**Metta Dharma Foundation**

**Jhana Practice and Study Group**

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**Controversies About Samadhi and Jhana**

1. **What is Jhana?**

A basic dispute regarding jhana is whether one is aware of the body while in jhana.

An intimate connection with body awareness that is maintained and refined throughout all four jhanas is an essential component comprising jhana in the suttas.

This important aspect of jhana is highlighted in the expanded jhana similes, which refer repeatedly to the body being filled with rapture, pleasure, or awareness.

Heightened awareness of and connection with the body is both a characteristic of jhana and a practice leading to it, as emphasized in the Kayagatasati (Mindfulness of the Body) Sutta (MN119), which states unambiguously that through attaining jhana one develops mindfulness of the body.

Descriptions given in the standard sutta definition can reasonably be understood and interpreted in more than one way.

The passages do not contain a lot of detail.

If we define jhana only in terms of the jhana factors we may be confused.

Though jhana is defined by the standard formula, elsewhere the suttas make it clear that other factors must be present and working together.

In order to understand what the suttas are conveying, the definition must be viewed within the context of the suttas’ entire range of teachings and descriptions of samadhi and jhana.

A basic dispute regarding jhana is whether one is aware of the body while in jhana.

There is controversy as to whether the mind is unified and aware of changing experience or one-pointed, whether it is a state of mindfulness and clear connection with body awareness or a purely mental state of fixed concentration in which there is no awareness of the body at all.

No suttas state explicitly that there is sense experience, as we normally understand it, in the jhanas.

However, the suttas put much emphasis on mindfulness of the body as a key feature of the jhanas, emphasizing the integration of breath and whole-body meditation.

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The sutta begins with the exact text of the six contemplations on mindfulness of the body from the Satipatthana Sutta: mindfulness of breathing, the four postures, full awareness of all activities, the constituent parts of the body, the four elements, and the nine contemplations of a decaying corpse.

A new passage is added in this sutta at the end of each contemplation: “As he abides thus diligent, ardent, and resolute, his memories and intentions based on the household life are abandoned; with their abandoning his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness, and concentrated. That is how a monk develops mindfulness of the body.”

A seventh section is then added on jhana, using the standard jhana definition and similes, and concluding with the same phrase “As he abides thus diligent . . . that too is how a monk develops mindfulness of the body.”

The sutta adds that one of the benefits of cultivating mindfulness of the body is the ability to obtain the four jhanas at will.

Thus, **the sutta states explicitly that body awareness is present in jhana**, which is the seventh in an ever subtler progression of practices and insights into the body.

As the mind becomes tranquil and is brought to singleness, rather than losing awareness of the body in jhana, mindfulness of the body is enhanced, as underscored by the jhana similes.

In contrast to the suttas, the Visuddhimagga clearly describes jhana as a state in which body awareness is lost as the mind absorbs into a nimitta, a mental image.

Jhana in the Visuddhimagga is a purely mental state characterized by fixed concentration in which no changing phenomena, including awareness of the physical body, can be experienced.

The mind absorbs into the nimitta and the jhana factors, which is why one cannot do insight practice in Visuddhimagga jhana.

The Visuddhimagga states that when the suttas refer to the body in conjunction with jhana they are referring to a metaphorical ‘mental’ body:

“Now, as to the clause *he feels pleasure with his body* [from the definition of the third jhana, the only place the body is mentioned in the standard formula]: here although in one actually possessed of the third jhana there is no concern about feeling pleasure, nevertheless he would feel the pleasure associated with his mental body, and after emerging from the jhana he would also feel pleasure since his material body would have been affected by the exceedingly superior matter originated by that pleasure associated with the mental body.” Vism IV,175

It is possible to interpret jhana in the Kayagatasati Sutta in this way.

The word ‘kaya’ means group, aggregate, collection, or body, and so could be used to refer to any group or ‘body’, either physical or mental.

However, the Kayagatasati Sutta is clearly about mindfulness of the physical body.

Beginning with the entire first satipatthana on mindfulness of the body - mindfulness of breathing, four postures, all activities, etc.

