

# The Jhānas and the Lay Disciple According to the Pāli Suttas

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Pāli Nikāyas leave no doubt of the important role the jhānas play in the structure of the Buddhist path. In such texts as the Sāmaññaphala Sutta (DN 2), the Cūḷahatthipadopama Sutta (MN 27), and many others on the “gradual training” (*anupubbāsikkhā*) of the Buddhist monk, the Buddha invariably introduces the jhānas to exemplify the training in concentration. When the bhikkhu has fulfilled the preliminary moral discipline, we read, he goes off into solitude and cleanses his mind of the “five hindrances.” When his mind has been so cleansed, he enters and dwells in the four jhānas, described by a stock formula repeated countless times in the Nikāyas:

Here, bhikkhus, secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters and dwells in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by thought and examination, with rapture and happiness born of seclusion. With the subsiding of thought and examination, he enters and dwells in the second jhāna, which has internal confidence and unification of mind, is without thought and examination, and has rapture and happiness born of concentration. With the fading away as well of rapture, he dwells equanimous and, mindful and clearly comprehending, he experiences happiness with the body; he enters and dwells in the third jhāna of which the noble ones declare: “He is equanimous, mindful, one who dwells happily.” With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous passing away of joy and displeasure, he enters and dwells in the fourth jhāna, which is neither painful nor pleasant and includes the purification of mindfulness by equanimity.<sup>26</sup>

In Theravada Buddhist circles during the past few decades a debate has repeatedly erupted over the question whether or not jhāna is necessary to attain the “paths and fruits,” that is, the four graded stages of enlightenment. The debate has been sparked off by the rise to prominence of the various systems of insight meditation that have become popular both in Asia and the West, especially among lay Buddhists. Those who advocate such systems of meditation contend that the paths and fruits can be attained by developing insight (*vipassanā*) without a foundation of jhāna. This method is called the vehicle of bare insight (*suddha-vipassanā*), and those who practise in this mode are known as “dry insighters” (*sukkha-vipassaka*) because their practice of insight has not been “moistened” by prior attainment of the jhānas. Apparently, this system finds support from the *Visuddhimagga* and the Pāli Commentaries, though it is not given a very prominent place in the commentarial treatment of the path, which usually follows the canonical model in placing the jhānas before the development of insight.<sup>27</sup>

To help answer the question whether the jhānas are necessary for the attainment of the stages of awakening, we might narrow the question down by asking whether they are needed to reach the first stage of awakening, known as stream-entry (*sotāpatti*). Since the Nikāyas order the process of awakening into four stages—stream-entry, once-returning, non-returning, and arahantship—it is possible that the jhānas come to assume an essential

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26. *Vivicc'eva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekaṃ pītisukhaṃ paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati. Vitakkavicārānaṃ vūpasamā ajjhattaṃ sampasādanaṃ cetaso ekodibhāvaṃ avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ samādhijaṃ pītisukhaṃ dutiyaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati. Pītiyā ca virāgā upekkhako ca viharati sato ca sampajāno sukhañca kāyena paṭisaṃvedeti, yaṃ taṃ ariyā ācikkhanti upekkhako satimā sukhaṃvihāri ti tatiyaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati. Sukhassa ca pahānā dukkhassa ca pahānā pubb'eva somanassadomanassānaṃ atthagamā adukkhamaṃ asukhaṃ upekkhāsati pārisuddhiṃ catutthaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

27. The vehicle of bare insight is mentioned at *Vism* XVIII.5 (PTS ed. p. 558); the dry insighter at XXI.112 (p. 666) and XXIII.18 (p. 702). See too Spk commenting on *SN* 12:70/S II 119–128.

role at a later stage in the unfolding of the path, and not at the first stages. Thus it may be that the insight required for the earlier stages does not presuppose prior attainment of the jhānas, while the jhānas become indispensable in making the transition from one of the intermediate stages to a more advanced stage. I myself believe there is strong evidence in the Nikāyas that the jhānas become an essential factor for those intent on advancing from the stage of once-returning to that of non-returner. I will review the texts that corroborate this thesis later in this paper.

Recently, however, several articulate teachers of meditation have argued down the validity of the dry insight approach, insisting that the jhānas are necessary for the successful development of insight at every stage. Their arguments usually begin by making a distinction between the standpoints of the Pāli Canon and the Commentaries. On this basis, they maintain that from the perspective of the Canon jhāna is needed to attain even stream-entry. The Nikāyas themselves do not address this problem in clear and unambiguous terms, and it is difficult to derive from them any direct pronouncement on its resolution. In the suttas dealing with the gradual training, all the stages of awakening are telescoped into one series, and thus no differentiation is made between the preparatory attainments required for stream-entry, once-returning, non-returning, and arahantship. We simply see the monk go off into solitude, attain the four jhānas, and then proceed directly to arahantship, called “the knowledge of the destruction of the taints.” From such texts, there can be no denying the role of the jhānas in bringing the path to fulfillment, but here I shall be concerned principally with the question whether or not they are categorically necessary to win the first fruit of the path.

In pursuing this question I intend to pick up an important but generally neglected clue the suttas lay at our doorstep. This is the fact that many of the Buddha’s followers who attained the first three stages of awakening, from stream-entry through non-returning, were lay people. The only stage that the Canon depicts as the near-exclusive domain of monks and nuns is arahantship.<sup>28</sup> This clue is more important than might appear at first glance, for a close examination of texts describing the

personal qualities and lifestyles of noble lay disciples might bring to light just the material we need to unravel the knots tied into this perplexing issue.

A study of the Nikāyas as a whole would show that they depict classes of disciples in terms of paradigms or archetypes. These paradigms are generally constructed with extreme rigor and consistency, indicating that they are evidently governed by a precisely determined scheme. Yet, somewhat strangely, it is rare for the outlines of this scheme to be spelled out in the abstract. This puts the burden on us to elicit from the relevant suttas the underlying principles that govern the portrayal of types. The texts with which we are concerned delineate disciples at different levels of development by way of clusters of specific qualities and practices. These texts function both descriptively and prescriptively. They show us what kinds of qualities we can normally expect of disciples at particular stages of progress, and thereby they imply (and sometimes state) what kinds of practices an aspirant at a lower stage should take up to advance further along the path.

To draw upon suttas dealing with lay disciples is to approach the question of the need for jhāna from an angle somewhat different from the one usually adopted. Most participants in this discussion have focused on texts dealing principally with monastic practice. The drawback to this approach, as indicated above, lies in the predilection of the Nikāyas to compress the successive levels of monastic attainment into a single comprehensive scheme without showing how the various levels of practice are to be correlated with the successive stages of attainment.<sup>29</sup> So instead of working with these monastic texts, I

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28. For example, at D II 92 the Buddha testifies that numerous lay disciples who had died had reached the first three stages, and at M I 490–91 he declares that he has “many more than five hundred” lay disciples who have become non-returners. The question of lay arahantship is a vexed one. While the texts record several cases of lay people who attained arahantship, immediately afterwards they either take ordination or expire. This is the basis for the traditional belief that if a lay person attains arahantship, he or she either enters the Sangha that very day or passes away.

intend to turn my spotlight on the unordained segment of the Buddhist community and look at suttas that discuss the spiritual practices and qualities of the lay noble disciple. For if the jhānas are truly necessary to attain stream-entry, then they should be just as much integral to the practice of the lay follower as they are to the practice of the monk, and thus we should find texts that regularly ascribe jhānic practice and attainment to lay disciples just as we find them in the case of monks. If, on the other hand, the texts consistently describe the practices and qualities of certain types of noble lay disciples in ways that pass over or exclude the jhānas, then we have strong grounds for concluding that the jhānas are not prerequisites for attaining discipleship at these levels.

