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Donald K. Swearer Control and freedom: The structure of Buddhist meditation in the Pāli suttas

Of all forms of religious practice, none exemplifies Buddhism better than the practice of meditation. Anesaki and Takakusu claim that meditation is “. . . the universal method of mental culture of all Indian religious schools,”¹ and Edward Conze writes, “meditational practices constitute the very core of the Buddhist approach to life On the way to Nirvāṇa they serve to promote spiritual development, to diminish the impact of suffering, to calm the mind and to reveal the true facts of existence.”²

This article is an attempt to analyze the structure of Buddhist meditation within the Pāli *suttas*. Our contention is that this structure is built around two foci—control and freedom. The ultimate aim of Buddhist meditation is freedom from the bondage of attachment to sense objects. This liberating state of being is reached through a process of consciousness control (*samādhi*) and insight into the real nature of the world (*vipassanā*). While Theravāda Buddhism tends to distinguish *samādhi* and *vipassanā* as two separate types of meditation, both aim to achieve enlightenment (*sambodha*). Furthermore, as this article will show, they may be seen as basically complementary rather than as mutually exclusive methods.

The structure of Buddhist meditation, which emerges from a study of the Pāli *suttas*, may be depicted by an hourglass figure³:

The path to enlightenment begins with a general awareness and proceeds to a greater and greater degree of consciousness refinement. This process produces decreasing degrees of attachment to the world of sense objects. The *jhānas* represent a transition from a narrowing of consciousness to its eventual expansion resulting in a condition of “hedonic neutrality,” that is, *upekkhā*. In this state the consciousness is totally freed (*cetovimutti*) from those conditions which qualify ordinary states of mind. It is characterized as immeasurable, nothingness, emptiness, and signless. In this mind-freed state, the knowledge of enlightenment (*paññāvimutti*) is fully realized. Or, in a better known idiom, one has attained *nibbāna*.

SATI AND MINDFUL AWARENESS

The process of meditation and the control of consciousness begin with *sati* and *sampajañña*, two practically inseparable terms in the Pāli canon.⁴ They are widely discussed in the *Piṭakas* and later commentaries, and according to

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¹ Masaharu Anesaki and Junjirō Takakusu, “Dhyana,” *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James A. Hastings, vol. 4 (New York: Scribner, 1912), p. 702.

² Edward Conze, *Buddhist Meditation* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956), p. 11.

³ For a different model see Conze, *Buddhist Meditation*, p. 16.

⁴ The meaning of *sati* and *sampajañña* came to be nearly synonymous. *Sampajañña* is formed from the verb, *pa-jānāti* + *sa-* meaning to come to know altogether, hence, to discriminate and comprehend.

a contemporary Buddhist one of the *suttas* devoted entirely to an exposition of *sati* and *sampajañña* is among the most highly respected and frequently memorized Buddhist texts in Ceylon.⁵ The Pāli word *sati* is related to Sanskrit *smṛti*, meaning “remembered” or “recollected.” In Hinduism the word has come to stand for a body of “remembered” literature (for example, the Epics, *sūtras*, *Purāṇas*) in contrast to “revealed” or *śruti* texts (for example, *Samitās*, *Brāhmaṇas*, *Upaniṣads*). The term in Pāli has taken on, not only the connotation of something called to mind or remembered, but also mindfulness, intentness of mind, or wakefulness.⁶ Nyāṇaponika interprets *sati* as “bare attention” and *sampajañña* as “clear comprehension.”⁷ *Sati* as bare attention has a threefold value of helping the mind to know, shape, and liberate itself.⁸ Its knowing function is to analyze the objects of existence through dissection and discrimination and realize the conditioned and conditioning nature of all phenomenal entities. *Sati* shapes individual’s lives by causing reflective action rather than immediate responses. Thus the mind gains a new power and a new freedom from control by habitual action-response. As Nyāṇaponika expresses it, “Right Mindfulness recovers for man the lost pearl of his freedom snatching it from the jaws of the dragon Time.”⁹ The third value of *sati* is the freeing of the mind. Paradoxically the control of attention and reflection liberates the mind rather than confining it, for it is *sati* that produces the insight (*vipassanā*) into the true nature of things. This realization leads to detachment from ordinary preoccupation with the objects and goals of the mundane world.

If *sati*, or bare attention, is a discipline of the consciousness appropriate to the act of meditation itself, *sampajañña* can be understood as the integration of *sati* with right knowledge (*ñāna*) or wisdom (*paññā*). *Sampajañña* is applied to intentionality and action in particular, and more generally to the awareness that at no time is there an abiding personality or ego behind one’s intentions and actions. The *sampajañña* dimension of mindfulness emphasizes the fact that the fundamental nonbeingness (*anattā*) of life is not limited to a serene moment of detached and quiet meditation, but conditions every act and thought of the individual.

Within the Nikāyas there are three *suttas* devoted entirely to a discussion of *sati* and *sampajañña*: the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Suttanta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*,

⁵ *The Foundations of Mindfulness (Satipaṭṭhana Sutta)*, trans. Nyaṇasatta Thera (Kandy, Ceylon: The Buddhist Publication Society, 1960).

⁶ Rhys Davids, T. W. and Stede, *The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary* (London: Luzac & Co., 1959), p. 672 (hereafter cited as Rhys Davids and Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary*).

⁷ Nyāṇaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* (London: Rider & Co., 1962), p. 30 (hereafter cited as Nyāṇaponika, *The Heart*).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* and the forty-seventh chapter of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Kindred Sayings on the Arisings of Mindfulness). The first *Sutta* in particular will serve as our guide for a more detailed exposition of *sati*.

The *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Suttanta* is nearly identical with the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* with the exception of an exposition of the Four Noble Truths at its conclusion. We are told at the beginning of this dialogue that the only path leading to the purification of beings, of passing beyond grief and lamentation, of the dying out of suffering and misery and the realization of *nibbāna* is the fourfold setting up of mindfulness.¹⁰ In order to come to grips with the full dimension of *sati* these four stages of mindfulness must be analyzed.

