



The Role of the Four Rūpajhānas in the Buddha's Path to Enlightenment

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Abstract

This article explores the pivotal role of the four *rūpajhānas* – also known as “fine-material jhānas”, “material jhānas”, “form jhānas” – in the Buddha's journey to enlightenment. It provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how these meditative states facilitate the overcoming of the five hindrances and the development of deep concentration (*samādhi*), equanimity (*upekkhā*), and mindfulness (*sati*).

The article analyzes each of the four jhānas in detail: the role of the first jhāna in overcoming the initial mental hindrances and its influence on the Buddha's path to enlightenment; the arising singleness of mind and deepening concentration of the second jhāna; the cultivation of equanimity and mindfulness of the third jhāna; and the attainment of pure equanimity and mindfulness of the fourth jhāna.

The article further discusses why the Buddha returned to the first jhāna after achieving greater absorption in the immaterial jhānas (*arūpajhānas*), and why he skipped the four immaterial jhānas in the final stages of his enlightenment. These analyses emphasize the crucial influence and miraculous power of the *rūpajhānas* in the Buddha's enlightenment, emphasizing their special function in achieving knowledge, ending suffering, and attaining Nibbāna.

Keywords: jhāna, first jhāna, second jhāna, third jhāna, fourth jhāna, rūpajhānas, arūpajhānas, enlightenment

Introduction

In the Buddhist doctrinal system, the Buddha's enlightenment is regarded as the culmination of a path founded on the principles of meditation (*jhāna*) and knowledge (*vijjā*). In the early discourses of the Pāli Canon, it is evident that these two dimensions meditation and knowledge are not merely preparatory practices but serve as direct instruments of enlightenment. Texts in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, such as the *Bhayabherava Sutta* (MN 4, ‘Fear

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and Dread'), the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (MN 26, 'The Noble Search'), the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (MN 36), and the *Bodhirājakumāra Sutta* (MN 85, 'To Prince Bodhi'), provide detailed accounts of how the Buddha, on the night of his enlightenment, entered the four *rūpajhānas*. This meditative absorption preceded his attainment of the threefold knowledge (*tevijjā*), ultimately leading to his full enlightenment (*sammāsambodhi*). Through this systematic progression, it is evident that *jhānic* absorption and insight were not mere by-products of liberation but constituted the essential framework of the Buddha's path to awakening.

By analyzing the doctrinal relevance of the spiritual development of meditations that played a pivotal role in developing liberating knowledge on the Buddha's path to enlightenment, the purpose of this article is to investigate the significance of these concepts.

Understanding how meditation and insight simultaneously functioned as the final stages of the Buddha's spiritual trajectory must be proven and explained. This will be done by closely reading selected canonical texts supported by traditional commentaries and contemporary educational interpretations. This exploration can deepen our understanding of the Buddha's path and its relevance to Buddhist practice today.

The Jhānas in the Buddha's Enlightenment: A Conceptual Framework

In the Buddha's journey toward enlightenment, the four *rūpajhānas* played a pivotal role in refining concentration (*samādhi*) and cultivating mental tranquility, thereby preparing his mind for the profound insights that led to liberation. Each *jhāna* represents a distinct meditative state characterized by specific mental factors, which progressively enhance the practitioner's ability to cultivate insight (*vipassanā*).

In the early Buddhist tradition, *jhāna* (Pāli; Sanskrit: *dhyāna*) is a core element of mental training (*bhāvanā*), primarily aimed at detaching the mind from reactive sensory engagement and burning up defilements, culminating in a state of "perfect equanimity and awareness (*upekkhā-sati-parisuddhi*)" (Vetter, 1988, p. 5). According to the Pali Text Society's *Pāli-English Dictionary*, *jhāna* is derived from "*ārammaṇ'ūpanijjhānato paccanīka-jhāpanato vā jhānam*," meaning focused contemplation on an object and the elimination of negative mental states, signifying its specialized role in meditation rather than a vague notion of thought (Davids & Stede, 1993, p. 322).

In the later Theravāda commentarial tradition, *jhāna* came to be equated with *samādhi* (concentration), a singular focus of mind with minimal external awareness. However, in the contemporary Vipassanā movement, such absorption is sometimes seen as secondary or even obstructive for attaining the initial stage of awakening, which is often linked instead with *vipassanā*, that is, mindfulness of body and direct insight into impermanence (Rose, 2016, p. 60). This interpretation has been increasingly challenged by modern scholars and practitioners who argue for a return to the integrated meditative model found in the early discourses.

Beyond Theravāda, the concept of *jhāna* permeates East Asian Buddhist traditions, including Chán (Chinese), Zen (Japanese), and Thiền (Vietnamese). All these terms originate from the Sanskrit word *dhyāna*. In traditions such as Tiantai and Theravāda, *ānāpānasati*



(mindfulness of breathing) remains a foundational method for cultivating *jhāna*, rooted in practices dating back to the Sarvāstivāda³ school in the early Common Era.

One of the most underexplored aspects of the Buddha's teaching is *sammāsamādhi* (right concentration), the final factor of the Noble Eightfold Path (Brasington, 2022). The *jhānas* form the direct meditative framework for this component, as seen in the Buddha's own practice on the night of his awakening, when he sequentially entered the four *rūpajhānas*: the first (*paṭhamajjhāna*), second (*dutiyajjhāna*), third (*tatiyajjhāna*), and fourth (*catutthajjhāna*).

Gunaratana (1995) emphasizes that these meditative states are not mere by-products of tranquility but essential stages of mental absorption and clarity. Through focused attention on a single object, the practitioner reaches profound mental unification, or one-pointedness of mind (*cittassa ekaggatā*), thereby attaining deep states of immersion essential for higher knowledge (pp. 13–15).

In summary, the *jhānas* are not optional or supplementary. They are core meditative attainments integral to the process of awakening. Early Buddhist sources affirm their foundational role in both the Buddha's enlightenment and in the training, he prescribed for his disciples.

First Jhāna: Overcoming the Five Hindrances and inspiration in Siddhattha Gotama's journey to enlightenment

The *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (MN 36; Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 2015) describes how, after years of practicing fruitless asceticism, the recluse Siddhattha Gotama recalled a spontaneous meditative experience from his youth. At the age of nine, while his father, the Shakyas, was ploughing the fields, he sat under the cool shade of a rose-apple tree (*jambu*) and spontaneously entered the first *jhāna*: “Quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first *jhāna*, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion” (p. 340).

Upon reflection, Siddhattha concluded that this meditative state was the correct path to enlightenment (Brasington, 2022, p. 57). He questioned, “Why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?” and resolved, “I am not afraid of that pleasure since it has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states” (MN 36, 2015, p. 340). Abandoning extreme austerities, he resumed eating raw food to regain his health (MN 36, 2015, p. 340).

The process of Siddhattha Gotama's awakening unfolded during the night as he meditated beneath the *assattha*-tree⁴ (*Mahāpadāna Sutta*, Dīgha Nikāya 14; Walshe, 1995, p.

³ Sarvastivāda is an ancient Buddhist school that originated under the reign of Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE (Westerhoff, 2018, p. 60). The term “Sarvastivāda” signifies “the doctrine that all exists” or “everything exists.” This institution is known for its unique philosophical perspectives on the essence of reality and time.

⁴ *Assattha* (Pāli; Davids & Stede, 1993, p. 104), *pippala* (Pāli); Saṃskṛta: *aśvattha* (Wikipedia, n.d), *pippala*; Hindi: *pipal* (Sutta Central, n.d.), *peepal*; according to The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary is “the holy fig-tree, *Ficus, Religiosa*; the tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment, i. e. the Bo tree” (Davids &



200). He entered successively the first, second, third, and fourth *jhānas* (MN 36, 2015, pp. 340–341). Following these absorptions, he directed his mind toward the realization of three higher knowledges (*tevijjā*): the recollection of past lives (*pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa*), the divine eye (*dibbacakkhuñāṇa*), and the destruction of the taints (*āsavakkhayañāṇa*) (Chödrön, 2001, pp. 145–146). Through this, he attained final liberation.

The first *jhāna* thus marks the initial meditative attainment on Siddhattha Gotama's path to enlightenment. On that night, beneath the *assattha*-tree, he re-entered the first *jhāna*, which is described in *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* as follows: “Quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first *jhāna*, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain” (MN 36, 2015, pp. 340–341).