I will frame my study around three specific questions:

- (1) Do the texts indicate that a worldlyling must attain jhāna before entering upon the “fixed course of rightness” (*sammatta-niyāma*), the irreversible path to stream-entry?
- (2) Do the texts typically ascribe the jhānas to lay disciples who have attained stream-entry?
- (3) If the texts do not normally attribute the jhānas to the stream-enterer, is there any stage in the maturation of the path where their attainment becomes essential?

## 2. JHĀNA AND THE ATTAINMENT OF STREAM-ENTRY

Let us turn directly to the texts themselves to see if they can shed any light on our problem. When we do survey the Nikāyas with this issue in mind we find, perhaps with some astonishment, that they neither lay down a clear stipulation that jhāna is needed to attain stream-entry nor openly assert that jhāna is dispensable. The Sutta Piṭaka mentions four preconditions for reaching the path, called *sotāpattiyaṅga*, factors of stream-entry, namely: association with superior people (i.e., with the noble ones); listening to the true Dhamma; proper attention; and practice in

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29. One such text which does make the correlations, in a monastic context, is AN 3:85/A I 231–32, which I will discuss below.

accordance with the Dhamma.<sup>30</sup> It would seem that all the elements of Buddhist meditative practice, including the jhānas, should come under the fourth factor, but the Nikāyas themselves do not state whether “practice in accordance with the Dhamma” includes the jhānas. The few texts that specify what is actually meant by “practice in accordance with the Dhamma” are invariably concerned with insight meditation. They employ a fixed formula, with variable subjects, to describe a bhikkhu practising in such a way. Two suttas define such practice as aimed at the cessation of the factors of dependent origination (SN 12:16/S II 18, SN 12:67/S II 115); another, as aimed at the cessation of the five aggregates (SN 22:115/S III 163–64); and still another, as aimed at the cessation of the six sense bases (SN 35:155/S IV 141). Of course, meditation practice undertaken to attain the jhānas would have to be included in “practice in accordance with the Dhamma,” but the texts give no ground for inferring that such practice is a prerequisite for reaching stream-entry.

A stream-enterer is endowed with four other qualities, mentioned often in the Sotāpatti-saṃyutta (SN chap. 55). These, too, are called *sotāpattiyaṅga*, but in a different sense than the former set. These are the factors that qualify a person as a stream-enterer. The first three are “confirmed confidence” (*aveccappasāda*) in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha; the fourth is “the virtues dear to the noble ones,” generally understood to mean inviolable adherence to the Five Precepts. From this, we can reasonably suppose that in the preliminary stage leading up to stream-entry the aspirant will need firm faith in the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha) and scrupulous observance of the Five Precepts. Further, the realization of stream-entry itself is often depicted as a cognitive experience of almost ocular immediacy. It is called the gaining of the eye of the Dhamma (*dhammacakkhu-paṭilābha*), the breakthrough to the Dhamma (*dhammābhisamaya*), the penetration of the Dhamma (*dhamma-paṭivedha*).<sup>31</sup> One who has undergone this experience is said to have “seen the Dhamma, reached the Dhamma, under-

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30. *Sappurisasamseva, saddhammasavana, yoniso manasikāra, dhammānuddhammapaṭipadā*. See SN 55:55/S V 410–11.

stood the Dhamma, fathomed the Dhamma.”<sup>32</sup> Taken together, both modes of description—by way of the four factors of stream-entry and by way of the event of realization—indicate that the disciple has arrived at stream-entry primarily through insight supported by unwavering faith in the Three Jewels. It is noteworthy that the texts on the realization of stream-entry make no mention of any prior accomplishment in jhāna as a prerequisite for reaching the path. In fact, several texts show the breakthrough to stream-entry as occurring to someone without any prior meditative experience, simply by listening to the Buddha or an enlightened monk give a discourse on the Dhamma.<sup>33</sup>

While the process of “entering the stream” involves both faith and wisdom, individuals differ in their disposition with respect to these two qualities: some are disposed to faith, others to wisdom. This difference is reflected in the division of potential stream-enterers into two types, known as the *saddhānusārī* or faith-follower and the *dharmānusārī* or Dhamma-follower. Both have entered “the fixed course of rightness” (*sammatta-niyāma*), the irreversible path to stream-entry, by attuning their understanding of actuality to the nature of actuality itself, and thus for both insight is the key to entering upon the path. The two types differ, however, in the means by which they generate insight. The faith-follower, as the term implies, does so with faith as the driving force; inspired by faith, he resolves on the ultimate truth and thereby gains the path. The Dhamma-follower is driven by an urge to fathom the true nature of actuality; inspired by this urge, he investigates the teaching and gains the path. When they have known and seen the truth of the Dhamma, they realize the fruit of stream-entry.

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31. *Dhammacakkhu-paññāpāṭha*, *dharmābhisamaya*, *dharmā-paññāpāṭha*. See S II 134–38 for the first two; the third is more a commentarial expression used to explain the second.

32. *Diṭṭhadhamma*, *pattadhamma*, *viditadhamma*, *pariyogāḷhadhamma*; at e.g. D I 110, M I 501, etc.

33. D I 110, M I 501, as well as S III 106, 135, etc.

Perhaps the most informative source on the difference between these two types is the Okkantika-saṃyutta, where the Buddha shows how they enter upon the fixed course of rightness:

“Bhikkhus, the eye is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. So too the ear ... nose ... tongue ... body ... mind. One who places faith in these teachings and resolves on them thus is called a faith-follower: he is one who has entered the fixed course of rightness, entered the plane of the superior persons, transcended the plane of the worldlings. He is incapable of doing any deed by reason of which he might be reborn in hell, in the animal realm, or in the sphere of ghosts; he is incapable of passing away without having realized the fruit of stream-entry.

“One for whom these teachings are accepted thus to a sufficient degree by being pondered with wisdom is called a Dhamma-follower: he is one who has entered the fixed course of rightness ... (he is) incapable of passing away without having realized the fruit of stream-entry.

“One who knows and sees these teachings thus is called a stream-enterer, no longer bound to the nether world, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as his destination.”<sup>34</sup>

It is noteworthy that this passage makes no mention of jhāna. While prior experience of jhāna would no doubt help to make the mind a more fit instrument for insight, it is surely significant that jhāna is not mentioned either as an accompaniment of the “entry upon the fixed course of rightness” or as a prerequisite for it.