In the first place, mindfulness demands a control of the body (*kāya*) which overcomes the desire and misery typical of the world.¹¹ This end is accomplished by practices of meditation and concentration. The *bhikkhu* is to isolate himself, assume a posture of meditation, and practice breathing exercises with a total consciousness of every act so that the bodily organism will be tranquilized.¹²

Mindfulness of the body begins with awareness of respiration. The Buddhist preoccupation with respiration exercises represents a continuity with earlier Indian thought. In the late *Ṛg Veda* and the *Brāhmaṇas*, breath was one of the objects of cosmogonic speculation, the life force through which it was thought the world might have come into being.¹³ Breathing exercises (*prāṇāyāma*) also played an important role in Hindu *haṭha yoga*. There the practice was eventually to arrest the movement of inhalation and exhalation. The purpose of breath control in *yoga*, however, was not merely to gain power over respiratory functions but access to higher states of consciousness. Thus Bhoja's commentary on the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali reads: "All the functions of the organs being preceded by that of respiration—there being always a connection between respiration and consciousness in their respective functions—respiration, when all the functions of the organs are suspended, realizes concentration of consciousness on a single object."¹⁴

Breathing exercises as the initiation of *sati* seem to have a dual function not unlike that in the practice of *haṭha yoga*, namely, to engender control over the body but also to produce an awareness of the real nature of the

¹⁰ *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 3 vols., eds., T. W. Rhys Davids and J. Estlin Carpenter (London: Luzac & Co., 1890–1911) 2:290.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ For example, see *Ṛg Veda* 10:129.

¹⁴ Quoted in Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), p. 55.

body. As Nyānaponika Thera observes, the mindfulness of breathing is both a subject for “tranquility-meditation” (*samathabhāvanā*) as well as an act used for the development of insight (*vipassanābhāvanā*).¹⁵

Following the initiation of mindfulness through breathing exercises, the *Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Suttanta* moves to contemplation of various aspects of the body and its functions. They are in brief: (1) mindfulness of bodily postures (2) contemplation of the parts of the body (3) reflection on the constituent elements of the body, and (4) the so-called cemetery contemplations. Turning first to the mindfulness of bodily postures the *bhikkhu* is enjoined to contemplate (*anupassanā*) the body internally and externally as something that comes into being and passes away again.¹⁶ Furthermore, such contemplation should accompany every act so that “. . . when [the *bhikkhu*] is walking, [he] is aware of it thus:—‘I walk’; or when he is standing, or sitting, or lying down, he is aware of it.”¹⁷ The purpose of the mindfulness of the bodily postures is to gain the knowledge (*ñāṇa*) that he dwells independent, grasping after nothing in the world.¹⁸ Awareness of bodily postures, therefore, should produce such a total self-awareness in the adept that “In going, standing, sitting, sleeping, watching, talking or keeping silence he knows (*sampajāna*) what he is doing.”¹⁹ This total self-knowledge is directed toward two ends: (1) an acknowledgment of the impermanence of the body (its arising and decay) and (2) an independence (*anissito*) from any attachment to the phenomenal world.

The contemplation of the parts of the body is an extension of mindfulness regarding the body and its functions. It begins with an enumeration of various physical organs and bodily products ranging from hair to the heart to urine. This description of the body and its parts is likened to a bag filled with various kinds of grain which can be separated out and identified: “. . . And a keen-eyed man . . . reflects as he pour(s) them out:—‘that’s rice, that’s paddy, those are beans,’ and so forth. Even so, bhikkhus, does a brother reflect on the body from the soles of the feet below upward to the crown of the head, as something enclosed in skin and full of divers impurities.”²⁰

Reflection on the parts of the body becomes even more discriminating or analytical, however. From physical parts, the *bhikkhu* moves his attention to the fundamental bases (*dhātu*) or constituent elements of which the body is composed. In the Theravāda scheme of things these basic elements are

¹⁵ Nyānaponika, *The Heart*, p. 63.

¹⁶ *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 2:292.

¹⁷ *The Dialogues of the Buddha (Dīgha Nikāya)*, 3 vols., trans. T. W. Rhys Davids and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (London: Luzac & Co., 1899–1959), 4th ed., 2:329 (hereafter cited as *Dialogues*).

¹⁸ *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 2:292.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Dialogues*, 2:330.

four—earth, water, heat, and air. Mindfulness of the fact that the body is composed of these elements is likened to the butcher who, when he has slain an ox, displays the carcass piece by piece.²¹ There appears to be a twofold purpose behind the development of mindfulness regarding the various parts and constituent elements of the body: (1) the knowledge that no abiding ego exists in the body but only those parts that can be observed and inferred from this observation and (2) the essentially “vile” and impermanent nature of the body.

This second purpose is carried to even greater extremes in the fourth aspect of bodily mindfulness, the cemetery contemplations. Here the *bhikkhu* is enjoined to contemplate his own body as though it were undergoing ever increasing degrees of decomposition after death. Initially he contemplates a body abandoned in a graveyard which is swollen and turning black and blue; then a body which has been partially eaten by wild animals; and finally a body which has been reduced to a mere heap of bones.²² All of these contemplations are symbols of the transient nature of the body.²³

The second stage of mindfulness is to arrive at the same degree of awareness of the true nature of the feelings (*vedanā*) as was developed by the body. The *bhikkhu* must be able to distinguish among feelings that are pleasurable (*sukha*), painful (*dukkha*), or neutral as well as feelings concerning either spiritual (*sāmisa*) or material (*nirāmisa*) things.²⁴ All of these types of *vedanā* are subject to arising and dying away, just as is the body; hence, they are transient, ephemeral. Mindfulness of feelings, consequently, just as mindfulness regarding the body, produces a detachment, an independence from the things of this world.

After subjecting the body (*kāya*) and the feelings (*vedanā*) to the kind of objective scrutiny that leads to an understanding of their true nature, the *bhikkhu* developing mindfulness turns his attention to *citta*, “. . . the ever-changing, ever-active continuance of consciousness, or reacting intelligence”²⁵

²¹ Ibid., p. 331.

²² *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 2:294–297.

²³ The preoccupation of early Buddhism with the notion of death offers some interesting possibilities of interpretation other than the rather obvious one given in the text. It might, for instance, be an outgrowth of archaic shamanistic practices, for the shaman is one who above all else is qualified by a knowledge of death. On this point see Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), p. 509f (hereinafter cited as Eliade, *Shamanism*). On the other hand, in the dialectic between the sacred and the profane, death plays a very important role. For example, as Van Gennep and others point out, rites of initiation marking a passage from a “profane” state to a “sacred” state are not infrequently signaled by a symbolic recreation of death on the part of the initiate. Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 75f.

²⁴ *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 2:298.

²⁵ *Dialogues*, 2:325.

and also to *dhamma*, the ideas, cognizable objects or presentations beyond the stage of mere sensory reaction.²⁶ Regarding the *citta* or conscious thinking process the monk must become aware of its various modes, for example, lustful, dull, intelligent, attentive, or distraught. That this awareness or knowledge of the states of the mind is for the purpose of control is illustrated by the following passage from the *Vitakkasanthāna Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*:

. . . if while the monk is attending to the thought function and form of those thoughts, there still arise evil unskilled thoughts associated with desire and associated with aversion and associated with confusion, . . . that monk, his teeth clenched, his tongue pressed against his palate, should by his mind subdue, restrain and dominate his mind (*citta*).²⁷

Through awareness directed toward the mind, the monk is enabled both to understand and subdue or control the mind or consciousness (*citta*). It is recognized that *citta* as well as *kāya* and *vedanā* comes into being but then passes away.²⁸

Regarding the *dhamma* or ideas, the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Suttanta* specifically mentions five groups: (1) the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*), (2) the five groups (*khandha*), (3) the five spheres of sense (*āyatana*), (4) the seven factors of enlightenment and, (5) the four Aryan truths. All of these groups of *dhamma* are to be reflected upon with the same scrutiny as body, feelings, and mind with the intent purpose of leading the monk to an independence where he grasps after nothing in the world.

