.

¹⁷ T 1545 at T XXVII 421c20: “the two groups of enemies and friends are each further divided into three, namely inferior, medium, and superior,” 怨親二品，復各分三，謂下，中，上。

the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* and the **Mahāvibhāṣā* is similar to the basic division found in the *Visuddhimagga*. A significant difference is that such practice serves as an option for those who are not able to undertake the boundless radiation due to the presence of some defilement.

In the Theravāda traditions, however, the taking of individual persons as the object seems to have become the default approach, instead of being only seen as a skillful means in the case of being under the influence of a defilement. The practical benefits of such person-oriented modes of meditation seem to have overshadowed the form of meditation described in the early sources to the extent that the boundless radiation is seen as necessarily requiring previous cultivation in the person-oriented method.

A contrastive example to the tendency to concretize the objects of the immeasurable/boundless states can be seen in several Mahāyāna texts, which recognize an objectless form of such practice as a superior stage of mental cultivation,¹⁸ undertaken by advanced bodhisattvas or even only by Buddhas.

¹⁸ For example, the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, Bendall 1902/1970: 212,¹² refers to a distinction of three forms of *maitrī* practiced by a bodhisattva, which proceed from taking as the object living beings, *satvārambaṇā*, to dharmas, *dharmārambaṇā*, and then to an objectless form, *anārambaṇā*. The description of the actual practice then starts with individuals and gradually proceeds until it covers the ten directions. The *Pañjikā* on the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* applies the same threefold distinction to *karuṇā*; see Tripathi 1988: 234,²⁹ (§ 9.76). The *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, Wogihara 1930/1936: 241,¹⁷ also describes the four *apramāṇas* being practiced *sattvālambaṇa*, *dharmālambaṇa*, and *anālambaṇa*. According to the **Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*, T 1509 at T XXV 209c6, the objectless form of practice is the domain of Buddhas only; see Lamotte 1970: 1253

Oneself as the Object

The scheme described in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* and the **Mahāvibhāṣā* does not mention oneself as the object of practice. In fact, oneself as the object of the immeasurable or boundless states is also not mentioned in the Theravāda Abhidharma or the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* but only seems to emerge in the Pāli commentarial tradition in relation to *mettā*.¹⁹

The arising of this aspect in the Theravāda traditions may be related to a variant reading found in the description of the radiation practice of all immeasurable or boundless states in some Pāli editions. This description qualifies such a radiation to be *sabbattatāya*. Some editions preserve the alternative reading *sabbatthatāya* (aspirate *th* instead of non-aspirate *t*). The last, *sabbatthatāya*, basically means “in every way” or “wholly.”²⁰

This alternative reading occurs in the Siamese edition of the *Dhānañjāni-sutta* mentioned above, for example, as well as in several other discourses found in the same middle part of the *Majjhima-nikāya*. For these discourses, the Siamese edi-

and on this notion as a Sarvāstivāda tenet Bareau 1955: 144 (§43). For a more detailed discussion see also, e.g., Pagel 1995: 137–143, Jenkins 1999: 188–227, and Schmithausen 2000: 447f. A meditation manual by Kumārajīva, T 616 at T XV 282a1, reckons the radiation practice in different directions as characteristic of the practice of bodhisattvas, although here sentient beings (眾生) are still mentioned as the object; see also Yamabe and Sueki 2009: 66 (translation) and Yamabe 2009: 57 (discussion).

¹⁹ According to Maithrimurthi 2004: 189 note 24, the notion of directing *mettā/maitrī* to oneself appears to have been an already established tradition by the time of Buddhaghosa.

²⁰ Rhys Davids and Stede 1921/1993: 681 s. v. *sabbatthatā* give: “the state of being everywhere,” and then for *sabbatthatāya*: “on the whole.”

tion adopts the reading *sabbatthatāya* for the boundless radiation practice.²¹ The reading *sabbatthatāya* is also found in the PTS edition of other Pāli discourses.²²

The reading adopted in the commentaries and the *Visud-dhimagga* is *sabbattatāya*, however, which Buddhaghosa explains to imply that the practice should be done toward all equally as toward oneself. He also indicates that here “all” covers those who are inferior, medium, or superior, and those who are friendly, hostile, or neutral.²³

Now, in the description of the radiation in the early discourses, the expression *sabbatt(h)atāya* occurs preceded by *sabbadhi*, “everywhere,” and followed by *sabbāvantaṃ lokaṃ*, “the whole world.” The description follows a standard pattern in the early discourses of expressing the same meaning with a series of terms of closely related or identical meaning.²⁴ Given

²¹ S^e reads *sabbatthatāya* in the case of what in E^e are MN 52 at MN I 351,21, MN 55 at MN I 369,14, MN 83 at MN II 76,9, MN 97 at MN II 195,5, and MN 99 at MN II 207,18 (I list only the first occurrence in each case for a usage that applies throughout the respective discourses).