The phrase “secluded from sensual pleasures” implies a conscious withdrawal from the five types of sense-based enjoyment: visual forms, sounds, odors, flavors, and tactile sensations, all of which are deemed enticing and provocative of desire. These are referred to as the five cords of sensual pleasure in the *Bahavedanīya Sutta* (*The Many Kinds of Feeling*, MN 59, 2015) which states: “Forms seen by the eye, sounds heard by the ear, odors smelled by the nose, flavors tasted by the tongue, and tangibles felt by the body - these are sensual pleasures” (p. 503).

In Buddhist meditation, renouncing sensual pleasures is essential for overcoming mental distractions and progressing spiritually. Sensuality is classified as one of the five hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇāni*) that obstruct concentration and insight. The practice of seclusion from sensory input cultivates inner tranquility, mental clarity, and focused awareness qualities necessary for deeper states of meditation and insight.

Furthermore, the expression “secluded from unwholesome states” refers specifically to a form of mental withdrawal. According to Bhikkhu Anālayo (2003), this denotes a mental purification process: “The standard *jhāna* formula describes this first absorption as being reached through seclusion from sensual pleasures (*kāmehi*) and seclusion from unwholesome states (*akusala dhammehi*). While seclusion from sensual pleasures refers primarily to physical seclusion, seclusion from unwholesome states refers to mental seclusion, achieved by overcoming the five hindrances” (p. 65).

Akusala dhamma is a Pāli term referring to comprises unwholesome *dhammas* (states) that result in negative mental states and actions. This concept encompasses actions and awareness that produce adverse karmic repercussions, together with unskillful *dhammas* that may result in additional bad consequences. Ultimately, *akusala dhamma* denotes elements that foster a cycle of unwholesomeness, influencing both personal conduct and wider karmic consequences (Wisdom Library, 2024 a).

Stede, 1993, p. 104). After the Buddha attained enlightenment, this tree was called the bodhi tree. Bodhi means enlightenment. Bodhi tree means tree of enlightenment.



The Buddha said that if someone thought that the five cords of sensual pleasure were the utmost pleasure and joy that beings experience, the Buddha would not give in and tell that person that there is a more and more superior kind of the utmost pleasure and joy that is detached from unwholesome states, entering and abiding in the first jhāna (MN 59, 2015, p. 503).

Sarao (2013) states that in the first jhāna, five factors must be abandoned and five factors must be possessed. The five abandoned factors are the five hindrances: sensual desire (*kāmacchanda*), ill-will (*byāpāda*), sloth-and-torpor (*thīna-middha*), worry-and-flurry (*uddhacca-kukkucca*), doubt (*vicikicchā*). The five possessed factors are applied thought (*vitakka*), sustained thought (*vicāra*), rapture (*pīti*), pleasure (*sukha*), and unification of mind (*cittassa ekaggatā*).

In the *Gaṇakamoggallāna Sutta*, when the brahmin Gaṇaka Moggallāna asked the Buddha about the Buddha's training process in the Dhamma and Discipline for his disciples, the Buddha outlined seven stages: (1) preservation of morals (*sīla*), (2) guards the doors of the sense faculties, (3) moderation in eating, (4) wakefulness, (5) mindfulness and full awareness, (6) overcoming the five hindrances: sensory desire (*kāmacchanda*); ill will (*vyāpāda*); sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*); restlessness and remorse (*uddhacca-kukkucca*); doubt (*vicikicchā*) and then (7) practice meditation to successively attain and abide in the first jhānas, second jhānas, third jhānas up to fourth jhānas (MN 107, 2015, pp. 874-877).

In another sense “secluded from sensual pleasures”, “secluded from unwholesome states” also means achievement of *sīla*: “Come, bhikkhu, be virtuous, restrained with the restraint of the Pātimokkha, be perfect in conduct and resort, and seeing fear in the slightest fault, train by undertaking the training precepts” (MN 107, 2015, p. 874).

So, to attain and abide in the first jhāna, one must practice and accomplish the above six stages as stated in the *Gaṇakamoggallāna Sutta* (MN 107, 2015, pp. 874-877). The question is whether one must achieve the above six stages before one can attain and abide in the first meditation or are the stages of the above six practiced at the same time and depending on the action at that time, one can apply it to practice?

In the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, this statement is repeated eight times as advice from the Buddha to his disciples: “This is morality, this is concentration, this is wisdom. Concentration, when imbued with morality, brings great fruit and profit. Wisdom, when imbued with concentration, brings great fruit and profit. The mind imbued with wisdom becomes completely free from the corruptions, that is, from the corruption of sensuality, of becoming, of false views and of ignorance.” (Dīgha Nikāya 16, 1995, 1.12, p. 234; 1.14, p. 234; 1.18, p. 236; 2.4, p. 240; 2.10, p. 242; 2.20, p. 244; 4.4, pp. 254-255; 4.12, p. 256).

This means that threefold training (Pāli: *tisikkhā*; Saṃskṛta: *trīśikṣā*): morality (higher virtue; Pāli: *adhisīla-sikkhā*), concentration (higher mind; Pāli *adhicitta-sikkhā*), and wisdom (Pāli: *adhipaññā-sikkhā*) can be practiced together, rather than necessarily achieving one training before practicing the other.



The *Mahā-Assapura Sutta* (*The Greater Discourse at Assapura*, MN 39, 2015) mentions that a bhikkhu, having abandoned the five hindrances, enters the first jhāna, experiencing rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. He pervades his entire body with this rapture and pleasure, just like a skilled bath attendant kneads bath powder with water, ensuring it's fully soaked and pervaded (pp. 367-368).

In the *Samañamañdikā Sutta*, when speaking about where unwholesome intentions cease without remaining, the Buddha also states: “Their cessation is stated: here, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first jhāna.” (MN 78, 2015, p. 652)

According to the suttas in Pāli Canon such as the *Bhayabherava Sutta* (MN 4, 2015, pp. 104-105), the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (MN 36, 2015, p. 340), the *Bahuvedanīya Sutta* (MN 59, 2015, p. 503), the *Mahāsakuludāyī Sutta* (MN 77, 2015, p. 641), the *Kāyagatāsati Sutta* (*Mindfulness of the Body*, MN 119, 2015, p. 953), the first jhāna is characterized as being “accompanied by applied and sustained thought” or “accompanied by thinking and examining” and “filled with the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion”. Thinking and examining, rapture and pleasure are the four qualities that are frequently described as the factors that contribute to the first jhāna.

Vitakka is a Pāli term which translates into English as “reflection”, “thinking”, “thought”, or “initial application” (Davids & Stede, 1993, p. 688). *Vicāra* is also a Pāli term which is translated into English as “examination”, “investigation”, “consideration”, or “deliberation”. (Davids & Stede, 1993, p. 683). These words are interpreted by the commentaries to signify initial and prolonged attention on the object of meditation. It is a fact that in order to practice any form of meditation, you must first focus your attention on the meditation object and then maintain that focus going forward.

Brasington (2022) argues that the terms *vitakka* and *vicāra* constantly and exclusively relate to something that is thought. When the meditator is able to develop access concentration and keep it going, there may still be a little bit of thinking going on in the background, which can be ignored for the most part. In the first jhāna, this fundamental way of thinking is preserved, and it is this way of thinking that is referred to by the words *vitakka* and *vicāra*.

According to Brasington (2022), during meditation practice, if meditators shift their attention to a pleasant feeling and retaining that feeling as their object of attention when they move from access concentration to first jhāna. They are also disregarding any thoughts that are occurring in the background during this process. In the event that they are able to keep their attention undistracted on the pleasant sensation, *pīti* will manifest itself.

The term *akusala dhamma* in Pāli refers to unwholesome mental and volitional states that give rise to negative psychological and ethical consequences. These states not only produce detrimental karmic outcomes but also perpetuate a cycle of unskillful actions and reactions. *Akusala dhammas* are thus central to the Buddhist understanding of suffering and its causes, as



they influence both personal conduct and broader karmic ramifications (Wisdom Library, 2024a).

The Buddha, in the *Bahuvedanīya Sutta*, made it clear that if someone believed the five cords of sensual pleasure to be the highest form of happiness, he would not support this notion. Instead, he would guide that individual towards a superior kind of joy one detached from unwholesome states, specifically the joy found in the attainment of the first *jhāna* (MN 59, 2015, p. 503).