Directing his attention toward the five aggregates (*khandha*), the *bhikkhu* considers individually their arising and passing away until in a state of non-grasping he attains to mindfulness. Contemplating the six *āyatana*s or the internal and external spheres of sense, the monk is made aware that any fetters that bind him to the world are a result of the coming together of the organs of sense and the objects of sense. By his analysis he becomes of the arising and the putting aside of all fetters. Of the seven factors of enlightenment the *bhikkhu* must grow aware ". . . if they are subjectively present, or absent, and he is aware of how there comes an uprising of any factor not hitherto arisen, and of how there comes a full development of such factors when it has arisen."²⁹ Finally the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Suttanta* expounds the four Aryan truths, which must also be considered in terms of the same pattern of their arising and passing away.

What in belief is the purpose of *sati-sampajañña*? In general terms mind-

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *The Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima-Nikāya)*, 3 vols., trans. I. B. Horner (London: Luzac & Co., Ltd., 1954-1959), 1:155.

²⁸ *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 2:299.

²⁹ *Dialogues*, 2:336.

fulness produces a profound self-awareness. More specifically it is intended to produce a detachment from the world of sense through controlling the sensory inputs, and realizing the fundamental impermanence or nonbeingness (*anattā*) of existence. Mindfulness, therefore, offers both a theoretical and practical means for the “. . . realization of that liberating truth of no-self (*anattā*), having the two aspects of egolessness and voidness of substance.”³⁰ This realization is a “lived understanding.” That is, it is arrived at through a carefully graded program in which control of the senses is coupled with an objective, discriminating knowing. The method of mindfulness conjoins psychomental programming, epistemological shifts, and ontological transformation. It lays the groundwork for later developments, in the meditative life.

SAMĀDHI AND ONEPOINTEDNESS

Samādhi represents a greater degree of control over the mind or consciousness (*citta*, *viññāṇa*) than *sati*. As the word itself (*sam-ā-dhā*) denotes, *samādhi* is a bringing together, a concentration of the mind in contrast to the more general practice of mindfulness (*sati*). In early Buddhism the important relationship between *samādhi* as the process whereby one concentrates his thoughts and controls his consciousness and *sīla* or the ethical and moral behavior of the religious man is a general assumption. For our purposes, however, *samādhi* has crucial implications for the higher goals of the salvation-quest.

In the *Subha Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya* the young Brahman, Subha, asks Ānanda to expound the doctrine regarding *samādhi*. The resulting answer includes elements which overlap with other categories of this exposition, but several points are made which will serve as a basis for our discussion of *samādhi*.

In the first place the *sutta* affirms that one practices *samādhi* by guarding the doors of the senses.³¹ This particular practice is described as follows: when the monk sees an object with his eye he is not grasped either by its general appearance or by its details; he restrains whatever factor might cause the arising of evil elemental reactions; so restraining his sense of sight he attains mastery over his sense of sight.³² In a similar fashion he controls his other sense organs: “. . . when he hears a sound with his ear, or smells an odor with his nose or tastes a flavor with his tongue or feels a touch with his body, or cognizes (*viññāya*) a phenomenon (*dhamma*) with his mind he is not grasped either by the general appearance or the details of it.”³³ By

³⁰ Nyānaponika, *The Heart*, p. 75.

³¹ *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 1:207, also p. 70.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

so restraining all of his senses, including the *manas* or conscious mind, he experiences an unblemished happiness. Having so restrained and guarded all the sense organs so that no element (*dhamma*) of the mundane world may claim him, the *bhikkhu* is now mindful (*sati*) and with clear comprehension (*sampajañña*). As described in the *Subha Sutta*, therefore, *samādhi* begins when the senses are no longer subject to the rule of the objects of sense.

In the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* the layman Visakha asks the nun Dhammadinnā, "What is concentration (*samādhi*), what are the distinguishing marks of concentration, what is the development of concentration?"³⁴ To this question the wise nun replies that *samādhi* is onepointedness of mind (*cittassa ekaggatā*), its marks the four objects of mindfulness, its requisites the four right efforts and that whatever leads to the increase of these is, in effect, the development of concentration.³⁵ This passage points to the close relationship between *sati* and *samādhi*. That is, concentration appears to presuppose the four objects of mindfulness. *Samādhi*, however, goes beyond the awareness of impermanence and sensory detachment produced by *sati*. It is a refined control of the consciousness, a concentration of the mind to a single point, thereby eliminating all extraneous thoughts. Buddhaghosa in applying the definition *cittassa ekaggatā* to *samādhi* elaborates as follows: "[*samādhi*] is the centering of the consciousness and consciousness-concomitants evenly and rightly on a single object."³⁶ The man of concentrated (*samādhi*) and one-pointed (*ekaggatā*) mind, therefore, stands in stark contrast to the profane man who is "empty-headed, frivolous and loose in talk."³⁷

The *Cūḷavedalla Sutta's* exposition of *samādhi* also says that the requisites of concentration are the four right efforts. The four right efforts are described in various parts of the *Nikāyas* as follows: checking the rise of evil and wrong states of consciousness not yet arisen; shedding evil and wrong states that have already arisen; encouraging the rise of right states not yet arisen; ensuring that right states which are already there shall be multiplied and developed.³⁸ The four right efforts are frequently mentioned as one of the formula truths reported to have been perceived by the Buddha and passed on to his disciples.³⁹ While this formula does indeed point to a relationship between *samādhi* and the production and retention of right constituent states of conscious being, it raises the broader issue of the place of *samādhi* in a

³⁴ *The Middle Length Sayings*, 1:363.

³⁵ *The Majjhima Nikāya*, 3 vols., ed. V. Trenckner, R. Chalmers, and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (London: Luzac & Co., 1888-1899), 1:295.

³⁶ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli (Colombo, Ceylon: R. Semage, 1956), p. 85.

³⁷ *The Book of Gradual Sayings (Anguttara-Nikāya)*, 5 vols., trans. F. L. Woodward and E. H. Hare (London: Oxford University Press, 1932-1936), 5:65.

³⁸ *The Majjhima Nikāya*, 2:11.

