Deep Dive Into Jhana Factors | The First Jhana

BUDDHIST CONTEXT OF JHANA

The Buddha says that just as in the great ocean there is but one taste, the taste of salt, so in his doctrine and discipline there is but one taste, the taste of freedom. The taste of freedom that pervades the Buddha's teaching is the taste of spiritual freedom, which from the Buddhist perspective means freedom from suffering. In the process leading to deliverance from suffering, meditation is the means of generating the inner awakening required for liberation. The methods of meditation taught in the Theravada Buddhist tradition are based on the Buddha's own experience, forged by him in the course of his own quest for enlightenment. They are designed to re-create in the disciple who practices them the same essential enlightenment that the Buddha himself attained when he sat beneath the Bodhi tree, the awakening to the Four Noble Truths.

The various subjects and methods of meditation expounded in the Theravada Buddhist scriptures — the Pali canon and its commentaries — divide into two inter-related systems. One is called the development of serenity (samathabhavana), the other the development of insight (vipassanabhavana). The former also goes under the name of development of concentration (samadhibhavana), the latter the development of wisdom (paññabhavana). The practice of serenity meditation aims at developing a calm, concentrated, unified mind as a means of experiencing inner peace and as a basis for wisdom. The practice of insight meditation aims at gaining a direct understanding of the real nature of phenomena. Of the two, the development of insight is regarded by Buddhism as the essential key to liberation, the direct antidote to the ignorance underlying bondage and suffering. Whereas serenity meditation is recognized as common to both Buddhist and non-Buddhist contemplative disciplines, insight meditation is held to be the unique discovery of the Buddha and an unparalleled feature of his path. However, because the growth of insight presupposes a certain degree of concentration, and serenity meditation helps to achieve this, the development of serenity also claims an incontestable place in the Buddhist meditative process. Together the two types of meditation work to make the mind a fit instrument for enlightenment. With his mind unified by means of the development of serenity, made sharp and bright by the development of insight, the meditator can proceed unobstructed to reach the end of suffering, Nibbana.

Pivotal to both systems of meditation, though belonging inherently to the side of serenity, is a set of meditative attainments called the jhanas. Though translators have offered various renderings of this word, ranging from the feeble "musing" to the misleading "trance" and the ambiguous "meditation," we prefer to leave the word untranslated and to let its meaning emerge from its contextual usages. From these it is clear that the jhanas are states of deep mental unification which result from the centering of the mind upon a single object with such power of attention that a total immersion in the object takes place. The early suttas speak of four jhanas, named simply after their numerical position in the series: the first jhana, the second jhana, the third jhana and the forth jhana. In the suttas the four repeatedly appear each described by a standard formula which we will examine later in detail.

The importance of the jhanas in the Buddhist path can readily be gauged from the frequency with which they are mentioned throughout the suttas. The jhanas figure prominently both in the Buddha's own experience and in his exhortation to disciples. In his childhood, while attending an annual plowing festival, the future Buddha spontaneously entered the first jhana. It was the memory of this childhood incident, many

years later after his futile pursuit of austerities, that revealed to him the way to enlightenment during his period of deepest despondency (M.i, 246-47). After taking his seat beneath the Bodhi tree, the Buddha entered the four jhanas immediately before direction his mind to the threefold knowledge that issued in his enlightenment (M.i.247-49). Throughout his active career the four jhanas remained “his heavenly dwelling” (D.iii,220) to which he resorted in order to live happily here and now. His understanding of the corruption, purification and emergence in the jhanas and other meditative attainments is one of the Tathagata’s ten powers which enable him to turn the matchless wheel of the Dhamma (M.i,70). Just before his passing away the Buddha entered the jhanas in direct and reverse order, and the passing away itself took place directly from the fourth jhana (D.ii,156).

The Buddha is constantly seen in the suttas encouraging his disciples to develop jhana. The four jhanas are invariably included in the complete course of training laid down for disciples.[1] They figure in the training as the discipline of higher consciousness (adhicittasikkha), right concentration (sammasamadhi) of the Noble Eightfold Path, and the faculty and power of concentration (samadhindriya, samadhibala). Though a vehicle of dry insight can be found, indications are that this path is not an easy one, lacking the aid of the powerful serenity available to the practitioner of jhana. The way of the jhana attainer seems by comparison smoother and more pleasurable (A.ii,150-52). The Buddha even refers to the four jhanas figuratively as a kind of Nibbana: he calls them immediately visible Nibbana, factorial Nibbana, Nibbana here and now (A.iv,453-54).

To attain the jhanas, the meditator must begin by eliminating the unwholesome mental states obstructing inner collectedness, generally grouped together as the five hindrances (pañcanivarana): sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry and doubt.[2] The mind’s absorption on its object is brought about by five opposing mental states — applied thought, sustained thought, rapture, happiness and one pointedness[3] — called the jhana factors (jhanangani) because they lift the mind to the level of the first jhana and remain there as its defining components.

After reaching the first jhana the ardent meditator can go on to reach the higher jhanas, which is done by eliminating the coarser factors in each jhana. Beyond the four jhanas lies another fourfold set of higher meditative states which deepen still further the element of serenity. These attainments (aruppa), are the base of boundless space, the base of boundless consciousness, the base of nothingness, and the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.[4] In the Pali commentaries these come to be called the four immaterial jhanas (arupajhana), the four preceding states being renamed for the sake of clarity, the four fine-material jhanas (rupajhana). Often the two sets are joined together under the collective title of the eight jhanas or the eight attainments (atthasamapattiyo).

The four jhanas and the four immaterial attainments appear initially as mundane states of deep serenity pertaining to the preliminary stage of the Buddhist path, and on this level they help provide the base of concentration needed for wisdom to arise. But the four jhanas again reappear in a later stage in the development of the path, in direct association with liberating wisdom, and they are then designated the supramundane (lokuttara) jhanas. These supramundane jhanas are the levels of concentration pertaining to the four degrees of enlightenment experience called the supramundane paths (magga) and the stages of liberation resulting from them, the four fruits (phala).

Finally, even after full liberation is achieved, the mundane jhanas can still remain as attainments available to the fully liberated person, part of his untrammeled contemplative experience.