²² DN discourses in E^e tend to note *sabbatthatāya* as a variant. The reading *sabbattathāya* has been adopted in the E^e edition of MN 7 at MN I 38,22, SN 41.7 at SN IV 296,17, AN 9.18 at AN IV 390,10, AN 10.208 at AN V 299,20, and AN 11.17 at AN V 344,22.

²³ Vism 308,29: *sabbattatāyā ti sabbesu hīnamajjhimukkattḥamittasapattamajjhantādippabhedesu attatāya*. This is followed by an alternative explanation according to which *sabbattatāya* means with one’s whole mind, *sabbena citta bhāgena īsakaṃ pi bahi avikkhipamāno*. It is noteworthy that the first explanation takes up the distinction between inferior, medium, and superior, which brings to mind the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma mode of practice; see above notes 16 and 17.

²⁴ See in more detail Anālayo 2007: 6–8.

this context, it seems quite safe to propose that the more original reading must have been “in every way,” *sabbatthatāya*, instead of *sabbattatāya* in the sense of “to all as to oneself.”²⁵

The term *sabbattatāya* is not found in other Pāli discourses, so that its only occurrences are as part of the standard descriptions of the meditative radiation of the immeasurable or boundless states.²⁶ The alternative *sabbatthatāya*, however, does recur in a discourse in the *Udāna*, where it is also preceded by *sabbadhi*. The passage indicates that all forms of existence are impermanent. This makes it clear that the sense of

²⁵ The whole expression *sabbadhi sabatt(h)atāya sabbāvantaṃ lokam* in its occurrence in the *Majjhima-nikāya* has been summarily rendered by Chalmers 1926: 27 as “the whole length and breadth of the wide world”. Horner 1967: 48 renders the same expression as “the whole world everywhere, in every way.” Ñāṇamoli 1995/2005: 120, however, follows the commentarial understanding and translates the phrase as “everywhere, and to all as to himself ... the all-encompassing world.” In the manuscript of his original translation (accessed on page 105 of http://issuu.com/pathpress/docs/mn-book1-new_split1) Ñāṇamoli comments that *sabbattatāya* “seems the reading more widely accepted than *sabbatthatāya*” and then refers to the *Visuddhimagga* for an explanation of the term. Several other translators have decided not to follow the commentarial gloss: Rhys Davids 1899: 318 translates *sabbatthatāya* together with *sabbavantaṃ lokam* as “the whole wide world,” a rendering also used by Hare 1934/1973: 165; Woodward 1936/1955: 193 renders the whole set as “everywhere, for all sorts and conditions ... the whole world”; and Hurvitz 1979: 123 translates *sabbatthatāya* as “to all purposes.”

²⁶ This has already been pointed out by Maithrimurthi 1999: 38: “trotz der Auslegung Buddhaghosas kommt der Begriff *sabbattatāya* in der von Buddhaghosa vorgeschlagenen Bedeutung nirgendwo im Pāli-Kanon vor.”

the term here is “in every way.”²⁷ In fact, in this case the reading *sabbattatāya* occurs only in the Ceylonese edition.

Examining the parallels to those Pāli discourses in which at least one edition reads *sabbatthatāya* brings to light that none of the relevant Chinese or Tibetan texts have a reference to oneself. Instead, wherever equivalents can be found, these all correspond to the basic notion “everywhere.”²⁸

Moving from Chinese parallels to Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, the phrase under discussion has its counterpart in *sarvatratāye*, which conveys the sense “in every way.”²⁹ The expression *sarvatratāye* occurs in the *Mahāvastu* in the description of the boundless radiation of compassion, and again in another passage in the same *Mahāvastu* that corresponds to the *Udāna* dictum on the impermanent nature of all forms of existence, mentioned above.³⁰ This leaves little doubt that the sense of

²⁷ Ud 3.10 at Ud 33,15: *ye hi keci bhavā sabbadhi sabbatthatāya* (C^e: *sabbattatāya*) *sabbe te bhavā aniccā*; “whatever existences, everywhere and in every way, all these existences are impermanent.” As pointed out by Schmithausen 1997: 49 note 53, regarding the interpretation proposed by Buddhaghosa, “in view of *Udāna* 3.10 cannot be the original meaning of this expression.”

