



# A Brief History of Buddhist Absorption

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Published online: 10 December 2019  
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## Abstract

This article presents a historical overview of developments in the construct of meditative absorption in Buddhist texts, with a particular emphasis on the Theravāda tradition. From pre-Buddhist antecedents via the Buddha's own mastery of absorption until modern times, different constructs of absorption have developed which show considerable variation in terms of their concentrative depth and subjective experience. For this reason, research on psychological dimensions of meditative absorption needs to be based on first ascertaining what kind of absorption is being investigated.

**Keywords** Absorption · Concentration · *dhyāna* · Insight meditation · *jhāna* · Mahāsi Sayādaw · Right concentration · *sutta-jhāna* · *vipassanā* · *vipassanā-jhāna* · Visuddhimagga

In a survey of potential areas for research on meditative experiences, Vieten et al. (2018, p. 13) noted that

sacred texts in contemplative traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism claim that meditative practices can result in states of mind that have not been adequately explored or differentiated phenomenologically in the scientific literature [namely] ... states of intense concentration, absorption, calm and equanimity ... investigation of these states may offer us new insights about cognition and perception that can only be reached through expanding contemplative science.

In order to provide support for such research, a brief historical overview of the development of Buddhist understandings of absorption could provide a starting point. For this purpose, the present article traces the notion of absorption (Pāli *jhāna*, Sanskrit *dhyāna*, Chinese 禪, Tibetan *bsam gtan*) from early to contemporary Buddhism, with a particular emphasis on developments in the Theravāda tradition that have had a substantial impact on current notions and ideas.

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## Pre-Buddhist Absorption

The discourses reflecting early Buddhist thought do not explicitly present the attainment of absorption as a unique discovery of the Buddha. A Pāli discourse contains an expression that could be taken to convey the idea that the Buddha awakened to absorption (SN 2.7). However, the formulation employed in its Chinese *Āgama* parallels clarifies that the import is not that such absorption was something newly discovered by him (SĀ 1305 and SĀ<sup>2</sup> 304; see Anālayo 2017a).

A discourse portraying an earlier stage in the evolution of human civilization reports that, already at that time in the far distant past, brahmins were engaged in absorption meditation. But some brahmins abandoned life in seclusion and went to dwell in villages, as they had been unable to carry out such absorption meditation. The parallel versions present this in the following manner:

They were unable to attain that absorption/meditation.  
(DN 27: *taṃ jhānaṃ anabhisambhuṇamānā*).

They did not delight in seclusion and giving attention to sitting in absorption/meditation.  
(DĀ 5: 不樂閑靜坐禪思惟者).

They trained in absorption/meditation but did not attain absorption/meditation.  
(MĀ 154: 學禪不得禪).

They had earlier [attempted to] cultivate absorption/meditation.

(T 10: 初修禪已).

The formulation in the Chinese versions is to some degree ambiguous, as the Chinese character 禪 not only renders “absorption,” *dhyāna*, but can at times also reflect other terms like “concentration,” *samādhi*, or “meditative attainment,” *samāpatti*, etc. Some ambiguity holds also for the Pāli version, as the standard translation “absorption” is not invariably appropriate for all occurrences of the term *jhāna*. This becomes particularly evident with the corresponding verb *jhāyati*, which can simply mean “to meditate.” For this reason, in the above translation of the relevant Pāli and Chinese passages, both terms have been given as alternatives: “absorption/meditation.”

At the same time, however, the context of the passage does point to some specific type of meditative attainment. According to the narrative setting, some brahmins abandoned the ideal life in seclusion and opted for a less prestigious life style because of an inability to emulate the precedent set by other brahmins. This description makes more sense if it is taken to refer to achieving a level of meditative expertise rather than just meditating as such. Hence, although the passage is ambiguous, understanding it to mean “absorption” appears more to the point than interpreting it to refer just to “meditation” in general.

Another passage reports the Buddha in conversation with a teacher by the name of Sakuludāyīn who was in the company of his followers. In the course of their discussion, the Buddha described the third absorption, which this teacher assumed to be the peak of meditative accomplishment. When the Buddha stated that there was a level of meditative experience that went beyond such attainment, which he subsequently disclosed to be the fourth absorption, this caused such amazement among the whole congregation of Sakuludāyīn as to lead to the following reaction:

When this had been said, the following of the wanderer Sakuludāyīn made an uproar, making a loud sound and a great noise: ‘Here we are lost together with our teachers, here we are lost together with our teachers, we do not know something higher than this!’

(MN 79: *evaṃ vutte, sakuludāyissa paribbājakassa parisā unnādinī uccāsaddā mahāsaddā ahosi: ettha mayaṃ anassāma sācariyakā, ettha mayaṃ anassāma sācariyakā, na mayaṃ ito bhīyyo uttaritaraṃ pajānāmā ti*).

Then that great following [of Sakuludāyīn] made a loud uproar: ‘There is something superior, more sublime, more excellent than this!’

(MĀ 208: 於是彼大眾放高大音聲: 彼是最上, 最妙, 最勝).

The reaction implies that they were familiar with the third absorption, even if only by hearsay, but had considered this to be the highest degree of meditative accomplishment possible. Hearing that there is something superior to what they had thought to be the peak of meditative attainment, namely the fourth absorption, was such a surprise for them as to cause an uproar.

Whereas the previous passage just spoke of absorption without any further qualification, in the present case, the description given by the Buddha employs the standard way the discourses usually present the attainment of the four absorptions.

The standard description of the four absorptions occurs in yet another relevant discourse, whose main concern is to analyze the grounds for the arising of various erroneous views. Here, the four absorptions appear in a set of altogether five grounds for making mistaken proclamations to have reached Nirvana here and now. Only the first of these is not related to absorption. It takes the following form:

When this self then enjoys itself provided with and endowed with the five sensual pleasures, then to that extent this self has attained supreme Nirvana here and now.

(DN 1: *yato kho ... ayaṃ attā pañcahi kāmagaṇehi samappito samāṅgibhūto paricāreti, ettāvataḥ kho ... ayaṃ attā paramadiṭṭhadhammanibbānaṃ patto hoti ti*).

I am now enjoying myself with the five sensual pleasures; this is my attaining of Nirvana here and now.

(DĀ 21: 我於現在五欲自恣, 此是我得現在泥洹).

Amusing oneself through the five sensual pleasures, that person says: ‘Now I have attained the unconditioned.’

(T 21: 以五欲自娛樂, 其人言: 我現在得無為).

At the time when I have acquired the five sensual pleasures, on simply enjoying and relishing them much, I have attained Nirvana here and now.

(Weller 1934: 56: *gang gyi tshe bdag 'dod pa'i yon tan lnga 'byor bar gyur cing, rtse dga' yongs su spyod pa de tsam gyis na, bdag 'di mthong ba'i chos la mya ngan las 'das pa thob pa yin no*).

As long as I obtain the five sensual pleasures, possessing them, being equipped with them, enjoying them, then I experience permanent Nirvana here and now.

(Up 3050: *ji srid du bdag 'dod pa'i yon tan lnga po len pa dang, khas len pa dang, ldan pa dang, rtse dga' zhing yongs su sbyong pa, de srid du bdag mthong ba'i chos la yongs su mya ngan las 'da' bar mi 'gyur ro*).

I am now completely enjoying myself with the five sensual pleasures; this is equal to my attaining of Nirvana here and now.

(T 1548: 我盡現在五欲自恣, 齊是我得現在涅槃).

An actual upholding of such a mistaken view of Nirvana can be found in another discourse, where a wanderer made the following declaration in front of the Buddha:

Master Gotama, this is that Nirvana: I am now healthy and happy; nothing afflicts me.

