On the relationship of calm and insight

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Both among contemporary scholars of the Pali texts and contemporary practitioners of meditation there exists a certain controversy concerning what are referred to as the practice of calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) meditation. While all – scholars and practitioners alike – are in general agreement about what these two terms refer to, they are not in agreement about the place of these two forms of meditation either in the historical development of Buddhism or in its contemporary practice.

Thus all are agreed that the practice of *samatha* refers to the cultivation of progressive states of calm or concentration (*samādhi*), referred to in the texts as the *jhānas* (usually counted as four) and the 'formless attainments' (*arūpasamāpatti*);[1] while *vipassanā* refers to the cultivation of insight or wisdom (*paññā*) through contemplating the aggregates – or *saṅkhāra*s or *dhammas* – as impermanent, suffering and not self, as phenomena that arise and cease according to a pattern of causal conditioning known as *paṭiccasamuppāda*. The straightforward use of the terms *samatha* and *vipassanā* to refer to these branches of Buddhist meditation is not exactly explicit in the earliest texts, and is only fully spelt out in the para-canonical *Peṭakopadesa* and *Nettippakaraṇa* and the commentaries.[2] Neverthelesss, the basic distinction that the two terms make seems unproblematic in the context of the earliest texts.

Certainly those who have approached the canonical Pali texts employing the tools of modern scholarship have made much of the distinction. The pioneering work that has provided the basic map of the terrain that subsequent scholars have followed in their attempts to provide more detailed surveys is that sketched by La Vallée Poussin and Frauwallner. Both in effect suggest that the Nikāyas provide two accounts of the cause of beings' problems – *dukkha* – and two corresponding accounts of its solution. According to the first account the cause of suffering is 'craving' (*taṇhā*) and the solution is thus to eradicate this craving; this is achieved by progressively subduing the emotions through the practice of the *jhānas* and formless attainments, culminating in the cessation of conceiving and feeling (*saññāvedayitanirodha*). According to the second account the cause of suffering is 'ignorance' (*avijjā*) and the solution is thus to eradicate this ignorance; this is achieved by coming to see things as they truly are through the contemplation of the aggregates as impermanent, suffering and not self, as phenomena that arise and cease according to the pattern of *paṭiccasamuppāda*. In proposing that the Nikāyas provide these two different accounts, both La Vallée Poussin and Frauwallner want to suggest that these two accounts are essentially incompatible, that they reflect opposing conceptions of the Buddhist path. The question that scholars have then tended

[1] The term does not appear to occur in the four primary Nikāyas, but is found in Nidd I and II and Paṭis; in the Nikāyas these attainments are referred to by their individual names.
[2] Cousins 1984.

to ask is, which is the more authentic, which is the method that was taught by the Buddha?

Following La Vallée Poussin and Frauwallner's lead, scholars such as Griffiths, Schmithausen, Bronkhorst, Vetter, Gombrich have elaborated on this theme and filled in some of the details, each in slightly different ways. But there are perhaps two common tendencies. The first is to understand the subsequent Buddhist tradition's systematic accounts of the Buddhist path and meditation – accounts exemplified in works such as Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* and Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* – as revisionist, that is, artificial, scholastic attempts at reconciling the incoherent, muddled and confused traditions of the earliest texts. According to this view, the later tradition, in naively accepting everything in the earlier texts as *buddhavacana*, has had no alternative but to attempt to smooth over real differences and controversies reflected in this earlier material.