Moreover, the instruction “secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states” is closely tied to the achievement of *sīla*. The Buddha’s exhortation to a bhikkhu “Be virtuous, restrained by the Pātimokkha, perfect in conduct and resort, and train with fear even in the slightest fault” emphasizes the foundational role of ethical discipline in meditative progress (MN 107, 2015, p. 874).

This raises a pivotal question in meditative praxis: must these preparatory stages be sequentially completed before entering the first *jhāna*, or can they be cultivated simultaneously, depending on situational appropriateness? The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* offers insight into this through repeated emphasis on the integrated practice of morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). The Buddha declared: “This is morality, this is concentration, this is wisdom. Concentration, when imbued with morality, brings great benefit. Wisdom, when imbued with concentration, brings great benefit. The mind imbued with wisdom becomes liberated from the taints: sensuality, becoming, false views, and ignorance” (DN 16, 1995, pp. 234–256).

This suggests that the *tisikkhā* (threefold training) higher virtue (*adhisīla-sikkhā*), higher mind (*adhicitta-sikkhā*), and higher wisdom (*adhipaññā-sikkhā*) are to be practiced in a mutually reinforcing manner, rather than in strict succession.

In the *Mahā-Assapura Sutta*, a bhikkhu is described as entering the first *jhāna* after abandoning the five hindrances, experiencing rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. This absorption is likened to a skilled bath attendant kneading bath powder with water until it is fully soaked and permeated (MN 39, 2015, pp. 367–368). Similarly, in the *Samañamañḍikā Sutta*, the Buddha states that unwholesome intentions cease when one becomes secluded from sensual pleasures and unwholesome states by entering the first *jhāna* (MN 78, 2015, p. 652).

Numerous suttas in the Pāli Canon including the *Bhayabherava Sutta* (MN 4), *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (MN 36), *Bahuvedanīya Sutta* (MN 59), *Mahāsakuludāyī Sutta* (MN 77), and *Kāyagatāsati Sutta* (MN 119) uniformly characterize the first *jhāna* as being “accompanied by applied and sustained thought” and “filled with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion.” These four mental factors *vitakka*, *vicāra*, *pīti*, and *sukha* are consistently identified as defining features of this initial meditative absorption.

According to the *Pāli-English Dictionary* by Davids & Stede (1993), *vitakka* is rendered as “reflection,” “thinking,” or “initial application,” while *vicāra* denotes “examination,” “investigation,” or “deliberation” (pp. 688, 683). Traditional commentarial interpretations



suggest these refer to the meditator's initial engagement with and sustained attention on the meditation object an indispensable process for entering absorption.

Brasington (2022) challenges more abstract interpretations by asserting that *vitakka* and *vicāra* consistently refer to cognitive activity. According to him, when a meditator has achieved access concentration, subtle background thinking may still be present but can be largely disregarded. It is this subdued form of thought that remains in the first *jhāna* and is denoted by *vitakka* and *vicāra*.

He further argues that, in the transition from access concentration to the first *jhāna*, meditators shift their focus to a pleasant feeling and maintain that as the object of attention. As they sustain attention on this feeling (disregarding residual background thoughts) *pīti* (rapture) arises naturally (Brasington, 2022).

In conclusion, the attainment of the first *jhāna* is contingent on both ethical and psychological purification. It involves the overcoming of *akusala dhammas*, the cultivation of *kusala* factors, and the integrated practice of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*. Whether practiced sequentially or concurrently, these components collectively support the meditative transformation necessary for liberation from unwholesome states and the progressive realization of inner peace.

Pīti is a Pāli term commonly translated as “joy,” “delight,” “zest,” or “exuberance” (Davids & Stede, 1993, p. 513). It is also frequently rendered as “rapture” in the translations of the Nikāyas by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (e.g., MN 36, 2015, p. 340). According to Brasington (2022), *pīti* refers to a pleasurable and energizing physical release that may range from subtle to quite intense. This experience is often accompanied by *sukha*, which is an integral aspect of early meditative absorptions.

Sukha, also a Pāli term, is typically translated as “pleasant,” “agreeable,” “blessed” (Davids & Stede, 1993, p. 792), or “happy” (Gunaratana, 1995). While *pīti* is primarily a bodily excitation or energizing joy, *sukha* denotes a more refined emotional state of contentment or happiness (Brasington, 2022). The co-arising of *pīti* and *sukha* is essential for the attainment of the first *jhāna*, the initial meditative absorption. This state represents a significantly altered mode of consciousness; it is often said that if a practitioner is uncertain about whether they have entered the first *jhāna*, they likely have not. The distinct emergence of *pīti* and *sukha* serves as a clear indicator that a transformative meditative state has arisen.

The manifestation of *pīti* is multifaceted, encompassing a wide range of sensory phenomena, such as tingling, shivering, bodily vibrations, feelings of buoyancy, or even ecstatic surges of energy. These experiences can range from mild to profoundly intense, with advanced states sometimes producing sensations akin to hair standing on end or the perception of floating. In the initial stages of *jhāna*, *vitakka* (initial application of thought) and *vicāra* (sustained application) continue to function in the background, supporting mental focus while the primary experience is dominated by *pīti* and *sukha*. Over time, practitioners may experience a blending



of these physical and emotional qualities, leading to a pervasive and immersive meditative absorption.

Brasington (2022) emphasizes that *pīti* not only supports the establishment of the first *jhāna* but also plays a functional role in deepening concentration, often giving rise to *sukha*, which becomes more prominent in the second and third *jhānas*. The energetic quality of *pīti* (manifesting as warmth, vibration, or an uplifting surge) serves as a catalyst for entering deeper meditative states characterized by tranquility and clarity.

Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw (2021) notes that during the first *jhāna*, the meditator's physical posture remains composed, stable, and unmoving for extended periods ranging from several hours to an entire day or night. Contrary to some misconceptions, involuntary movements or dramatic bodily reactions, such as rolling on the ground, are not indicative of true meditative attainment. The state of *jhāna*, as well as the higher attainments of *maggā* (path) and *phala* (fruition), is classified as *appanā-javana*⁵, or attainment-impulsion a highly focused and absorbed state of consciousness that is internally poised and externally still (p. 14).

Why did Siddhattha Gotama have to return to the First Jhāna after reaching the higher levels of Immaterial Jhāna?

The inquiry pertains to why, after achieving the base of nothingness under Ālāra Kālāma and the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception under Uddaka Rāmaputta, regarded as the pinnacle of the immaterial *jhānas* (*arūpajjhāna*), the recluse Siddhattha Gotama reverted to the first *jhāna*, deemed the lowest of the four *rūpajjhānas*, which he had encountered in his youth. We must evaluate about:

1. The Accomplishments of Immaterial Jhānas and Their Limitations

It must be said that the first *jhāna* is very important in the progression of the higher *jhānas* and is of strategic significance in the Buddha's journey to enlightenment. Although while practicing under the guidance of teacher Ālāra Kālāma, who himself realized, attained, and declared the base of nothingness (MN 26, 2015, p. 257). This is the third *jhāna* of the four immaterial *jhānas* or formless *jhānas* (*arūpajjhāna*), which include: the base of infinite space (*ākāśānañcāyatana-jhāna*), the base of infinite consciousness (*viññānañcāyatana-jhāna*), the base of nothingness (*ākāśānañcāyatana-jhāna*), and the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception (*nevasaññā-nāsaññāyatana-jhāna*) (MN 59, 2015, pp. 504-505).

While studying Dhamma with teacher Ālāra Kālāma for a while, Siddhattha Gotama soon quickly realized the base of nothingness like his teacher. Notwithstanding this significant contemplative accomplishment, he recognized that they did not culminate in ultimate liberty. According to the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta*:

⁵ *Appanajavana* refers to the absorption or achievement of a meditative state, especially within the context of *jhāna*. In this context, “*appana*” signifies absorption or attainment, whereas “*javana*” denotes the state or flow of consciousness. *Appanajavana* delineates the moment or process of completely achieving and absorbed in a meditative state, such as *jhāna* (Bodhi, 2000).



“This Dhamma does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna, but only to reappearance in the base of nothingness. Not being satisfied with that Dhamma, disappointed with it, I left.” (MN 26, 2015, p. 258).