In the seventh section on jhana, there is no mention that ‘body’ is going to have a new meaning in the following discussion.

It is hard to conceive that the entire sutta would focus on mindfulness of the physical body, and then switch to mindfulness of the ‘mental body’ just in this last section on jhana.

It is unlikely that the Buddha would switch meanings for the word ‘kaya’ without signaling that he is doing so, especially if it is so essential to jhana that kaya *not* mean physical body.

Adding jhana in the Kayagatasati Sutta emphasizes the connection of jhana with mindfulness of the physical body.

So, while some sort of connection with or awareness of the body seems to be indicated in the suttas, the nature of this body awareness is less clear. Perhaps the suttas are referring to a subtler type of body awareness, not accessible through the normal sense apparatus.

**Revisiting the Satipatthana Sutta**

One could argue that samadhi in the Satipattthana Sutta is meant to be a pre-jhana level:

We have seen that the Kayagatasati Sutta begins by presenting all six contemplations in the first foundation of mindfulness from the Satipatthana Sutta.

Jhana is then added to the Kayagatasati Sutta as a seventh contemplation, implying that jhana is an attainment separate from the satipatthana practices and the Satipatthana Sutta is concerned with a level of concentration below jhana. Otherwise, why add jhana as an additional practice?

One answer is that jhana is added here to indicate that jhana is an outcome of the first six practices, as well as to highlight body awareness as a crucial aspect of jhana.

**The Jhana Factors Vitakka-Vicara**

Two ways of interpreting the jhana factor *cittass’ ekaggata* in relation to the practice of jhana.

The mind can become *one-pointed* or *unified*.

Is one-pointedness incompatible with vitakka-vicara.

If we assume that ekaggata means total, unmoving, one-pointed focus on a single object, exclusive of all else, then vitakka and vicara must have a very circumscribed meaning, as nothing more perhaps than an instability in one’s single focus.

During any moments of true one-pointedness it seems that no other mental activity could arise, including vitakka-vicara in any of its usual senses, whether thinking and pondering, or connecting and sustaining the mind on an object.

The mind cannot be simultaneously fixed in one-pointed concentration and engaged in some sort of activity.

Proponents of the Visuddhimagga approach to jhana say that, in fact, vitakka and vicara have functions other than those evident to us in normal sensory consciousness and that they perform these functions in the jhana. Thus, vitakka and vicara can be present in one-pointed concentration while engaged in activity, such as connecting and sustaining.

The sutta simile for the first jhana indicates a certain amount of purposeful movement within the context of the jhana, engaged in spreading the sense of rapture and pleasure throughout the body.

This would seem to indicate that vitakka and vicara are more than a mere unstability or a directly and sustaining the attention on an object, and instead that a certain amount of mental activity is a useful and essential part of the first jhana.

In this case, the second interpretation of ‘one-pointedness’ as unification of mind may correspond better to the canonical descriptions of jhana. If interpreted in this way, we can have a unified mind present along with the mental activity of vitakka-vicara.

1. **The Relationship of Jhana and Insight**

**How Does Insight Lead to Enlightenment?**

Insight is not the ultimate goal in the Pali tradition.

The goal is the attainment of Nibbana, which is typically described as being attained through the destruction of the taints (Pali: āsavas), also called corruptions, intoxicants.

From the night of the Buddha’s enlightenment:

“When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being (this means desiring existence), and from the taint of ignorance. When it was liberated, there came the knowledge: ‘It is liberated.’ I directly knew: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, and what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming into any state of being.’” MN36.38-43

Sometimes a fourth element is added to the list of the taints, the taint of views (which refers to wrong views).

In the traditional Theravada model of enlightenment, the taint of views is destroyed upon attaining Stream Entry; sensual desire is destroyed with the attainment of Non-Returning; being and ignorance are destroyed through Arahantship.

Insight leads to the destruction of the taints.

When one or more of the three characteristics of existence are directly perceived, ignorance is ended as the true nature of experience is realized. The mind lets go of clinging to views, sensual desire and desire for becoming.