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34. SN 25:1/S III 224: *Cakkhuṃ bhikkhave aniccaṃ vipariṇāmiṃ aññathābhāvī. Sotam ... mano anicco vipariṇāmi aññathābhāvī. Yo bhikkhave ime dhamme evaṃ saddahati adhimuccati, ayaṃ vuccati saddhānusārī okkanto sammattaniyāmaṃ sappurisabhūmiṃ okkanto vītivatto puthujjanabhūmiṃ. Abhabbo taṃ kammaṃ kātuṃ yaṃ kammaṃ katvā nirayaṃ vā tiracchānayoṇiṃ vā pettivisaṃyaṃ vā upapajjeyya. Abhabbo ca tāva kālaṃ kātuṃ yāva na sotāpattiphalāṃ sacchikaroti. Yassa kho bhikkhave ime dhammā evaṃ paññāya mattaso nijjhānaṃ khamanti, ayaṃ vuccati dhammānusārī okkanto sammattaniyāmaṃ ... Abhabbo ca tāva kālaṃ kātuṃ yāva na sotāpattiphalāṃ sacchikaroti. Yo bhikkhave ime dhamme evaṃ jānāti evaṃ passati, ayaṃ vuccati sotāpanno avinipātadhammo niyato sambodhiparāyano.*

It might be objected that several other passages on the two candidates for stream-entry implicitly include the jhānas among their meditative equipment. The details of these passages need not concern us here. What is of interest to us is that they assign to both the faith-follower and the Dhamma-follower the five spiritual faculties: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.<sup>35</sup> The Indriya-saṃyutta states that the faculty of concentration “is to be seen among the four jhānas,”<sup>36</sup> and a definition of the concentration faculty includes the formula for the jhānas.<sup>37</sup> Thus, if we argue deductively from these ascriptions and definitions, it would seem to follow as a matter of logic that both the Dhamma-follower and the faith-follower possess the jhānas. More broadly, since these faculties and powers belong to all noble disciples, not to monks alone, this might be held up as proof that all noble disciples, monks and lay followers, invariably possess the jhānas.

Such a conclusion would follow if we adopt a literal and deductive approach to the interpretation of the texts, but it is questionable whether such a hermeneutic is always appropriate when dealing with the formulaic definitions employed so often by the Nikāyas. To extract the intended meaning from such schematic definition, we require greater sensitivity to context, sensitivity guided by acquaintance with a wide assortment of relevant texts. Further, if we do opt for the literalist approach, then, since the passage simply inserts the formula for the four jhānas without qualification into the definition of the concentration faculty, we would have to conclude that all noble disciples, monks and lay followers alike, possess all four jhānas,

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35. E.g., M I 479, S V 200–2. SN 55:25/S V 379 ascribes the five faculties to two types of persons who, though the terms are not used, are clearly identifiable as the *dhammānusārī* and *saddhānusārī*.

36. SN 48:8/S V 196: *catusu jhānesu, ettha samādhindriyaṃ daṭṭhabbaṃ*. See too AN 5:15/III 12, where it is said that the power of concentration (*samādhibala*) “is to be seen among the four jhānas.”

37. At SN 48:10/S V 198, the faculty of concentration is defined by the formula for the four jhānas. At AN 5:14/A III 11, the power of concentration (*samādhibala*) is similarly defined.

not just one. Even more, they would have to possess the four jhānas already as faith-followers and Dhamma-followers, at the very entry to the path. This, however, seems too generous, and indicates that we need to be cautious in interpreting such formulaic definitions. In the case presently being considered, I would regard the use of the jhāna formula here as a way of showing the most eminent type of concentration to be developed by the noble disciple. I would not take it as a rigid pronouncement that all noble disciples actually possess all four jhānas, or even one of them.

But there is more to be said. When we attend closely to these texts, we see that a degree of flexibility is already built into them. In the analysis of the faculties at SN 48:9–10/S V 197–98, the first sutta offers an alternative definition of the faculty of concentration that does not mention the four jhānas, while the following sutta gives both definitions conjointly. The alternative version runs thus: “And what, monks, is the faculty of concentration? Here, monks, a noble disciple gains concentration, gains one-pointedness of mind, having made release the object. This is called the faculty of concentration.”<sup>38</sup>

The Nikāyas themselves nowhere explain exactly what is meant by the concentration gained by “having made release the object” (*vossaggārammaṇaṃ karitvā*), but they do elsewhere suggest that release (*vossagga*) is a term for Nibbāna.<sup>39</sup> The Commentary interprets this passage with the aid of the distinction between mundane (*lokiya*) and supramundane (*lokuttara*) concentration: the former consists in the form-sphere jhānas (and the access to these jhānas), the latter in the supramundane jhānas concomitant with the supramundane path.<sup>40</sup> On the basis of this

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38. *Katamañca bhikkhave samādhindriyaṃ? Idha bhikkhave ariyasāvako vossaggārammaṇaṃ karitvā labhati samādhiṃ labhati cittaassa ekaggataṃ. Idam bhikkhave samādhindriyaṃ.*

39. Throughout the Magga-saṃyutta, the expression *vossagga-pariṇāmi*, “maturing in release,” is used to describe the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. This suggests that *vossagga*, as the goal of the path, is Nibbāna.

40. Below I will elaborate on the distinction between the form-sphere and supramundane jhānas.

distinction, the Commentary explains “the concentration that makes release the object” as the supramundane concentration of the noble path arisen with Nibbāna as object.<sup>41</sup> Thus if we feel obliged to interpret the faculty and power of concentration in the light of the jhāna formula, we might go along with the Commentary in regarding it as the supramundane jhāna pertaining to the supramundane path and fruit.

However, we need not agree with the Commentaries in taking the expression “having made release the object” so literally. We might instead interpret this phrase more loosely as characterizing a concentration aimed at release, that is, directed towards Nibbāna.<sup>42</sup> Then we can understand its referent as the concentration that functions as the basis for insight, both initially in the preparatory phase of practice and later in immediate conjunction with insight. This would allow us to ascribe to the noble disciple a degree of concentration strong enough to qualify as a faculty without compelling us to hold that he must possess jhāna. Perhaps the combined definition of the concentration faculty in SN 48:10 is intended to show that two courses are open to disciples. One is the route emphasizing strong concentration, along which one develops the jhānas as the faculty of concentration; the other is the route emphasizing insight, along which one develops concentration only to the degree needed for

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41. Spk III 234, commenting on SN 48:9.

42. Paṭiṣ III 586–87 seems to take this tack in commenting on the expression thus: “Having as object release: here release is Nibbāna, for Nibbāna is called release because it is the releasing of the conditioned, its relinquishment. Insight and the phenomena associated with it have Nibbāna as object, Nibbāna as support, because they are established on Nibbāna as their support in the sense of slanting towards it by way of inclination. Concentration is nondistraction distinguished into access and absorption (*upacārappanābhedo avikkhepo*), consisting in the one-pointedness of mind aroused by being established on Nibbāna, with that as cause by taking as object release of the phenomena produced therein. Concentration partaking of penetration (*nibbedhabhāgiyo samādhi*), aroused subsequent to insight, is described.” From this, it seems that “concentration having release as its object” can be understood as a concentration aroused through the practice of insight meditation, aiming at the attainment of Nibbāna.

insight to arise. This concentration, though falling short of *jhāna*, could still be described as “concentration that makes release its object.”

The faith-follower and the Dhamma-follower are the lowest members of a sevenfold typology of noble persons mentioned in the *Nikāyas* as an alternative to the more common scheme of “the four pairs of persons,” the four path-attainers and the realizers of their respective fruits.<sup>43</sup> The seven fall into three groups. At the apex are the arahants, who are distinguished into two types: (i) “both-ways-liberated” arahants (*ubhatobhāgavimutta*), who gain release from the taints together with deep experience of the formless attainments; and (ii) “wisdom-liberated” arahants (*paññāvimutta*), who win release from the taints without such experience of the formless attainments. Next are three types in the intermediate range, from stream-enterers up to those on the path to arahantship. These are: (iii) the body-witness (*kāyasakkhī*), who has partly eliminated the taints and experiences the formless attainments; (iv) the view-attainer (*ditṭhippatta*), who does not experience the formless attainments and has partly eliminated the taints, with emphasis on wisdom; and (v) the faith-liberated (*saddhāvimutta*), who does not experience the formless attainments and has partly eliminated the taints, with emphasis on faith. Any disciple at the six intermediate stages—from stream-enterer to one on the path to arahantship—can fall into any of these three categories; the distinctions among them are not determined by degree of progress but by mode of progress, whether through strong concentration, wisdom, or faith. Finally come the two kinds of *anusārī* (vi–vii), who are on the path to stream-entry.