(MN 75: *idan taṃ nibbānaṃ: ahañ hi, bho gotama, etarahi arogo sukhī, na maṃ kiñci ābādhaṭi ti*).

With both hands he stroked [his body] and said this: “Gotama, this is free from disease; this is Nirvana.”

(MĀ 153: 以兩手捫摸而作是說: 瞿曇, 此是無病, 此是涅槃; adopting the variant 捫 instead of 找).

Needless to say, from the Buddha’s viewpoint, this was a thoroughly mistaken position. The same holds for the idea that the attainment of any of the four absorptions is the final goal. Each of them clearly falls short of that; otherwise, they would not have been included among five grounds for mistakenly proclaiming to have reached Nirvana here and now. The employment of the standard way of describing the four absorptions found regularly elsewhere in the early discourses might have been deliberately to make it unmistakably clear that the presentation of mistaken views about the nature of Nirvana refers to the very same experiences.

Although in the first case examined above there could be reservations as to how far the description of what former brahmins were unable to attain corresponds to the meditative experiences achieved by Buddhist practitioners, the other two passages employ the same detailed analysis of absorption found regularly in the discourses. Conversely, whereas in the case of the third passage one might conjecture that the mistaken idea that identifies absorption with Nirvana might have emerged only after other practitioners had come to know about absorption from Buddhist practitioners, the other two passages imply that absorption was a pre-Buddhist practice. In this way, the above passages taken together make it fair to conclude that the early discourses consider absorption attainment to have already been known before the advent of the Buddha.

## Recollection of Past Lives

The discourse offering an analysis of grounds for the arising of various erroneous views provides additional support for this conclusion. The ability to attain absorption is not only of relevance to four of its five proposals of Nirvana here and now. It

also stands in the background of a range of other views examined in this discourse, which makes it even less convincing to assume that all these views only emerged after those who upheld them had learned absorption from Buddhist practitioners. Instead, the discourse rather points to the substantial impact of absorption-related practices in the ancient Indian setting. In relation to the views listed in this discourse, Bodhi (1978/1992, p. 6) pointed out that

the fact that a great number, perhaps the majority, have their source in the experience of meditative attainments has significant implications for our understanding of the genetic process behind the fabrication of views. It suffices to caution us against the hasty generalization that speculative views take rise through preference for theorization over the more arduous task of practice. As our sutta shows, many of these views make their appearance only at the end of a prolonged course of meditation ... for these views the very basis of their formulation is a higher experience rather than the absence of one.

The first erroneous views surveyed in this discourse are held by recluses and brahmins who had developed “recollection of past lives” (Anālayo 2009, p. 188), an ability to remember various aspects of one’s own former lifetimes. The early discourses consider this ability to require mastery of the four absorptions. This can be seen, for example, in the passage below, which sets in after depicting the successive attainment of these four absorptions:

With the mind concentrated in this way, purified, bright, without blemish, free of imperfection, malleable, workable, steadied, having gained imperturbability, one directs the mind to knowledge of recollecting past lives.

(MN 65: *so evaṃ samāhite citte parisuddhe pariyodāte anaṅgaṇe vigatūpakkilese mudubhūte kammaniye thite āneñjappatte pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇāya cittaṃ abhininnāmeti*).

With the mind having attained concentration in this way, purified, without defilement, without affliction, malleable, well steadied, having attained mental imperturbability, one trains in the realization of the higher knowledge of recollecting past lives.

(MĀ 194: 彼如是得定心, 清淨, 無穢, 無煩, 柔軟, 善住, 得不動心, 學憶宿命智通作證; adopting the variant 學 instead of 覺).

It follows that the recluses and brahmins who proposed various mistaken views based on having recollected their own past lives must have had mastery of the four absorptions.

Another knowledge of a related type involves observing the passing away and being reborn of others sentient beings, called the “divine eye.” Such ability is regularly prefaced by the same description as recollection of one’s own past lives, indicating that it requires the same mastery of the four absorptions. A discourse providing an analysis of karma surveys a range of mistaken conclusions drawn by some recluses and brahmins, based on having witnessed the passing away and being reborn of others (MN 136 and MĀ 171). All of these recluses and brahmins must have been attainers of the four absorptions. These occurrences further support the impression that the early discourses considered absorption to be a pre-Buddhist practice.

## The Buddha’s Teachers

Confirmation for the conclusion proposed above can also be found in the explicit report that, during his quest for awakening, the future Buddha practiced under the guidance of two teachers, Ājāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, whose teachings were related to the third and fourth of the four immaterial spheres (MN 26 and MĀ 204; Anālayo 2011). Although the relevant discourse does not explicitly mention the four absorptions, other discourses regularly present the four absorptions and the four immaterial spheres one after the other in what clearly is a successive order of attainment. A case in point is the account of the Buddha’s passing away, where a range of sources agree that he gradually proceeded through the four absorptions and the four immaterial spheres in forward and reverse order (Anālayo 2014a).

At times, the relationship between these two series finds explicit expression. An example can be seen in a discourse addressed to a disciple named Udāyin. The relevant part depicts a gradual progression of attainments, where in each stage something needs to be transcended in order to reach the next stage. This procedure applies not only to the progression from the first via the second and third to the fourth absorption but also from the fourth absorption to the first immaterial sphere (and from this to the other immaterial spheres). The progression from the fourth absorption to the first immaterial sphere takes the following form:

With the abandoning of happiness and the abandoning of pain and with the previous disappearance of joy and displeasure, with neutrality and purity of mindfulness and equanimity, one dwells having attained the fourth absorption, which is the passing beyond that (i.e. beyond the third absorption). And of that, Udāyin, I still say: ‘it is not enough,’ I say: ‘let go of it’, and I say: ‘pass beyond it.’ And what is the passing beyond that? Here, Udāyin, passing beyond all perceptions of form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, without attending to perceptions of diversity, [attending

instead to] ‘boundless space,’ a monastic dwells having attained the sphere of boundless space, which is the passing beyond that (i.e. beyond the fourth absorption). (MN 66: *sukhassa ca pahānā dukkhassa ca pahānā pubbe va somanassadomanassānaṃ atthaṅgamā adukkhamasukhaṃ upekkhāsati pārisuddhiṃ catutthaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati, ayaṃ tassa samatikkamo. idam pi kho ahaṃ, udāyi, analan ti vadāmi, pajahathā ti vadāmi, samatikkamathā ti vadāmi. ko ca tassa samatikkamo? idh’ udāyi, bhikkhu sabbaso rūpasāññānaṃ samatikkamā paṭighasāññānaṃ atthaṅgamā nānattasāññānaṃ amanasikārā ananto ākāso ti ākāśānañcāyatanam upasampajja viharati, ayaṃ tassa samatikkamo.*)

With the cessation of pleasure and the cessation of pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and displeasure, with neutrality and purity of equanimity and mindfulness, a monastic attains and dwells in the accomplishment of the fourth absorption. Herein, this is reckoned to be the passing beyond (the third absorption). Udāyin, I say this is still not the attainment [that has] nothing [superior to it], not the attainment of abandoning, and not the attainment of the [complete] passing beyond. Herein, what is the passing beyond? Udāyin, by completely transcending perceptions of form, with the cessation of perceptions of resistance, not being aware of perceptions of diversity, [being aware instead of] infinite space, a monastic dwells in the accomplishment of the sphere of infinite space. Herein, this is reckoned to be the passing beyond (the fourth absorption).

(MĀ 192: 比丘樂滅, 苦滅, 喜憂本已滅, 不苦不樂, 捨念清淨, 得第四禪成就遊. 是謂此中過度. 烏陀夷, 我說此亦不得無, 不得斷, 不得過度. 此中何等過度? 烏陀夷, 比丘度一切色想, 滅有對想, 不念若干想, 無量空, 是無量空處成就遊, 是謂此中過度).