The second common tendency of the scholars mentioned above is to see the Buddha as originally teaching a path to nirvana characterized by the practice of the *jhānas* with the aim of stilling the emotions. Some, such as Bronkhorst, argue that the *jhānas* are in fact the Buddha's peculiar innovation and contribution to the tradition of Indian yogic practice. But, the suggestion is, the Buddha's original conception of the path comes to be superseded, to a greater or lesser extent, by a method of reaching awakening that focuses on the attainment of a liberating insight or knowledge, perhaps without the practice of any 'meditation' at all – though it is not always clear what is meant by the English 'meditation' in this context. The scholars mentioned are not in agreement over whether this alternative method is to be seen as a development introduced by the Buddha himself[3] or the result of challenges and influences from beyond Buddhist circles[4] or the innovation of the second or third generations of the Buddha's disciples.[5]

To be sure, there are other more or less scholarly presentations of Theravāda Buddhist meditation, such as King 1980 and Solé-Leris 1986 that take a rather different view of the matter. Both these writers regard the *jhānas* and the practice of *samatha* more generally as something the Buddha straightforwardly inherited from the pre-existing Brahmanical yogic tradition; the Buddha's distinctive contribution is seen as the liberating knowledge that comes as a result of the insight into the way things truly are, and while the *jhānas* may be conducive to the gaining of that insight they are certainly not essential pre-requisites.

Yet the kind of presentation characteristic of King and Solé-Leris has in common with that of the other group of scholars a predisposition to see the history of the development of Buddhist ideas about meditation – at least in the Theravāda tradition – in terms of the gradual rise of *vipassanā* at the expense of *samatha* until the former occupies some sort of position of pre-eminence and the latter is marginalized. King is in fact more careful about what he says. But the suggestion [of one scholar] that 'insight worsted concentration in the Pali canon' seems to imply that by the time the Pali canon was closed the advocates

[3] Vetter 1988, xxxv.
[4] Bronkhorst 1993, 107–08, 128.
[5] Gombrich, 1996, 132.

of insight had unambiguously come out on top. Yet much of this scholarly discussion of early Buddhist meditation is carried on with surprisingly little specific reference to how the later systematic accounts of Buddhist meditation actually present and understand the relationship between *samatha* and *vipassanā*.

Henepola Gunaratana's study published in 1985 is one of the few attempts to present some of the details of this later systematic understanding, though unfortunately, since it was originally written in 1981 – before the publication of the writings of Griffiths, Schmithausen, Bronkhorst, Vetter, and Gombrich – it does not engage with other scholarly discussions. It seems to me that certain details of the later understanding of the relationship of *samatha* and *vipassanā* have not been fully appreciated and in some cases largely overlooked, and that it is therefore worth considering them further with reference to what we find in the earlier sources, especially since the significance of what we find in the earlier sources is not always self-evident. In the present context I can only make one or two general remarks, but am currently in the process of producing a more comprehensive study.

The canonical Abhidhamma texts are often bypassed in the scholarly literature, but I would like to consider the implications of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi's* presentation of the classes of consciousness (*cittūppāda*). The *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* is an exposition of a set of twenty-two triple and one hundred double classifications of mental and physical qualities (*dhammas*). About two thirds of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* is taken up with the exposition of the initial triplet: 'wholesome qualities, unwholesome qualities, undetermined qualities'; the exposition of the remaining triplets is given in a radically abbreviated form.[6] The exposition of qualities that fall into each of these classes is given with reference to a series of collections or sets of qualities that arise simultaneously and are understood as collectively constituting a unified moment of consciousness or *citta*. These collections or sets of qualities are further classified by reference to various characteristics that allow us to distinguish subclasses within the more general classes of 'wholesome', 'unwholesome', and 'undetermined'. Thus within the first and the third classes there are subclasses consisting of sense-sphere collections of qualities, form-sphere collections, formless sphere collections and transcendent collections; the middle class consists only of sense-sphere collections. And within each of these subclasses there are further subclasses, and again within each of those. The number of levels of subclass varies from subclass to subclass, and it is not easy to calculate the total number of subclasses of collections of qualities indicated by the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* – certainly thousands, if not tens or even hundreds of thousands. The later commentarial Abhidhamma chose to work with a reduced basic system of 89 (or sometimes 121) *cittas*. Certainly this reduced system is convenient for grasping the basic structure so the Abhidhamma, but it imposes a certain rigidity on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi's* more fluid, open, an even uncertain presentation of reality.