ETYMOLOGY OF JHANA

The great Buddhist commentator Buddhaghosa traces the Pali word “jhana” (Skt. dhyana) to two verbal forms. One, the etymologically correct derivation, is the verb jhayati, meaning to think or meditate; the other is a more playful derivation, intended to illuminate its

function rather than its verbal source, from the verb jhapeti meaning to burn up. He explains: “It burns up opposing states, thus it is jhana” (Vin.A. i, 116), the purport being that jhana “burns up” or destroys the mental defilements preventing the developing the development of serenity and insight.

In the same passage Buddhaghosa says that jhana has the characteristic mark of contemplation (upanijjhana). Contemplation, he states, is twofold: the contemplation of the object and the contemplation of the characteristics of phenomena. The former is exercised by the eight attainments of serenity together with their access, since these contemplate the object used as the basis for developing concentration; for this reason these attainments are given the name “jhana” in the mainstream of Pali meditative exposition. However, Buddhaghosa also allows that the term “jhana” can be extended loosely to insight (vipassana), the paths and the fruits on the ground that these perform the work of contemplating the characteristics of things the three marks of impermanence, suffering and non-self in the case of insight, Nibbana in the case of the paths and fruits.

In brief the twofold meaning of jhana as “contemplation” and “burning up” can be brought into connection with the meditative process as follows. By fixing his mind on the object the meditator reduces and eliminates the lower mental qualities such as the five hindrances and promotes the growth of the higher qualities such as the jhana factors, which lead the mind to complete absorption in the object. Then by contemplating the characteristics of phenomena with insight, the meditator eventually reaches the supramundane jhana of the four paths, and with this jhana he burns up the defilements and attains the liberating experience of the fruits.

JHANA AND SAMADHI

In the vocabulary of Buddhist meditation the word “jhana” is closely connected with another word, “samadhi” generally rendered by “concentration.” Samadhi derives from the prefixed verbal root sam-a-dha, meaning to collect or to bring together, thus suggesting the concentration or unification of the mind. The word “samadhi” is almost interchangeable with the word “samatha,” serenity, though the latter comes from a different root, sam, meaning to become calm.

In the suttas samadhi is defined as mental one-pointedness, (cittass’ekaggata M.i,301) and this definition is followed through rigorously in the Abhidhamma. The Abhidhamma treats one-pointedness as a distinct mental factor present in every state of consciousness, exercising the function of unifying the mind on its object. From this strict psychological standpoint samadhi can be present in unwholesome states of consciousness as well as in wholesome an neutral states. In its unwholesome forms it is called “wrong concentration” (micchasamadhi), In its wholesome forms “right concentration” (sammasamadhi).

In expositions on the practice of meditation, however, samadhi is limited to one-pointedness of mind (Vism.84-85; PP.84-85), and even here we can understand from the context that the word means only the wholesome one-pointedness involved in the deliberate transmutation of the mind to a heightened level of calm. Thus Buddhaghosa explains samadhi etymologically as “the centering of consciousness and consciousness concomitants evenly and rightly on a single object... the state in virtue of which consciousness and its concomitants remain evenly and rightly on a single object, undistracted and unscattered” (Vism.84-85; PP.85).

However, despite the commentator’s bid for consistency, the word samadhi is used in the Pali literature on meditation with varying degrees of specificity of meaning. In the narrowest sense, as defined by Buddhaghosa, it denotes the particular mental factor responsible for the concentrating of the mind, namely, one-pointedness. In a wider sense it can signify the states of unified consciousness that result from the strengthening of concentration, i.e., the meditative attainments of serenity and the stages leading up to them. And in a still wider sense the word samadhi can be applied to the method of practice used to produce

and cultivate these refined states of concentration, here being equivalent to the development of serenity.

It is in the second sense that samadhi and jhana come closest in meaning. The Buddha explains right concentration as the four jhanas (D.ii,313), and in doing so allows concentration to encompass the meditative attainments signified by the jhanas. However, even though jhana and samadhi can overlap in denotation, certain differences in their suggested and contextual meanings prevent unqualified identification of the two terms. First behind the Buddha's use of the jhana formula to explain right concentration lies a more technical understanding of the terms. According to this understanding samadhi can be narrowed down in range to signify only one mental factor, the most prominent in the jhana, namely, one-pointedness, while the word "jhana" itself must be seen as encompassing the state of consciousness in its entirety, or at least the whole group of mental factors individuating that meditative state as a jhana.

In the second place, when samadhi is considered in its broader meaning it involves a wider range of reference than jhana. The Pali exegetical tradition recognizes three levels of samadhi: preliminary concentration (parikammasamadhi), which is produced as a result of the meditator's initial efforts to focus his mind on his meditation subject; access concentration (upacarasamadhi), marked by the suppression of the five hindrances, the manifestation of the jhana factors, and the appearance of a luminous mental replica of the meditation object called the counterpart sign (patibhaganimitta); and absorption concentration (appanasamadhi), the complete immersion of the mind in its object effected by the full maturation of the jhana factors.[5] Absorption concentration comprises the eight attainments, the four immaterial attainments, and to this extent jhana and samadhi coincide. However, samadhi still has a broader scope than jhana, since it includes not only the jhanas themselves but also the two preparatory degrees of concentration leading up to them. Further, samadhi also covers a still different type of concentration called momentary concentration (khanikasamadhi), the mobile mental stabilization produced in the course of insight contemplation of the passing flow of phenomena.

THE PREPARATION FOR JHANA

The jhanas do not arise out of a void but in dependence on the right conditions. They come to growth only when provided with the nutriments conductive to their development. Therefore, prior to beginning meditation, the aspirant to the jhanas must prepare a groundwork for his practice by fulfilling certain preliminary requirements. He first must endeavor to purify his moral virtue, sever the outer impediments to practice, and place himself under a qualified teacher who will assign him a suitable meditation subject and explain to him the methods of developing it. After learning these the disciple must then seek out a congenial dwelling and diligently strive for success. In this chapter we will examine in order each of the preparatory steps that have to be fulfilled before commencing to develop jhana.

THE MORAL FOUNDATION FOR JHANA

A disciple aspiring to the jhanas first has to lay a solid foundation of moral discipline. Moral purity is indispensable to meditative progress for several deeply psychological reasons. It is needed first, in order to safeguard against the danger of remorse, the nagging sense of guilt that arises when the basic principles of morality are ignored or deliberately violated. Scrupulous conformity to virtuous rules of conduct protects the meditator from this danger disruptive to inner calm, and brings joy and happiness when the meditator reflects upon the purity of his conduct (see A.v,1-7).