Thus, insight is critical in service of the destruction of the taints.

**Are Samadhi and Insight Two Paths or One?**

There is no insight meditation in the suttas. Insight is something you get or attain from doing right samadhi meditation, which uses mindfulness as the vehicle to develop samadhi up to jhana, a state of absorption with profound insight into the nature of the body and mind.

Interpretations vary regarding whether the cultivation of samadhi is an endeavor separate from the development of insight or whether they are two aspects of the same practice.

The Visuddhimagga unambiguously separates meditation practice into two distinct types or paths of development, tranquility and insight.

The path of tranquility focuses exclusively on the attainment of jhana, defined as one-pointed concentration.

The path of insight can be pursued either after attaining jhana or directly, as the path of ‘dry’ insight, in which case samadhi develops in conjunction with the contemplations leading to insight but does not reach the level of jhana.

The path of insight must be a separate endeavor from that of concentration in Visuddhimagga jhana because sense contact is lost as the mind absorbs into fixed concentration, and insight cannot develop until emerging from jhana and reflecting back on what has happened.

Though many of the suttas teach that liberating understanding arises through insight practice, supported by some degree of concentration, the suttas also place much emphasis on samadhi’s important role in the development of insight:

“Bhikkhus, develop concentration. A bhikkhu who is concentrated understands things as they really are. And what does he understand as it really is? He understands as it really is: ‘This is suffering.’ He understands as it really is: ‘This is the origin of suffering.’ He understands as it really is: ‘This is the cessation of suffering.’ He understands as it really is: ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.’” SN56.1

If read without imposing any interpretation on them, the suttas seem to be saying that insight can occur within a jhana:

In the Anupada Sutta (MN111) Sariputta is able to discern and analyze all the various qualities associated with each jhana:

“And the states in the first jhana – the thought, the examination, the rapture, the pleasure, and the unification of mind; the contact, feeling, perception, volition, and mind; the zeal, decision, energy, mindfulness, equanimity, and attention – these states were individually determined/defined by him; known to him those states arose, known they were present, known they disappeared. He understood thus: ‘So indeed, these states, not having been, come into being; having been, they vanish.’ Regarding those states, he abided unattracted, unrepelled, independent, detached, free, dissociated, with a mind rid of barriers . . . in the second jhana . . . in the third jhana . . . and the states in the fourth jhana . . . these states were individually determined/defined by him; known to him those states arose, known they were present, known they disappeared.”

In this way, Sariputta was able to recognize, investigate and develop insight into each of the jhanas.

Similarly, in another sutta, “The destruction of the taints occurs in dependence on the first jhana . . . a monk enters and dwells in the first jhana . . . whatever states are included there comprised by form, feeling, perception, volitional formations or consciousness (the five aggregates): he views those states as impermanent, as suffering . . . as empty, as non-self.” AN9.36

There are suttas suggesting that meditation should be practiced sequentially, developing samadhi until jhana has been achieved and then switching to insight as a separate practice, just as presented in the Visuddhimagga.

On the night of his enlightenment the Buddha practiced jhana meditation before attaining numerous supernormal powers and then directing his mind toward insight into the Four Noble Truths to gain his final great breakthrough into full realization and ultimate liberation:

“I entered upon and abided in the first jhana . . . in the second jhana . . . in the third jhana . . . in the fourth jhana . . . When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability . . . I directed it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints. I directly knew as it actually is: ‘This is suffering’;… ‘This is the origin of suffering’;…’This is the cessation of suffering’;…’This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering’;…’These are the taints’;…’This is the origin of the taints’;…’This is the cessation of the taints’;…This is the way leading to the cessation of the taints’ . . . thus my mind was liberated.” MN36.34-43

This is sometimes cited as evidence in the suttas that, although jhana is a necessary prerequisite for insight, insight meditation is something distinct from, and practiced after jhana meditation.