Then Siddhattha Gotama went to learn Dhamma under the guidance of teacher Uddaka Rāmaputta. Uddaka Rāmaputta declared that by realizing it himself with direct knowledge, he entered upon and abided in the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception (*nevasaññā-nāsaññāyatana-jhāna*). This is the fourth and final stage of jhāna in the four immaterial jhānas (MN 26, 2015, p. 258).

After a while, Siddhattha Gotama quickly attained the same level as his teacher. But he also left because he thought that this was not the ultimate goal of enlightenment, Nibbāna and liberation from saṃsāra.

It must be said that both times he studied with two teachers and attained the highest stages of immaterial jhānas, however significant, but Siddhattha Gotama was still aware that they remain within the cycle of existence (*saṃsāra*) and do not facilitate the attainment of Nibbāna.

2. The Importance of Reverting to the First Jhāna

Following years of rigorous asceticism, Siddhattha Gotama reminisced a spontaneous meditative experience from his boyhood beneath a rose-apple tree, during which he attained the first jhāna. He pondered: “Why do I fear that enjoyment unrelated to sensual pleasures and detrimental states?” (MN 36, 2015, p. 340)

This contemplation enabled him to recognize that the first jhāna, defined by a “seclusion from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states”, constituted a vital and beneficial basis for his pursuit of enlightenment.

3. The Journey to Enlightenment

Upon achieving the first jhāna, Siddhattha Gotama embraced the Middle Way, balancing sensual enjoyment with self-mortification. This methodology enabled him to cultivate insight (*vipassanā*) with concentration (*samādhi*), culminating in the comprehension of the Four Noble Truths and the achievement of Nibbāna.

In *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, Alexander Wynne (2007) elucidates that Siddhattha’s reversion to the first jhāna signified a pivotal transition from pursuing transcendent states to fostering a harmonious approach that integrated ethical behavior, mental discipline, and wisdom: “The Buddha’s insight was that liberation could not be found in the formless attainments, but required a return to the meditative absorption he had experienced in his youth, which provided a basis for insight.” (p. 76)

Siddhattha Gotama’s reversion to the first jhāna was not a withdrawal but a calculated and sagacious decision. Recognizing the constraints of the states of formless jhānas, he embraced a balanced practice that ultimately culminated in his enlightenment. This judgment



reflects the Buddha's deep comprehension of the route to liberation. Gunaratana (1995) argues that it was this memory of his childhood, many years later in his futile quest for asceticism, that illuminated the path to enlightenment during his deepest period.

He practiced asceticism for many years until his body and mind were exhausted and he reminisced his entry into the first *jhāna* at the age of nine and wondered if that was the way. Then that night he began to enter again into the first *jhāna*, then successively into the second *jhāna*, the third *jhāna* up to the fourth *jhāna*.

Second Jhāna: Arising Singleness of Mind and Deepening Concentration

According to Theravada Buddhism, the second *jhāna* is a higher state of meditation that occurs after the first *jhāna* has been achieved. This state is characterized by increased joy and clarity of mind, with the absence of the initial application being one of its components, and represents a deeper level of concentration and integration. When meditators are in this state of meditation, they experience a greater level of absorption, which indicates that they are more deeply involved in their meditation practice. In this view, the second *jhāna* represents a significant progression in the development of contemplative consciousness (Wisdom Library, 2024 b).

The Buddha recounted the process of his entering the second *jhāna* on the night of his enlightenment as follows:

“With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, I entered upon and abided in the second *jhāna*, which has self-confidence and singleness of mind without applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of concentration.” (MN 4, 2015, p. 105; MN 36, 2015, p. 341)

Principal characteristic of the second *jhāna*:

1. *Vitakka* and *vicāra* (applied and sustained thought) have ceased

In the first *jhāna*, the meditator employs *vitakka* (initial thought) and *vicāra* (sustained thought) to concentrate on the meditation object, akin to delicately positioning and maintaining the mind's attention there. In the second *jhāna*, both of these cognitive processes cease. The mind no longer requires conscious “think about” or “hold” of the object; it is now inherently immersed, effortlessly tranquil and concentrated. This signifies an enhancement of tranquility and internal stillness.

The subsequent Theravada commentarial tradition, exemplified by Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*, interprets *vitarka* and *vicāra* as the initial and continued focus on a meditative object, ultimately leading to the tranquility of the mind. Fox (1989) and Bucknell (1993) assert that *vitarka-vicāra* may denote “the normal process of discursive thought” which is subdued through absorption in the second *jhāna* (p. 82; p. 375-376).

2. The mind attains more unity and internal coherence

When cognitive activity is subdued, attention converges singularly. This state is referred to as “*ekaggatā*” in Pāli, denoting singleness of mind or one-pointedness of mind. Distractions



have dissipated, allowing the practitioner to attain inner clarity, like to a tranquil lake devoid of ripples.

3. *Pīti* (rapture) and *sukha* (pleasure) persist, now originating from *samādhi* rather than seclusion

In the first *jhāna*, rapture and pleasure emerge from seclusion – liberation from sensual distractions and unwholesome thoughts. In the second *jhāna*, rapture (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukha*) arise from the profundity of concentration (*samādhi*). This joy is more sophisticated and introspective, reliant on interior engagement rather than external tranquility.

4. This phase signifies a transition from discursive reasoning to pure mental absorption

The second *jhāna* still encompasses subtle mental talk or thinking (discursive thought). The second *jhāna* occurs when the meditator entirely relinquishes inner chatter. The mind gets fully absorbed – devoid of evaluation, analysis, or commentary. It is a silent, unified awareness.

Venerable Mahāsī Sayādaw (2021) said that in insight meditation (*vipassanā*) and *jhāna* have certain qualities. When mindfulness is firmly established at the exploratory stage (*sammāsanañāṇa*), there exists the conception of object (*vitakka*), repeated reflection (*vicāra*), rapture (*pīti*), pleasure (*sukha*), and concentration of attention (*samādhi*). Consequently, when the meditator perceives any phenomenon, his insight meditation resembles the first *jhāna* with its five attributes. Upon acquiring insight-knowledge into the emergence and cessation of all things, the meditator possesses minimal awareness of an originating object, devoid of cognitive perception or contemplation. He experiences profound rapture, pleasure, and tranquility. His meditation resembles the second *jhāna*, characterized by its three qualities (p. 17).

According to Bhikkhu Bodhi (2015), the phrase “rapture and pleasure that are distinct from sensual pleasures” pertains to the rapture and pleasure linked to the first and second *jhānas*. The states that exhibit greater peace are the elevated *jhānas*. This suggests that a disciple can achieve the second path and fruit without engaging in worldly meditation (MN, 2015, Notes to Sutta 14, p. 1201). The phrase “rapture and pleasure are distinct from sensual pleasures” symbolizes the first and second *jhānas*, along with ‘something more peaceful than that,’ which pertains to the higher *jhānas* and the four directions (MN, 2015, Notes to Suttas 68, p. 1272).

The Buddha said that a bhikkhu who attains the second *jhāna* saturates his entire being with the rapture and pleasure derived from concentration, akin to a lake replenished with cool water from its source, where every aspect of the lake is pervaded by the water (MN 39, 2015, p. 368). However, if someone were to say that the pleasure and joy of the second *jhāna* is the highest pleasure and joy, the Buddha would not yield and would reply that it does not represent the highest kind of pleasure and joy experienced by beings; rather, there exists a superior and more exalted pleasure found in the third *jhāna* (MN 59, 2015, p. 504).

Third Jhāna: Cultivating Equanimity and Mindfulness

In Theravāda Buddhist meditation, the third *jhāna* is characterized by the fading of *pīti* (rapture), and the subsequent emergence of a state of *upekkhā* (equanimity), *sati* (mindfulness),



and *sukha* (pleasure). This particular stage signifies a transition from the intense joy experienced during the second *jhāna* to a mental state that is more serene and balanced (Gunaratana, 1995).

In the *Bhayabherava Sutta* (MN 4, 2015), when recounting the state of third *jhāna* on the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha describes that:

“With the fading away as well of rapture, I abided in equanimity, and mindful and fully aware, still feeling pleasure with the body, I entered upon and abided in the third *jhāna*, on account of which noble ones announce: ‘He has a pleasant abiding who has equanimity and is mindful.’” (p. 105)

Gunaratana (1995) observes that equanimity, in this case, denotes a certain mental attribute of inner balance, differentiated from a neutral feeling state. In the third *jhāna*, mindfulness and discernment become increasingly significant, aiding in preserving the meditative state and averting a return to earlier stages marked by rapture.