Each collection of qualities that constitutes an arising of *citta* is analysed in the text by way of what the commentary calls three 'great sections' (*mahā-vāra*): the section that determines *dhammas* (*dhamma-vavatthāna*); the section of

[6] Initial triplet = pp. 9–179; remaining triplets and couplets = pp. 180–264.

groups (*saṃgaha)* or sets (*koṭṭhāsa*), and the section on emptiness (*suññatā*). In the *Dhammasangani* these three great sections are indicated and fully elaborated only in the case of the first class of wholesome *citta* belonging to the sense-sphere.

The initial determination of *dhammas* for the first kind of *citta* begins by simply listing fifty-six *dhammas* as present which are then defined. The fifty-six fall fairly clearly into various groupings some of which the subsequent *koṭṭhāsavāra* makes explicit. Among the groupings distinguished are the qualities that constitute *jhāna* and also *samatha* and *vipassanā.* There can be little doubt what the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* is doing here: it is pointing out that in ordinary wholesome consciousness – the kinds of consciousness that arises in our minds when we are temporarily free of greed, hatred and delusion – the qualities that constitute *jhāna* and *samatha* and *vipassanā* more generally are present in our minds. This is not, I think, because the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* wants to, as it were, 'dumb down' *jhāna* and suggest that in fact any old ordinary wholesome consciousness will do in its place. On the contrary, it is clear, as I shall presently discuss, that the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* puts considerable store by the *jhānas.* Rather the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* is pointing out that the seeds of the peace, calm and clarity are present in certain types of ordinary consciousness. Indeed, were it not so, it would be difficult to see how we could ever cultivate those states. As for the *jhānas*, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* devotes more space to this (24 pages in the PTS edition) than any other general class of consciousness. Over these 24 pages the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* elaborates *jhāna* using both the fourfold and fivefold systems of the Suttanta and Abhidhamma respectively with reference to the eight *kasiṇas*, the eight *abhibhāyatanas*, three (of the ten) *vimokkhas*, the four *brahmavihāras*, and ten kinds of ugliness (*asubha*); and each of these thirty-five types is further elaborated by reference to four types of object, and four modes of progress; and then subsequently to the four dominants (*adhipati*). Since not all variables apply in every case and the text is radically abbreviated it is not easy to calculate precisely how many varieties of *jhāna* consciousness are intended by the text, but the figure I come up with is 14,912. It is also worth noting that the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* presents the four formless attainments as straightforwardly and explicitly as further types of the fourth (but curiously not the fifth?) *jhāna* (Dhs 55–56): the fourth *jhāna* modified so that consciousness has moved beyond conceiving 'form' and is accompanied by the conception of infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, and finally neither conceiving nor non-conceiving. This, of course, is taken up in subsequent accounts of how to attain the formless attainments such as that found in the *Visuddhimagga.*

It is difficult, then, to read the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* as a text that seeks to marginalize the practice of *jhāna.* A further feature of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi's* treatment of *citta* that is significant is the introduction of the notion of 'transcendent' (*lokuttara*) *jhāna.* The notion of *lokuttarajjhāna* makes explicit something that I have argued is in fact already implicit in the Nikāyas,[7] namely that at the time the meditator attains the paths and fruits of stream entry, etc., his mind becomes concentrated in a peaceful, happy state that has precisely the

[7] The clearest evidence is found in connection with the treatment of the *bojjhaṅgas*; see Gethin 1992.

same qualities as *jhāna*, the difference being that in the case of *lokuttarajjhaana* the object of consciousness if the 'unconditioned' (*asaṃkhatadhātu*) or *nibbāna*.

The relationship of transcendent *jhāna* to ordinary *jhāna* is, from the perspective of modern scholarship, problematic. Some might wish to suggest that this is a prime example of a later, somewhat artificial and forced, synthesis of *samatha* and *vipassanā*, of what were in the earliest Buddhist texts quite distinct paths of meditation, involving quite distinct conceptions of 'awakening'. I would prefer to see the presentation of these matters in Buddhist exegetical literature not so much as a revisionist reading that holds together the incompatible and attempts to hide the joins, but rather as an elaboration of a particular vision and understanding of the practice of meditation and 'awakening' that is already articulated quite generally in the Nikāyas.