²⁸ Parallels to MN 7: EĀ 13.5 at T II 574a8, MĀ 93 at T I 575c12, and T 51 at T I 844a16; parallels to MN 52 (= AN 11.17): MĀ 217 at T I 802b15 and T 92 at T I 916b26; parallel to MN 97: MĀ 27 at T I 458b3; parallel to MN 99: MĀ 152 at T I 669c6; parallel to SN 41.7: SĀ 567 at T II 149c26; parallel to AN 10.208: MĀ 15 at T I 438a9 and Up 4081 at D 4094 *ju* 238a3 or P 5595 *tu* 272a1. In the case of MN 55 and MN 83, the radiation practice is not described at all in the parallels; in the case of AN 9.18, no parallel is known.

²⁹ Edgerton 1953/1998: 584 explains *sarvatratāye* as an instrumental used as an adverb with the meaning “altogether, in every way.”

³⁰ In the description of the boundless radiation of compassion in the *Mahāvastu*, Marciniak 2019: 267,4 (= Senart 1897: 213,14.), *sar-*

sarvatratāye is indeed “in every way.” The related expression *sarvatrānugatenā* occurs in descriptions of the radiation of the immeasurable or boundless states in the *Daśabhūmika-sūtra* and the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, conveying the same basic sense.³¹

Perhaps the apparently less original reading *sabbattatāya* in the sense of “to all as to oneself” gave rise to the idea that the radiation should be directed to oneself, or at least it allowed this idea to gather strength. Once accepted by the commentaries as the way to proceed in actual practice, this notion would in turn have influenced the preferred reading adopted for the discourses themselves, over the reading *sabbatthatāya*, “in every way.”

Although this is of course only a hypothesis, it would provide an explanation for the arising of the idea in the Theravāda commentaries that practice should begin with oneself. Notably, whereas *mettā* should in this way first of all be directed to oneself,³² in the case of compassion the *Visuddhimagga* does not mention oneself in its description of the actual meditation practice.³³

vatratāye is preceded by *sarvaṃhi* (or *sarvehi* in Senart’s ed.) and followed by *sarvāvantaṃ lokaṃ*. The counterpart to the statement in Ud 3.10 (quoted above in note 27), Marciniak 2020: 499,7 (= Senart 1890: 418,11), reads: *ye kecid bhavā sarvehi sarvatratāye samvartanti, sarve the bhavā anityāḥ*.

³¹ Rahder 1926: 34,19 and Dutt 1934: 181,19; see the discussion in Maithrimurthi 1999: 35–39.

³² Vism 296,26: *sabbapaṭhamañ pana: ahaṃ sukhito homi, nidukkhoti ... evañ punappunaṃ attani yeva bhāvetabbā*.

³³ Vism 314,21: *sabbapaṭhamañ tāva kiñcid eva karuṇāyitabbaṃ virūpaṃ paramakicchappattaṃ duggataṃ durūpetañ kapaṇapuri-sañ ... taṃ alabhantena ... pāpakārī puggalo ... karuṇāyitabbo ...*

First of all one should therefore have compassion for some individual who is deformed, fallen into supreme misery, in difficulty, ill-endowed, and wretched ... failing which one should have compassion for a person who is an evil doer ... having thus had compassion for that person, one should then successively extend compassion further in the same way to a dear person, then to a neutral one, and then to an enemy.

A reference to oneself occurs only in the subsequent description of the overcoming of divisions between the individuals to whom one has meditatively directed compassion.³⁴

The above passage gives the impression that the idea of directing compassion to oneself could be the result of following the precedent set by the previously described cultivation of *mettā*, an application that has not yet been fully worked out and for this reason has not found a placing in the actual instruction.

Nevertheless, such an application is in itself natural, given that in the Pāli discourses the phrase *sabbatt(h)atāya* occurs in relation to each of the four immeasurable or boundless states, so that, on implementing the interpretation adopted in the Pāli commentaries, one would indeed have to direct compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity similarly to oneself.