A further example, that could be interpreted as a sequential style of development, is found in a stock passage recurring numerous times throughout the suttas, where a standard gradual path of practice proceeds

progressively through the threefold division of the eightfold path: morality, concentration and wisdom (DN2 and others).

The meditator develops the four jhanas. Only after mastering jhana does he turn his attention to insight practices as he “inclines his mind towards knowing and seeing.”

But this is not an instruction that one should first attain jhana and then come out of jhana to begin insight practice, only that insight practice begins after the attainment of jhana.

Neither the above passage from the night of the Buddha’s enlightenment nor the standard graduated path of spiritual cultivation say that the meditator comes out of jhana into a lower level of samadhi to practice insight as a distinct form of meditation.

Only that insight practice begins after the attainment of jhana and the iddhis (it also does not say that one has to go through the iddhis before gaining insight into the four noble truths).

We could interpret these formulations either to indicate insight meditation is begun as a separate practice after leaving jhana, or begun based upon and while still in jhana, all depending on how jhana is interpreted and defined.

In the Visuddhimagga you cannot do insight practice while in jhana, so we could construe this passage as meaning this progressive path unfolds first through jhana, and then leaves jhana and shifts to insight meditation as a distinct practice.

In the suttas, since insight can be interpreted to occur at any level of samadhi, including, as we have seen above, jhana, insight is a progression and natural outcome of jhana.

As in the Visuddhimagga, the suttas acknowledge that a person can develop either tranquility or insight separately.

“. . . he who has gained tranquility in himself, but not the higher wisdom of insight into things, should make an effort to establish the one and attain the other . . . he who has gained the higher wisdom of insight into things, but not tranquility in himself, should make an effort to establish the one and attain the other . . . he who has gained neither tranquility in himself nor the higher wisdom of insight into things should put forth intense desire, effort, exertion, impulse, unobstruction, mindfulness and attention for the attainment of those profitable states . . . he who has gained both these things should make an effort to establish those profitable states and further to destroy the taints.” AN4.93

One can develop insight and then tranquility, tranquility and then insight, or both in concert. There is no stipulation that tranquility at the level of jhana must precede vipassana.

They can be developed in either order, but both are necessary in order to attain arahantship:

“[All who attain arahantship] do so in one of four ways . . . [one] develops insight preceded by serenity . . . or [one] develops serenity preceded by insight . . . or [one] develops serenity and insight joined in pairs . . . or [one’s] mind is seized by agitation about the teaching. But there comes a time when his mind becomes internally steadied, composed, unified, and concentrated.” AN4.170

There is not only one way that meditation practice can unfold, but regardless of how it develops, upon reaching its ultimate fruition both tranquility and insight are bound together in balance, which is right concentration:

 “When one knows and sees [things as they actually are] . . . the Noble Eightfold Path comes to fulfillment in him . . . tranquility and insight occur in him yoked evenly together . . . he understands by direct knowledge those things that should be understood by direct knowledge.” MN149.10

We see a theme running throughout the suttas that through right concentration tranquility and insight develop in concert, are practiced together and, thus, synthesized into a unified and complete practice and path.

Jhana in the suttas is not easily separated from insight, each supports the development of the other and both are essentially integrated into one unified practice.

Right samadhi entails integrating a depth of tranquility and insight. Whichever is developed should be retained while strengthening the other:

“Two things partake of supreme knowledge. What two? Tranquility and insight. If tranquility is developed . . . the mind becomes developed . . . [and] all lust is abandoned. If insight is developed . . . wisdom becomes developed . . . [and] all ignorance is abandoned . . . Through the fading away of lust there is liberation of mind; and through the fading away of ignorance there is liberation by wisdom.” AN2.3.10

**Important:** Neither tranquility nor insight unaccompanied by the other constitute right concentration. This is why the development of insight needs to be specifically emphasized if the meditator develops pure tranquility alone. On the other hand, if right concentration is developed then tranquility and insight can arise together.

1. **Is Jhana necessary for Liberating Insight?**

“There is no jhana for one without discernment.

There is no discernment for one without jhana.

One with both jhana and discernment is close to Nibbana.”