A characteristic of the third *jhāna* is that “rapture precedes the actual arising of the first *jhāna*, but persists through the remaining stages up to the third *jhāna*” (Gunaratana, 1995).

Rapture and pleasure (happiness) are closely related but distinct. Pleasure is a *vedana* (feeling), while rapture is a *sankhara* (mental formation). Whenever rapture is there, pleasure must also be present, but in the third *jhāna*, there is pleasure but no rapture. Rapture is “delight in the attaining of the desired object” and pleasure as “the enjoyment of the taste of what is acquired”. The rapture of a weary traveler in the desert during the summer who heard of, or saw the water of a shady wood. Ease (pleasure) is like his delight in entering the forest shade (Gunaratana, 1995).

Gunaratana (1995) argues that the meditator must apply the same method to attain the third *jhāna* as he did for the first and second *jhāna*. He must grasp the five ways to enter and exit the second *jhāna* and reflect on its flaws. In this situation, proximal pollution is the nearness of applied and prolonged thought, which threatens the calm of the second *jhāna*; its essential flaw is rapture, which now seems crude and should be eliminated. Because of the shortcomings of the second *jhāna*, the meditator cultivates indifference towards it and strives for the tranquility and sublimity of the third *jhāna*. When his practice matures, he enters the third *jhāna*, where there is pleasure and one-pointedness when after the absence of the rapture state.

The Buddha said that one who attains the state of third *jhāna* will experience pleasure without rapture, accompanied by equanimity and mindfulness. The pleasure permeates the whole body, just as cool water permeates lotus flowers that grow in a pond without emerging from the water, and the cool water permeates them from root to tip, so that there is no part of all those lotus flowers that is not permeated by the cool water. Likewise, one who has achieved the third *jhāna* is permeated with the pleasure divested of rapture permeating the whole body, so that there is no part of his whole body that is not permeated with the pleasure divested of rapture (MN 39, 2015, p. 368; MN 119, 2015, pp. 953-954).



In addition to the two characteristic factors of rapture and pleasure, the third jhāna also has three additional components not found in the meditation factors: equanimity (*upekkhā*), mindfulness (*sati*), and fully aware or discernment (*sampajañña*). *Upekkhā* in Pāli is referenced in numerous suttas with varying interpretations, the most significant being “neutral feeling,” defined as “a sensation that is neither painful nor pleasurable”; and “mental balance”, referred to as “specific neutrality.” The *upekkhā* referenced in the third jhāna pertains to “specific neutrality” which belongs to the aggregate of mental formations (*saṅkhārakkhandha*), rather than to *upekkhā* as a “neutral feeling”. While these two components are invariably linked, each factor exists separately, and *upekkhā* in the third jhāna denotes a “specific neutrality” that coexists with pleasant feeling (Gunaratana, 1995).

Mindfulness (*sati*) and fully aware (*sampajañña*) are mentioned in third jhāna, indicating pair of often-related mental activities. *Sati* implies keeping the object meditation in mind without letting it, and *sampajañña* involves examining an object and denying its nature without delusion. The third jhāna is where these two factors become effective, although they were present in the preceding two to prevent rapture (*pīti*). Jhāna’s pleasure (*sukha*) moves towards rapture, its natural partner, if unguarded by mindfulness and fully aware, to prevent this and loss of rapture state is the task of mindfulness and fully aware in third jhāna (Gunaratana, 1995).

Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw (2021) argues that the disappearance of the light, among other factors (*upakkilesa*: mental defilements), signifies a progression in the insight-knowledge regarding the emergence and dissolution of phenomena. Consequently, there is no rapture (*pīti*); however, pleasure or bliss (*sukha*) is profoundly intense. The mind is tranquil and devoid of disturbances. The meditator embodies the bliss and one-pointedness of mind, which are characteristics of the third jhāna (p. 17).

Even though the third jhāna has superior features than the second jhāna, if anyone says “that is the utmost pleasure and joy that beings experience”, then the Buddha will not yield and say that it is not true. “Because there is another kind of pleasure loftier and more sublime than that pleasure” that is the state of the fourth jhāna (MN 59, 2015, p. 504)

Fourth jhāna: Fourth Jhāna: Achieving Pure Equanimity and Mindfulness

The fourth jhāna is the highest of the four fine-material jhānas applied in the path of the Buddha’s enlightenment and in early Buddhist practice. This fourth jhāna is characterized by a profound state of equanimity and mindfulness, the absence of both pleasure and pain.

Gunaratana (1995) argues that to attain the fourth jhāna, the meditator sees that the third jhāna is threatened by rapture, which is always ready to swell up again due to its natural affinity with pleasure, and that pleasure, a gross factor that fuels clinging, makes it defective. The meditator should then contemplate the fourth jhāna, which combines equanimous feeling and one-pointedness, as more tranquil and secure than any of the jhanās that he has experienced, so that the fourth jhāna is the stage of jhāna to be attained. The meditator takes the elements of the previous jhānas as his object and concentrates his efforts in order to eliminate the gross elements



of pleasure and enter the higher. When practiced skillfully, the meditator's mind enters the fourth jhāna.

The Buddha described the state of fourth jhānas in the suttas as follows:

“With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, I entered upon and abided in the fourth jhāna, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity.” (MN 4, 2015, p. 105)

Keren Arbel (2017 a) explains that: “With the abandoning of [the desire for] *sukha* (pleasure) and [aversion to] *dukkha* (pain) and with the previous disappearance of [the inner movement between] *somanassa* (gladness), and *domanassa* (discontent), a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the fourth jhāna, which is *adukkham asukham* (neither-painful-nor-pleasurable or from freedom and pain) and has *upekkhāsatiparisuddhi* (complete purity of equanimity and mindfulness).” (pp. 124-125)

The phrase “purity of mindfulness due to equanimity” (*upekkhāsatipārisuddhi*) is explained as “this mindfulness is cleared, purified, clarified by equanimity” or “for the mindfulness in this jhāna is quite purified, and its purification is effected by equanimity, not by anything else”. Concrete neutrality, the sublime equanimity without attachment and aversion, purifies mindfulness. Despite having specific neutrality and mindfulness, the three lower jhānas do not have “purity of mindfulness due to equanimity”. In lower jhānas, equanimity is unpurified, veiled by opposing states, and unrelated to it. Like a crescent moon that cannot be seen during the day due to the sunlight and bright sky. But in the fourth jhāna, equanimity is supported by equanimous feeling so that it shines like a crescent moon at night and purifies mindfulness and other states (Gunaratana, 1995).

By characterizing the fourth jhāna as a state of “non-reactive and lucid awareness”, Keren Arbel (2017 a) provides a nuanced understanding of the concept presented in the previous sentence. Not only does she argue that this meditative absorption is characterized by deep concentration, but she also asserts that it is characterized by a mind that is free from habitual emotions of craving and aversion. The analysis conducted by Arbel indicates that the fourth jhāna is responsible for cultivating a profound equanimity, which is crucial for the development of insight (p. 16).

In *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*, Daniel Ingram (2018) provides a description of the fourth jhāna as a level of awareness that is both vast and inclusive. He makes the observation that this meditative absorption makes it possible to have a balanced and all-encompassing sense of experience, combining both the center and the periphery of attention. Fourth jhāna plays an important role in cultivating a stable platform for advanced insight practices.

Gunaratana (1995) said that the process into the transition that occurs between the third and fourth jhānas, the meditator, upon realizing the subtle disruptions of joy that occur in the third jhāna, strives to attain the more refined equanimity that is found in the fourth jhāna. Purity, clarity, and balance that are good states for meditative absorption.



Alexander Wynne (2007) asserts that the jhāna-scheme is inadequately comprehended. Terms denoting the cultivation of awareness, such as *sati*, *sampajāno*, and *upekkhā*, are sometimes misinterpreted as specific elements of meditative states, when in fact they pertain to a distinct manner of experiencing sensory objects (p. 106).

The term *sato sampajāno* in the third jhāna must signify a state of consciousness distinct from the meditative absorption of the second jhāna (*cetaso ekodibhāva*). It indicates that the meditator is engaging in an activity distinct from maintaining a meditative state, implying that he has emerged from his absorption and is now cognizant of external objects. The term *upekkhā* does not signify an abstract “equanimity”; rather, it conveys awareness of something while remaining indifferent to it. The third and fourth jhānas appear to delineate the method of channeling meditative absorption states towards the mindful awareness of objects (Wynne, 2007, pp. 106-107).