The person-oriented method in general, whether this involves oneself or not, seems to be to some degree a different

evaṃ taṃ puḅḅalaṃ karuṇāyitvā tato paraṃ eten' eva upāyena piyapuggale, tato majjhatte, tato verimhī ti anukkamena karuṇā pavattetabbā.

³⁴ *Vism* 315,19: *sabbathā pi karuṇāyitvā vuttanāyena' eva attani piyapuggale majjhatte verimhī ti catūsu janesu sīmāsambhedaṃ katvā ... appanā vaḍḍhetabbā.*

form of practice when compared to the way the meditation on the four immeasurable or boundless states is described in the early discourses. The basic quality of *appamāṇa/apramāṇa* that characterizes the immeasurable or boundless radiation is no longer prominent and has been replaced by mental images or recollections of individual persons. The form such practice has taken then requires at a subsequent stage an overcoming of the divisions created by way of these individuals, divisions that in the boundless radiation mode have not been built up in the first place. The boundless radiation also does not need a special effort to bring in oneself. Being seated right in the very midst of this radiation, the practitioner is in a way automatically part of it.

One of the reasons why, according to the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*, the immeasurable or boundless states are incapable of removing defilements is that they take sentient beings as their object.³⁵ The Pāli commentaries similarly consider the practice of the immeasurable or boundless states as problematic, in so far as they take sentient beings as their object.³⁶ The problem implied here is that cultivating *mettā*, for example, supposedly comes close to holding the view of a self, since it takes sentient beings as its object.³⁷ Although this does of course not in itself imply holding any view of a self, such problematizing helps to appreciate an advantage of the description of the boundless radiation in the early discourses, which does not explicitly mention any individual person as the object.

³⁵ Pradhan 1967: 454,1.

³⁶ Mp II 41,27 notes that the four *brahmavihāras* cannot acquire a supramundane dimension because they take living beings as their object.

³⁷ Pj I 251,5: *yasmā mettā sattārammaṇattā attadiṭṭhiyā āsannā hoti.*

Contemporary Practice

Modern-day practice of the immeasurable or boundless states tends to follow the model of the Theravāda commentaries. From a text-historical perspective, this model appears to be the result of literalism, combined perhaps with the adoption of a variant reading, or at least strengthened by the existence of this variant reading. The ensuing understanding would have gathered momentum because of the practical benefits of the person-oriented method in providing an easy object for mental focus.

Actual practice usually proceeds closely in line with the presentation in the *Visuddhimagga*, which covers oneself as an aspect of a cultivation of the immeasurable or boundless state toward various kinds of persons. For example, Salzberg (1995: 116) offers the following instruction:

The first object of the compassion meditation is someone with great physical or mental suffering ... You can progress from there through the same sequence that unfolds in metta practice: self, benefactor, friend, neutral person, difficult person, all beings.

Implementation of the person-oriented approach at times comes combined with a highlight on the need to have *mettā* or compassion for oneself. According to a description of “self-love” in Thich Nhat Hanh (2007: 20), “until we are able to love and take care of ourselves, we cannot be of much help to others.” Kornfield (1993: 222) notes that the “ground for compassion is established first by practicing sensitivity toward ourselves. True compassion arises from a healthy sense of self.” In this way, “compassion for ourselves ... allows us to extend warmth, sensitivity, and openness to the sorrows around us in a truthful and genuine way.” Along similar lines, Wallace

(1999: 130) explains that the meditations on “both loving-kindness and compassion require that we first develop loving-kindness and compassion towards ourselves.” For actual practice, the recommendation then is as follows (1999: 136):

Even though Buddhaghosa recommends starting this practice by bringing to mind someone who you know is suffering, it may be helpful nevertheless to start with oneself. Look to yourself: Do you have any suffering you want to be free of? Any anxieties, any problems, any sources of distress, physical or mental? Are there any things that you fear? Do you wish you were free of these things? ... then bring to mind another person who is suffering. Just as I wish for myself, so may you be free of suffering.

The description seems to reflect experience with teaching the *brahmavihāras* in a contemporary setting, especially in the West, where often there can be a need to help practitioners first of all relate to themselves with acceptance. At the same time, however, it is noteworthy that contemporary Buddhist teachers view self-compassion (or *mettā* directed toward oneself) as a step leading over to more general cultivation of compassion, etc., in line with the Theravāda (or Sarvāstivāda) model.

In contrast, the idea to take self-compassion as a stand-alone practice, in the sense of directing compassion only toward oneself, without extending it also to others, appears to be a novelty manifesting in the 21st century, whose roots seem to be found in Western psychology.