Dhammapada 372

There is no consensus on whether or not jhana is necessary to realize the deeper stages of insight.

Perhaps the strongest argument in favor of jhana’s essential role in awakening is that the Noble Eightfold Path defines right concentration as jhana.

The Visuddhimagga acknowledges a path of the “bare insight worker”.

In order to find a similar dry insight path in the suttas, in which the deeper stages of samadhi play no part, we have to look for occasional hints scattered throughout the suttas.

The suttas contain examples of people attaining states of insight and awakening merely upon hearing a dharma talk from the Buddha or another monk.

According to the traditional account, the five ascetics, to whom the Buddha preached his first sermon on the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths, attained at least the first stage of enlightenment, stream-entry, in this way.

All of these possible cases must be weighed against the large number of texts emphasizing the central role jhana plays in achieving the stages of enlightenment.

The suttas are explicit that samadhi, in some measure, is indispensable for attainment of arahantship:

 “Knowledge of the ending of the taints, as it is actually present, occurs to one who is concentrated, I tell you, and not to one who is not concentrated. So concentration is the path, monk. Non-concentration is no path at all.” AN6.64

It is reasonable to assume the Buddha is referring to right concentration here, though that is not stated directly.

 “I declare, O monks, that the destruction of the taints occurs in dependence on the first jhana, the second jhana, the third jhana, the fourth jhana.” AN9.36 and others.

A key question is whether attainment of the first stage of enlightenment requires prior attainment of the jhanas.

There are no suttas that explicitly speak of arahants without jhana, and proficiency in the jhanas is routinely ascribed to the arahants.

Anyone who has ever been enlightened, or who ever will be, has done so through realization of the seven factors of enlightenment, which appears to be tantamount to the four jhanas.

Right concentration of the Eightfold Path is defined as the four jhanas, and the four jhanas are integral to the complete model of monastic progressive training, as mentioned in the preceding section, as well as the threefold higher training:

“There are these three trainings: the training in the higher virtue, the training in the higher mind, and the training in the higher wisdom . . . And what is the training in the higher mind? . . . one enters and dwells in the first jhana . . . the second jhana . . . the third jhana . . . one enters and dwells in the fourth jhana . . . this is the training in the higher mind.” AN3.88

All of these examples seem to indicate that attainment of the jhanas is necessary for arahantship.

Other suttas, though, allow the possibility of arahantship with the attainment of any jhana.

The Jhana Sutta (AN9.36), for example, states that one could attain any one of the four jhanas or lower three immaterial states, and then investigate the essential aspects of that state – form, feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness – in various ways, as impermanent, as suffering, as empty, and as non-self, to name a few.

The destruction of the asavas, and arahantship, follows directly if the meditator remains firm in the investigation.

There are other examples.

The implication is that the suttas describing right concentration and the training in higher mind as entailing the four jhanas should not be taken literally, but that attainment of any *one* of the jhanas is sufficient to attain the highest goal of liberation.

We might hesitate to read the suttas as definitely excluding the possibility of arahantship without jhana, but at the least there is a strong suggestion it is so.

Although jhana may be a necessary condition for enlightenment, it alone is not a sufficient condition. The suttas define four kinds of persons, each of whom attain one of the four jhanas, but rather than freeing the mind they crave for and cling to the jhana experiences, “relishes it, longs for it and finds satisfaction in it.” AN4.123

After passing away each person is reborn in a celestial realm corresponding to his or her particular meditative attainment, and after living in those realms for the duration of a normal lifespan (quite a long time in the deva realms), they are subject to rebirth in lower realms in unfortunate circumstances.

This sutta makes it clear that meditative attainments are not to be sought after for their own sake, and also suggests that attainment of jhana needs to be within the context of the full path, including virtue and discernment, in order to lead to the stage of non-return.

The suttas are conflicting regarding whether or not jhana is necessary to reach the stage of non-returner.