The two passages makes it clear that, just as passing beyond the third absorption leads to the fourth absorption, so passing beyond the fourth absorption leads to the sphere of boundless space. This presentation implies that, in actual practice, the four absorptions and the four immaterial spheres stand in a meditative continuum.

A difference between these two sets is that the four absorptions can be attained using a variety of potential objects. For this reason, the standard descriptions in the discourses only mention the condition of the mind. In contrast, the four immaterial spheres each have a distinct object (such as boundless space in the present case); hence, this object naturally is a prominent aspect of their description. However, the distinct perspectives adopted in this way do not imply that the two sets could not be successive parts of one continuous meditative progression (Anālayo 2017a).

A reference found in both versions in relation to the first immaterial sphere could appear problematic, as this indicates that entry into the sphere of boundless space requires not attending to or not being aware of “perceptions of diversity.” This could at first sight give the impression that the sphere of boundless space can be attained directly from an ordinary mental state perceptive of diversity, without first unifying the mind by progressing through the four absorptions. However, here it needs to be kept in mind that the way the discourses describe the absorptions and the immaterial attainments is not governed by the wish to present a neat inventory of the respective mental state on its own (Anālayo 2019c).

This can be seen in the preceding description of the fourth absorption, which mentions the “previous disappearance of joy and displeasure,” together with the “abandoning” or “cessation” of “pain.” Pain had been left behind much earlier and, as evidenced in the explicit qualification “previous,” the same holds for joy and displeasure. It would be a misunderstanding to assume that, since these are mentioned in the description of the fourth absorption, it is only at this stage that pain, joy, and displeasure are actually left behind. Instead, these qualifications present the fourth absorption as a culmination point of a progression that has spanned all the preceding attainments, where pain was already left behind with the first absorption. The same pattern holds for the reference to “perceptions of diversity.” A basic degree of unification of the mind had already been established much earlier with the first absorption (Anālayo 2019c). In the present context, the absence of perceptions of diversity finds explicit mention because attending to boundless space, rather than to any material object, leads to a superb degree of unification.

The description offered in the passages translated above, with its clear indication that the immaterial spheres build on previous mastery of the four absorptions, in turn implies that the future Buddha’s apprenticeship under Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta is yet another instance where the early Buddhist texts point to the four absorptions as a pre-Buddhist practice, as their mastery would have been required in order to attain the third and fourth immaterial spheres.

## The Buddha’s First Absorption Experience

The early discourses record that the Buddha had an experience of the first absorption already well before he met Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. The relevant descriptions proceed as follows:

I remember that, being seated in the cool shade of a Jambul tree, while my father the Sakyan was at work, I dwelled secluded from sensuality and secluded from unwholesome states, with application and sustaining,

with joy and happiness born of seclusion, having attained the first absorption.

(MN 36: *abhijānāmi kho panāhaṃ pitu sakkassa kammante sītāya jambucchāyāya nisinno vivicc’ eva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekaṃ pītisukhaṃ paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharitā*).

I remember that, accompanying my father, the Śākyan Śuddhodana, at his work and while being seated in the shadow of a Jambul tree, I dwelled secluded from sensuality and secluded from bad and unwholesome states, with application and sustaining, with joy and happiness born of seclusion, having attained the first absorption.

(Liu 2010, p. 222: *abhijānāmy ahaṃ pituḥ śākyasya śuddhodanasya karmāntān anusmoyogya jambucchāyāyāṃ niśadya viviktaṃ kāmair viviktaṃ pāpakair akuśalaiḥ dharmaiḥ savitarkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekaṃ prītisukhaṃ prathamam dhyānaṃ upasampadya vihartuṃ*).

Furthermore, I remember that a long time ago I saw farmers resting in their fields. I approached the base of a Jambul tree and sat down cross-legged. Secluded from sensuality and secluded from bad and unwholesome states, with [directed] awareness and [sustained] contemplation, with joy and happiness born of seclusion, I attained and dwelled in the accomplishment of the first absorption.

(MĀ 117: 我復憶昔時看田作人止息田上。往詣閻浮樹下，結跏趺坐。離欲，離惡不善之法，有覺，有觀，離生喜樂，得初禪成就遊；this discourse is not a parallel to MN 36, but rather to AN 3.38, or AN 3.39 in the alternative count by Bodhi 2012).

It is noteworthy that in all versions the Buddha-to-be qualifies his experience as the “first” absorption, even though at that time he would hardly have known that this is the first in a series of four levels of absorption. As in the case of the passages on reaching Nirvana here and now, discussed above, it seems fair to assume that the standard description has been applied here in order to convey that the experience the Buddha had in his youth was of the same type as the first in the standard depiction of four levels of absorption regularly mentioned in the discourses.

In the case of those who proclaimed the first absorption to be equivalent to reaching Nirvana here and now, the very fact that they considered this experience to be the final goal implies that they were not aware of higher levels of absorption. Without such awareness, however, it hardly makes sense for them to qualify their experience as the “first” absorption. Hence, it can safely be assumed that the employment of these analytical descriptions reflects the understanding of the reciters when the discourse

was delivered, rather than the understanding of those who had these experiences in the first place.

In the account of the future Buddha's progress to awakening, this recollection forms a turning point. Recalling what he had experienced before he had gone forth and engaged in various practices, which had failed to lead him to awakening, helped him to change perspective. The resultant change of perspective is based on the realization that the wholesome type of happiness experienced during absorption need not be shunned, as it can support progress to awakening.

He also experienced the first and higher absorptions after having gone forth and set out in quest of awakening. However, such experiences would have been affected by the thrust of his overall attempt to find liberation, in the sense of being from the outset viewed in relation to this goal. Of relevance here would have been in particular a common ancient Indian belief that freedom can only be won by abstaining from anything pleasant, a perspective that could easily have led to regarding any joy and happiness experienced during an absorption with suspicion.

In contrast, this early experience was of an accidental nature. It did not occur as part of his quest for awakening and therefore was not accompanied by some kind of evaluation or even apprehension of its potential repercussions. For this reason, such an accidental occurrence, on being recollected, was more easily amenable to being viewed in a completely different way and thereby led to a decisive shift in perspective.

## The Buddha's Struggle with Obstructions to Absorption

Another passage describes the future Buddha's struggle to master absorption. Judging from the context, this struggle should be allocated to the time before he met Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta (Anālayo 2017b). The parallel versions describe a sustained exertion to surmount various mental obstructions, which he had to overcome one after the other in order to enable his eventual mastery of the first absorption. A summary list of these obstructions takes the following form:

Having seen that 'doubt is a [minor] defilement of the mind,' doubt as a [minor] defilement of the mind was abandoned; having seen that 'lack of attention is a [minor] defilement of the mind' ... 'sloth-and-torpor is a [minor] defilement of the mind' ... 'fear is a [minor] defilement of the mind' ... 'elation is a [minor] defilement of the mind' ... 'inertia is a [minor] defilement of the mind' ... 'excessive energy is a [minor] defilement of the mind' ... 'deficient energy is a [minor] defilement of the mind' ... 'longing is a [minor] defilement of the mind' ... 'perception of diversity is a [minor] defilement

of the mind' ... 'excessive meditation on forms is a [minor] defilement of the mind,' excessive meditation on forms as a [minor] defilement of the mind was abandoned.