A second reason a moral foundation is needed for meditation follows from an understanding of the purpose of concentration. Concentration, in the Buddhist discipline, aims at providing a base for wisdom by cleansing the mind of the dispersive influence of the defilements. But in order for the concentration exercises to effectively combat the defilements, the coarser expressions of the latter through bodily and verbal action first have to be checked. Moral transgressions being invariably motivated by defilements — by greed, hatred and delusion — when a person acts in violation of the precepts of morality he excites and reinforces the very same mental factors his practice of meditation is intended to eliminate. This involves him in a crossfire

of incompatible aims which renders his attempts at mental purification ineffective. The only way he can avoid frustration in his endeavor to purify the mind of its subtler defilements is to prevent the unwholesome inner impulses from breathing out in the coarser form of unwholesome bodily and verbal deeds. Only when he establishes control over the outer expression of the defilements can he turn to deal with them inwardly as mental obsessions that appear in the process of meditation.

The practice of moral discipline consists negatively in abstinence from immoral actions of body and speech and positively in the observance of ethical principles promoting peace within oneself and harmony in one's relations with others. The basic code of moral discipline taught by the Buddha for the guidance of his lay followers is the five precepts: abstinence from taking life, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, from false speech, and from intoxicating drugs and drinks. These principles are bindings as minimal ethical obligations for all practitioners of the Buddhist path, and within their bounds considerable progress in meditation can be made. However, those aspiring to reach the higher levels of jhanas and to pursue the path further to the stages of liberation, are encouraged to take up the more complete moral discipline pertaining to the life of renunciation. Early Buddhism is unambiguous in its emphasis on the limitations of household life for following the path in its fullness and perfection. Time and again the texts say that the household life is confining, a "path for the dust of passion," while the life of homelessness is like open space. Thus a disciple who is fully intent upon making rapid progress towards Nibbana will when outer conditions allow for it, "shave off his hair and beard, put on the yellow robe, and go forth from the home life into homelessness" (M.i,179).

The moral training for the bhikkhus or monks has been arranged into a system called the fourfold purification of morality (catuparisuddhisila).[6] The first component of this scheme, its backbone, consists in the morality of restraint according to the Patimokkha, the code of 227 training precepts promulgated by the Buddha to regulate the conduct of the Sangha or monastic order. Each of these rules is in some way intended to facilitate control over the defilements and to induce a mode of living marked by harmlessness, contentment and simplicity. The second aspect of the monk's moral discipline is restraint of the senses, by which the monk maintains close watchfulness over his mind as he engages in sense contacts so that he does not give rise to desire for pleasurable objects and aversion towards repulsive ones. Third, the monk is to live by a purified livelihood, obtaining his basic requisites such as robes, food, lodgings and medicines in ways consistent with his vocation. The fourth factor of the moral training is proper use of the requisites, which means that the monk should reflect upon the purposes for which he makes use of his requisites and should employ them only for maintaining his health and comfort, not for luxury and enjoyment.

After establishing a foundation of purified morality, the aspirant to meditation is advised to cut off any outer impediments (palibodha) that may hinder his efforts to lead a contemplative life. These impediments are numbered as ten: a dwelling, which becomes an impediment for those who allow their minds to become preoccupied with its upkeep or with its appurtenances; a family of relatives or supporters with whom the aspirant may become emotionally involved in ways that hinder his progress; gains, which may bind the monk by obligation to those who offer them; a class of students who must be instructed; building work, which demands time and attention; travel; kin, meaning parents, teachers, pupils or close friends; illness; the study of scriptures; and supernormal powers, which are an impediment to insight (Vism.90-97; PP.91-98).

The Good Friend and the Subject of Meditation
The path of practice leading to the jhanas is an arduous course involving precise techniques and skillfulness is needed in dealing with the pitfalls that lie along the way. The knowledge of how to attain the jhanas has been transmitted through a lineage of teachers going back to the time of the Buddha himself. A prospective meditator is advised to avail himself of the living heritage of accumulated

knowledge and experience by placing himself under the care of a qualified teacher, described as a “good friend” (kalyanamitta), one who gives guidance and wise advice rooted in his own practice and experience. On the basis of either of the power of penetrating others minds, or by personal observation, or by questioning, the teacher will size up the temperament of his new pupil and then select a meditation subject for him appropriate to his temperament.

The various meditation subjects that the Buddha prescribed for the development of serenity have been collected in the commentaries into a set called the forty kammatthana. This word means literally a place of work, and is applied to the subject of meditation as the place where the meditator undertakes the work of meditation. The forty meditation subjects are distributed into seven categories, enumerated in the Visuddhimagga as follows: ten kasinas, ten kinds of foulness, ten recollections, four divine abidings, four immaterial states, one perception, and one defining.[7]

A kasina is a device representing a particular quality used as a support for concentration. The ten kasinas are those of earth, water, fire and air; four color kasinas — blue, yellow, red and white; the light kasina and the limited space kasina. The kasina can be either a naturally occurring form of the element or color chosen, or an artificially produced device such as a disk that the meditator can use at his convenience in his meditation quarters.

The ten kinds of foulness are ten stages in the decomposition of a corpse: the bloated, the livid, the festering, the cut-up, the gnawed, the scattered, the hacked and scattered, the bleeding, the worm-infested and a skeleton. The primary purpose of these meditations is to reduce sensual lust by gaining a clear perception of the repulsiveness of the body.

The ten recollections are the recollections of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, morality, generosity and the deities, mindfulness of death, mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of breathing, and the recollection of peace. The first three are devotional contemplations on the sublime qualities of the “Three Jewels,” the primary objects of Buddhist virtues and on the deities inhabiting the heavenly worlds, intended principally for those still intent on a higher rebirth. Mindfulness of death is reflection on the inevitability of death, a constant spur to spiritual exertion. Mindfulness of the body involves the mental dissection of the body into thirty-two parts, undertaken with a view to perceiving its unattractiveness. Mindfulness of breathing is awareness of the in-and-out movement of the breath, perhaps the most fundamental of all Buddhist meditation subjects. And the recollection of peace is reflection on the qualities of Nibbana.

The four divine abidings (brahmavihara) are the development of boundless loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. These meditations are also called the “immeasurables” (appamañña) because they are to be developed towards all sentient beings without qualification or exclusiveness.