What is noteworthy about this list is that *samādhi*, as a faculty, does not determine a class of its own until after the fruit of stream-entry has been realized. That is, facility in concentration determines a distinct type of disciple among the arahants (as the both-ways-liberated arahant) and among the aspirants for the higher stages (as the body-witness), but not among the aspirants

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43. The fullest discussion of this sevenfold typology is at M I 477–79. The seven types are also defined, somewhat differently, at Pp 14–15.

for stream-entry. In this lowest category we have only the faith-follower and the Dhamma-follower, who owe their status to faith and wisdom, respectively, but there is no type corresponding to the body-witness.<sup>44</sup>

From the omission of a class of disciples training for stream-entry who also enjoy the experience of the formless meditations, one might suppose that disciples below the level of stream-entry cannot gain access to the formless attainments. This supposition is not tenable, however, for the texts show that many of the ascetics and contemplatives in the Buddha's day (including his two teachers before his enlightenment) were familiar with the jhānas and formless attainments. Since these attainments are not dependent on the insight made uniquely available through the Buddha's teaching, the omission of such a class of jhāna-attainers among those on the way to stream-entry must be explained in some other way than by the supposition that such a class does not exist.

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44. One possible exception to this statement is a curious sutta, AN 7:53/A IV 78. Here the Buddha begins by discussing the first six types, of which the first two are said to be "without residue" (*anupādisesa*), i.e., of defilements, which means that they are arahants; the next four are said to be "with residue" (*sa-upādisesa*), meaning they have some defilements and thus are not yet arahants. But in the seventh position, where we would expect to find the *saddhānusāri*, he inserts instead "the seventh type, the person who dwells in the signless" (*sattamaṃ animittavīhāriṃ puggalaṃ*). This is explained as "a monk who, through non-attention to all signs, enters and dwells in the signless mental concentration" (*bhikkhu sabbanimittānaṃ amanasikārā animittaṃ cetosamādhīṃ upasampajja viharati*). This assertion seems to open up, as an alternative to the faith-follower, a class of aspirants for stream-entry who specialize in concentration. But this passage is unique in the Nikāyas and has not formed the basis for an alternative system of classification. Moreover, the commentary explains the "signless mental concentration" to be "strong insight concentration" (*balava-vipassanā-samādhī*), so called because it removes the signs of permanence, pleasure, and selfhood. (See Mp IV 40) Thus it is questionable whether even the recognition of this type means that *samatha* concentration determines a class of disciple on the path to stream-entry.

I would propose that while disciples prior to stream-entry may or may not possess the formless attainments, skill in this area does not determine a distinct type because powerful concentration is not a governing factor in the attainment of stream-entry. The way to stream-entry certainly requires a degree of concentration sufficient for the “eye of the Dhamma” to arise, but the actual movement from the stage of a worldling to that of a path-attainer is driven by either strong conviction or a probing spirit of inquiry, which respectively determine whether the aspirant is to become a faith-follower or a Dhamma-follower. Once, however, the path has been gained, then one’s degree of accomplishment in concentration determines one’s future mode of progress. If one gains the formless attainments one takes the route of the body-witness, culminating in release as a both-ways-liberated arahant. If one does not attain them, one takes the route of the view-attainer or faith-liberated trainee, culminating in release as a wisdom-liberated arahant. Since these distinctions relate only to the formless attainments and make no mention of the jhānas, it is reasonable to suppose that types (ii), (iv–v), and (vi–vii) may have possession of the form-sphere jhānas. But by making faith and wisdom the key factors in gaining the initial access to the path, this scheme leaves open the possibility that some stream-enterers, and perhaps those at still higher levels, may not have gained these jhānas at all.

### 3. JHĀNA AND RIGHT CONCENTRATION

Though the above discussion seems to imply that the path of stream-entry might be reached without prior attainment of jhāna, the thesis that jhāna is necessary at every stage of enlightenment claims powerful support from the canonical account of the Noble Eightfold Path, which defines the path factor of right concentration (*sammā samādhi*) with the stock formula for the four jhānas.<sup>45</sup> From this definition it might be argued that since right concentration is integral to the path, and since the jhānas form the content of right concentration, the

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45. For example, at D II 313 and S V 10.

jhānas are indispensable from the first stage of awakening to the last.

This conclusion, however, does not necessarily follow. Even if we agree that the definition of right concentration by way of the jhānas categorically means that the jhānas must be reached in the course of developing the path, this need not be taken to stipulate that they must be attained prior to attaining stream-entry. It could be that attainment of jhāna is necessary to complete the development of the path, becoming mandatory at a relatively late point in the disciple's progress. That is, it may be a prerequisite for reaching one of the higher paths and fruits, but may not be indispensable for reaching the first path and fruit. The Theravāda exegetical system found in the Pāli Commentaries handles this issue in a different way. Based on the Abhidhamma's classification of states of consciousness, the Commentaries distinguish two kinds of path: the preliminary (*pubbabhāga*) or mundane (*lokiya*) path and the supramundane (*lokuttara*) path.<sup>46</sup> Two kinds of jhānas, mundane and supramundane, correspond to these two kinds of path. The mundane jhānas are exalted states of consciousness (*mahaggata-citta*) developed in the preliminary path, as a preparation for reaching the supramundane path; technically, they are "form-sphere" states of consciousness (*rūpāvacara-citta*), that is, types of consciousness typical of the "form realm" and tending to rebirth in the form realm. The supramundane jhānas are supramundane states of consciousness (*lokuttara-citta*) identical with the supramundane paths or fruits themselves.

This distinction allows the Commentaries to hold simultaneously two theses regarding the relation of jhāna to the path: (i) every path and fruition attainment, from the stage of stream-entry up, is also a jhāna, and thus all path-attainers are attainers of supramundane jhāna; (ii) not all path-attainers have reached jhāna in the preliminary path leading up to the supramundane path, and thus they need not be attainers of

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46. The distinction is found already in Dhs, in its analysis of the classes of wholesome consciousness pertaining to the sphere of form and the supramundane types of wholesome consciousness. See too the Jhānavibhaṅga (Abhidhamma-bhājanīya) of Vibh.

mundane (or form-sphere) jhāna. These two theses can be reconciled because the paths and fruits always occur at a level of concentration corresponding to one of the four jhānas and thus may be considered jhānas in their own right, though jhānas of the supramundane rather than mundane type. These jhānas are quite distinct from the mundane jhānas, the exalted states of concentration pertaining to the form-sphere (*rūpāvacara*). As all path-attainers necessarily attain supramundane jhāna, they fulfill the definition of right concentration in the Noble Eightfold Path, but they may not have attained the form-sphere jhānas prior to reaching the path. Those who do not attain jhāna develop a lower degree of concentration (called access concentration, *upacāra-samādhi*) which they use as a basis to arouse insight and thereby reach the supramundane path. When those meditators who arouse insight without prior attainment of jhāna reach the supramundane path, their path attainment occurs at the level of the first supramundane jhāna. Those who have already cultivated the mundane jhānas prior to attaining the path, it is said, generally attain a path that occurs at a jhānic level corresponding to their degree of achievement in the practice of the mundane jhānas.<sup>47</sup>