Lusthaus (2002) states that “mindfulness in the fourth jhāna is an alert, relaxed awareness detached from positive and negative conditioning” (p. 91).

Arbel (2017 a) uses the term “non-reactive and lucid awareness” to characterize the fourth jhāna, which is not a state of deep concentration (p. 16).

According to Richard Shankman (2008), the sutta accounts of jhāna practice clarify that the meditator does not emerge from jhāna in order to practice vipassana. Instead, the process of insight is done while the meditator is in jhāna itself. To be more specific, the meditator is given the instruction to “enter and remain in the fourth jhāna” prior to beginning the task of insight in order to eradicate the mental defilements (p. 177). He comments that the first four jhāna elements have been eradicated in the fourth jhāna, resulting in the sole presence of mental unification. The fourth jhāna is distinguished by an elevated degree of concentration and tranquility, hence maintaining mental unification as a jhāna element. A neutral sensation is occasionally regarded as a second element in the fourth jhāna, supplanting pleasure, which has been eradicated (p. 49).

Shankman (2008) also believes that by refocusing on the meditation object and its sign of concentration, with the aim of relinquishing pleasure, or by employing the divine abiding of equanimity (*upekkhā*) as a meditation subject, but on the condition that the third jhāna has been achieved through the practice of one of the three divine abiding: *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion) and *muditā* (sympathetic joy), the meditator will attain the fourth jhāna (p. 71).

However, in the *Tevijja Sutta*, it is stated that after overcoming the five hindrances a bhikkhu attains and dwells in the first jhāna. Now the sutta is abbreviated and does not mention further that he attained and dwelt in the second jhāna, third jhāna up to the fourth jhāna but says that then he dwells suffusing the whole world with a heart filled with equanimity, abundant, unbounded, without hate or ill-will. Through the liberation of the mind through loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, nothing remains unaffected in the



sensuous sphere. This is the path to union with Brahmā (DN 13, 1995, The Threefold Knowledge - The Path to Brahmā, p. 194).

In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN, 2012), the Buddha said that a bhikkhu, if he lives and is always surrounded by a large crowd of bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, laymen, kings, royal officials, sectarian teachers and disciples, cannot practice his spiritual practice. He should desire to live in solitude, seek independent residence, preferring to sleep in places such as forests, at the foot of trees, on mountains, in ravines, in caves on hillsides, in cemeteries, among thickets, in open fields or in stubble, in the wilderness, at the foot of trees or in an abandoned house, where he sits cross-legged, erect and focused with mindfulness. He lives without material desires and purifies his mind. Having abandoned anger and ill will, he lives with loving-kindness towards all beings and purifies his mind. He purifies his thoughts to attain inner calm and gradually overcomes the five hindrances. After overcoming the five hindrances, defilements and unwholesome states, he successively attained the first jhānas, second jhānas, third jhānas and fourth jhānas, followed by the realization and abiding in the base of infinite space, the base of infinite consciousness, the base of nothingness, the base of neither perception nor non-perception, and the cessation of perception and feeling. When he attained insight, his defilements were eradicated and he found joy in his liberation. (Book 9:1, IV, 40. A Bull Elephant, pp. 1308-1309).

Living in a community and having individuals around him will enhance both physical and mental health; however, challenges and disputes are bound to arise. The more people there are, the more problems there will be, and it will be inevitable that time will be wasted in resolving disputes and conflicts, which will affect the spiritual practice of seeking higher attainments. Therefore, the Buddha advised that a bhikkhu who has mastered the precepts and seeks to improve his meditation practice should live apart from the community, in solitude and seclusion to concentrate on meditation. If he devotes himself completely to the practice of meditation, then success will be easily attained for him.

According to Nyanaponika (1999), to achieve our goals, we will usually need to use four attributes are *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (sympathetic joy) and *upekkhā* (equanimity) called *Brahmavihāra* (divine abodes) as rules for behavior, objects of contemplation, and subjects for systematic meditation. The method of cultivating sublime states through meditation is called *Brahmavihāra-bhāvanā*. Using these sublime states, the goal is to achieve jhāna, or 'meditative absorption,' times of mental concentrate. Concentrating on *mettā*, *karuṇā*, and *muditā* can achieve the first three jhānas, but focusing on *upekkhā* is necessary for the fourth jhāna (p. 9).

The Buddha stated that a bhikkhu enters the fourth jhāna, a state of neither-pain-nor-pleasure, and pure mindfulness due to equanimity. He permeates his whole body with pure bright mind, like a person whose body is completely covered with a white cloth (MN 39, 2015, pp. 368-369; MN 119, p. 954).

In the *Bahuvedanīya Sutta*, the Buddha says that the pleasure and joy of the fourth jhāna is not the ultimate, because there is a higher kind of joy and happiness:



“With the complete surmounting of perceptions of form, with the disappearance of perceptions of sensory impact, with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that ‘space is infinite,’ a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the base of infinite space. This is that other kind of pleasure loftier and more sublime than the previous pleasure” (MM 59, 2015, p. 504).

Then he went on to upgrade the levels of the utmost pleasure and joy of the base of infinite consciousness, the base of nothingness, the base of neither-perception-nor non-perception, and finally the cessation of perception and feeling (MN 59, 2015, pp. 504-505).

The miraculous power of the four rūpajhānās in Siddhattha Gotama’s journey to enlightenment

The culmination of the spiritual path is meditation, which is a personal experience rather than theoretical contemplation. Buddhism emphasizes the evaluation of the authenticity of the Buddha’s teachings through practice, because truth must be verified to be authentic. The practitioner must meditate deeply to evaluate the Buddha’s teachings. The attainment of jhānas signifies entering and abiding and they require constant attention. Resentment, jealousy and anger promote negative thoughts, making meditation difficult so changing negative mental states and transforming them into positive ones is essential before and during the practice of meditation (Raypole, 2021).

According to the *Pali-English Dictionary*, jhāna was partitioned into four states. (1) The mystic, liberated from sensory and worldly notions, focuses his attention on a certain subject (for example, the impermanence of all things). He deduces this through careful observation of the facts and logical reasoning. (2) Subsequently, elevated beyond attention and reasoning, he encounters joy and tranquility in both body and mind. (3) Subsequently, the euphoria dissipates, and he is enveloped in a sensation of tranquility. (4) He attains awareness of pristine mental clarity and emotional equilibrium (Davids & Stede, 1993, p. 322).

The mental condition following the experience of the four jhānas is articulated in Majjhima Nikāya as: “When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability.” (MN 36, 2015, p. 341). It will be observed that there is no suggestion of trance, but rather of an augmented vigor (Davids & Stede, 1993, p. 322).

In *The Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation*, Henepola Gunaratana (1995) explored the combination of jhāna practice with insight meditation. He emphasized that the jhāna serves as the foundation for insight, thereby promoting direct knowledge of impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and the non-self (*anattā*). He argued that fourth jhāna is not only a method of enhancing concentration but also a means of cultivating insight.

Wynne (2007) outlines the process of the four rūpajhānas delineates two distinct cognitive states. The third and fourth jhānas are markedly dissimilar to the second (p. 140, note 58). Although the second jhāna signifies a state of absorption, the third and fourth jhāna indicate escape from this state of absorption, maintaining awareness of objects while remaining indifferent to them (p. 106-107; 140, note 58). He also quotes Gombrich asserts that the



subsequent tradition has distorted the jhānas by categorizing them as the quintessence of concentrated, tranquil meditation, ignoring other and truly superior elements (p. 140, note 58).

When the fourth jhāna is reached, the jhāna factors remain unchanged, and in the subsequent progression to the attainments of formless jhānas, the jhāna factors are no longer eliminated. Thus, the immaterial jhānas, when classified on the basis of their elemental composition as given in the Abhidhamma, are considered to be modes of the fourth jhāna. They are all two-factor jhānas, consisting of one-pointedness and equanimous feeling (Gunaratana, 1995).