The four immaterial states are the base of boundless space, the base of boundless consciousness, the base of nothingness, and the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. These are the objects leading to the corresponding meditative attainments, the immaterial jhanas.

The one perception is the perception of the repulsiveness of food. The one defining is the defining of the four elements, that is, the analysis of the physical body into the elemental modes of solidity, fluidity, heat and oscillation.

The forty meditation subjects are treated in the commentarial texts from two important angles — one their ability to induce different levels of concentration, the other their suitability for differing temperaments. Not all meditation subjects are equally effective in inducing the deeper levels of concentration. They are first distinguished on the basis of their capacity for inducing only access concentration or for inducing full absorption; those capable of inducing absorption are then distinguished further according to their ability to induce the different levels of jhana.

Of the forty subjects, ten are capable of leading only to access concentration: eight recollections — i.e., all except mindfulness of the body and mindfulness of breathing — plus the perception of repulsiveness in nutriment and the defining of the four elements. These, because they are occupied with a diversity of qualities and involve and active application of discursive thought, cannot lead beyond access. The other thirty subjects can all lead to absorption.

The ten kasinas and mindfulness of breathing, owing to their simplicity and freedom from thought construction, can lead to all four jhanas. The ten kinds of foulness and mindfulness of the body lead only to the first jhana, being limited because the mind can only hold onto them with the aid of applied thought (vitakka) which is absent in the second and higher jhanas. The first three divine abidings can induce the lower three jhanas but not the fourth, since they arise in association with pleasant feeling, while the divine abiding of equanimity occurs only at the level of the fourth jhana, where neutral feeling gains ascendency. The four immaterial states conduce to the respective immaterial jhanas corresponding to their names.

The forty subjects are also differentiated according to their appropriateness for different character types. Six main character types are recognized — the greedy, the hating, the deluded, the faithful, the intelligent and the speculative — this oversimplified typology being taken only as a pragmatic guideline which in practice admits various shades and combinations. The ten kind of foulness and mindfulness of the body, clearly intended to attenuate sensual desire, are suitable for those of greedy temperament. Eight subjects — the four divine abidings and four color kasinas — are appropriate for the hating temperament. Mindfulness of breathing is suitable for those of the deluded and the speculative temperament. The first six recollections are appropriate for the faithful temperament. Four subjects — mindfulness of death, the recollection of peace, the defining of the four elements, and the perception of the repulsiveness in nutriment — are especially effective for those of intelligent temperament. The remaining six kasinas and the immaterial states are suitable for all kinds of temperaments. But the kasinas should be limited in size for one of speculative temperament and large in size for one of deluded temperament.

Immediately after giving this breakdown Buddhaghosa adds a proviso to prevent misunderstanding. He states that this division by way of temperament is made on the basis of direct opposition and complete suitability, but actually there is no wholesome form of meditation that does not suppress the defilements and strengthen the virtuous mental factors. Thus an individual meditator may be advised to meditate on foulness to abandon lust, on loving-kindness to abandon hatred, on breathing to cut off discursive thought, and on impermanence to eliminate the conceit “I am” (A.iv,358).

CHOOSING A SUITABLE DWELLING

The teacher assigns a meditation subject to his pupil appropriate to his character and explains the methods of developing it. He can teach it gradually to a pupil who is going to remain in close proximity to him, or in detail to one who will go to practice it elsewhere. If the disciple is not going to stay with his teacher he must be careful to select a suitable place for meditation. The texts mention eighteen kinds of monasteries unfavorable to the development of jhana: a large monastery, a new one, a dilapidated one, one near a road, one with a pond, leaves, flowers or fruits, one sought after by many people, one in cities, among timber of fields, where people quarrel, in a port, in border lands, on a frontier, a haunted place, and one without access to a spiritual teacher (Vism. 118-121; PP122-125).

The factors which make a dwelling favorable to meditation are mentioned by the Buddha himself. If should not be too far from or too near a village that can be relied on as an alms resort, and should have a clear path: it should be quiet and secluded; it should be free from rough weather and from harmful insects and animals; one should be able to obtain one’s physical requisites while dwelling there; and the dwelling should provide ready access to learned elders and spiritual friends who can be consulted when problems arise in meditation (A.v,15). The types

of dwelling places commended by the Buddha most frequently in the suttas as conductive to the jhanas are a secluded dwelling in the forest, at the foot of a tree, on a mountain, in a cleft, in a cave, in a cemetery, on a wooded flatland, in the open air, or on a heap of straw (M.i,181). Having found a suitable dwelling and settled there, the disciple should maintain scrupulous observance of the rules of discipline, He should be content with his simple requisites, exercise control over his sense faculties, be mindful and discerning in all activities, and practice meditation diligently as he was instructed. It is at this point that he meets the first great challenge of his contemplative life, the battle with the five hindrances.

THE FIRST JHANA AND ITS FACTORS

The attainment of any jhana comes about through a twofold process of development. On one side the states obstructive to it, called its factors of abandonment, have to be eliminated, on the other the states composing it, called its factors of possession, have to be acquired. In the case of the first jhana the factors of abandonment are the five hindrances and the factors of possession the five basic jhana factors. Both are alluded to in the standard formula for the first jhana, the opening phrase referring to the abandonment of the hindrances and the subsequent portion enumerating the jhana factors:

Quite secluded from sense pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states of mind, he enters and dwells in the first jhana, which is accompanied by applied thought and sustained thought with rapture and happiness born of seclusion. (M.i,1818; Vbh.245)

In this chapter we will first discuss the five hindrances and their abandonment, then we will investigate the jhana factors both individually and by way of their combined contribution to the attainment of the first jhana. We will close the chapter with some remarks on the ways of perfecting the first jhana, a necessary preparation for the further development of concentration.

The Abandoning of the Hindrances

The five hindrances (pañcanivarana) are sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt. This group, the principal classification the Buddha uses for the obstacles to meditation, receives its name because its five members hinder and envelop the mind, preventing meditative development in the two spheres of serenity and insight. Hence the Buddha calls them “obstructions, hindrances, corruptions of the mind which weaken wisdom”(S.v,94).