³⁹ For example, see *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 2:120.

variety of conceptual structures illustrative of an enlightened state of mind. For instance all of the five *iddhipādas*, the paths to the attainment of supra-normal powers, are dependent on *samādhi*.⁴⁰ The five forces (*indriyāni*) or organs of spiritual sense include *samādhi* which is described by one Buddhist scholar as "the dominant faculty, which brings about concentration of thoughts and makes the adept rise higher and higher in meditations."⁴¹ *Samādhi* is also the sixth of the seven factors leading to enlightenment,⁴² and it has already been pointed out that concentration is one of the three major divisions of the Noble Eightfold Path. On the basis of the crucial role played by *samādhi* in the formulae cited, it is arguable that concentration of mind is the necessary step to the attainment of a higher truth and the powers accompanying it.

The Buddhist adept who chooses the way of *samādhi* begins his religious quest with a general awareness of the nature of the self and reality but must move beyond the state of objective detachment produced by this mindfulness. He must progress to a unity of concentration which eliminates the flow of sensory material into his conscious mind. By such a concentrated effort he is able to rise to higher forms of apperception, to a mystic intuition of a reality veiled to ordinary perception.⁴³

JHĀNA, STAGES TO THE ULTIMATE

Buddhist meditation progresses from *samādhi* to *jhāna*, or from concentration and onepointedness to the gradual expansion of the consciousness to hitherto-unexperienced dimensions. In the Pāli *Suttas*, *jhāna* is often found as part of the formula of the four *jhānas*, where it is translated as mental absorption or trance. By carefully analyzing this formula and the contexts in which it occurs, the significance of *jhāna* in relationship to the control of consciousness and saving-knowledge will become clear.

In the *Brahmajāla Sutta* a discussion of the four *jhānas* occurs within the context of the question, "How may the self or soul (*atta*) attain to the highest Nibbāna in this visible world?" It is in answer to this question that an explication of the four *jhānas* is set forth.

⁴⁰ The five *iddhipādas* are resolution (*chanda*), effort (*virīya*), consciousness (*citta*), and investigation (*vimamsā*). *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 3:77.

⁴¹ Nalinaksha Dutt, *Early Monastic Buddhism*, rev. ed. (Calcutta: Oriental Book Agency, 1960), p. 248.

⁴² The seven factors or limbs of enlightenment (*sambojjhaṅga*) are: *sati*, *dhammavicaya*, *virīya*, *pīti*, *passaddhi*, *samādhi*, and *upekkhā*.

⁴³ The process of mental training became greatly elaborated in the scholastic or Abhidhamma period of Theravāda Buddhism. Nalinaksha Dutt provides an excellent discussion of the various forms of *samādhi* (as represented in particular by the *Vissuddhimagga*) in chapter 7 of *Early Monastic Buddhism*.

In this *sutta* it is accepted as an a priori condition of phenomenal existence that the self is subject to *kāma* or sensuous desires. It is also the case that sensuous desires are characterized by impermanence (*anicca*). Phenomenal existence, therefore, necessarily involves suffering since sensory pleasures are constantly subject to change. The only way one can hope to achieve happiness and joy (*pīṭisukha*) is by cutting off *kāma*. In the first *jhāna* this state is accomplished by detachment (*viveka*) accompanied by reflection and investigation (*vitakka-vicāra*). In order to understand this *jhāna* these three terms must be studied in some detail.

The term *viveka* has a threefold significance: a physical separation from the world in the sense of "seclusion"; an intellectual separation in the sense of "discrimination"; and an ethical separation in the sense of the mind (*citta*) "being separate from the world."⁴⁴ For instance, in the *Mahāsuññatā Sutta* the Buddha tells Ānanda that a *bhikkhu* who delights in society cannot enjoy well-being or emancipation of mind (*cetovimutti*) but that such happiness demands renunciation, solitude, and enlightenment (*sambodha*).⁴⁵ The Buddha claims that as a Tathāgata he has reached such a state of isolation (*viveka*) by dismissing thoughts of all attendant phenomena and by developing and dwelling in a state of emptiness (*suññatā*).⁴⁶ The *sutta* goes on to say that a monk who likewise desires to develop and dwell in inward emptiness should calm, tranquilize, focus and concentrate his mind inwardly.⁴⁷ This *sutta* clearly indicates that *viveka* implies both a physical separation from the delights of ordinary worldly intercourse as well as an isolation of the mind (*citta*). It is interesting to note that the resultant separation is described as a condition of inward emptiness (*suññatā*) since in the later Mādhyamika tradition the perspective on this important term will shift from a psychophysical emphasis to an ontological one.

In the *Naḷakapāna Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, *viveka* is described in terms of separation from sensuous desires and from the evil constituents of being. This separation is said to result in the attainment of joy and happiness. The Tathāgata who has reached such a state has overcome the attachments to the mundane world known as the *āsavas*, which produce the suffering of "birth, old age and death."⁴⁸ *Viveka*, then, means a detachment from the world of sense with its accompanying desires and kammic resultants of rebirth.

The terms *vitakka* and *vicāra* should be taken together. In fact T. W. Rhys Davids contends that by examining the use of these two words in earlier

⁴⁴ *The Dialogues of the Buddha*, 1:84 (see the footnote).

⁴⁵ *The Majjhima Nikāya*, 3:110.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:111.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:464.

and later works, one concludes that they once had synonymous meanings.⁴⁹ They came to have slightly different intentions, however, with *vitakka* referring in particular to initial thought or observation and *vicāra* denoting continuing or sustained investigation and reflection. Together they are used to indicate “. . . the whole of the mental process of thinking.”⁵⁰

In the *Upakkilesa Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* both *vitakka* and *vicāra* are related to concentration (*samādhi*). The Buddha is recorded as saying that by developing *samādhi* in several modes beginning with *vitakka* and *vicāra*, he gained the knowledge (*ñāṇa*) and the vision (*dassana*) that his final liberation (*vimutti*) was assured. *Vitakka* and *vicāra*, therefore are important to the concentration (*samādhi*) of one's thoughts and act as one of the first steps toward the attainment of the apperception (*dassana*) of ultimate reality. They share with *viveka* the characteristics of directing the individual away from mere sensory reality. Thus in the *Dasuttara Suttanta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* the eight thoughts (*vitakka*) of the great man (*mahāpurisa*) include the limitation of desires, detachment, and mental concentration.⁵¹ As we shall see, however, *vitakka* can become dangerous. As the *Sakkapañha Suttanta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* points out, *vitakka* can become a mental pre-occupation which causes desire (*chanda*),⁵² the root of attachment to the mundane world.⁵³

In sum, the first *jhāna* is depicted primarily as a condition of detachment. It involves a physical, intellectual, and ethical separation from the phenomenal world. An important phase of the development of the concentration necessary to acquire the first *jhāna* is careful thought and analysis of one's self and the surrounding world.