(MN 128: *vicikicchā cittassa upakkilesa ti iti viditvā vicikicchā cittassa upakkilesa pahīno ahoṣi, amanasikāro cittassa upakkilesa ... thīnamiddham cittassa upakkilesa ti ... chambhitattam cittassa upakkilesa ti ... ubbilam cittassa upakkilesa ti ... duṭṭhullam cittassa upakkilesa ti ... accāraddhavīriyam cittassa upakkilesa ti ... atilīnavīriyam cittassa upakkilesa ti ... abhijappā cittassa upakkilesa ti ... nānattasaññā cittassa upakkilesa ti ... atinijjhāyitattam rūpānam cittassa upakkilesa ti iti viditvā atinijjhāyitattam rūpānam cittassa upakkilesa pahīno ahoṣi).*

When the affliction of doubt arose in my mind, I attained purification of my mind from that; [when] the affliction of lack of attention ... of bodily inertia [affecting] perception ... of sloth-and-torpor ... of excessive energy ... of lack of energy ... of fear ... of elation ... of conceit in the mind ... of giving rise to perceptions of diversity ... of not contemplating forms [arose in my mind], I attained purification of my mind from that.

(MĀ 72: 若我心生疑患，彼得心清淨，無念，身病想，睡眠，太精勤，太懈怠，恐怖，喜悅，高心，生若干想，不觀色心患，彼得心清淨)。

The list of minor defilements or afflictions of the mind in the two versions is closely similar. Particularly noteworthy is the absence of any reference to sensual desire and anger or ill will, the first two in a standard listing of five mental hindrances to successful meditation practice. This implies that the overcoming of obstructions depicted in this discourse sets in at a stage when the future Buddha had already gone at least temporarily beyond these two comparatively gross hindrances.

The two versions continue after the above listing by depicting his progression via the first absorption to a level of concentration between the first and the second and then to the second absorption. The mode of description employed here differs from the standard list of four absorptions by mentioning an interim stage when the absorption factor of mental application has already been left behind but some degree of sustaining the mind in concentrative abiding is still required (Anālayo 2019c).

Despite having had an accidental experience of the first absorption in his youth, according to the above passages the future Buddha had to undergo a sustained struggle in order to master the first absorption. The report of his own struggle in this discourse is addressed to Anuruddha, who had similar difficulties. Once such difficulties had been overcome,

Anuruddha became an outstanding meditator among the Buddha's followers, renowned as foremost among all monastic disciples in the "divine eye" (AN 1.14 and EĀ 4.2). As already mentioned above, this requires a high degree of concentrative ability. The indications provided by the passages translated above concord with other discourses that the first absorption is already a deeply concentrated mental state (Anālayo 2017a). When gifted meditators like Anuruddha and the Buddha himself had to struggle to master the first absorption, it could hardly be otherwise.

The Buddha's eventual attainment of awakening again involves the four absorptions (Anālayo 2019c). Based on their successful attainment, he was able to cultivate three higher knowledges, which are recollection of his own past lives, the "divine eye," and the destruction of the unwholesome influxes in the mind as the third knowledge leading to his becoming a Buddha (Anālayo 2017b).

## Potential Drawbacks of Absorption

Absorption attainment clearly played an important role in the Buddha's own progress to awakening and for this reason naturally became a central element in the early Buddhist path to awakening. Many a discourse highlights the benefits to be expected from the cultivation of absorption.

At the same time, however, the early discourses also reflect a keen awareness that, in spite of the indubitable benefits that absorption has to offer, there can be potential drawbacks. One problem can be attachment to deep concentration experiences, as a result of which a practitioner might lack the inspiration for the ceasing of patterns of identification, the final goal of early Buddhist soteriology. This finds the following illustration:

Monastics, it is just like a person who were to take hold of a branch with a hand smeared with glue, whose hand would stick to it, hold on to it, and adhere to it.

(AN 4.178: *seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, puriso lepagatena hatthena sākhaṃ gaṇḥeyya, tassa so hattho sajjeyyā pi gaṇḥeyyā pi bajjheyvā pi*).

It is just like a person who has applied glue to the hand and with that takes hold of the branch of a tree. The hand will stick to the tree and be unable to get freed from it. Why is that? It is because of the glue that has been applied to the hand.

(SĀ 492: 譬如士夫膠著於手，以執樹枝，手即著樹，不能得離。所以者何？膠著手故；the passage is based on adopting a CBETA emendation of 技 to 枝).

Similar to the hand glued to the branch, a practitioner might end up being glued with attachment to the meditative experience of deeper levels of concentration and as a result lack the inspiration to progress to Nirvana. For this reason, according to another Pāli discourse and its parallel, developing conceit around attainments of deep concentration and losing the inspiration to progress further to the final goal is comparable to mistaking either the bark or else the roots of a tree for its heartwood (MN 29 and EĀ 43.4). The point made with this simile is that, being in need of heartwood for some construction purpose, one will not be able to put to use these other parts of a tree to achieve one's goal. Similarly, the glue of attachment and conceit can turn deep concentration experiences into obstacles for progress to liberation.

From this perspective, then, even the highest of the four absorptions could become problematic if the glue of attachment should manifest. How this can take place finds illustration in another passage, which presents the matter in this way:

One dwells having attained the fourth absorption. Consciousness follows after the neutrality [of the fourth absorption], is tied to the gratification of neutrality, is bound by the gratification of neutrality, is fettered by the fetter of the gratification of neutrality. One's mind is reckoned to be stuck within.

(MN 138: *catuttham jhānam upasampajja viharati. tassa adukkhamasukhānusāri viññāṇam hoti a dukkha ma sukha s s ā d a g a d h i t a ṃ a dukkha ma sukha s s ā d a v i n i b a d d h a ṃ adukkhamasukhassādasamyojanasamyuttam ajjhattam cittam saṅghitan ti vuccati*).

One attains and dwells in the accomplishment of the fourth absorption. One's consciousness is attached to the gratification [derived from] the purity of equanimity and mindfulness, depends on that, is established in that, is conditioned by that, and is shackled by that. One's consciousness is not settled within.

(MĀ 164: 得第四禪成就遊。彼識著捨及念清淨味，依彼，住彼，緣彼，縛彼。識不住內)。

According to yet another passage, even a monastic able to attain the fourth absorption has not yet undergone a transformation of the mind sufficiently strong to prevent that on a later occasion sensual lust overwhelms the mind to such a degree as to lead to disrobing. In the thought-world of the early discourses, disrobing features as the direst misfortune that could befall to a monastic. The relevant passage proceeds as follows:

A certain person dwells having attained the fourth absorption. [Thinking:] 'I am one who gains the fourth

absorption,' [this person] dwells socializing ... and sensual desire invades the mind. With the mind invaded by sensual desire, [this person] gives up the [monastic] training and reverts to the lower [life].

(AN 6.60: *ekacco puggalo ... catuttham jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati. so lābhī 'mhi catutthassa jhānassā ti saṃsaṭṭho viharati ... rāgo cittaṃ anuddhaṃseti. so rāgānuddhaṃsitena cittena sikkhaṃ paccakkhāya hīnāyāvattati*).

Suppose a person has attained the fourth absorption. Having attained the fourth absorption, that [person] in turn remains at ease and no longer strives with a wish to attain what has not yet been attained, to gain what has not been gained, to realize what has not been realized. At a later time, that [person] in turn socializes much ... and sensual desire arises in the mind. Sensual desire having arisen in that [person's] mind, the body in turn becomes passionate and the mind becomes passionate. The body and the mind having become passionate, [the person] in turn abandons the moral precepts and quits the path.

(MĀ 82: 或有一人得第四禪。彼得第四禪已，便自安住，不復更求未得欲得，不獲欲獲，不作證欲作證。彼於後時，便數與 ... 心便生欲。彼心生欲已，便身熱心熱。彼身心熱已，便捨戒罷道)。

The indications provided in these passages should certainly not be taken as a wholesale dismissal of absorption practice, which the early discourses repeatedly commend, precisely for their potential to offer substantial support for progress on the path to liberation. The point to be taken from all this is only that, from the viewpoint of early Buddhist meditation theory, absorption attainment on its own can become a source of attachment.