Though the Nikāyas do not clearly distinguish the two types of paths and jhānas, several suttas foreshadow this distinction, the most prominent among them being the Mahācattārisaka Sutta.<sup>48</sup> The distinction becomes explicit in the Abhidhamma, where it is used as a basis for the definitions of the form-sphere and supramundane wholesome states of consciousness. The Commentaries go one step further and adopt this distinction as foundational to their entire method of exegesis. Although one is certainly not justified in reading the interpretative concepts of the Commentaries into the canonical texts themselves, since the Commentaries feel obliged to explain the definition of right concentration as the four jhānas in a way that does not imply all path-attainers possess the form-sphere jhānas, this makes it plain

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47. See Vism XXI.112–16.

that they did not regard the form-sphere jhānas as a prerequisite for attaining the path of stream-entry.

#### 4. THE STREAM-ENTERER AND JHĀNA

The contention between the two parties in the contemporary debate might be recapitulated thus: Those who assert that jhāna is necessary for the attainment of stream-entry usually insist that a mundane (or form-sphere) jhāna must be secured before one can enter the supramundane path. Those who defend the dry-insight approach hold that a mundane jhāna is not indispensable, that a lower degree of concentration suffices as a basis for the cultivation of insight and the attainment of the path. Both parties usually agree that jhāna is part of the actual path experience itself. The issue that divides them is whether the concentration in the preliminary portion of the path must include a jhāna.

To decide this question, I wish to query the texts themselves and ask whether they show us instances of stream-enterers who are not attainers of the jhānas. Now while there are no suttas which flatly state that it is possible to become a stream-enterer without having attained at least the first jhāna, I think there are several that imply as much.

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48. MN 117. In this sutta the Buddha distinguishes five of the path factors, from right view through right livelihood, into two kinds, one “connected with taints, partaking of merit, ripening in the aggregates” (*sāsava puññabhāgiya upadhivepakka*), the other “noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path” (*ariya anāsava lokuttara maggaṅga*). “Noble right concentration with its supports and requisites” (*ariya sammā samādhi sa-upanisa sa-parikkhāra*) is mental one-pointedness equipped with the other seven factors in their noble, supramundane dimension. If the latter is understood to be supramundane jhāna, then we might suppose the jhānas usually described in the training of the disciple are “connected with taints, partaking of merit, ripening in the aggregates.” The texts never describe the jhānas in quite these terms, but some suttas imply their attainment leads only to a higher rebirth without necessarily conducing to deliverance. See note 63 below.

(1) Let us start with the Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta (MN No. 14). The sutta opens when the Sakyan lay disciple Mahānāma, identified by the commentary as a once-returner, comes to the Buddha and presents him with a personal problem. Although he has long understood, through the guidance of the teaching, that greed, hatred, and delusion are corruptions of the mind (*cittassa upakkilesa*), such states still arise in him and overpower his mind. This troubles him and makes him wonder what the underlying cause might be. In his reply (M I 91) the Buddha says: “Even though a noble disciple has clearly seen with perfect wisdom that sensual pleasures give little satisfaction and are fraught with suffering and misery, rife with greater danger, if he does not achieve a rapture and happiness apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, or something more peaceful than this, then he is not beyond being enticed by sensual pleasures.” The first part of this statement implies that the subject is at least a stream-enterer, for he is referred to as a “noble disciple” (*ariya-sāvaka*). Though the term *ariya-sāvaka* is occasionally used in a loose sense that need not be taken to imply attainment of stream-entry, here the expression “seeing with perfect wisdom” seems to establish his identity as at least a stream-enterer. Yet the second part of the statement implies he does not possess even the first jhāna, for the phrase used to describe what he lacks (“a rapture and happiness apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states”) precisely echoes the wording of the basic formula for the first jhāna. The state “more peaceful than that” would, of course, be the higher jhānas.

(2) At AN 5:179/A III 211, the Buddha speaks, with reference to “a lay follower clothed in white” (*gihī odātavaśana*), of four “pleasant dwellings in this very life pertaining to the higher mind” (*cattāro ābhicetasikā ditṭhadhamma-sukhavihārā*). Now in relation to monks, the Nikāyas invariably use this expression to mean the four jhānas.<sup>49</sup> If it were considered commonplace, or even paradigmatic, for a lay noble disciple to attain the four

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49. See, e.g., M I 356; AN 10:8/A V 11, etc.

jhānas, one would expect the Buddha to explain the above expression in the same way as he does for monks. But he does not. Rather, when he specifies what these “pleasant abidings” mean for the noble lay follower, he identifies them with the possession of the four “factors of stream-entry” (*sotāpattiyaṅga*), namely, confirmed confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha, and possession of “the virtues dear to the noble ones.” This difference in explanation has important ramifications and is indicative of major differences in expectations regarding lay followers and monks.

(3) At AN VI 10/A III 284–88, the Sakyan noble Mahānāma again approaches the Buddha and inquires about the meditative practice of “a noble disciple who has reached the fruit and understood the message” (*ariyasāvako āgataphalo viññātasāsano*). Here again, it is clear from the epithets used that the question concerns a lay follower who has realized stream-entry or some higher stage. Further, at the end of each expository section, the Buddha stresses the ariyan stature of the disciple with the words: “This is called, Mahānāma, a noble disciple who among unrighteous humanity has attained righteousness, who among an afflicted humanity dwells unafflicted, who has entered the stream of the Dhamma and develops recollection of the Buddha” (and so for each object of recollection).<sup>50</sup>

In his reply the Buddha shows how the lay disciple takes up one of the six objects of recollection (*cha anussati*): the Three Jewels, morality, generosity, and the devas. As the disciple recollects each theme, his mind is not obsessed by lust, hatred, or delusion, but becomes upright (*ujugata*): “With an upright mind he gains the inspiration of the goal, the inspiration of the Dhamma, gladness connected with the Dhamma. When he is gladdened rapture arises, his body becomes tranquil, and he experiences happiness. For one who is happy the mind becomes concentrated.”<sup>51</sup> As this passage shows, contemplation based on the Buddha (and the other objects of recollection) culminates in

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50. A III 285, etc.: *Ayaṃ vuccati Mahānāma ariyasāvako visamaḡatāya pajāya samappatto viharati, saṃyāpajjhāya pajāya aṃyāpajjho viharati, dhammasotaṃ samāpanno buddhānussatiṃ bhāveti.*

samādhi, yet the nature of this samādhi is not elucidated by way of the jhāna formula. In fact, the Nikāyas never ascribe to these reflective contemplations the capacity to induce jhāna, and this is expressly denied in the Commentaries, which hold that because these meditation subjects involve intensive use of discursive thought they can lead only as far as access concentration (*upacāra-samādhi*).

It thus seems that the type of concentration typically available to a lay noble disciple at the stage of stream-entry or once-returning is access concentration. This, of course, does not mean that stream-enterers and once-returners don't attain the jhānas, but only that the standard doctrinal structure does not ascribe the jhānas to them as essential equipment.