The hindrance of sensual desire (kamachanda) is explained as desire for the “five strands of sense pleasure,” that is, for pleasant forms, sounds, smells, tastes and tangibles. It ranges from subtle liking to powerful lust. The hindrance of ill will (byapada) signifies aversion directed towards disagreeable persons or things. It can vary in range from mild annoyance to overpowering hatred. Thus the first two hindrances correspond to the first two root defilements, greed and hate. The third root defilement, delusion, is not enumerated separately among the hindrances but can be found underlying the remaining three.

Sloth and torpor is a compound hindrance made up of two components: sloth (thina), which is dullness, inertia or mental stiffness; and torpor (middha), which is indolence or drowsiness. Restlessness and worry is another double hindrance, restlessness (uddhacca) being explained as excitement, agitation or disquietude, worry (kukkucca) as the sense of guilt aroused by moral transgressions. Finally, the hindrance of doubt (vicikiccha) is explained as uncertainty with regard to the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha and the training.

The Buddha offers two sets of similes to illustrate the detrimental effect of the hindrances. The first compares the five hindrances to five types of calamity: sensual desire is like a debt, ill will like a disease, sloth and torpor like imprisonment, restless and worry like slavery, and doubt like being lost on a desert road. Release from the hindrances is to be seen as freedom from debt, good health, release from prison, emancipation from slavery, and arriving at a place of safety (D.i,71-73).

The second set of similes compares the hindrances to five kinds of impurities affecting a bowl of water,

preventing a keen-sighted man from seeing his own reflection as it really is. Sensual desire is like a bowl of water mixed with brightly colored paints, ill will like a bowl of boiling water, sloth and torpor like water covered by mossy plants, restlessness and worry like water blown into ripples by the wind, and doubt like muddy water. Just as the keen-eyed man would not be able to see his reflection in these five kinds of water, so one whose mind is obsessed by the five hindrances does not know and see as it is his own good, the good of others or the good of both (S.v,121-24). Although there are numerous defilements opposed to the first jhana the five hindrances alone are called its factors of abandoning. One reason according to the Visuddhimagga, is that the hindrances are specifically obstructive to jhana, each hindrance impeding in its own way the mind's capacity for concentration.

The mind affected through lust by greed for varied objective fields does not become concentrated on an object consisting in unity, or being overwhelmed by lust, it does not enter on the way to abandoning the sense-desire element. When pestered by ill will towards an object, it does not occur uninterruptedly. When overcome by stiffness and torpor, it is unwieldy. When seized by agitation and worry, it is unquiet and buzzes about. When stricken by uncertainty, it fails to mount the way to accomplish the attainment of jhana. So it is these only that are called factors of abandonment because they are specifically obstructive to jhana.(Vism.146: PP.152)

A second reason for confining the first jhana's factors of abandoning to the five hindrances is to permit a direct alignment to be made between the hindrances and the jhanic factors. Buddhaghosa states that the abandonment of the five hindrances alone is mentioned in connection with jhana because the hindrances are the direct enemies of the five jhana factors, which the latter must eliminate and abolish. To support his point the commentator cites a passage demonstrating a one-to-one correspondence between the jhana factors and the hindrances: one-pointedness is opposed to sensual desire, rapture to ill will, applied thought to sloth and torpor, happiness to restlessness and worry, and sustained thought to doubt (Vism. 141; PP.147).[8] Thus each jhana factor is seen as having the specific task of eliminating a particular obstruction to the jhana and to correlate these obstructions with the five jhana factors they are collected into a scheme of five hindrances.

The standard passage describing the attainment of the first jhana says that the jhana is entered upon by one who is "secluded from sense pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states of mind." The Visuddhimagga explains that there are three kinds of seclusion relevant to the present context — namely, bodily seclusion (kayaviveka), mental seclusion (cittaviveka), and seclusion by suppression (vikkhambhanaviveka) (Vism. 140; PP.145). These three terms allude to two distinct sets of exegetical categories. The first two belong to a threefold arrangement made up of bodily seclusion, mental seclusion, and "seclusion from the substance" (upadhiviveka). The first means physical withdrawal from active social engagement into a condition of solitude for the purpose of devoting time and energy to spiritual development. The second, which generally presupposes the first, means the seclusion of the mind from its entanglement in defilements; it is in effect equivalent to concentration of at least the access level. The third, "seclusion from the substance," is Nibbana, liberation from the elements of phenomenal existence. The achievement of the first jhana does not depend on the third, which is its outcome rather than prerequisite, but it does require physical solitude and the separation of the mind from defilements, hence bodily and mental seclusion. The third type of seclusion pertinent to the context, seclusion by suppression, belongs to a different scheme generally discussed under the heading of "abandonment" (pahana) rather than "seclusion." The type of abandonment required for the attainment of jhana is abandonment by suppression, which means the removal of the hindrances by force of concentration similar to the pressing down of weeds in a pond by means of a porous pot.[9]

The work of overcoming the five hindrances is accomplished through the gradual training (anupubbasikkha) which the Buddha has laid down so often in the suttas, such as the Samaññaphala Sutta and the Culahatthipadopama Sutta. The gradual training is a step-by-step process designed to lead

the practitioner gradually to liberation. The training begins with moral discipline, the undertaking and observance of specific rules of conduct which enable the disciple to control the coarser modes of bodily and verbal misconduct through which the hindrances find an outlet. With moral discipline as a basis, the disciple practices the restraint of the senses. He does not seize upon the general appearances of the beguiling features of things, but guards and masters his sense faculties so that sensual attractive and repugnant objects no longer become grounds for desire and aversion. Then, endowed with the self-restraint, he develops mindfulness and discernment (sati-sampajañña) in all his activities and postures, examining everything he does with clear awareness as to its purpose and suitability. He also cultivates contentment with a minimum of robes, food, shelter and other requisites.

Once he has fulfilled these preliminaries the disciple is prepared to go into solitude to develop the jhanas, and it is here that he directly confronts the five hindrances. The elimination of the hindrances requires that the meditator honestly appraises his own mind. When sensuality, ill will and the other hindrances are present, he must recognize that they are present and he must investigate the conditions that lead to their arising: the latter he must scrupulously avoid. The meditator must also understand the appropriate antidotes for each of the five hindrances. The Buddha says that all the hindrances arise through unwise consideration (ayoniso manasikara) and that they can be eliminated by wise consideration (yoniso manasikara). Each hindrance, however, has its own specific antidote. Thus wise consideration of the repulsive feature of things is the antidote to sensual desire; wise consideration of loving-kindness counteracts ill will; wise consideration of the elements of effort, exertion and striving opposes sloth and torpor; wise consideration of tranquillity of mind removes restlessness and worry; and wise consideration of the real qualities of things eliminates doubt (S.v,105-106).