The same is also reflected in early Buddhist cosmology, as even the highest of the four absorptions still leads to rebirth. How this comes about can be seen in the following passage:

One dwells having attained the fourth absorption. One enjoys it, longs for it, and finds satisfaction in it. Being established on it, dedicated to it, dwelling much in it, and not having lost it, on passing away one will arise in the company of the Celestials of Great Reward.

(AN 4.123: *catuttham jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati. so tad assādeti, taṃ nikāmeti, tena ca vittiṃ āpajjati. tatha ṭhito tadadhimutto tabbahulavihārī aparihīno kālaṃ kurumāno vehapphalānaṃ devānaṃ saḥabyataṃ upapajjati*).

One attains and dwells in the accomplishment of the fourth absorption. One delights in this concentration,

desires it, and is established in it. Having delighted in this concentration, desired it, and become established in it, it is certainly the case that, being established in it and delighting in it, one will after death be born among the Celestials of Great Reward.

(MĀ 168: 得第四禪成就遊。彼此定樂，欲，住。彼此定樂，欲，住已，必有是處，住彼，樂彼，命終生果實天中)。

In Buddhist cosmology, the Celestials of Great Reward inhabit a superior heaven in which those who have mastery of the fourth absorption are reborn. From the viewpoint of early Buddhist thought, such rebirth is not the proper aim of monastic practice. A Pāli discourse and most of its parallels go so far as to place a monastic's aspiration for a heavenly rebirth on a continuum that includes succumbing to various types of sexual attraction (AN 7.47, or AN 7.50 in the alternative count by Bodhi 2012, and Hahn 1977). Given the recurrent emphasis on the ideal of celibacy in early Buddhist monasticism, this is about as strong a censure as one might imagine. Indubitably, the type of attachment that can arise even with the fourth absorption was seen with apprehension for potentially leading one astray from the final goal of freedom from any type of rebirth.

## Absorption and Right Concentration

Another perspective on the role of absorption in the early Buddhist scheme of the path to awakening emerges with the noble eightfold path. One who has attained the first level of awakening, stream-entry, has thereby "entered" the "stream" of this eightfold path (SN 55.5 and SĀ 843), in the sense of being endowed with its eight factors, at least to some degree. One of the factors of this eightfold path is right concentration, which at times is equated with the four absorptions. This type of definition has been of considerable influence in subsequent times. Nevertheless, a close inspection brings to light that this equation occurs only rarely in the Pāli discourses (Anālayo 2019a).

One such occurrence features in what is quite obviously a later addition to an exposition of the four noble truths (DN 22; Anālayo 2014b). In fact, the two Chinese parallels (MĀ 89 and EĀ 12.1) do not even mention the topic of the four noble truths, let alone give it a detailed exposition (Anālayo 2013). In the case of another occurrence (MN 141), none of the three Chinese parallels lists the four levels of absorption when defining right concentration (Anālayo 2006b). Regarding a third occurrence (SN 45.8), the two parallels extant in Chinese define right concentration without mentioning absorption at all (SĀ 784 and T 112).

In addition to these three, another Pāli discourse of relevance defines right concentration by listing the four absorptions along with a fifth type of concentration that involves a

form of meditative reviewing (AN 5.28). In this case, a Sanskrit parallel version has preserved parts of a similar description, but this comes under the heading of just being a form of “concentration”, rather than constituting “right concentration” (Anālayo 2019a). In this way, in the case of all of these four instances, the parallels do not support an equation of right concentration with the attainment of the four absorptions.

In contrast, the early discourses also present another type of definition of right concentration, in which case the parallels tend to agree. Here is one example:

Right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness: unification of the mind endowed with these seven factors is called noble right concentration with its endowments and its supports.

(MN 117: *sammādiṭṭhi sammāsaṅkappo sammāvācā sammākammanto sammā-ājīvo sammāvāyāmo sammāsati, yā kho ... imehi sattahaṅgehi cittassa ekaggatā parikkhatā, ayaṃ vuccati ... ariyo sammāsamādhi sa-upaniso iti pi saparikkhāro iti pi*).

Right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness; if, based on arousing these seven factors, on being supported by them, and on being endowed with them, the mind progresses well and attains unification, then this is reckoned noble right concentration with its arousing, with its supports, and with its endowments.

(MĀ 189: 正見, 正志, 正語, 正業, 正命, 正方便, 正念。若有以此七支習, 助, 具, 善趣向心得一者, 是謂聖正定, 有習, 有助, 亦復有具)。

Right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness. Unification of the mind that, being cultivated, is cultivated through these seven factors of the noble path is called right concentration.

(Up 6080: *yang dag pa'i lta ba dang, yang dag pa'i rtog pa dang, yang dag pa'i ngag dang, yang dag pa'i las kyi mtha' dang, yang dag pa'i 'tsho ba dang, yang dag pa'i rtsol ba dang, yang dag pa'i dran pa ste ... 'phags pa'i lam yan lag bdun 'di rnams kyis yongs su sbyangs shing yongs su sbyang ba byas pas sems rtse gcig par gyur pa 'di ni yang dag pa'i ting nge 'dzin zhes bya'o*).

Although the Pāli version of this discourse shows clear signs of later addition in other parts of its exposition (Anālayo 2010, 2014b), the passage translated above appears to belong to an early stratum of the discourse. The three versions are closely similar in their presentation, with a minor

difference being that the Pāli and Chinese versions qualify right concentration additionally as “noble.” This appears to be in line with a general tendency, evident from comparative studies, toward a proliferation of this qualification in various contexts where it was probably not found at the outset (Anālayo 2006b).

The above concordance of parallels contrasts with the earlier-mentioned instances where the parallels differ. This suggests that the original idea of right concentration would have been cultivation of unification of the mind in conjunction with the other path factors. Hence, the “stream” that one enters on reaching the first level of awakening simply involves cultivating concentration by way of a collaboration with the other path factors, rather than requiring proficiency in absorption.

On reflection, this is indeed the more meaningful perspective. What makes concentration “right” must be the input provided by right view and the other path factors, rather than merely the depth of concentration reached. This could be related to the case mentioned above of mistaking absorption for being Nirvana here and now, of mastering absorption and then getting stuck in attachment to it or else of then becoming so overwhelmed by sensuality as to disrobe. None of these instances naturally qualifies as an achievement of right concentration. Such qualification would be more appropriate when concentration, whatever its depth, is fully aligned with right view and supported by the other path factors. Such alignment would help to avoid mistaken views and attachment.

## Absorption and the Qualities Required for Awakening

That mere absorption attainment was not considered an indispensable requirement for progress on the path to awakening can also be seen in a listing of qualities that are considered pertinent for progress to awakening (*bodhipakkhiyā dhammā, bodhipākṣika-dharmā*, 道品法, *byang chub kyi chos*). Such listings present seven sets of qualities. Here is an example:

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

(DN 28: *cattāro satipaṭṭhānā, cattāro sammappadhānā, cattāro iddhipādā, pañc' indriyāni, pañca balāni, satta bojjhaṅgā, ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*).

This listing does not mention the four absorptions. On the equation of right concentration (as the eighth factor of the noble eightfold path) with the four absorptions, these would at least have been part of such listing implicitly. Yet, this equation turns out to reflect quite probably a later development.