The *Visuddhimagga* presents the attainment of transcendent *jhāna* in the following way. The meditator's success in watching the rise and fall of *dhammas* is signalled by the fact that he begins to experience directly a world made up not, as he has previously experienced, of substantial beings and objects, put of patterns of events rising and falling, coming into existence, and passing out of existence. A feeling for the meditator's experience at this stage is well evoked by the images (drawn from the earlier texts) that Buddhaghosa gives in this connection: the world is no longer experienced as consisting of things that are lasting and solid but rather as something that vanishes almost as soon as it appears—like dew drops at sunrise, like a bubble on water, like a line drawn on water, like a mustard-seed placed on the point of an awl, like a flash of lightning; things in themselves lack substance and always elude one's grasp—like a mirage, a conjuring trick, a dream, the circle formed by a whirling fire brand, a fairy city, foam, or the trunk of a banana tree (Vism xx 104).

The experience is profoundly peaceful and in fact has the basic characteristics of *jhāna* (although the term is not used). The texts highlight ten qualities: illumination (*obhāsa*), knowledge (*ñāṇa*), joy (*pīti*), tranquillity (*passaddhi*), happiness (*sukha*), commitment (*adhimokkha*), resolve (*paggaha*), alertness (*upaṭṭhāna*), equanimity (*upekkhā*) and, significantly, attachment (*nikanti*). Because of the presence of the last, these ten qualities are collectively referred to as the ten 'defilements of insight' (*vipassanupakkilesa*).[8]

What is being said here is that the mind, being so deeply affected by its experience, grasps at it and takes it for awakening itself. In other words, the meditator may think that he has reached the end of the path and become convinced that he is an arahat at this point, and live with this idea for many years. Only when some experience—like the arising of strong anger or fear—brings home to him or her that this cannot be the case does the meditator move on, returning to his or her practice until the true transcendent *jhāna* of stream-entry, once return, non-return or arahatship is attained and his personality is radically transformed so that he becomes one of the noble persons (*ariya-puggala*).

As the exegetical texts present things, then, there is a broad class of *jhāna*-type states in which the mind becomes peaceful and still by focusing and becoming absorbed in a particular object of concentration. When that object is

[8] Defined and discussed at Vism XX 105–30.

a simple conceptual object, like the *kasiṇas* or the breath or friendliness directed toward all living beings, the mind is stilled temporarily. But when the object of concentration is, in some sense, the nature of 'reality' itself, the *jhāna* state has the transcendent, transforming quality of awakening: the personality is altered permanently. But transcendent *jhāna* is not, as it were, a rabbit drawn from a hat. Its basic qualities are present in and shared with *jhāna* states in general. That is precisely why the practice of the *jhānas* is so conducive to the attainment of awakening.

What I would like to suggest in conclusion is that it is neither *samatha* and the practice of *jhāna* nor *vipassanā* and the gaining of wisdom that should be seen as the Buddha's distinctive contribution to the Indian theories of *yoga* or meditation. That is I believe that the Buddhist tradition drew on pre-existing traditions and techniques of both stilling the mind and seeking liberating knowledge. The genius of the Buddha lies precisely in the bringing and yoking together of these two. There is in at least significant portions of the Nikāyas a broadly consistent and definite theory of meditation practice: the mind should by the use of various meditation practices be brought to a certain kind of deeply peaceful state where certain mental qualities, certain emotions and feelings, such as joy, tranquillity, happiness, mindfulness and equanimity, are accentuated. These qualities, these emotions and feelings, are in the first place the qualities developed by the practice of *jhāna*. But they are also the means to and constituents of awakening (*bojjhaṅga*). The Buddhist contribution to our understanding of what I must call, for want of better word, 'meditation' lies not only in the bringing of the practice of *samatha* and *vipassanā* together, but also in the precision and exhaustiveness of the manner in which Buddhist exegetical literature articulates the Buddhist vision of spiritual practice.

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