The second *jhāna* is achieved when observation and investigation (*vitakka* and *vicāra*) are suppressed. In this stage these two mental functions are said to be *oḷārika* or gross, implying that they are necessarily involved in the empirical world. The second *jhāna* is characterized by joy and happiness (*pīṭisukha*), born not of *viveka* or detachment but of *samādhi*, translated by Rhys Davids in this passage as “serenity.”⁵⁴ This state is further characterized by a tranquil inner nature and a concentrated mind or heart.⁵⁵

Just as the first *jhāna* was labeled gross (*oḷārika*) since it involved *vitakka* and *vicāra*, the second acquires the same rubric because it is characterized by

⁴⁹ Rhys-Davids and Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary*, p. 620.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *The Dialogues of the Buddha*, 3:261.

⁵² In this particular case, *chanda* or excitement is nearly identical in meaning with *taṇhā*, thirst or craving.

⁵³ *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 2:277. *Dialogues*, 2:311.

⁵⁴ *Dialogues*, 1:50.

⁵⁵ *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 1:37.

joy (*pīti*) and an exhilaration of the heart.⁵⁶ The qualities which are found in one who attains to the third *jhāna* are equanimity (*upekkhā*) and mindfulness (*sati*), "self-possession" (*sampajāna*), dispassion (*virāga*), and an abiding happiness. Finally in the fourth *jhāna* the attention of the heart on happiness is transcended as is a concern with its opposite, *dukkha* or suffering.⁵⁷ Similarly the polarity of *somanassa* and *domanassa* or mental distress is overcome. The last *jhāna* is, therefore, composed of pure equanimity and mindfulness (*upekkhāsatiṭṭhāparisuddhi*)⁵⁸ and is "a state where some maintain the complete happiness, in the visible world, of a living being."⁵⁹

The fourfold *jhāna* formula appears again in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, the discourse on the fruits of the life of a *samaṇa* or recluse. In this *sutta* the discussion of the *jhānas* is preceded by an overcoming of the five hindrances or *nīvaraṇas* and is followed by the acquisition of supranormal powers or *iddhi* and *abhiññā* (supranormal knowledge) as well as the overcoming of the *āsavas*. To understand more fully the role of *jhāna* within the scope of Buddhist soteriology, we shall examine in some detail the most important of the concepts in this *sutta*, namely, *nīvaraṇa*, *iddhi*, *abhiññā*, and *āśava*.

The classical formula of the five *nīvaraṇas*⁶⁰ as found in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* and elsewhere in the Nikāyas (for example, *Dīgha* III, 49) is described as follows: (1) coveting the world, (2) malevolence and the desire to injure, (3) stolidity and slothfulness, (4) excitement and misdeeds and (5) wavering or doubt.⁶¹ One must overcome these hindrances so that in each case the mind may be purified. Separated from sensuous desires and evil elemental impulses the *samaṇa* is enabled to enter into the sequence of the four *jhānas* previously described.⁶² With the exception of the fifth *nīvaraṇa* the concern of this formula is clearly with those emotions which tend toward unreflective involvement in the phenomenal world. As *Samyutta Nikāya* 5:83 puts it, the *nīvaraṇas* are conducive ". . . to the still more becoming and growth thereof."⁶³ Involvement in the becoming of the phenomenal world supposes lack of insight or ignorance described as blindness and loss of sight. One who has not overcome the *nīvaraṇas* obviously is unable to acquire any degree of knowledge beyond that granted through the agency of the senses in dependence on the empirical world.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 1:37-38.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1:38.

⁵⁹ *Dialogues*, 1:51.

⁶⁰ *Nīvaraṇa* is the Sanskrit *niś + varaṇa* literally meaning not choosing or unable to choose and, hence, an obstacle or hindrance.

⁶¹ *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 1:71.

⁶² Ibid., 1:73.

⁶³ *The Book of Kindred Sayings (Samyutta-Nikāya)*, 5 vols., trans. C. A. F. Rhys Davids and F. L. Woodward (London: Oxford University Press, 1917-1930), 5:70.

The *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* makes clear, however, that one who passes through the *jhānas* transcends an ordinary involvement in the phenomenal world exemplified by the *nīvaranas*. Through attaining the four *jhānas* the consciousness or mind (*citta*) is made pure (*parisuddha*), freed from blemish, devoid of evil (*kilesa*),⁶⁴ stable and immovable.⁶⁵ The *citta* is thereby freed to direct itself toward the “insight that comes from knowledge.”⁶⁶ This insight is simply that this body (*kāya*) has a form (*rūpa*) composed of the four great elements; that it is a result of a human birth; that it is perpetuated by partaking of foods; that it is impermanent and subject to dissolution and disintegration; and that consciousness itself (*viññāṇa*) depends on the body and is bound up with it.⁶⁷ With the *citta* purified and collected, the *samaṇa* has the mental power to be able to create (*maya*) with it another body (*añña kāya*) than the body subject to the frailties described above. As the text describes this process it is “. . . as if a man were to pull out a reed from its sheath. He would know: ‘this is the reed, this the sheath. The reed is one thing, the sheath another. It is from the sheath that the reed has been drawn forth.’ And similarly were he to take a snake out of its slough, or draw a sword from its scabbard.”⁶⁸

The notion of *manomaya* or mental power has significant possibilities for this study; however, on the basis of the Pāli texts it is difficult to arrive at a specific interpretation. In general the term denotes being made or formed by the mind, particularly as though magically made.⁶⁹ For example, the *Brahmajāla Sutta* refers to the evolution of the world system to the point where most beings have been reborn in the “World of Radiance” and “there they dwell made of mind (*manomaya*), feeding on joy, radiating light from themselves, traversing the air [and] continuing in glory”⁷⁰ A similar association of *manomaya* with a heavenly realm is found in the *Apaṇṇaka Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*. There it is stated that the corporeal gods are a product of *manomaya*.⁷¹ The two passages cited above clearly refer to the

⁶⁴ The word, *kilesa*, along with other terms such as the *nīvaraṇa*, *taṇhā*, the *āsava*, etc., has reference to unthinking involvement in the phenomenal or profane world. *Kilesa* literally means stain, soil, impurity and comes to stand for sensuous desires, passions, etc. “Its occurrence in the Piṭakas is rare; in later works, very frequent, where it is approx. tantamount to our terms lower or unregenerate nature” Rhys Davids and Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary*, p. 216.

⁶⁵ *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 1:76.

⁶⁶ *Dialogues*, 1:86.

⁶⁷ *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 1:76. We find here a standard description of the body. Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) in this instance indicates the five senses or the entire emotional and intellectual process. See *Dialogues*, 1:87, notes 1 and 2.