Having given up covetousness [i.e., sensual desire] with regard to the world, he dwells with a heart free of covetousness; he cleanses his mind from covetousness. Having given up the blemish of ill will, he dwells without ill will; friendly and compassionate towards all living beings, he cleanses his mind from the blemishes of ill will. Having given up sloth and torpor, he dwells free from sloth and torpor, in the perception of light; mindful and clearly comprehending, he cleanses his mind from sloth and torpor. Having given up restlessness and worry, he dwells without restlessness; his mind being calmed within, he cleanses it from restlessness and worry. Having given up doubt, he dwells as one who has passed beyond doubt; being free from uncertainty about wholesome things, he cleanses his mind from doubt...
And when he sees himself free of these five hindrances, joy arises; in him who is joyful, rapture arises; in him whose mind is enraptured, the body is stilled; the body being stilled, he feels happiness; and a happy mind finds concentration. Then, quite secluded from sense pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states of mind, he enters and dwells in the first jhana, which is accompanied by applied thought and sustained thought, with rapture and happiness born of seclusion. (D.i,73-74)[10]

THE FACTORS OF THE FIRST JHANA

The first jhana possesses five component factors: applied thought, sustained thought, rapture, happiness and one-pointedness of mind. Four of these are explicitly mentioned in the formula for the jhana; the fifth, one-pointedness, is mentioned elsewhere in the suttas but is already suggested by the notion of jhana itself. These five states receive their name, first because they lead the mind from the level of ordinary consciousness to the jhanic level, and second because they constitute the first jhana and give it its distinct definition.

The jhana factors are first aroused by the meditator's initial efforts to concentrate upon one of the prescribed objects for developing jhana. As he fixes his mind on the preliminary object, such as a kasina disk, a point is eventually reached where he can perceive the object as clearly with his eyes closed as with them open. This visualized object is called the learning sign (uggahanimitta). As he concentrates

on the learning sign, his efforts call into play the embryonic jhana factors, which grow in force, duration and prominence as a result of the meditative exertion. These factors, being incompatible with the hindrances, attenuate them, exclude them, and hold them at bay. With continued practice the learning sign gives rise to a purified luminous replica of itself called the counterpart sign (patibhaganimitta), the manifestation of which marks the complete suppression of the hindrances and the attainment of access concentration (upacarasamadhi). All three events — the suppression of the hindrances, the arising of the counterpart sign, and the attainment of access concentration — take place at precisely the same moment, without interval (Vism. 126; PP.131). And though previously the process of mental cultivation may have required the elimination of different hindrances at different times, when access is achieved they all subside together:

Simultaneously with his acquiring the counterpart sign his lust is abandoned by suppression owing to his giving no attention externally to sense desires (as object). And owing to his abandoning of approval, ill will is abandoned too, as pus is with the abandoning of blood. Likewise stiffness and torpor is abandoned through exertion of energy, agitation and worry is abandoned through devotion to peaceful things that cause no remorse; and uncertainty about the Master who teaches the way, about the way, and about the fruit of the way, about the way, and about the fruit of the way, is abandoned through the actual experience of the distinction attained. So the five hindrances are abandoned. (Vism. 189; PP.196)

Though the mental factors determinative of the first jhana are present in access concentration, they do not as yet possess sufficient strength to constitute the jhana, but are strong enough only to exclude the hindrances. With continued practice, however, the nascent jhana factors grow in strength until they are capable of issuing in jhana. Because of the instrumental role these factors play both in the attainment and constitution of the first jhana they are deserving of closer individual scrutiny.

APPLIED THOUGHT (VITAKKA)

The word vitakka frequently appears in the texts in conjunction with the word vicara. The pair signify two interconnected but distinct aspects of the thought process, and to bring out the difference between them (as well as their common character), we translate the one as applied thought and the other as sustained thought.

In both the suttas and the Abhidhamma applied thought is defined as the application of the mind to its object (cetaso abhiniropana), a function which the Atthasalini illustrates thus: “Just as someone ascends the king’s palace in dependence on a relative of friend dear to the king, so the mind ascends the object in dependence on applied thought” (Dhs.A.157). This function of applying the mind to the object is common to the wide variety of modes in which the mental factor of applied thought occurs, ranging from sense discrimination to imagination, reasoning and deliberation and to the practice of concentration culminating in the first jhana. Applied thought can be unwholesome as in thoughts of sensual pleasure, ill will and cruelty, or wholesome as in thoughts of renunciation, benevolence and compassion (M.i,116).

In jhana applied through is invariably wholesome and its function of directing the mind upon its object stands forth with special clarity. To convey this the Visuddhimagga explains that in jhana the function of applied thought is “to strike at and thresh — for the meditator is said, in virtue of it, to have the object struck at by applied thought, threshed by applied thought” (Vism.142;PP148). The Milindapanha makes the same point by defining applied thought as absorption (appana): “Just as a carpenter drives a well-fashioned piece of wood into a joint, so applied thought has the characteristic of absorption” (Miln.62).

The object of jhana into which vitakka drives the mind and its concomitant states is the counterpart sign, which emerges from the learning sign as the hindrances are suppressed and the mind enters access concentration. The Visuddhimagga explains the difference between the two signs thus:

In the learning sign any fault in the kasina is apparent. But the counterpart sign appears as if breaking out from the learning sign, and a hundred times, a thousand times more purified, like a looking-glass disk drawn from its case, like a mother-of-pearl dish well washed, like the moon's disk coming out from behind a cloud, like cranes against a thunder cloud. But it has neither color nor shape; for if it had, it would be cognizable by the eye, gross, susceptible of comprehension (by insight) and stamped with the three characteristics. But it is not like that. For it is born only of perception in one who has obtained concentration, being a mere mode of appearance (Vism. 125-26; PP.130)

The counterpart sign is the object of both access concentration and jhana, which differ neither in their object nor in the removal of the hindrances but in the strength of their respective jhana factors. In the former the factors are still weak, not yet fully developed, while in the jhana they are strong enough to make the mind fully absorbed in the object. In this process applied thought is the factor primarily responsible for directing the mind towards the counterpart sign and thrusting it in with the force of full absorption.