According to Vetter (1988), the first and second jhāna signify the initiation of jhāna through withdrawal and right effort, namely the four proper efforts, succeeded by concentration, whereas the third and fourth jhāna amalgamate concentration with mindfulness (p. XXVI, note 9). The initiation of the first jhāna is characterized as a natural progression, resulting from prior endeavors to control the senses and cultivate wholesome states (p. XXV). He also argues that *samādhi*, the eighth phase of the Noble Eightfold Path, comprises the four stages of jhāna; nonetheless, the first jhāna appears to yield, after a period, a state of profound concentration, from which subsequent phases emerge; the second jhāna stage is referred to as “*samadhiya*” (p. 13), meaning “*born from samadhi*” (p. XXVI, note 9).

The Buddha indicated that illusion and self-satisfaction may emerge from the second jhāna, characterized by rapture, joy, and one-pointedness of mind; from the third jhāna, characterized by joy and one-pointedness of mind; or from the fourth jhāna, characterized by equanimity and one-pointedness of mind. The second, third, and fourth jhānas are indeed more exalted than the earlier levels of consciousness; nonetheless, they provide only transient bliss in the current life but not the purpose of eliminating afflictions (Sayādaw, 1969-1970).

The Buddha asserted that to enter and dwell in the first, second, third, and fourth jhāna, a bhikkhu must relinquish five forms of miserliness: concerning dwellings, families, gains, praise, and the Dhamma (AN, 2012, Book 5:6, I, 256. First Jhāna & 257 – 263. Second Jhāna, p. 841).

The Buddha has declared that “quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first jhāna, the second jhāna, the third jhāna, the fourth jhāna. This is called the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of seclusion, the bliss of peace, the bliss of enlightenment. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should be pursued, that it should be developed, that it should be cultivated, and that it should not be feared.” (*Araṇavibhanga Sutta*, MN 139, 2015, p. 1083)

In the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (2012) the Buddha says that there are four developments of concentration. In the first of these, it is mentioned that in the four jhānās there is a development of concentration that leads to a dwelling happily in this very life (Book 4:1, V, 41. Concentration, pp. 431-432).

The four jhānas are conditioned, volitionally produced, and so ephemeral, subject to cessation. The noble disciple, therefore, upon entering and residing in each of these four jhānas,



must advance his understanding of the elements of emergence and vanishing. Regardless of his adherence to those jhānas, he must focus his mind on the deathless elements that are tranquil and exalted, the cessation of all forms, the relinquishment of all attachments, and the eradication of craving: nibbāna. By standing upon it, he achieves the eradication of the defilements and strives to become an Arahant. However, if he has not yet achieved the eradication of the taints through these four jhānas, thanks to his enjoyment of the Dhamma and the destruction of the five lower fetters, he can still acquire the status of a non-returner (Sarao, 2013).

While the jhānas are not seen essential for achieving enlightenment, they significantly enhance the inherent excellence of the path and foster profound concentration, so establishing a robust foundation for the development of insight. Consequently, “although still mundane” (Sarao, 2013), but accomplishing the four jhanās is called “a footprint of the Tathāgata, something scraped by the Tathāgata, something marked by the Tathāgata.” (*Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta [The Shorter Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant’s Footprint]*, MN 27, 2015, pp. 275-276), and omens of the bliss of nibbāna that resides at the conclusion of the training (Sarao, 2013).

It can be affirmed that the sequential development through the four jhānas progressively purifies the mind, rendering it an appropriate tool for insight. This path involves not only attaining deeper levels of concentration but is fundamentally connected to the development of knowledge that culminates in enlightenment. Peter Harvey (1995) argues that: “The jhānas 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” (p. 170).

Levels of jhāna serve as progressive steps in detaching the mind from the sensory realm and refining attention for higher cognitive functions, specifically the arising of direct knowledge (*ñāṇa*). Thus, each jhāna has a specific role in Siddhattha Gotama’s journey to enlightenment which involves methodically removing mental distractions, enhancing concentration, and cultivating equanimity, which are essential for attaining liberating insight. It can be determined that the Buddha re-established himself in the four jhanās, gradually purifying the mind in preparation for insight (*vipassanā*). The sutta clearly describes this sequence, indicating that the stability of jhanā is not the final goal but the foundation from which three liberating knowledges (*tevijja*) arises.

The three knowledges (*tevijja*) are:

- (1) *Pubbe-nivasanussati-ñāṇa*: the knowledge of the memory of former existences or knowledge of of recollecting past lives;
- (2) *Cutūpapāta-ñāṇa*: the knowledge of divine eye or knowledge of the arising and passing away of beings;
- (3) *Āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa*: the knowledge of destruction of the impurities or knowledge of the destruction of cankers or defilements.

When directing his mind to the knowledge of eliminating taints, he knows the Four Noble Truths as they really are, which are “suffering,” “the origin of suffering,” “the cessation



of suffering,” and “the path directly leading to the cessation of suffering.” He knows clearly about “the taints”, “the origin of the taints”, “the cessation of the taints”, “the path leading to the cessation of the taints”. He knows clearly about liberation from the taint of sensual desire, of being, and of ignorance. He knows clearly that “I have been liberated” with the inspiring declaration: “Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being” (MN 4, 2015, pp. 106-107).

Why did the Buddha skip the four immaterial jhānas in the journey of his enlightenment?

The Buddha’s journey to enlightenment, as illustrated in early Buddhist scriptures, highlights the achievement of the four *rūpajhānas* but omits the four formless or immaterial jhānas (*arūpajhānas*). This has prompted researchers to investigate the reasons of the Buddha’s potential exclusion of the immaterial jhānas during his path to enlightenment.

In *The Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation*, Henepola Gunaratana (1995) delineates the differentiation between fine-material and immaterial jhānas. He observes that although the immaterial jhānas represent higher meditation states attained by transcending perceptions of material form, they do not entail the further elimination of jhāna elements beyond the fourth jhāna. This implies that the Buddha may have deemed the fourth jhāna adequate for achieving enlightenment, as it offered the requisite mental clarity and equanimity without the need to attain additional immaterial jhānas. He explained this view as follows:

- The condition for attaining the fourth jhāna is the liberation of the mind from neither-pain-nor-pleasure, which requires the abandonment of four incompatible feelings. The first two represent bodily feelings, the latter two represent corresponding mental feelings. It refers to a new feeling, neither-pain-nor-pleasure (*adukkhamasukhā*), that remains after the other four (rapture, pleasure, equanimous feeling, one-pointedness). This feeling, also called equanimous or neutral feeling, replaces pleasure as the accompanying feeling and is also one of the jhāna factors. This attainment therefore has two jhāna factors: neutral feeling and one-pointedness of mind. Previously, the progression from one jhāna to another was marked by the gradual elimination of the gross jhāna factors, but no factor was added to replace those that had been eliminated. But in the transition from the third to the fourth jhāna, a substitution occurs, neutral feeling moving in to replace pleasure (Gunaratana, 1995).

- The sequence of the immaterial jhānas is dictated by the transcendence of objects rather than by a surmounting of objects. In the fine-material jhānas, the object may remain constant while the factors must vary; conversely, in the immaterial jhānas, the factors remain constant while the objects change. The base of the infinity of space transcends the *kasīṇa* object of the fourth jhāna; the base of infinity of consciousness surpasses the object of the base of infinity of space; the base of nothingness exceeds the object of the base of infinity of consciousness; and the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception surpasses the object of the base of nothingness (Gunaratana, 1995).

As mentioned above, the Buddha did not consider the pleasure and joy of the first jhāna, second jhāna, third jhāna and fourth jhāna to be the ultimate, but he also mentioned the pleasure



and joy at higher levels, namely the pleasure and joy of the base of infinite space, the base of infinite consciousness, the base of nothingness, the base of neither-perception-nor non-perception, and finally the cessation of perception and feeling (MN 59, 2015, pp. 504-505).

The Buddha declares that there are nine progressive cessations:

“(1) For one who has precipitated the first jhāna, sensual perception has ceased. (2) For one who has concluded the second jhāna, thought and examination have ceased. (3) For one who has precipitated the third jhāna, rapture has ceased. (4) For one who has concluded the fourth jhāna, in-breathing and out-breathing have ceased. (5) For one who has revived the base of the infinity of space, the perception of form has ceased. (6) For one who has revived the base of the infinity of consciousness, the perception pertaining to the base of the infinity of space has ceased. (7) For one who has revived the base of nothingness, the perception pertaining to the base of the infinity of consciousness has ceased. (8) For one who has revived the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, the perception pertaining to the base of nothingness has ceased. (9) For one who has concluded the cessation of perception and feeling, perception and feeling have ceased.” (AN, 2012, Book 9:1, III, 31. Progressive Cessation, p. 1287).