⁶⁸ *Dialogues*, 1:88.

⁶⁹ Rhys Davids and Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary*, p. 521.

⁷⁰ *Dialogues*, 1:30. *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 1:17.

⁷¹ *The Majjhima Nikāya*, 1:410.

magical power of the mind by relating *manomaya* to the mythological realms of Buddhism. Indeed, *manomaya*'s earliest meaning may have been magically oriented—the notion that *mano* was responsible for the attainment of heavenly rewards of some form or another; however, we find that *manomaya* comes to assume both ethical and ontic connotations.

For instance, the *Dhammapāda* opens with the following two verses:

Mind is the forerunner of (all evil) states. Mind is chief; mind-made are they. If one speaks or acts with wicked mind, because of that, suffering follows one, even as the wheel follows the hoof of the draught-ox.

Mind is the forerunner of (all good) states. Mind is chief; mind-made are they. If one speaks or acts with pure mind, because of that, happiness follows one, even as one's shadow that never leaves.

In this passage the ethical and the ontic are definitely related in terms of mind, that is, the mind appears as the center point. It has, as it were, the power to create the "self." The ethical dimension stems from this fact. If the mind is ignorant and impure, one will suffer; if, on the other hand, the mind is enlightened and pure, one will attain happiness.

Having overcome the five hindrances, attained the four mental absorptions and the power of *manomaya*, the *samaṇa* now acquires *iddhi* or supranormal power, and *abhiññā* or supranormal knowledge. The term *iddhi* is of pre-Buddhistic origin. In different contexts it may be used in the Pāli texts to describe the potency of a king, a rich noble, a hunter, etc.⁷² In the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, eight modes of *iddhi* are mentioned: (1) the power of becoming one or many, (2) the ability to become invisible, (3) passing through objects such as walls and hills, (4) penetrating through solid ground, (5) the power to walk on water, (6) traveling cross-legged in the sky, (7) touching the moon and the sun, (8) reaching Brahmā heaven.⁷³

The above listed *iddhis* acquired by the Buddhist adept have striking similarities with the archaic phenomenon of shamanism.⁷⁴ The coincidence of characteristics between these two religious practitioners has been studied by Mircea Eliade in his monograph, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*.⁷⁵ In particular he points to the "identity in expression" between the superhuman experiences of the Buddhist *yogin* and the archaic symbolism of ascent and flight found so frequently in shamanism.⁷⁶ Symbols of ascent and flight are especially important since they illustrate the ecstatic experience at which

⁷² Rhys Davids and Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary*, p. 120.

⁷³ *Dialogues*, 1:88–89.

⁷⁴ Eliade notes that the word, shaman, is derived through the Russian from the Tungusic, "saman." Some scholars, however, have derived the term from Pāli. See Eliade, *Shamanism*, p. 495.

⁷⁵ See chapter 11, "Shamanic Ideologies and Techniques Among the Indo-Europeans," in Eliade, *Shamanism*.

⁷⁶ P. 409.

shamanism aims. The shaman through the medium of this experience obtains a superhuman state of being enhancing him with such powers as flight, especially for the purpose of reaching otherworldly realms. The magical aspect of this power is well illustrated by our particular text, which specifically indicates that prior to the acquisition of *iddhi*, the *samaṇa* has exercised the power of *manomaya*, the “magic” of his mind, in order to create “another body.” It would appear that the *iddhi* which follow are powers of that “other body” created as a result of passing through the four *jhānas*.

The possible shamanistic and, hence, magically oriented origin of *iddhi* is furthered by what appears to be a growing suspicion on the part of early Buddhism toward the public display of paranormal or superhuman psychic powers. In the *Kevaddha Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* the Buddha is represented as warning against the use of magical wonders because they might be confused with the use of magical charms practiced in Gandhāra.⁷⁷ He is made to say, “It is because I perceive danger in the practice of mystic wonders, that I loath, and abhor, and am ashamed thereof.”⁷⁸ In the *Vinaya Piṭaka* it is stated that a monk should not display psychic powers before the laity beyond the powers of ordinary men.⁷⁹ The *Sampasādanīya Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* makes it clear that there are indeed two types of *iddhi*, one which is termed ignoble and the other noble.⁸⁰ The ignoble are those powers discussed above in the *Samaññaphala Sutta* and elsewhere in the *Nikāyas*.⁸¹ In the *Sampasādanīya Sutta* the *iddhis* are labeled ignoble since they are concomitant with mental intoxicants and worldly aims.⁸² In other words, it is possible to employ the fruits of the *jhāna* or the *iddhi* in such a manner that the mundane world, rather than being transcended, becomes even more attractive and one’s involvement within it is deepened even further. *Iddhi* produced through *manomaya* may become the occasion of a descent into the actual or phenomenal world rather than ascent into the real or noumenal.

In contrast to the ignoble powers, all of which involve some superhuman power, the *Sampasādanīya Sutta* describes the noble powers as follows: “When a *bhikkhu* can, if he so desire, remain unconscious of the disgust amid what is disgusting; or conscious of disgust amid what is not disgusting; or unconscious of disgust amid what is both disgusting and the opposite; or, avoiding both that which is disgusting and the opposite, should remain indifferent to them as such, mindful and understanding.”⁸³ As should be expected, the

⁷⁷ *The Dialogues of the Buddha*, 1:278.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *The Book of Discipline (Vinaya-Piṭaka)*, 5 vols., trans. I. B. Horner, Sacred Books of the Buddhists (London: Luzac & Co., 1940–1952), 2:112.

⁸⁰ *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 3:112.

⁸¹ See the *Kevaddha Sutta*.

⁸² *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 3:112.

⁸³ *Dialogues*, 3:107.

noble *iddhis* overcome the mental intoxicants (*āsavas*) and the worldly aims instead of becoming further embroiled in them. Rather than representing the superhuman or the magical, *Aryan* powers stand for control of *saññā* or perceptions and lead to an indifference (*upekkhaka*) toward the disgusting and the nondisgusting, those polarities which qualify our perception of the phenomenal world.

The transformation of *iddhi* from an archaic, magical meaning is further illustrated by the *Janavasabha Suttanta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* describing the four ways in which *iddhi* is developed. They are: concentration and effort with desire (*chanda-samādhi*), concentration and effort with energy (*virīya-samādhi*), concentration and effort with a "dominant idea" (*citta-samādhi*), concentration and effort with investigation (*vīmaṃsā-samādhi*).⁸⁴ Here we find a progression not to a state of ecstasy leading to powers of invisibility and flight, but rather a progression from desire (*chanda*) to investigation (*vīmaṃsā*), or from motivation and effort to a more refined and sophisticated use of the mind. It appears that *iddhi* as the fruit of *jhāna* becomes, rather than supernatural powers acquired in shamanistic trance, a discriminating understanding (*vīmaṃsā*) of the phenomenal world engendering a detached objectivity (*upekkhaka*) in the face of the polarities of impure/pure, loathsome/nonloathsome, disgusting/nondisgusting typical of the phenomenal or mundane world.