Another implicit reference could be seen in the relationship established in a Pāli discourse between cultivation of the establishments of mindfulness and the first absorption. The passage in question depicts a progression from an establishment of mindfulness cultivated in the absence of thought directly to the second absorption (MN 125). This could convey the impression that at least the first absorption is implicitly included once the four establishments of mindfulness are mentioned. Consultation of the Chinese parallel, however, makes it fairly probable that the presentation in this Pāli discourse is the result of an error in textual transmission (Anālayo 2006a). It follows that a reference to the four establishments of mindfulness would also not imply absorption.

In a Chinese parallel to the Pāli listing quoted above, found in the *Dīrgha-āgama*, the four absorptions do become another member of this list.

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

(DĀ 18: 四念處, 四正勤, 四神足, 四禪, 五根, 五力, 七覺意, 八賢聖道).

Standard listings count thirty-seven such states, whereas an addition of the four absorptions results in an overall count of forty-one. According to Har Dayal (1932/1970, p. 82), “the formula, in its final form, includes ... thirty-seven dharmas” only. Similarly, Gethin (1992, p. 14) commented that “the expression ‘thirty-seven *bodhi-pakkhiyā dhamma/bodhi-pākṣikā dharma*’ seems common to all traditions of Buddhism.” Lamotte (1970, p. 1121) noted other expansions, resulting in what he qualified as “listes aberrantes,” in the form of additions to the standard set of thirty-seven. In sum, it is only in what can confidently be considered a subsequent expansion that the four absorptions find explicit mention in listings of the qualities and practices required for progress to awakening.

Such expansion is not confined to the collection of discourses, the *Dīrgha-āgama* extant in Chinese, in which the passage quoted above is found. As already noted by Warder (1970/1991, p. 77), in relation to another occurrence of such an addition in another discourse in this collection (DĀ 2), one in a range of parallels similarly “inserts” the four absorptions (T 6: 四志惟, 四意端, 四神足, 四禪行, 五根, 五力, 七覺, 八道諦). Salomon (2018, p. 135) pointed out that the same expansion can be seen in a Gāndhārī fragment and in the “Chinese translation of the vinaya belonging to that [same] school” that was also responsible for the transmission of the Chinese *Dīrgha-āgama*.

Bronkhorst (1985, p. 306) noted another instance of such “obvious extension” in a discourse belonging to yet another

collection, the *Madhyama-āgama*. The relevant part of this discourse, which is without a parallel, is not exactly a list of the qualities pertinent to awakening. Instead, the body of this discourse is based on combining different lists, and one of these is the standard list of the qualities pertinent to awakening, which here comes together with a few additional items, including the four absorptions (MĀ 222).

The late nature of this discourse is evident from the fact that, if it were to be recited in full, “without abbreviations, then it would become more than twice as long as the whole *Madhyama-āgama* collection” (Anālayo 2014b, p. 46). It can safely be assumed that this discourse was never recited in full, but came into being in an abbreviated form. When it comes to actual listings of the qualities pertinent to awakening, other discourses in the same *Madhyama-āgama* collection have in fact the same list as the Pāli discourse translated above.

This instance points to a tendency to give increasing importance to the relevance of absorption for progress to awakening in later texts. In fact, although the Pāli tradition has kept the overall count at thirty-seven, a comparable addition of the four absorptions can be seen in the *Samyutta-nikāya*, the collection of discourses assembled according to topics. The final volume of this collection adopts the qualities pertinent to awakening as its basic scaffolding, although in a difference sequence. It begins with the topic of the eightfold “path,” for example, then has the “awakening factors,” followed by the “establishments of mindfulness,” etc.

The same volume also has a collection on “absorption,” the *Jhāna-samyutta* (SN 53). This just lists the four absorptions once and then applies a number of stereotyped formulas to these four that have similarly been applied in the preceding coverage of items corresponding to the qualities pertinent to awakening, such as the eightfold path, the four establishments of mindfulness, and the seven awakening factors. As a result, the four absorptions are qualified as leading to awakening in the same way as these other qualities or practices.

The entire *Jhāna-samyutta* has no parallel in other transmission lineages and can safely be considered a later addition, in line with a general tendency evident in the collection of discourses assembled according to topics to create new topics and then fill these up with discourses for the most part involving abbreviations (similar in kind to the tendency evident in the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse surveyed above).

By applying the stereotyped formulas that must have originated in expositions of qualities that are indeed pertinent to awakening, this *Jhāna-samyutta* achieves the same effect as the Chinese passages discussed above, which expand the listing of such qualities from thirty-seven to forty-one. In each of these cases, the four absorptions appear to have been subsequently added to qualities pertinent to awakening in such a way that they now share their liberating potential.

The tendency to add the four absorptions in this way concurs with the apparent development of definitions of right concentration. In all of these cases, it seems as if, with the passing of time, in some Buddhist traditions an increasing importance had been accorded to absorption attainment as required for progress to awakening.

## The Supposed Need to Master Absorption for Insight Meditation

The need of absorption attainment for being able to gain awakening has remained a contested ground in later Buddhist traditions. The debate on this topic became particularly prominent with the emergence of the widespread teaching of insight meditation, *vipassanā*, in the last century. The attempt to make such teachings available to lay practitioners at large naturally tended to focus on meditation practices that were perceived as more accessible to those encumbered by family life and by having to earn a living. Once even the Buddha and Anuruddha had to go through a sustained struggle to master just the first absorption, it could hardly be expected that the average lay disciple will easily succeed in gaining such deep levels of concentration. This led to the devising of what has come to be known as “dry insight,” in the sense of meditation practices aimed entirely at the cultivation of insight, without the “moisture” of experiencing the joy and happiness of concentrative absorption. Progress in dry insight was understood to require in particular the cultivation of mindfulness, without a need to dedicate time and effort to the development of concentration on its own.

The spread of such dry insight meditation by the disciples of Mahāsi Sayādaw met with considerable opposition from traditional Sri Lankan monastics, who found it doubtful that a meditation practice could lead to awakening without relying on the cultivation of absorption. Such opposition led to a sustained debate on the topic (Kheminda and Nyanuttara 1966/1979).

The equation of right concentration with the four absorptions was accepted by both sides in the debate as axiomatic, as was a distinction between normal absorption attainment, qualified as “worldly” (*lokiya*), and the absorbed condition of the mind at the moment of experiencing any of the four levels of awakening, qualified as “supramundane” (*lokuttara*). This distinction seems to emerge only in exegetical literature (Brahmāli 2007).

Expressing the debated issue in simple terms, without getting into its details, the question is: does the degree of concentration that occurs at the moment of stream-entry suffice to fulfil the path factor of right concentration, without any need to have previously trained in mastery of normal or worldly absorption (*jhāna*)? From the viewpoint of proponents of dry insight, supramundane absorptive concentration suffices as “the path of noble Right Concentration proper.” This

position, taken by Mahāsi (1981a/1998, p. 130), led to counterarguments, reported by him as follows:

Hanging on to this statement of ours, some say that Vipassanā can be developed only after achieving purification of [the] mind through attaining *jhānic* concentration. Without *jhānic* concentration, purification of the mind cannot be brought about. Consequently, Vipassanā cannot be developed.

The expression “purification of the mind” in this context refers to one in a stage of seven purifications that form the scaffolding of the *Visuddhimagga* (Anālayo 2005). The need to fulfill these stages is another doctrine held in common by both sides of the debate. The idea is that one has to accomplish each purification in order to be able to proceed to the next. Hence, without fulfilling the stage of purification of the mind, understood by opponents of dry insight to equal absorption attainment, it will not be possible to progress to the higher stages of purification that then lead on to stream-entry.

From this viewpoint, the argument that the need to attain absorption will be taken care of at the actual time of stream-entry falters. The counterargument pointing to the need to fulfill purification of the mind demands that in some way the attainment of absorption occurs well before the breakthrough to stream-entry.