SUSTAINED THOUGHT (VICARA)

Vicara seems to represent a more developed phase of the thought process than vitakka. The commentaries explain that it has the characteristic of "continued pressure" on the object (Vim. 142; PP.148). Applied thought is described as the first impact of the mind on the object, the gross inceptive phase of thought; sustained thought is described as the act of anchoring the mind on the object, the subtle phase of continued mental pressure. Buddhaghosa illustrates the difference between the two with a series of similes. Applied thought is like striking a bell, sustained thought like the ringing; applied thought is like a bee's flying towards a flower, sustained thought like its buzzing around the flower; applied thought is like a compass pin that stays fixed to the center of a circle, sustained thought like the pin that revolves around (Vism. 142-43; PP.148-49).

These similes make it clear that applied thought and sustained thought functionally associated, perform different tasks. Applied thought brings the mind to the object, sustained thought fixes and anchors it there. Applied thought focuses the mind on the object, sustained thought examines and inspects what is focused on. Applied thought brings a deepening of concentration by again and again leading the mind back to the same object, sustained thought sustains the concentration achieved by keeping the mind anchored on that object.

RAPTURE (PITI)

The third factor present in the first jhana is piti, usually translated as joy or rapture.[11] In the suttas piti is sometimes said to arise from another quality called pamojja, translated as joy or gladness, which springs up with the abandonment of the five hindrances. When the disciple sees the five hindrances abandoned in himself "gladness arises within him; thus gladdened, rapture arises in him; and when he is rapturous his body becomes tranquil" (D.i,73). Tranquillity in turn leads to happiness, on the basis of which the mind becomes concentrated. Thus rapture precedes the actual arising of the first jhana, but persists through the remaining stages up to the third jhana.

The Vibhanga defines piti as "gladness, joy, joyfulness, mirth, merriment, exultation, exhilaration, and satisfaction of mind" (Vbh. 257). The commentaries ascribe to it the characteristic of endearing, the function of refreshing the body and mind or pervading with rapture, and the manifestation as elation (Vism.143; PP.149). Shwe Zan Aung explains that "piti abstracted means interest of varying degrees of intensity, in an object felt as desirable or as calculated to bring happiness."[12]

When defined in terms of agency, piti is that which creates interest in the object; when defined in terms of its nature it is the interest in the object. Because it creates a positive interest in the object, the jhana factor of rapture is able to counter and suppress the hindrance of ill will, a state of aversion implying a negative evaluation of the object.

Rapture is graded into five categories: minor rapture, momentary rapture, showering rapture, uplifting rapture and pervading rapture.[13] Minor rapture

is generally the first to appear in the progressive development of meditation; it is capable of causing the hairs of the body to rise. Momentary rapture, which is like lightning, comes next but cannot be sustained for long. Showering rapture runs through the body in waves, producing a thrill but without leaving a lasting impact. Uplifting rapture, which can cause levitation, is more sustained but still tends to disturb concentration, The form of rapture most conductive to the attainment of jhana is all-pervading rapture, which is said to suffuse the whole body so that it becomes like a full bladder or like a mountain cavern inundated with a mighty flood of water. The Visuddhimagga states that what is intended by the jhana factor of rapture is this all-pervading rapture "which is the root of absorption and comes by growth into association with absorption" (Vism.144; PP.151)

HAPPINESS (SUKHA)

As a factor of the first jhana, sukha signifies pleasant feeling. The word is explicitly defined in the sense by the Vibhanga in its analysis of the first jhana: "Therein, what is happiness? Mental pleasure and happiness born of mind-contact, the felt pleasure and happiness born of mind-contact, pleasurable and happy feeling born of mind contact — this is called 'happiness' " (Vbh.257). The Visuddhimagga explains that happiness in the first jhana has the characteristic of gratifying, the function of intensifying associated states, and as manifestation, the rendering of aid to its associated states (Vism. 145; PP.151).

Rapture and happiness link together in a very close relationship, but though the two are difficult to distinguish, they are not identical. Happiness is a feeling (vedana); rapture a mental formation (sankhara). Happiness always accompanies rapture, so that when rapture is present happiness must always be present; but rapture does not always accompany happiness, for in the third jhana, as we will see, there is happiness but no rapture. The Atthasalini, which explains rapture as "delight in the attaining of the desired object" and happiness as "the enjoyment of the taste of what is acquired," illustrates the difference by means of a simile:

Rapture is like a weary traveler in the desert in summer, who hears of, or sees water of a shady wood. Ease [happiness] is like his enjoying the water of entering the forest shade. For a man who, traveling along the path through a great desert and overcome by the heat, is thirsty and desirous of drink, if he saw a man on the way, would ask 'Where is water?' The other would say, 'Beyond the wood is a dense forest with a natural lake. Go there, and you will get some.' He, hearing these words, would be glad and delighted and as he went would see lotus leaves, etc., fallen on the ground and become more glad and delighted. Going onwards, he would see men with wet clothes and hair, hear the sounds of wild fowl and pea-fowl, etc., see the dense forest of green like a net of jewels growing by the edge of the natural lake, he would see the water lily, the lotus, the white lily, etc., growing in the lake, he would see the clear transparent water, he would be all the more glad and delighted, would descend into the natural lake, bathe and drink at pleasure and, his oppression being allayed, he would eat the fibers and stalks of the lilies, adorn himself with the blue lotus, carry on his shoulders the roots of the mandalaka, ascend from the lake, put on his clothes, dry the bathing cloth in the sun, and in the cool shade where the breeze blew ever so gently lay himself down and saw: 'O bliss! O bliss!' Thus should this illustration be applied. The time of gladness and delight from when he heard of the natural lake and the dense forest till he saw the water is like rapture having the manner of gladness and delight at the object in view. The time when, after his bath and dried he laid himself down in the cool shade, saying, 'O bliss! O bliss!' etc., is the sense of ease [happiness] grown strong, established in that mode of enjoying the taste of the object.[14]

Since rapture and happiness co-exist in the first jhana, this simile should not be taken to imply that they are mutually exclusive. Its purport is to suggest that rapture gains prominence before happiness, for which it helps provide a causal foundation.