The Mahamalunkyaputta Sutta states clearly that jhana is a necessary condition for, the way leading to, the state of non-returner (strengthening the argument for the necessity of jhana for arahantship, as well) and that attainment of any one of the jhanas or the lower three immaterial attainments, alone is sufficient:

“There is a path to the abandoning of the five lower fetters; that anyone, without coming to that path, to that way, shall know or see or abandon the five lower fetters – that is not possible . . . And what is the path, the way to the abandoning of the five lower fetters? [one] enters upon and abides in the first jhana . . . whatever exists of [the five aggregates] he sees those states as impermanent, as suffering . . . he turns his mind away from those states . . . he attains the destruction of the taints. But if he does not . . . he enters and abides in the second jhana . . . in the third jhana . . . in the fourth jhana . . . the base of infinite space . . . the base of infinite consciousness . . . the base of nothingness . . . this is the path, the way to the abandoning of the five lower fetters.” MN64.7-15

A distinction is made between two types of non-returners, those who, after death, attain final Nibbana with exertion and those who do so without exertion. AN4.169

One attains Nibbana with exertion by contemplating the unattractiveness of the body, repulsiveness of food, discontent with the entire world, impermanence in all formations, and the perception of death.

A non-returner attains Nibbana without exertion by attaining and dwelling in the four jhanas.

 This does not categorically mean that there are some non-returners without access to jhana, though it seems to suggest so since they are contrasted with those who attain Nibbana without exertion through the four jhanas.

The difference between a once-returner and a non-returner is the degree of samadhi developed:

“[one] fully accomplished in virtue but only moderately accomplished in concentration and wisdom . . . with utter destruction of the three fetters and the attenuation of greed, hatred and delusion he becomes a once-returner . . . [one] fully accomplished in virtue and concentration (concentration is defined in a following sutta as the four jhanas) but only moderately accomplished in wisdom . . . with the utter destruction of the five lower fetters he becomes one due to be reborn spontaneously (in a celestial realm) and there attain final Nibbana, without ever returning from that world (he becomes a non-returner).” AN3.85

Nowhere do the suttas tell us clearly either that the jhanas are required for the attainment of stream entry or that they are unnecessary.

The suttas do state categorically that the ‘stream’ is defined as the Noble Eightfold Path, which includes right concentration (jhana): “The Noble Eightfold Path is the stream, that is, right view . . . right concentration . . . One who possesses this Noble Eightfold Path is called a stream-enterer.” SN55.5

This does not necessarily mean that the jhanas are prerequisites for stream-entry.

Anyone possessing the Eightfold Path is a stream-enterer, but others might be so as well.

Stream-entry could be attained well before mastering all aspects of the Eightfold Path, though the Eightfold Path must be incorporated to some degree.

The four factors with which a stream enterer is fully endowed do not include concentration.

The Buddha declared that a person possessing four qualities is a stream-enterer: confirmed confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, along with ‘virtues dear to the noble ones’. SN55.2

Attainment of samadhi to any extent is not mentioned.

Furthermore, in the Sotapattisamyutta the Buddha teaches that a person who is a stream-enterer should make further effort to become concentrated.

A noble disciple who is a stream-enterer, possessing confirmed confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, and virtues dear to the noble ones, should not become complacent and “make further effort for solitude by day and for seclusion at night. When he thus dwells diligently, gladness is born. When he is gladdened, rapture is born . . . the body becomes tranquil . . . [one] experiences happiness. The mind of one who is happy becomes concentrated.” SN55.40

The stream is defined as the Noble Eightfold Path, which includes jhana.

But one can be a stream-enterer and only moderately accomplished in concentration: “[one] fully accomplished in virtue but only moderately accomplished in concentration and wisdom . . . With the utter destruction of the three fetters he becomes a stream-enterer.” AN3.85

In a following sutta, concentration is defined as the four jhanas, so ‘moderately accomplished in concentration’ would mean that the stream-enterer has some experience of jhana, but that jhana is not yet fully mastered.

Alternatively, ‘moderately accomplished in the four jhanas’ might mean that the practitioner has done some work towards attaining jhana, but has not yet reached that goal.