## Insight Knowledges as Forms of Absorption

In an apparent attempt to counter such criticism, Mahāsi Sayādaw identified some of the stages of the insight meditation taught by him with the four absorptions (*jhāna*). This identification relies on the so-called insight knowledges, which describe experiences a meditator practicing traditional Theravāda *vipassanā* meditation may encounter in the progress to stream-entry (Anālayo 2019b). The correspondences proposed by Mahāsi (1981b/2006, p. 24) took the following form:

Insight meditation (*vipassanā*) and *jhāna* have some characteristics in common ... whenever the yogi observes any phenomena, his insight meditation is somewhat like the first *jhāna* and its five characteristics ... when the yogi gains insight knowledge of the arising and passing away of all phenomena ... his meditation is somewhat like the second *jhāna* ... an advance in the insight knowledge of the arising and passing away of phenomena ... shares the joy and the one-pointedness of mind that are characteristic of the third *jhāna* ... the higher levels of insight knowledge ... are characterized by equanimity and one-pointedness of mind. The former is especially pronounced in the *saṅkhārupekkhā nāṇa*

[i.e. the insight knowledge that leads up to the breakthrough to stream-entry]. At this stage the insight meditation is akin to the fourth *jhāna*.

The correlation proposed in this way by Mahāsi Sayādaw is based on the fact that mental factors characteristic of absorption can already manifest at levels of concentration far below actual absorption attainment (the reference to “five characteristics” of the first absorption is to the five absorption factors of application, sustaining, joy, happiness, and unification). Identifying their presence during insight meditation thereby forms the basis for developing the idea of *vipassanā jhāna*, “insight-absorption,” explained by Mahāsi (1981a/1998, p. 132) in the following way:

*Jhāna* means closely observing an object with fixed attention. Concentrated attention given to a selected object of meditation such as respiration for tranquility concentration gives rise to *samatha jhāna* [tranquility-absorption]; whereas noting the characteristic nature of *rūpa*, *nāma* [form, name] and contemplating their impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality brings about *vipassanā jhāna* [insight-absorption]. We have given the following summarized note for easy memory:

1. Close observation with fixed attention is called *jhāna*.
2. There are two types of *jhāna*: *samatha jhāna* and *vipassanā jhāna*.
3. Fixed attention to develop only tranquility is called *samatha jhāna*.
4. Contemplating on the three characteristics constitutes *vipassanā jhāna*.

From the viewpoint of debating strategies, this is a dexterous move. Given that the opponents insist that the four absorptions need to be taken into account prior to the attainment of stream-entry, to acquiesce to their demand in this way is quite effective. Since opponents to dry insight meditation, precisely because they doubt the efficacy of this approach, will not practice it and therefore cannot rely on personal meditation experience to verify this identification of stages of insight with levels of absorption, it becomes difficult for them to counter this claim.

The apparent success of this line of argument to promote dry insight meditation has led to its adoption by the disciples of Mahāsi Sayādaw. For example, U Paṇḍita (1992/1993, p. 180 and 186) reasoned that

*vipassanā jhāna* allows the mind to move freely from object to object, staying focused on the characteristics of impermanence ... the *vipassanā jhānas* lead to

wisdom, because they consist of direct, sustained contact with the ultimate realities.

The claim made in this way is not entirely an innovation, but is merely a skillful employment of terminology. It simply applies the prestigious term “absorption” to what in exegetical literature is known as “access concentration,” a level well below full absorption attainment. Characteristic of access concentration is the absence of the five hindrances. Such absence can become the way of access to actual absorption attainment but can alternatively be employed for the cultivation of insight in a mind aloof from the hindrances. As explained by Cousins (1973, p. 118),

in the commentarial literature the abandoning of the five hindrances is regarded as synonymous with the attainment of the first stage of concentration (*samādhi*) known as access (*upacāra*) ... the concept of access is not known in the Pali Canon.

Mahāsi (1981a/1998, p. 133) related the commentarial notion of access concentration to his own presentation in the following manner:

*vipassanā samādhi* [insight concentration] is also called access concentration because it has the same characteristic of suppressing the hindrances as access concentration. When *Vipassanā* concentration becomes strongly developed, it can keep the mind well-tranquilized just like the absorption concentration. This has been clearly borne out by the personal experiences of the yogis practising *Satipaṭṭhāna* meditation.

Besides reflecting a reliance on the experiences of practicing yogis as a form of validation, the passage presents the idea of *vipassanā jhānas* as corresponding to the notion of access concentration. It is during such access concentration, when the hindrances have been suppressed, that mental factors characteristic of actual absorption already occur, although in a much weaker form than when absorption is fully attained. Hence, stages of access concentration can be matched with the four absorptions if one focuses only on the presence or absence of selected absorption factors and disregards the depth of concentration required for actual absorption attainment. It is in this way that the *vipassanā jhānas* seem to have entered the scene.

## Reinterpretations of Absorption

The success of this strategic move of baptizing stages of insight meditation as *jhāna*, in order to forestall criticism of dry insight meditation, appears in the course of time to have

spread beyond the audience to which it was originally addressed. Notions of absorption that emerged during this debate have influenced contemporary Western meditation circles, where the practice of absorption has been steadily gaining ground alongside *vipassanā* meditation. Teachers of absorption differ in their understanding of what this term entails, both theoretically and practically speaking (Quli 2008).

Needless to say, judging the depth of one's own concentration is a subjective matter and can vary considerably, easily leading to overestimation. This must have happened throughout the history of Buddhism. The difference at present, however, is that due to the developments that appear to have originated from the strategy adopted by Mahāsi Sayādaw and his disciples, such tendencies to overestimation easily receive sanction and have led to new meditation traditions that are quite independent of, and at times even explicitly opposed to, dry insight and Theravāda exegesis.

Proponents of *jhāna* meditation traditions seem to have been influenced, often unknowingly, by the strategic move employed by the Mahāsi tradition. This led to an adoption of the idea of *vipassanā jhānas* as states in which contemplation of impermanence takes place, followed by attributing the undertaking of such contemplation to the absorptions in general. Some such proponents even present absorption attainment as being in itself a form of insight.

A strategy adopted in such approaches posits a substantial difference between description of absorption in the early discourses and in later Theravāda exegesis. This can be seen in the position taken by Shankman (2008, p. 101), who argued that

During the centuries between the composition of the suttas and Buddhaghosa's great work, the understanding of *jhāna* evolved from being a state of undistracted awareness and profound insight into the nature of changing phenomena to states of extreme tranquility in which the mind is utterly engrossed in the mental qualities of the *jhāna* itself.

There can be little doubt that the way of developing absorption meditation described in Theravāda exegesis, in particular in the important Theravāda path-manual, the *Path of Purification* by Buddhaghosa, employs vocabulary unknown in the early discourses and differs from them in various respects. It does not necessarily follow, however, that the resultant experience must be substantially different from the type of absorption envisioned in the early discourses.

The assumption that the actual results of such practice differ substantially finds expression in contrasting the "*Visuddhimagga jhāna*," referring to a type of absorption envisaged in Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification*, with "*sutta jhāna*," *sutta* being the Pāli term for "discourse" and here

serving to indicate the type of absorption reflected in the discourses. This involves a change of terminology compared to the precedent set by Mahāsi Sayādaw. What he designated as tranquility-absorption, *samatha jhāna*, now comes under the heading of *Visuddhimagga jhāna*, and his insight-absorption, *vipassanā jhāna*, is now referred to as *sutta jhāna*.