In the description of the first jhana, rapture and happiness are said to be "born of seclusion" and to suffuse the whole body of the meditator in such a way that there is no part of his body which remains

unaffected by them:

Monks, secluded from sense pleasure... a monk enters and dwells in the first jhana. He steeps, drenches, fills and suffuses his body with the rapture and happiness born of seclusion, so that there is no part of his entire body that is not suffused with this rapture and happiness. Just as a skilled bath-attendant or his apprentice might strew bathing powder in a copper basin, sprinkle it again and again with water, and knead it together so that the mass of bathing soap would be pervaded, suffused, and saturated with moisture inside and out yet would not ooze moisture, so a monk steeps, drenches, fills and suffuses his body with the rapture and happiness born of seclusion, so that, there is no part of his entire body that is not suffused with this rapture and happiness born of seclusion. (D.i,74)

ONE-POINTEDNESS (EKAGGATA)

Unlike the previous four jhana factors, one-pointedness is not specifically mentioned in the standard formula for the first jhana, but it is included among the jhana factors by the Mahavedalla Sutta (M.i,294) as well as in the Abhidhamma and the commentaries. One-pointedness is a universal mental concomitant, the factor by virtue of which the mind is centered upon its object. It brings the mind to a single point, the point occupied by the object.

One-pointedness is used in the text as a synonym for concentration (samadhi) which has the characteristic of non-distraction, the function of eliminating distractions, non-wavering as its manifestation, and happiness as its proximate cause (Vism.85; PP.85). As a jhana factor one-pointedness is always directed to a wholesome object and wards off unwholesome influences, in particular the hindrance of sensual desire. As the hindrances are absent in jhana one-pointedness acquires special strength, based on the previous sustained effort of concentration.

Besides the five jhana factors, the first jhana contains a great number of other mental factors functioning in unison as coordinate members of a single state of consciousness. Already the Anupada Sutta lists such additional components of the first jhana as contact, feeling, perception, volition, consciousness, desire, decision, energy, mindfulness, equanimity and attention (M.iii,25). In the Abhidhamma literature this is extended still further up to thirty-three indispensable components. Nevertheless, only five states are called the factors of the first jhana, for only these have the functions of inhibiting the five hindrances and fixing the mind in absorption. For the jhana to arise all these five factors must be present simultaneously, exercising their special operations:

But applied thought directs the mind onto the object; sustained thought keeps it anchored there. Happiness [rapture] produced by the success of the effort refreshes the mind whose effort has succeeded through not being distracted by those hindrances; and bliss [happiness] intensifies it for the same reason. Then unification aided by this directing onto, this anchoring, this refreshing and this intensifying, evenly and rightly centers the mind with its remaining associated states on the object consisting in unity. Consequently possession of five factors should be understood as the arising of these five, namely, applied thought, sustained thought, happiness [rapture], bliss [happiness], and unification of mind. For it is when these are arisen that jhana is said to be arisen, which is why they are called the five factors of possession. (Vism.146;PP.152)

Each jhana factor serves as support for the one which succeeds it. Applied thought must direct the mind to its object in order for sustained thought to anchor it there. Only when the mind is anchored can the interest develop which will culminate in rapture. As rapture develops it brings happiness to maturity, and this spiritual happiness, by providing an alternative to the fickle pleasures of the senses, aids the growth of one-pointedness. In this way, as Nagasena explains, all the other wholesome states lead to concentration, which stands at their head like the apex on the roof of a house (Miln. 38-39).

PERFECTING THE FIRST JHANA

The difference between access and absorption concentration, as we have said, does not lie in the absence of the hindrances, which is common to both, but in the relative strength of the jhana factors. In access the factors are weak so that concentration is fragile, comparable to a child who walks a few steps

and then falls down. But in absorption the jhana factors are strong and well developed so that the mind can remain continuously in concentration just as a healthy man can remain standing on his feet for a whole day and night (Vism.126; PP.131).

Because full absorption offers the benefit of strengthened concentration, a meditator who gains access is encouraged to strive for the attainment of jhana. To develop his practice several important measures are recommended.[15] The meditator should live in a suitable dwelling, rely upon a suitable alms resort, avoid profitless talk, associate only with spiritually-minded companions, make use only of suitable food, live in a congenial climate, and maintain his practice in a suitable posture. He should also cultivate the ten kinds of skill in absorption. He should clean his lodging and his physical body so that they conduce to clear meditation, balance his spiritual faculties by seeing that faith is balanced with wisdom and energy with concentration, and he must be skillful in producing and developing the sign of concentration (1-3). He should exert the mind when it is slack, restrain it when it is agitated, encourage it when it is restless or dejected, and look at the mind with equanimity when all is proceeding well (4-7). The meditator should avoid distracting persons, should approach people experienced in concentration, and should be firm in his resolution to attain jhana (8-10).

After attaining the first jhana a few times the meditator is not advised to set out immediately striving for the second jhana. This would be a foolish and profitless spiritual ambition. Before he is prepared to make the second jhana the goal of his endeavor he must first bring the first jhana to perfection. If he is too eager to reach the second jhana before he has perfected the first, he is likely to fail to gain the second and find himself unable to regain the first. The Buddha compares such a meditator to a foolish cow who, while still unfamiliar with her own pasture, sets out for new pastures and gets lost in the mountains: she fails to find food or drink and is unable to find her way home (A.iv, 418-19).

The perfecting of the first jhana involves two steps: the extension of the sign and the achievement of the five masteries. The extension of the sign means extending the size of the counterpart sign, the object of the jhana. Beginning with a small area, the size of one or two fingers, the meditator gradually learns to broaden the sign until the mental image can be made to cover the world-sphere or even beyond (Vism. 152-53; PP.158-59).

Following this the meditator should try to acquire five kinds of mastery over the jhana: mastery in adverting, in attaining, in resolving, in emerging and in reviewing. [16] Mastery in adverting is the ability to advert to the jhana factors one by one after emerging from the jhana, wherever he wants, whenever he wants, and for as long as he wants. Mastery in attaining is the ability to enter upon jhana quickly, mastery in resolving the ability to remain in the jhana for exactly the pre-determined length of time, mastery in emerging the ability to emerge from jhana quickly without difficulty, and mastery in reviewing the ability to review the jhana and its factors with retrospective knowledge immediately after adverting to them. When the meditator has achieved this fivefold mastery, then he is ready to strive for the second jhana.