In addition to *iddhi*, the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* indicates that other powers are acquired by the *samaṇa* who has overcome the *nīvaraṇas* and acquired the *jhānas*. These powers are said to be the heavenly or divine ear; discernment of various types of minds or *citta*; knowledge of previous existences; the heavenly or divine eye with which the adept ". . . sees beings as they pass away from one form of existence and take shape in another . . .".⁸⁵ These supranormal powers eventually developed into a stereotyped list of six *abhiññās* (higher knowledge). They appear in the *Dasuttara Suttanta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* as follows: (1) the *iddhis* in their various modes described above; (2) "deva-hearing" by which the adept "hears sounds both heavenly and human, far and near"; (3) a mind that ". . . understands the minds of other beings, other persons . . ."; (4) an ability to recall to mind ". . . the various temporary states as he lived in days gone by . . ."; (5) "deva-sight" by which "he discerns the pageant of beings faring according to their deeds"; (6) the realization and knowledge of the extinction of the "intoxicants" (*āsavas*) and the attainment of freedom.⁸⁶

We can discern in this list an amalgam of two different types of *abhiññā*. In the first instance there is the type illustrated by the occurrence of the

⁸⁴ *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 2:213.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:79f.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:281. See also *Dialogues*, 3:257f.

supranormal powers in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*. There the *abhiññās* are acquired as the result of *jhāna* through the power of *manomaya*. In particular, however, *abhiññā* seems to express a psychic or mental power in contrast to the extraordinary physical power of the *iddhis*. For example, the heavenly ear and the divine eye would appear above all else to indicate a heightened mode of perception enabling the adept to arrive at a supranatural knowledge bordering on omniscience. Thus *iddhi* and *abhiññā* seem to complement each other, the one pointing to physical power, the other to mental power. It is just such a mutually supporting role, for example, that *iddhi* and *abhiññā* play in the *Akankheyya Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*.⁸⁷

There is, on the other hand, another type of *abhiññā* in the *Dasuttara Suttanta* list, a “higher knowledge” of the destruction of all attachments to the mundane and of the realization of ultimate reality or *nibbāna*. This aspect of the *abhiññās* is found in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, where they are preceded by the “middle path” and followed by enlightenment and *nibbāna*.⁸⁸ Or, again in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* where it is said that the *abhiññās* lead to full emancipation,⁸⁹ and the *Dīgha* where we find that they are contrary to priestly superstitions and vain (sophistical) speculations.⁹⁰ In other words, *abhiññā*, at this level, is insight into the truth claims of Buddhism regarding the nature of reality. It may be that the two seemingly different types of *abhiññā* represent a synthesis of a more popular and “primitive,” magically oriented tradition with the more sophisticated, ethically oriented tradition of the priests. It is difficult to assert, as the *Pāli Text Society Dictionary* does, that the more magically oriented understanding of *abhiññā* is later.⁹¹ Perhaps all that can be safely said is that in the *Nikāyas* the two traditions came to be amalgamated. That is to say, it was expected that as a person gained detachment from the phenomenal world he not only gained a “higher knowledge” (*abhi-jñā*), but supranormal powers (*iddhis*) as well.

Having destroyed the *nīvaraṇas*, attained the *jhānas*, the *iddhis*, and *abhiññās*, the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* goes on to say that the *sāmaññā* is then able to destroy the “deadly floods” or “intoxicants” (*āsavas*) that are part of the attachment of the profane man to the mundane world. In this *sutta* the *āsavas* are enumerated as *kāma* (sensual desire), *bhāva* (becoming or desire for future life), and *avijjā* (ignorance of the four noble truths).⁹² One of the most famous passages referring to the intoxicants is contained in a formula repeated throughout the *Nikāyas*, the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* in particular.

⁸⁷ *The Majjhima Nikāya*, 1:33.

⁸⁸ *The Book of Kindred Sayings*, 5:357.

⁸⁹ *The Book of Gradual Sayings*, 4:179.

⁹⁰ *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 3:131.

⁹¹ Rhys Davids and Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary*, p. 64.

⁹² *The Dīgha Nikāya*, 1:83.

It illustrates the interrelationship of conduct (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and understanding (*paññā*) in overcoming the *āsavas*. After affirming that concentration must be accompanied by right conduct and understanding by concentration, the passage concludes that the mind (*citta*) of the individual surrounded by a profound understanding (*paññā*) of the nature of reality will be freed (*vimuccati*) from being “poured out” (*āsava*) into the mundane world through sensual desires, the wish for a life of continual becoming, false views, and ignorance of his true state of being.⁹³

The *āsavas*, as do the *nīvaraṇas*, serve to clarify that from which the *jhānas* free a man. Fundamentally it is the mundane, specifically as the world of sensuous desire, becoming, anger, worry, dullness, stupidity; or, in other words, ignorant, unthinking involvement in and attachment to the empirical world. The *jhānas* represent stages by which an individual attains a power of mind (*manomaya*) which represents a new order of being, “another body” (*añña kāya*) as the text states it. This new being is graphically illustrated by certain powers the texts describe partially in the terms of a popular, magical tradition and partially in terms of the higher knowledge represented by the Buddhist analysis of existence. We may conclude that the *jhānas* preserve two types of knowledge in relationship to the salvation quest: ecstasy and a mode of knowledge characterized by *vīmaṃsā*, *vitakka*, and *vicāra* or more rational and discriminating forms of thinking. Knowledge as power, then, comes to take on a rather particular meaning. It is power over the world of becoming and change, but it is also the power of new being.

UPEKKHĀ AND THE UNLIMITEDS

We have seen in our discussion of *jhāna* that *upekkhā* (equanimity) appeared in the third stage and that in the fourth there remained only *sati* (mindfulness) and *upekkhā*. Having discussed the former term, we now turn to an examination of *upekkhā*. The word *upekkhā* is derived from the Sanskrit root *īkṣ*, meaning to gaze or look at, plus the prefix *upa*; hence, the word literally means to overlook or neglect.⁹⁴ Its meaning is extended, however, to denote patience, equanimity, or indifference. The *Pāli Text Society Dictionary* defines *upekkhā* as, “hedonic neutrality or indifference, the zero point between joy and sorrow.”⁹⁵ A. B. Keith notes that *upekkhā*, as a quality of the third and fourth *jhāna*, does not actually connote a hedonistic sense of indifference but rather an intellectual neutrality. Thus, *upekkhā*, at least in its jhānic context, is an impartial tolerance in regard to all mental states.⁹⁶

⁹³ Ibid., 2:81.