A significant difference is that whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw's *vipassanā jhāna* designated the experience of insight meditation as clearly distinct from the type of absorption described in the early discourses, the corresponding *sutta jhāna* is now believed to have been the type of absorption originally taught by the Buddha. Based on this assumption, Brasington (2015, p. 165) argued that

It seems after the Buddha's death, the monks began a slow process of redefining just what constitutes these states ... When we look at the *jhānas* as described in the *Abhidhamma*, which was composed some one to two hundred or more years after the Buddha's death, what we find being described are states of much deeper absorption ... By the time of the *Visuddhimagga*, some eight hundred plus years after the Buddha's death, the *jhānas* had become redefined to such an extent that it was extremely difficult to learn them ... Since the number of people who could actually attain *Visuddhimagga*-style *jhānas* was quite small, the teaching of *jhānas* became more and more neglected in favor of 'dry insight'—insight meditation without the preliminary *jhāna* practice.

Brasington (2015, p. 167) proposed the following possible reasons for this development:

My best guess is that the forest monks in the generations after the Buddha's death basically had nothing much to do but sit around and meditate. With this deeply dedicated practice, some of them discovered these deeper states of absorption but failed to recognize them as not being what was talked about in the suttas ... All this has had the unfortunate side effects of not only failing to understand what the Buddha was experiencing and teaching, but also of redefining *jhānic* concentration to such an extreme depth that almost no one could experience it or use it. The *sutta jhānas*, which far more people could attain and use, fell into disfavor and were mostly forgotten.

The position taken in this way implies that the monks who lived after the Buddha attained substantially deeper levels of concentration than the Buddha himself and his personal disciples had ever been able to reach. In other words, abilities in

absorptive concentration gradually increased over the centuries, allowing for the posited development from the shallower levels of absorptive concentration that the Buddha experienced after a sustained struggle to the much deeper absorptions known by the time of Buddhaghosa. Moreover, whereas the Buddha and his accomplished monastic disciples had to strive hard to gain these shallower absorptions, nowadays lay meditators achieve the same quite easily.

### Absorption as a Form of Insight on Its Own

A related approach presents absorption as in itself productive of liberating insight and hence as a distinct discovery of the Buddha. Probably unaware of being indebted to a reasoning proposed originally by Mahāsi Sayādaw, Arbel (2017, p. 86) argued that “by progressing through the *jhānas*, insight (*vipassanā*) becomes deeper and reality is perceived more clearly.” In this way, the “*jhānic* mind is a broad field of awareness, observant of the changing phenomenal field” (p. 156).

In line with the identification of higher levels of insight knowledge with the fourth absorption, prosed originally by Mahāsi Sayādaw, Arbel (2017, p. 160) argues that “the fourth *jhāna* marks the realization and actualization of a mind that knows directly *aniccā* (sic) and *anattā* [impermanence and not self] with regard to all phenomena.” In this way, according to Arbel (2017, p. 166), “the fourth *jhāna* should be recognized as the actualization of wisdom,” hence it is through its attainment that one “might finally break ignorance completely and awaken the mind” (p. 167).

Several of the arguments proposed in support of this position are based on misunderstandings of terminology or discourse passages (Anālayo 2016). Adopting this approach also fails to take into account passages documenting pre-Buddhist absorption practices, which would directly conflict with the assumption that absorption is a practice discovered by the Buddha as in itself liberating. The same holds for passages that draw attention to the potential drawbacks of absorption, which are not compatible with the idea that absorption is in itself an actualization of liberating wisdom.

The indications surveyed above on potential drawbacks of absorption clearly show that the early Buddhist discourses did consider absorption to be potentially deluding. Nevertheless, Arbel (2017, p. 147) took the position: “I would argue that the notion that the *jhānas* have delusive power is quite problematic. On the contrary, they seem to have the uttermost potential to eradicate delusion completely.”

The trajectory surveyed above comes full circle with an argument proposed by Polak (2016, p. 109). After presenting the absorptions as forms of insight meditation, Grzegorz Polak saw confirmation for this in U Paṇḍita Sayādaw’s description of the *vipassanā jhānas* as documenting that “the very

existence of such forms of meditation at least shows the actual possibility of a state which can be simultaneously endowed with both insight and calm ... this fits pretty well with all the textual evidence we have about the four *jhāna*-s.”

The problem with these reinterpretations of absorption is precisely that they do not take into account “all the textual evidence we have.” The passages surveyed in this article suffice to document that such notions do not accurately reflect the available evidence for early Buddhist thought and practice.

This is not to take the position that the actual meditation practices undertaken under such premises cannot have beneficial effects. In fact, to some extent they provide a welcome counterbalance to the one-sidedness of dry insight, which gives little room to the intentional cultivation of concentrative joy and happiness. From that perspective, the appeal of these reinterpretation strategies is quite understandable.

The point of the above analysis is only to clarify that the appropriation of the prestigious term “*jhāna*” by followers of these contemporary meditation traditions should be seen as an authentication strategy that has its antecedent in a polemic move by the promoters of dry insight.

### Unintended Consequences of Absorption Rhetoric

From an overall perspective, it is worthy of note that each of the positions taken in the course of the development sketched above has had some unintended side effects. The firm position taken by traditional monastics in support of the need for absorption, in their debate with the proponents of dry insight meditation, has elicited an undermining of the very notion of what absorption entails. This has and still is of pervasive influence in meditation circles. As a result, even those sincerely interested in learning to cultivate absorption are often at a loss to know who teaches genuine absorption attainment.

The creation of the notion of insight-absorption (*vipassanā jhāna*) to defend the validity of dry insight, despite its success in the debate, has unwittingly triggered the emergence of serious contestants for meditation disciples. The prestigious label of “absorption,” the supposed intrinsic potential of absorption to produce insight, and the encouragement for meditators to cultivate concentrative types of joy and happiness from the outset result in an attractive presentation that promoters of dry insight find difficult to compete with.

The identification of meditation experiences in which some absorption factors are weakly present as full-fledged absorption, in spite of its attraction among prospective disciples, has the net result of potentially foreclosing meditative progress to genuine absorption. This can to some extent be seen reflected in a practical advice offered by Catherine (2008, p. 155):

“should you choose to apply the term *jhana* liberally to states lightly saturated by jhanic factors, please don’t presume such states represent the full potential of *jhana*.” When meditators, who are only experiencing absorption factors in a state of mind corresponding to what exegetical texts call “access concentration,” believe to have already mastered the four absorptions, this can have the result that they settle for that much instead of deepening their concentration to the level of actual absorption attainment.

As for psychological research on meditative experiences, mentioned at the outset of this article, the historical development sketched here implies that there are a range of quite different experiences promoted under the label of “absorption” by various practitioners and teachers. It follows that, as a precondition for any research, there is a need to ascertain first of all what type of absorption a practitioner claims to have reached. For example, Yates and Immergut (2015 p. 386) distinguished absorptions into three types: “whole-body *jhānas*,” glossed as “very lite,” “pleasure *jhānas*,” explained to be “lite,” and “luminous *jhānas*,” with the last being of the “deep” type among these three. Although the terminology employed is not necessarily ideal, the idea that there are substantially different types of absorption constructs in current meditation circles is certainly meaningful and should be taken into account in future research.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Ethical Approval** This article does not contain any studies performed by the author with human participants or animals.

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

**Abbreviations** AN, *Aṅguttara-nikāya*; CBETA, Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association; DĀ, *Dīrgha-āgama* (T 1); DN, *Dīghanikāya*; EĀ, *Ekottarika-āgama* (T 125); MĀ, *Madhyama-āgama* (T 26); MN, *Majjhima-nikāya*; SĀ, *Saṃyukta-āgama* (T 99); SĀ<sup>2</sup>, *Saṃyukta-āgama* (T 100); SN, *Saṃyutta-nikāya*; T, Taishō edition; Up, *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā*

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