(4) Nor does the above sutta imply that a lay stream-enterer must remain content merely with excursions into access concentration and cannot develop the higher wisdom of insight. To the contrary, the Buddha includes the higher wisdom among the five excellent qualities he regularly ascribes to noble lay disciples: faith, virtue, learning, generosity, and wisdom.<sup>52</sup> In several suttas of the Sotāpatti-saṃyutta, generosity and wisdom even replace virtue as the fourth factor of stream-entry, faith being included by “confirmed confidence” in the Three Jewels.<sup>53</sup> We should note that we do not find among these qualities any mention of samādhi or a formula for the jhānas. Yet we see that wisdom is defined in exactly the same terms used to define the wisdom of a monk in training (*sekha*). It is “the noble wisdom that discerns the arising and passing away of things, that is noble and penetrative and leads to the complete destruction of suffering.”<sup>54</sup> Since the

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51. Ibid: *Ujugatacitto kho pana Mahānāma ariyasāvako labhati atthavedaṃ labhati dhammavedaṃ labhati dhammūpasamhitam pāmujjam; pamuditassa pīti jāyati, pītimanassa kāyo passambhati; passaddhakāyo sukhaṃ vediyati; sukkhino cittaṃ samādhiyati.*

52. *Saddhā, sīla, suta, cāga, paññā.* Sometimes learning is omitted, since this is not as integral to the *ariyan* character as the other four qualities.

53. See SN 55:32–33, 42–43; V 391–92, 401–2.

54. *Udayatthagāminiyā paññāya samannāgato ariyāya nibbedhikāya sammā-dukkhakkhaya-gāminiyā.*

lay stream-enterer or once-returner is thus well equipped with the wisdom of insight but is not typically described as a jhāna attainer, this implies that attainment of jhāna is not normally expected or required of him. From this we can also conclude that at these early stages of the path liberative wisdom does not depend on a supporting base of jhāna.

(5) A text in the Sotāpatti-saṃyutta gives credit to this conclusion. At SN 55:40/V 398–99, the Buddha explains to the Sakyan Nandiya how a noble disciple dwells diligently (*ariyasāvako appamāḍavīhārī*). He says that a noble disciple should not become complacent about possessing the four factors of stream-entry but should use these qualities as starting points for contemplation: “He is not content with his confirmed confidence in the Buddha (etc.), but strives further in seclusion by day and in retreat by night. As he dwells diligently, gladness arises ... (as above) ... for one who is happy the mind becomes concentrated. When the mind is concentrated, phenomena become manifest. It is with the manifestation of phenomena to him that he is reckoned as ‘one who dwells diligently.’”<sup>55</sup>

The expression “manifestation of phenomena” (*dhammānaṃ pātubhāva*) indicates that the disciple is engaged in contemplating the rise and fall of the five aggregates, the six sense bases, and so forth. Thus this passage shows how the disciple proceeds from concentration to insight, but it does not describe this concentration in terms suggesting it occurs at the level of jhāna. Since the sequence switches over from concentration to insight without mentioning jhāna, it seems that the concentration attained will be tantamount to access concentration, not jhāna, yet even this suffices to support the arising of insight.

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55. S V 398–99: *Idha Nandiya ariyasāvako Buddhhe aveccappasādena samannāgato hoti ... So tena Buddhhe aveccappasādena asantuṭṭho uttarim vāyamati divā pavivekāya rattiṃ paṭisallānāya. Tassa evaṃ appamattassa viharato pāmujjam jāyati ... sukhino cittaṃ samādhīyati. Samāhite citte dhammā pātubhavanti. Dhammānaṃ pātubhāvā appamāḍavīhārī tveva saṅkham gacchati.... Evaṃ kho Nandiya ariyasāvako appamāḍavīhārī hoti.*

## 5. WHEN DO THE JHĀNAS BECOME NECESSARY?

While there seem to be no suttas that impose an inflexible rule to the effect that a lay noble disciple must possess the jhānas, there are at least two texts that explicitly ascribe all four jhānas to certain householders. One, found in the Citta-saṃyutta (SN 41:9/IV 300–2), features Citta the householder, the foremost lay preacher, in a conversation with a naked ascetic named Kassapa. Kassapa was an old friend of Citta who had embraced the life of renunciation thirty years earlier, and this is apparently their first meeting since that time. Kassapa confesses to Citta that in all these years he has not achieved any “superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision befitting the noble ones” (*uttarimanusadhamma alamariya-nānadassanavisesa*); all he does is go about naked, with a shaved head, using a feather brush to sweep his seat. He then asks Citta whether, as a lay disciple of the Buddha, he has reached any distinguished attainments. Citta says that he has, and then declares his ability to enter and dwell in the four jhānas (he uses the standard formula). To this he adds: “Further, if I were to die before the Blessed One, it would not be surprising if the Blessed One would declare of me: ‘There is no fetter bound by which Citta the householder might come back to this world.’”<sup>56</sup> Through this bit of coded text, partly a stock formulation, Citta is informing his friend that he is a non-returner with access to the four jhānas.

The other sutta is AN 7:50/A IV 66–67 and concerns the lay woman Nandamātā. In the presence of the Venerable Sāriputta and other monks, Nandamātā has been disclosing the seven wonderful and marvelous qualities with which she is endowed. The sixth of these is possession of the four jhānas, again described by the stock formula. The seventh is as follows: “As to the five lower fetters taught by the Blessed One, I do not see

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56. Spk IV 301: *Sace kho pan’āhaṃ bhante Bhagavato paṭhamataraṃ kālaṃ kareyya anacchariyaṃ kho pan’etaṃ yaṃ maṃ Bhagavā etaṃ vyākareyya, Natthi taṃ saññojanaṃ yena saññojanena saṃyutto Citto gahapati puna imaṃ lokaṃ āgaccheyyā ti.*

among them any as yet unabandoned in myself.”<sup>57</sup> This too is a coded way of declaring her status as a non-returner.

Such are the reports that have come down in the Sutta Piṭaka about two lay followers who possess both the four jhānas and the status of non-returner. Whether these two achievements are inseparably connected or not is difficult to determine on the basis of the Nikāyas, but there are several texts that lend support to this conclusion. One sutta (AN 3:85/A I 231–32) ranks the four classes of noble disciples in relation to the threefold higher training consisting of the higher virtue, the higher mind, and the higher wisdom. Just below, the Buddha explains the training in the higher virtue (*adhisīla-sikkhā*) as the restraint of the Pātimokkha, the code of monastic rules; the training in the higher mind (*adhicitta-sikkhā*), as the four jhānas (defined by the usual formula); and the training in the higher wisdom (*adhipaññā-sikkhā*), as either the knowledge of the four noble truths or liberation from the taints (AN 3:88–89/I 235–36). Although the Buddha’s treatment of this topic is governed by a monastic context, the principles of classification can easily be extended to lay disciples. Returning to AN 3:85, we learn that the stream-enterer and the once-returner have fulfilled the training in the higher virtue (which for a lay disciple would mean possession of “the virtues dear to the noble ones”) but have accomplished the other two trainings only partly; the non-returner has fulfilled the trainings in the higher virtue and the higher mind but accomplished the training in the higher wisdom only partly; and the arahant has fulfilled all three trainings. Now since the non-returner has fulfilled the training in the higher mind, and this is defined as the four jhānas, he is probably an attainer of the jhānas.