The employment of self-compassion in psychology seems to have had its starting point in the search for something that has the potential of providing many of the psychological benefits that have been associated with increased self-esteem but

without some of the detrimental repercussions that can result from teaching people how to enhance their self-esteem. Such detrimental repercussions can take the form of increased narcissism and self-centeredness as well as increased prejudice toward others, even at times going so far as to result in aggressive and violent behavior against those perceived as a threat to the ego.

In search for an alternative, a perusal of contemporary Buddhist meditation teachings must have been a natural avenue to take, in particular in view of the precedent set by the immense popularity and success gained by mindfulness-based programs of various types.

In what has become a groundbreaking publication leading to a steadily growing interest in the practice of self-compassion as a viable alternative to increasing self-esteem, in order to build up a healthy attitude and relationship toward oneself, Neff (2003: 224) reasoned that “in Buddhist psychology, it is believed that it is as essential to feel compassion for oneself as it is for others.”

From a text-historical perspective, however, the idea of distinguishing between compassion for oneself and for others in the first place is a development that emerges as a somewhat accidental outcome of Theravāda exegesis. Moreover, even in the relevant exegetical text a need to arouse compassion for oneself is not explicitly verbalized as something considered essential, quite probably because in the radiation mode of practice (which is also the final goal of the procedure of taking individuals as objects), meditators will anyway receive their due share of the quality they cultivate.

The idea to consider self-compassion as essential as compassion for others seems to be more the result of the experiences of contemporary meditation teachers, who found it help-

ful if meditators first arouse a sense of compassion toward themselves, as an easy way to access this mental attitude, and then only direct this toward others.

Thus, it is not the case, as asserted by Neff and Knox (2017: 2), that “self-compassion ... is central to the 2,500-year-old tradition of Buddhism.” Instead, self-compassion, especially as a stand-alone practice, is a recent development originating mainly in the West.

In this way, the practice of the immeasurable/boundless states in general and of compassion in particular appears to have gone through an intriguing evolution from the early discourses to contemporary notions. An immeasurable or boundless radiation in all directions seems to have gradually acquired concrete individuals as the objects of meditative practice, which eventually came to be seen as an indispensable entry point for such radiation. In the course of time, one of these meditative objects appears to have become oneself, and with the starting point set in this way a practice has emerged in a clinical setting where compassion to oneself functions as a stand-alone practice.

The last is particularly significant and thereby brings in a new element, compared to the other case studies surveyed in the previous chapters, as it points to the repercussions of the steadily increasing interest among psychologists in aspects of Buddhist meditation. Such interest has the remarkable development of mindfulness-related clinical practices as its starting point. Although it remains to be seen what forms this relatively new development will take in the future, for now it can already safely be assumed that it will leave its own distinct imprint on the fascinating interactive process of various cross-fertilizations that have become evident in relation to the dimensions of Buddhist meditation examined in this book.

Conclusion

With the four case studies undertaken in the preceding pages, I have tried to present a diachronic perspective on the interrelationship between theory and practice in Buddhist meditation traditions. Such interrelation is hardly surprising in view of the lack of a rigid division between these two in the ancient Indian setting. Formal meditation practice comes imbued with and influenced by theoretical constructs just as reflection on the teachings can function as a form of mental cultivation. Even just the chief modality for becoming learned in the ancient setting, hearing and remembering a teaching, has a direct relationship to mindfulness and thereby to some extent partakes of the field of mental cultivation.¹ From this viewpoint, the interrelationship that has emerged from these four case studies can be considered quite natural, even though the consequences of the developments traced here are often remarkable.

Mindfulness of Breathing

The early discourses describe a meditative progression of sixteen steps for the practice of mindfulness of breathing, the majority of which require an open, mindful monitoring rather than an exclusive focus on the breath itself at the exclusion of everything else. From the starting point set in this way by texts ostensibly recording actual meditation practiced by the Buddha himself, an apparent oral transmission error in the Dharmaguptaka and Theravāda traditions led to the expression “concentration on mindfulness of breathing.”

¹ See Anālayo 2021e.

An integration of mindfulness of breathing among the body contemplations surveyed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels appears to have resulted in presenting only the first tetrad of mindfulness of breathing as a stand-alone practice. Instructions in discourses in the *Ekottarika-āgama* incorporate only the first three steps from the standard exposition of sixteen steps, combining these with additional tools like discerning the temperature of the breath.