However, in his journey of enlightenment he only used the four fine-material jhānas. This shows the unnecessary of the four immaterial jhānas because when he practiced under the guidance of Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta he had reached the base of nothingness and the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception but realized that the jhāna stages were not the ultimate goal so he left.

Although the Buddha did not practice the four immaterial jhānas along with the cessation of perception and feeling (*saññāvedayitanirodha*) in his journey to enlightenment, but in the process of entering final Nibbāna (*mahāparinibbāna*), the Buddha entered and emerged in the first jhāna, second jhāna, third jhāna, fourth jhāna, the base of infinite space, the base of infinite consciousness, the base of nothingness, the base of neither-perception-nor non-perception, and finally the cessation of perception and feeling in the opposite direction. Then he entered and emerged again in the first jhāna, second jhāna, third jhāna, and fourth jhāna. Emerging from the fourth jhāna, the Buddha immediately passed away (*Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, DN 16, 1995, p. 271)

Sarao (2013) argues that the meditational pleasure in the four *arūpajhānas* is considered superior and more exalted than that in the four jhānas. However, it is not the utmost pleasure and ecstasy that creatures experience, as there exists a more elevated and exquisite form of pleasure. This is the meditative state characterized by the cessation of perception and feeling.

In the *Exploration of similes used for Four Jhānas*, Bhikkhu Anālayo (2024) explored the concept and how the four *rūpajhānas* serve as a foundation for knowledges (*vijjās*), which ultimately leads to liberation. According to his argument, the Buddha's emphasis on the form jhānas is a reflection of their practical effectiveness in cultivating the required conditions for enlightenment, without the complexities involved in the immaterial jhānas.



In her work titled *Early Buddhist Meditation: The Four Jhanās as the Actualization of Insight*, Keren Arbel (2017 b) emphasized the role of the four fine-material jhānas in the process of developing insight and the realization of the Four Noble Truths. She contends that the Buddha's concentration on these jhānas highlights their sufficiency in the path to enlightenment, so rendering the attainment of immaterial jhānas irrelevant for the sake of achieving this ultimate goal.

Davids & Stede (1993) state that the jhānas are merely a means, and not the end. Imagining that going through them was the same as attaining Arahantship and was thus the goal that was being pursued is a heresy that is considered to be extremely dangerous. The term “*arūpajjhānā*” can be found in the late Pāli texts. A new name has been given to the final four *vimokkhā*, which are the culmination of the eight *vimokkhā*, which end in trance (p. 322).

According to Pali-English Dictionary: “*Vimokkha*: ‘deliverance’, ‘release’, ‘emancipation’, ‘dissociation’ from the things of the world, Arahantship. The eight *vimokkhas* or stages of emancipation, are: the condition of *rūpī*, *arūpa-saññī*, recognition of subha, realization of *ākāśānañc’āyatana*, of *viññāṇ’ānañc’āyatana*, *ākīñcaññ’āyatana*, *neva-saññā n’āsaññ’āyatana*, *saññāvedayita-nirodha*.” (Davids & Stede, 1993, p. 701)

The eight *vimokkhā*, or emancipations (liberations), are meditative states in Buddhism that facilitate practitioners in achieving profound levels of concentration and insight.

First emancipation: Possessing a physical form enables the perception of physical forms. This entails the perception of internal and exterior forms, frequently achieved by meditation on physical objects or imaginations.

Second emancipation : In the absence of internal perception of form, one observes exterior visions. This phase entails concentrating on exterior forms or things devoid of internal imagery.

Third emancipation: One is predisposed solely to the aesthetic or agreeable. This emancipation entails contemplating beautiful or excellent objects, fostering a sense of admiration and separation.

Fourth emancipation: By transcending the notions of corporeal existence, one ascends into the base of infinite space. This phase entails transcending physical perceptions and accessing the base of infinite space.

Fifth emancipation : Surpassing the base of infinite space, one enters to the base of infinite consciousness. This emancipation entails broadening one's awareness to include infinite consciousness.

Sixth emancipation: Ascending beyond the base of infinite consciousness, one enters into the base of nothingness. This phase entails acknowledging the lack of intrinsic existence or essence.



Seventh emancipation: Surpassing the base of nothingness, one enters to the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. This emancipation entails achieving a condition transcending dualistic thinking and perception.

Eighth emancipation: Surpassing the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, one attains the cessation of perception and feeling. This ultimate release entails a transient cessation of all cognitive functions, resulting in a condition of deep tranquility and emancipation (AN, 2012, Book 8:2, I. Gotamī, 66. Emancipations, pp. 1210-1211).

Wisdom Library (2024 c) suggests that in Theravāda Buddhism, vimokkhā denotes states of liberation attained by meditation, containing advanced spiritual accomplishments from coarse to subtle states of consciousness. It signifies a great liberation from cognitive impediments and opposing states, culminating in a state of ecstatic bliss. These elements underscore the significance of authentic spiritual advancement and the tranquil mental clarity that vimokkhā represents, providing a route to profound comprehension and enlightenment in practice.

It is a fact that Siddhattha Gotama rejected the ideas taught by his two teachers Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta because they made arūpajjhānā the main focus of their teachings (Davids & Stede, 1993, p. 322).

The academic consensus suggests that the Buddha's decision to exclude the immaterial jhānas from his enlightenment tale is indicative of an intentional emphasis on the form jhānas as being both sufficient and needed for attaining Nibbāna. These states supplied the mental discipline and clarity that was necessary to acquire profound insight, which was in keeping with the pragmatic approach that the Buddha took to the path to enlightenment.

Conclusion

The attainment of enlightenment by Siddhattha Gotama, recognized as the Buddha (Enlightened One), was a significant and complex process that has been studied and appreciated for centuries. The jhānas that underlie this process have served as essential meditative states in his own journey to enlightenment and in Buddhism in general. This article explores the importance of the four fine-material jhānas on the Buddha's path to enlightenment and analyzes their role in his attainment of ultimate wisdom.

The jhānas are deep levels of concentration and mental engagement that arise from the practice of meditation. In the context of the Buddha's enlightenment, the jhānas provided the foundation for cultivating knowledge and understanding the true nature of reality. The four *rūpajjhānas* are crucial in this process, as they foster a stable and focused mind capable of grasping profound truths.

The first jhāna signifies the beginning of the Buddha's deep concentration and mental engagement. By overcoming the five hindrances, the Buddha attained the state of rapture and pleasure that comes from seclusion of sensual pleasures and unwholesome states. This state of mind provided the necessary motivation and drive to pursue his path to enlightenment.



Despite achieving higher states of immaterial jhāna, the Buddha returned to the first jhāna and realized the importance of establishing a solid foundation in concentration and mental coherence. This return helped him re-establish a solid foundation for the days to come to develop and integrate the insights gained from his higher states of consciousness.

The second jhāna was marked by the emergence of mental unification and deep concentration. As initial thought and sustained thought subsided, the Buddha's mind became increasingly purified and focused, allowing him to penetrate more deeply into the nature of reality.

In the third jhāna, the Buddha developed equanimity and mindfulness, experiencing the joy that comes from concentration. This state allowed him to perceive events with greater clarity and precision, laying the foundation for the development of knowledge.

The fourth jhāna represents the attainment of mindfulness and equanimity, in which the Buddha's mind is completely purified and lucid. In this state, he is able to perceive phenomena with absolute clarity and precision, without any mental defilements.

The four *rūpajhānas* contributed significantly to the Buddha's path to enlightenment, equipping him with the concentration, knowledge, and understanding necessary to understand the true nature of reality. Through mastering these states, the Buddha overcame the obstacles to enlightenment and attained ultimate wisdom.

The Buddha's choice to omit the four immaterial jhānas in his quest for enlightenment emphasizes his concentration on cultivating the wisdom and insight necessary to understand the true nature of reality. Although the *rūpajhānas* represent deeper states of concentration than the *rūpajhānas*; However, they do not facilitate the cultivation of wisdom and insight, which was the fundamental goal of the Buddha's practice.

In conclusion, the four fine-material jhānas played an important role in the Buddha's journey to enlightenment, equipping him with the concentration, knowledge, and insight necessary to understand the true nature of reality. By understanding the importance of these states, his disciples and practitioners can enhance their practice and progress toward the attainment of ultimate wisdom and supreme enlightenment.

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