It might still be questioned, however, whether he must possess all four jhānas. While a literal reading of the above sutta would support this conclusion, if we bear in mind my earlier comments about interpreting stock formulas, we might conjecture that the training in the higher mind is fulfilled by the

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57. A IV 67: *Yānīmāni bhante Bhagavatā desitāni pañc’orambhāgiyāni saṃyojanāni, nāhaṃ tesaṃ kinci attani appahīnaṃ samanupassāmī ti.*

secure attainment of even one jhāna. This seems to be confirmed by the Mahāmāluṅkya Sutta (MN 64/M I 434-37), which shows how the attainment of jhāna figures in the preliminary phase of the path to the stage of non-returner. At a certain point in his discourse, the Buddha announces that he will teach “the path and way for the abandoning of the five lower fetters” (*yo maggo yā paṭipadā pañcannaṃ orambhāgiyānaṃ saṃyojanānaṃ pahānāya*). He underscores the importance of what he is about to explain with a simile. Just as it is impossible to cut out the heartwood of a great tree without first cutting through the bark and softwood, so it is impossible to cut off the five lower fetters without relying on the path and practice he is about to make known. This lays down categorically that the procedure to be described must be exactly followed to win the promised goal, the eradication of the five lower fetters (the defining achievement of the non-returner).

The Buddha then explains the method. The meditator enters into one of the four jhānas or the lower three formless attainments (the text takes up each in turn) and dissects it into its constituents: form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness in the case of the four jhānas; the same, but omitting form, for the three formless attainments.<sup>58</sup> He next contemplates these phenomena in eleven ways: as impermanent, suffering, a disease, a boil, a dart, misery, affliction, alien, disintegrating, empty, and non-self. Then, when his contemplation reaches maturity, he turns his mind away from these things and directs it to the deathless element (*amata-dhātu*), i.e., Nibbāna. “If he is firm in this he reaches arahantship right on the spot, but if he holds back slightly due to attachment and delight in the Dhamma, then he eliminates the five lower fetters and becomes a spontaneous ariser, who attains final Nibbāna there (in a celestial realm) without ever returning from that world.”<sup>59</sup>

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58. According to the commentary, the fourth formless state, the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, is not mentioned because its constituents are too subtle to be comprehended by insight. But a parallel text, AN 9:36/A IV 422–26, teaches a method by which the fourth formless attainment, as well as the cessation of feeling and perception, can be used to generate insight and thereby reach arahantship or non-returning.

The Mahāmāluṅkya Sutta thus makes the attainment of jhāna a necessary part of the preparatory practice for attaining the stage of non-returner. Though the sutta discusses the practice undertaken by a monk, since the Buddha has declared this to be “the path and practice for abandoning the five lower fetters,” we are entitled to infer that lay practitioners too must follow this course. This would imply that a once-returner who aspires to become a non-returner should develop at least the first jhāna in the preliminary phase of the path, using the jhāna as the launching pad for developing insight.

While the Mahāmāluṅkya Sutta and its parallel (AN 9:36/A IV 422–26) imply that prior attainment of the first jhāna is a minimum requirement for reaching the fruit of non-returning, we may still query whether this is an invariable rule or merely a general stipulation that allows for exceptions. Several suttas suggest the latter may in fact be the case. In two consecutive texts the Buddha extols the “eight wonderful and marvelous qualities” of two lay followers named Ugga. In the first (AN 8:21/A IV 211), he declares that Ugga of Vesālī has abandoned all five fetters (as for Nandamātā above); in the second (AN 8:22/A IV 216), he says that Ugga of Hatthigāma has no fetters bound by which he might come back to this world (as for Citta). Yet, though he thus confirms their standing as non-returners, the Buddha does not mention jhānic attainments among their eight wonderful qualities. This, of course, need not be taken to mean that they lacked attainment of jhāna. It may have been that their jhānic skills were less remarkable than the other qualities they possessed, or they may have been adept in only one or two jhānas rather than in all four. But it does leave open the possibility that they were non-returners without jhāna.

Still another suggestive text is the Dīghāvu Sutta (SN 55:3/S V 344–46). Here, the Buddha visits a young lay follower named Dīghāvu, who is gravely ill. He first enjoins the sick boy to

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59. M I 435–36: *So tatthaṭṭhito āsavānaṃ khayam pāpuṇāti; no ce āsavānaṃ khayam pāpuṇāti ten’eva dhammarāgena tāya dhammanandiyā pancannaṃ orambhāḡiyānaṃ saṃyojanānaṃ parikkhayā opapātiko hoti tatthapariniḡbāyī anāvattidhammo tasmā lokā.*

acquire confirmed confidence in the Three Jewels and the virtues dear to the noble ones, that is, to become a stream-enterer. When Dīghāvu declares that he already possesses these qualities, the Buddha tells him that since he is established in the four factors of stream-entry, he should “strive further to develop six qualities that partake of true knowledge” (*cha vijjābhāgiyā dhammā*): “You should dwell contemplating the impermanence of all formations, perceiving suffering in what is impermanent, perceiving non-self in what is suffering, perceiving abandonment, perceiving dispassion, perceiving cessation.”<sup>60</sup> Dīghāvu assures the Blessed One that he is already practising these contemplations, and the Master leaves. A short time later Dīghāvu dies. On hearing the news of his death, the monks approach the Buddha to ask about his future rebirth. The Buddha declares that Dīghāvu the lay follower had eradicated the five lower fetters and was spontaneously reborn as a non-returner. Here the transition from stream-entry to non-returning occurs entirely through a series of contemplations that pertain to insight. There has been no exhortation to develop the jhānas, yet through the practice of the “six things partaking of true knowledge” Dīghāvu has severed the five fetters and gained the third fruit of the path.

A theoretical foundation for Dīghāvu’s approach might be gleaned from another sutta. At AN 4:169/A II 155–56, the Buddha contrasts two kinds of non-returners: one who attains final Nibbāna without exertion (*asañkhāra-parinibbāyī*), and one who attains final Nibbāna with exertion (*sasañkhāra-parinibbāyī*). The former is one who enters and dwells in the four jhānas (described by the stock formula). The latter practises instead the “austere” meditations such as the contemplation of the foulness of the body, reflection on the repulsiveness of food, disenchantment with the whole world, perception of impermanence in all formations, and recollection of death.<sup>61</sup> Again, there is no categorical assertion that the latter is altogether bereft of jhāna, but the

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60. S V 345: *Cha vijjābhāgiye dhamme uttarim bhāveyyāsi. Idha tvaṃ Dīghāvu sabbasañkhāresu aniccānupassī viharāhi, anicce dukkhasaññī dukkhe anattasaññī pahānasaññī virāgasaññī nirodhasaññī ti.*

contrast of this type with one who gains the four jhānas suggests this as a possibility.

Though the possibility that there might be non-returners without jhānas cannot be ruled out, from the Nikāyas we can elicit several reasons why we might normally expect a non-returner to have access to them. One reason is inherent in the very act of becoming a non-returner. In ascending from the stage of once-returner to that of non-returner, the meditator eradicates two fetters that had been merely weakened by the once-returner: sensual desire (*kāmacchanda*) and ill will (*byāpāda*). Now these two fetters are also the first two among the five hindrances, the defilements to be abandoned to gain the jhānas. This suggests that by eradicating these defilements the non-returner permanently removes the main obstacles to concentration. Thus, if his mind so inclines, the non-returner should not find it difficult to enter upon the jhānas.