A simile employed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* to elucidate the first tetrad of mindfulness of breathing in actual fact only illustrates the first two steps, which feature in an Abhidharma work as a stand-alone practice. With later exegesis, another simile comes into use that conveys an all-out focus on the breath as such.

In this way, a survey of textual accounts shows a gradual reduction of the scheme of sixteen steps, whose predominant modality appears to require mindful monitoring of the breath alongside remaining aware of a range of other aspects of the meditative experience. This gradually seems to have changed into becoming a concentration exercise by focusing on the breath to the exclusion of anything else. The resultant challenge to remain with the breath without succumbing to distraction, rendered more difficult due to sidestepping the intentional cultivation of joy and happiness found in the full scheme of sixteen steps, would have stimulated the emergence of alternative supports for achieving the same aim, such as by way of counting the breaths.

Considered in conjunction, an intriguing trajectory emerges where a textual account of meditation practice changes in the course of textual developments and at times errors during oral transmission, thereby influencing meditation practice, which in turn yields new textual descriptions about how mindfulness of breathing should now be cultivated.

The Luminous Mind

Instead of taking off from a meditation instruction, my second case study has as its starting point an apparent fascination with imagery related to fire and luminosity. Besides impacting descriptions of supernormal feats performed by the Buddha (or even his footprint), the same fascination seems to have also had an impact on references to consciousness, of which at least one stands in a context related to awakening.

Other instances then show the application of the motif of luminosity to the mind or to meditative qualities and practices. Several such instances in Pāli discourses are without support in their parallels, and in one case, resulting in attributing luminosity to equanimity, closer inspection shows clear signs of a later expansion of a passage that originally did not involve luminosity.

The same appears to hold true for a well-known passage in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya*, which attributes luminosity to the mind even when it is in a defiled condition. A quotation of this passage in an Abhidharma work then adds that such luminosity, or rather purity, is the intrinsic nature of the mind.

With this idea in place, a range of different influences appear to have led to emphasizing the resultant presentation. Besides doctrinal concerns related to the problems caused by the theory of momentariness, appropriations of the type of presentation evident in this passage or its derivatives have been an important factor in a process of reconceptualizing the role of meditation practice in relation to awakening, such as the notion that the practitioner's mind is already intrinsically awakened. From the viewpoint of this notion, actual practice simply requires recognizing this already fully realized and luminous nature of the mind.

Absorption

A comparative survey of Pāli discourses defining right concentration by way of listing the four absorptions brings to light that these are not supported by their parallels. An alternative definition, however, which instead defines right concentration by way of its embeddedness in the context set by the other seven factors of the noble eightfold path, does receive confirmation by parallel versions.

This situation gives the impression that the idea of equating right concentration with the attainment of the four absorptions would be a somewhat later development. In fact, the examples of the Buddha's teacher Āḷāra Kālāma, who must have been highly proficient in concentrative abilities (the same probably also applies to Uddaka Rāmaputta), or of the various views based on absorption attainment surveyed in the *Brahmajālasutta* and its parallels, makes it clear that strength of concentrative ability does not necessarily mean that the respective concentration is of the right type. Instead, the directional input of right view is required above all, together with endowment with the other path factors, as these are the crucial ingredients that turn concentration into the right type.

Yet, with the idea in place that attainment of the four absorptions equals right concentration, it is perhaps unsurprising that the absorptions were eventually also added to listings of the qualities pertinent to awakening or else came to feature as a practice that inclines the mind toward Nirvana, that leads to the perfection of direct knowledge, that is indispensable for abandoning the five lower fetters, that serves as the path to the unconditioned, and that even equals Nirvana in a relative sense.

The repositioning of absorption attainment achieved in this way in turn had an impact on conceptualizations of what it takes to progress to stream-entry (and higher levels of awaken-

ing). In a Theravāda setting, the standard model for such progress involves a series of insight knowledges. These can be considered a detailed exposition of a basic pattern of insight development, found in the early discourses, which progresses through the three characteristics (impermanence, what is impermanent is *dukkha*, what is *dukkha* is not self).

As a way to face staunch opposition to the promotion of so-called dry insight, in the sense of insight meditation that dispenses with the intentional cultivation of mental tranquility, the idea of “insight-absorptions” arose. The original idea appears to have been just to point out that the progress of insight on its own takes care of the type of mental cultivation that the opponents believed to require the cultivation of absorption.

