

Appendix 6: Is Sound Heard When Engaging in the Jhānas?

Some meditators, by conviction of their own experience, say we can't hear sound when engaging in the jhānas, not even the first one. I agree; it's true for the complete absorption, Visuddhimagga jhāna.

However, some among them claim they are going by the Suttas, citing a statement in Kaṇṭhaka Sutta (AN10.72): “**Sound is a thorn (kaṇṭhaka) to the first jhāna.**”⁶ (Both “thorn” and “kaṇṭhaka” carry the figurative meaning of “source of discomfort” or “bother”.) They seem to interpret the statement as “Sound hinders one from attaining the first jhāna”. Then upon attaining the first jhāna (and by logic the rest too), one isn't supposed to hear any sound. But is this view supported by that sutta statement?

Firstly, if it is speaking of sound hindering one's attaining of the first jhāna, that means there's no jhāna yet. If there's no jhāna, then what is there for sound to be a thorn to? Besides, if that interpretation is correct, sound wouldn't be a thorn; it would be a hindrance.

Secondly, if it *does* mean one can't hear any sound upon attaining the first jhāna, then sound wouldn't be a thorn or bother at all. How can sound bother one who can't hear it?

So, actually, saying that sound is a thorn or bother to the first jhāna doesn't mean one can't hear sound in the first jhāna; it means one can!

To be sure that this understanding is correct, we can refer to other ‘thorny’ statements in the sutta. For example, just before the statement quoted above, we find “Proximity with womenfolk (mātugāmūpacāra) is a thorn to the divine-practice (brahmacariya).” (The Buddha must be speaking to monks only then.) Does that mean

6 *paṭhamassa jhānassa saddo kaṇṭhako*. Although *sadda* generally means “sound”, it can also specifically mean “noise”. In fact, this may be the actual meaning here going by the context in the sutta, in which the Buddha spoke in response to an occasion where many well-known Licchavis who arrived to see him were *uccāsaddā mahāsaddā*, literally “of high sound, of great sound”. In other words, they were very noisy. In NDB, *sadda* is translated as “noise”.

men of divine-practice, such as Buddhist monks, are disabled from noticing women near them? Hasn't happened to me yet.

So the sutta statement "Sound is a thorn to the first jhāna" does not support the idea that we can't hear sounds in the Sutta jhāna. Instead, it supports the opposite. Nonetheless, one can rightly say sound can't be heard in the absorption jhāna.

In the same sutta, we find that sound is not a thorn to the second jhāna or higher. Does that mean sound can't be heard in those jhānas? Not so. It just means that to higher jhānas, sound is not a thorn, not a source of discomfort, not a bother.⁷

By the way: Some people take pride in not hearing sound during meditation. But just as Ajahn Chah and Sayadaw U Tejaniya both say, "Sound is just sound," in the same way, no sound is just no sound. The deaf don't hear sounds all the time. So, what is there to take pride in?

7 For a more thorough analysis of this subject, read "Silence Isn't Mandatory" in a collection titled *Noble & True* by Ajahn Ṭhānissaro: http://www.dhammadata.org/ebook_index.html#NobleAndTrue. Interestingly, we've separately arrived at many similar arguments.