Another reason why non-returners should be gainers of the jhānas, while stream-enterers and once-returners need not be so, pertains to their future destination in saṃsāra. Though all three types of disciple have escaped the plane of misery—rebirth in hell, the animal realm, and the sphere of ghosts—stream-enterers and once-returners are still liable to rebirth in the sensuous realm (*kāmadhātu*), while non-returners are utterly freed from the prospect of such a rebirth. What keeps the former in bondage to the sensuous realm is the fetter of sensual desire (*kāmacchanda*), which remains inwardly unabandoned by them. If they succeed in attaining the jhānas, they can suppress sensual desire (and the other mental hindrances) and thus achieve rebirth in the form or formless realms. But this is not fixed for noble disciples at the lower two stages, who normally expect only a fortunate rebirth in the human realm or the sense-sphere heavens. Non-returners, on the other hand, are so called precisely because they never again return to the sensuous realm. They have eliminated sensual desire, observe celibacy, and enjoy a high degree of facility in

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61. A II 156: *Idha bhikkhu asubhānupassī kāye viharati, āhāre paṭikkūlasaññī, sabbaloke anabhiratasaññī, sabbasaṅkhāresu aniccānupassī, maraṇasaññā pan'assa ajjhataṃ sūpaṭṭhitā hoti.*

meditation. At death, the non-returner takes rebirth spontaneously in the form realm (generally in the Pure Abodes) and attains final Nibbāna there without ever returning from that world.

The non-returner severs all connection with the sensuous realm by eliminating the fetter of sensual desire, and this establishes a certain correspondence between the non-returner and the ordinary jhāna-attainer. The texts sometimes speak of the worldly jhāna-attainer as “an outsider devoid of lust for sensual pleasures.”<sup>62</sup> If he retains mastery over a jhāna at the time of death, his sublime kamma leads him to rebirth in the form realm, the specific plane of rebirth being determined by his degree of mastery over the jhānas. However, while both the ordinary jhāna-attainer and the non-returner are devoid of sensual desire and bound for rebirth in a non-sensuous realm, the two are divided by deep and fundamental differences. The ordinary jhāna-attainer has not fully eliminated any fetters and thus, with a slip of mindfulness, can easily fall victim to sensuality; the non-returner, in contrast, has cut off sensual desire and ill will at the root, ensuring that they will never again arise in him. He is not reborn in the form realm merely through the wholesome kamma generated by the jhānas, like the ordinary jhāna-attainer, but because he has eradicated the two fetters that bind even the once-returner to the sensuous realm.

This difference implies still another difference concerning their long-term fate. The ordinary jhāna-attainer, after being reborn in the form realm, eventually exhausts the powerful meritorious kamma responsible for this sublime rebirth and might then take rebirth in the sensuous realm, even in the nether world. The non-returner, on the other hand, never falls away. Set firmly on the path of the Dhamma, the non-returner who is reborn in the form realm continues to develop the path without ever regressing until he attains final Nibbāna within the form realm itself.<sup>63</sup>

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62. M III 255: *Bāhiraka kāmesu vītarāga*.

63. See AN 4:123/A II 126–28, which contrasts the worldly jhāna-attainer with the Buddhist disciple who attains them.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND AN AFTERTHOUGHT

Our study has led us to the following conclusions regarding the relationship between lay noble disciples and the jhānas.

(1) Several suttas describe the process by which a worldlyling enters “the fixed course of rightness” in a way that emphasizes either faith or wisdom as the chief means of attainment. None of the texts, however, that deal with the two candidates for stream-entry—the faith-follower and the Dhamma-follower—show them as being proficient in the jhānas. Though some suttas include the jhānas in the analysis of the faculty of concentration, this may be done simply out of compliance with the formulaic style of definition employed by the Nikāyas and need not be seen as having categorical implications. The Commentaries treat these definitions as referring to the supramundane jhāna arisen within the supramundane path. Moreover, the analysis of the concentration faculty mentions another type of concentration, which is gained “by making release the object,” and this may be interpreted broadly enough as including degrees of concentration short of the jhānas.

(2) All noble disciples acquire the right concentration of the Noble Eightfold Path, which is defined as the four jhānas. This need not be understood to mean that stream-enterers and once-returners already possess jhāna before they reach stream-entry. The formula for right concentration may imply only that they must eventually attain the jhānas in the course of developing the path to its culmination in arahantship. If we go along with the Commentaries in recognizing the Abhidhammic distinction between the preparatory path and the supramundane path, then we can maintain that the jhānas included in right concentration as a path factor pertain to the supramundane path and are thus of supramundane stature. This still leaves open the question whether aspirants for stream-entry must develop the mundane jhānas in the preliminary phase of their practice.

(3) A number of texts on stream-enterers and once-returners imply that they do not possess the jhānas as meditative attainments which they can enter at will. Though it is obvious that disciples at the lower two levels may have jhānic attainments, the

latter are not declared to be an integral part of their spiritual equipment.

(4) Several non-returners in the Nikāyas claim to possess all four jhānas, and according to the Mahāmāluṅkya Sutta, attainment of at least the first jhāna is part of the practice leading to the eradication of the five lower fetters. It thus seems likely that stream-enterers and once-returners desirous of advancing to non-returnership in that very same life must attain at least the first jhāna as a basis for developing insight. Those content with their status, prepared to let the “law of the Dhamma” take its course, generally will not strive to attain the jhānas. Instead, they settle for the assurance that they are bound to reach the final goal within a maximum of seven more lives passed in the human and celestial worlds.

(5) As non-returners have eliminated sensual lust and ill will, the main obstacles to jhānic attainment, they should face no major problems in entering the jhānas. The non-returner is similar to the ordinary jhāna-attainer in being bound for rebirth in the form realm. Unlike the latter, however, the non-returner is utterly free from sensual desire and ill will and thus can never fall back to the sensuous realm.

(6) Although in the Nikāyas the tie between the two attainments—the jhānas and non-returnership—is clear enough, it remains an open question whether the connection is absolutely binding. Several suttas speak of the achievements of non-returners without mentioning the jhānas, and at least one sutta contrasts the non-returner who gains all four jhānas with one who practises more austere types of meditation that do not typically lead to the jhānas.

The Commentaries speak even of a *sukkhavipassaka* arahant, an arahant who has gained the goal entirely through “dry insight,” without any attainment of form-sphere jhāna at all. Although such a type is not explicitly recognized in the Nikāyas, the question may be raised whether the Commentaries, in asserting the possibility of arahantship without attainment of jhāna in the mundane portion of the path, have deviated from the Canon or brought to light a viable possibility implicit in the older texts. The famous Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta declares, in its conclusion,

that all those who earnestly dedicate themselves to uninterrupted practice of the four establishments of mindfulness are bound to reap one of two fruits: either arahantship in this very life or, if any residue of clinging remains, the stage of non-returning. While several exercises within the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta are certainly capable of inducing the jhānas, the system as a whole seems oriented towards direct insight rather than towards the jhānas.<sup>64</sup> Thus this opens the question whether the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta might not be propounding a way of practice that leads all the way to non-returning, even to arahantship, without requiring attainment of the jhānas. This, however, is another question, one that lies beyond the scope of this paper.

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64. This is a widespread view among contemporary interpreters, though the sutta itself does not describe its method explicitly in such terms.