The invention of “insight-absorptions,” although originating from the identification of stages of insight as akin to absorption in some respect, appears to have in turn led to a redefinition of what absorption attainment entails. Such redefinitions at times propose easily accessible states of mental composure to correspond to the type of absorption described in the early discourses, set in contrast to the supposedly later development of conceiving absorption as profound Buddhas requiring much meditative mastery, associated with Buddhaghosa’s *Vissuddhimagga*.

A related strand of development then interprets the absorptions as productive of liberating insight in and of themselves. Another approach can take the form of proposing that *satipaṭṭhāna/smr̥tyupasthāna* meditation was originally just about absorption attainment, a concern of such practice with liberating insight being consequently considered a later development.

The agendas manifesting in this way have at times had effects quite contrary to their aims. The insistence on the need to master absorption prior to being able to gain liberating insight

seems to have triggered a redefinition of what the term absorption stands for. The promotion of insight-absorption by the adherents of dry insight in turn appears to have fueled the arising of competitors in the field of meditation instructions to lay practitioners, who are able to gather a substantial following by promising an easy access to the prestigious *jhāna* attainment.

Attempts to authenticate such attainments or to promote absorption as intrinsically liberating show the degree to which polemics have had a substantial influence on the development under discussion. This serves as a reminder that the proposed interplay between theory and practice does not take place in a vacuum, as it is situated in a particular historical, social, and cultural context. For this reason, it needs to be understood by taking a variety of additional potential influences into account.

Immeasurable/Boundless States

The meditative cultivation of the immeasurable or boundless states, described in the early discourses, takes the form of a radiation in all directions. The boundless nature of such a form of practice can be illustrated with the example of blowing a conch, whose sound spreads in all directions.

As the result of apparent literalism, descriptions of a cultivation of the immeasurable or boundless states that employ a person in a particular condition as an example to illustrate the appropriate attitude seem to have been read as injunctions to take individual beings as the specific objects of the practice. The model of meditative cultivation apparently emerging from this literalism involves a series of individuals, graded according to their agreeable or disagreeable nature, which the practitioner calls up mentally one after the other.

Such a series of individuals does not yet explicitly bring in oneself. The idea to do so may have had its origin in a variant

reading, describing the boundless radiation in all directions as pervading these “in every way,” which has been taken to mean instead “to all as to oneself.”

At the stage of development evident in the *Visuddhimagga*, the idea of taking oneself as the object seems to have been fully and consistently applied only to *mettā*, and not yet to the treatment of compassion.

A further stage of development then appears to have taken place at the beginning of the 21st century, when Western psychologists developed approaches that serve to arouse self-compassion as a stand-alone practice, without being part of a similar cultivation of compassion toward others.

This thereby brings in a new perspective to the interplay between theory and practice already evident in the previous three case studies, as it points to the steadily growing interactions between traditional forms of Buddhism and meditation-related research in psychology, which can safely be expected to continue to have a considerable impact on the development of Buddhist meditation traditions in theory and practice.

Abbreviations

Abhs	<i>Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha</i>
AN	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
As	<i>Atthasālinī</i>
B ^e	Burmese edition
C	Cone edition
C ^e	Ceylonese edition
CBETA	Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association
D	Derge edition
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
Dhs	<i>Dhammasaṅgaṇī</i>
DN	<i>Dīrgha-nikāya</i>
E ^e	Pali Text Society edition
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
EĀ ²	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 150A)
G	Golden Tanjur edition
It	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
Kv	<i>Kathāvatthu</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhīma-nikāya</i>
Mp	<i>Manorathapūraṇī</i>
N	Narhang edition
P	Peking edition
Peṭ	<i>Peṭakopadesa</i>
Pj	<i>Paramatthajotikā</i>
Paṭis	<i>Paṭisambhidāmagga</i>
Paṭis-a	<i>Paṭisambhidāmagga-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
PTS	Pali Text Society

S ^e	Siamese edition
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 100)
SĀ ³	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 101)
S ^e	Siamese edition
SHT	Sanskrihandschrift aus den Turfanfunden
Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsinī</i>
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
Sn	<i>Sutta-nipāta</i>
Sv	<i>Sumaṅgalavilāsinī</i>
T	Taishō edition (CBETA)
Th-a	<i>Theragāthā-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
Up	<i>Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā</i>
Vibh	<i>Vibhaṅga</i>
Vibh-a	<i>Sammohavinodanī</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

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