⁹⁴ Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, p. 215.

⁹⁵ Rhys Davids and Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary*, p. 150.

⁹⁶ A. B. Keith, *Buddhist Philosophy in India and Ceylon*, 4th ed. (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1963), p. 126.

A broad survey of the uses of *upekkhā* in the Theravāda tradition is given by Edward Conze as follows: (1) neutral feelings which are neither pleasant nor unpleasant, (2) an attitude of “serene unconcern” or sameness of thought arising from the practice of concentration or *jhāna*, (3) the final stage of worldly wisdom just prior to reaching the Path when evenmindedness toward all conditioned beings is achieved, (4) the equanimity of the Arahant who retains a natural state of purity, (5) the equanimity of the Arahant as contrasted with the dull indifference of ignorant men, and (6) an attitude or impartiality providing an antidote to ill will and sensuous greed.⁹⁷

In the Nikāyas themselves we discover that *upekkhā* is used frequently in the formula of the four *brahma vihāras* or the abodes of *brahmā*. The *brahma vihāras* are four “states of mind” that result, after death, in a rebirth in the heavenly worlds of *brahmā*.⁹⁸ There is disagreement among Buddhist scholars as to the origin of the *brahma vihāras*. T. W. Rhys Davids contends that they were almost certainly exclusively Buddhist,⁹⁹ whereas E. J. Thomas believes they show a direct connection with Brahmanical practices since they occur in the *Yoga Sūtras*.¹⁰⁰ Regardless of origin, however, the *brahma vihāras* are important as modes of heightened awareness, although they are not in themselves the highest goal of *nibbāna*.¹⁰¹

Another term used in the Nikāyas to define the *brahma vihāras* is *appamaññā* or “infinite feelings.”¹⁰² This term is applied to these states of mind or categories of consciousness dealing with mind expansion. *Mahāsudassana Suttanta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* reports the following attainments of “the Great King of Glory” after reaching the fourth *jhāna*: “And he let his mind pervade one quarter of the world with thoughts of love; and so the second quarter and so the third and so the fourth. And thus the whole wide world, to pervade with heart of love, far-reaching, grown great, and beyond measure, free from the least trace of anger or ill will.”¹⁰³ And in a similar fashion he pervaded the whole world with a consciousness of compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. The *brahma vihāras* in general and *upekkhā* in particular represent, if you will, universal states of consciousness. They are one of the somewhat paradoxical outcomes of the process of meditation and the control of the mind which has been described in the Nikāyas, a process that becomes even more

⁹⁷ Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India*, pp. 89–90.

⁹⁸ The four *brahma vihāras* are: love (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*).

⁹⁹ *Dialogues*, 1:298.

¹⁰⁰ Edward J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, 2d ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 50.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Appamaññā* corresponds to the Sanskrit *prāmāṇya* + the prefix, *a*, literally meaning “not.”

¹⁰³ *Dialogues*, 2:219.

refined in a later period. This outcome of Buddhist meditation is seemingly paradoxical in that the progression from *sati* to *samādhi*, and even into the *jhānas*, was primarily a narrowing down of the consciousness. But the narrowing of the consciousness was for the purpose of its ultimate liberation. The refinement of the mind was important primarily for the elimination of attachment to the objects of sense and concomitantly to develop such mental control that the mind developed the power to construct a new reality (*manomaya*). That is to say, the purpose of meditation in the Nikāyas is to free the mind from dependence on sensory objects so that it can be expanded to realities which defy empirical definition. *Upekkhā*, therefore, becomes the last element in the seven factors of enlightenment and is a characteristic shared by both Arahants and *buddhas*.

Perhaps the significance of the difference in consciousness implied by *upekkhā* and ordinary states of consciousness can be best demonstrated by referring to two Nikāya texts. The *Salāyatanavibhaṅga Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* lists six indifferences (*upekkhā*). A worldly indifference is “. . . the indifference on seeing a thing which appertains to the ignorant and foolish average man . . . such indifference . . . fails to transcend the thing seen . . .”¹⁰⁴ By way of contrast the indifference of renunciation arises when “. . . on discerning the transitory nature of things seen and their mutability, instability and annihilation, indifference arises from causal understanding.”¹⁰⁵ *Upekkhā* denotes, therefore, a transcendence of the thing seen.

Assuming that meditation frees the mind from dependence on the mundane world, to what is it freed? The answer must of necessity be in abstract terms, and the person who is looking for a concrete definition of the knowledge of ultimates is bound to be disappointed; however, one answer given by the Nikāyas is found in the *Mahāvadella Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*. There, in a conversation between Sāriputta and Koṭṭhita the Great, Sāriputta discusses four “freedoms” of the mind (*cetovimutti*): *appamāṇā* (immeasurable), *ākiñcaññā* (nothingness), *suññatā* (emptiness), *animittā* (signless).¹⁰⁶ All four of these characteristics of the *cetovimutti* are identical in that they connote a state or condition of nonattachment. They also point beyond themselves to a reality beyond definition, a reality that can be known but not in the way that people ordinarily know. The whole thrust of Buddhist meditation, therefore, is to produce a *condition of consciousness* in which *ultimate reality can be known directly*, just as objects are perceived directly in the phenomenal world. The Buddhist way of coming to know ultimate reality is to produce a condition of being in which reality can be perceived directly. It is because the

¹⁰⁴ *The Further Dialogues of the Buddha (Majjhima Nikāya)*, 2 vols., trans. Robert Chalmers (London: Oxford University Press, 1926–1927), 2:280.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *The Majjhima Nikāya*, 1:297.

reality to be known is “other” than that which is ordinarily known that the process of meditation—*sati*, *samādhi*, *jhāna* and *upekkhā*—is undergone. The cognizing apparatus must be transformed since, indeed, to reach *nibbāna* involves a total transformation of consciousness and being.

The process of meditation described in the Pāli *suttas* provides the proper context for a discussion of Buddhist epistemology. Epistemology in Buddhism is basically a soteriological and not a philosophical problem. To understand the Theravāda view of knowledge (*viññāna* and *paññā*) demands a serious study of the structure of Buddhist meditation. This essay has attempted such a study. It has argued that within the progressive refinement of consciousness developed in the Buddhist meditative process, discriminating and analytical modes of knowledge played a decisive role, both in terms of understanding the true nature of things as well as in producing a state of detachment. It has further argued that meditation leads to a state of consciousness in which only a nondiscriminating mode of knowledge is appropriate. Such knowledge might be labeled mystical or intuitive but, finally, as the texts themselves point out, it is without any proper designation (*animittā*).