The Curious Case of the Formless Attainments

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The Buddha has been depicted most often seated in the bhūmisparśa or the dhammacakkappavattana mudrā, in an image that brings to mind words such as serenity, peaceful repose, relaxed awareness, presence, grace, compassion, and wisdom. These qualities are the mark of his nibbāna, the outcome of a tortuous process he undertook to achieve what is described as freedom from the rounds of birth and death. All of the Buddha’s teachings, in his forty-five years of ministry, emanate from that experience under the Bodhi tree. That these teachings were vast and subtle is borne out by the numerous schools in Buddhism and their canons maintained in Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan languages. As Buddhism disseminated across Asia for well over a thousand years after his passing it also gave rise to a rich commentarial tradition as well as remarkable efforts at translations. Despite the voluminous pedagogical materials, though, there was no doubt that the Buddha’s method was one of practice. Meditation was central to his teaching and the textual materials preserve the skillful devices he used to communicate the complexity of the mind, the deep-rooted nature of delusion and the way to overcome the fundamental cognitive error in our understanding of the nature of reality.

Buddhist meditation is commonly described as a two-stage process, comprising a calming of the mind (samatha) and an analytical component (vipassanā). The former leads to concentration (samādhi) while the latter results in liberating insight (paññā) his Visuddhimagga treatise is so encyclopedic in scope that it is regarded as a general commentary on the Tipiṭaka; Nāṇamoli (2010: xxvii) calls it “the principal non-canonical authority of the Theravāda”. Buddhaghosa rendered invaluable service with this work that finally breaks the fetters that bind a meditator to samsāra. The Theravāda tradition, for instance, respects and highly reveres Ācariya Buddhaghosa for his immense contribution in systematizing commentarial literature. In the particular case of meditation practice, for one main reason: although the path that the meditator traverses en route to nibbāna is described in numerous places in the Suttas, as Gethin (2004) observes: there is precious little that is available as practical instruction. Buddhaghosa refers to the Suttas, Abhidhamma and the commentarial literature that had been developed in Sinhala to compose a comprehensive guide. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Visuddhimagga is popular and in use even today.

Even so, textual material on meditation does present a challenge, especially when it is for academic study, by a non-meditator. He is immediately at a disadvantage, as he has only texts to rely on, in what is essentially a lived experience. The modern scholar’s method of linguistic and textual criticism, while delivering admirable insights into historical and developmental aspects of the teachings, cannot fully plumb the depths of the instructions meant for practice, because in the Indian context there was always reliance on a teacher. Each individual’s experience in meditation practice being unique and subject to his particular conditioning, meditation always was, and still is, practiced under the guidance of a teacher. Strictly speaking, therefore, there really cannot be a general purpose “meditation manual”; there can only be broad, guiding principles. The role of the teacher was invaluable and irreplaceable, because of the numerous perspectives he brought to bear on textual materials by virtue of his own experience. Recognizing this, some modern scholars do study with and cite the interpretations and
instructions of practitioners in order to come to a better-informed conclusion. Largely speaking however, there is an intellectual divide between the scientific approach of the modern scholar and the implicit faith of the practitioner in the texts.

It might be useful for academic study, though, to consider meditation as a living tradition, and complement the analyses of textual criticism with recourse to the experience of practitioners. The Theravāda tradition has three internationally-known meditation traditions: the Mahasi tradition, the method of S. N. Goenka, following his teacher U Ba Khin, and the third being that of Pa-Auk Sayadaw and their approach to practice has been studied by Anālayo (2010). Of these three, only the method followed by Pa-Auk Sayadaw has recourse to the systematic cultivation of the jhāna-states. While the Pāli word jhāna is connected to the Sanskrit dhyāna, it refers to specific states of meditative attainments in Buddhist literature and is often translated as “absorption”. Jhānas comprise two distinct sets, rūpa jhānas and arūpa jhānas, each with four sequential stages. This paper examines the descriptions of the arūpa jhānas, as mentioned in the Visuddhimagga for what, on the face of it, seems like an inconsistency in formulation.

As Nāṇamoli (2010: xxxii) notes, very little is known about Buddhaghosa, despite his rich legacy of commentarial literature and much of what we do know can be construed to be based on legend. Theravāda tradition maintains that while the commentaries themselves were drawn on ancient materials, his work on the Visuddhimagga itself was the result of a “test” administered to him by Mahāvihāra monks, to gauge his capability for the task that they had in mind for him. As such, it is considered to reflect his deep grasp of the Dhamma and his sound knowledge of canonical works. The discovery of the Chinese translation of the Vimuttimagga cast doubt on this tradition which was reinforced by a statement Dhammapāla makes in his commentary, the Visuddhimagga Mahāṭīkā.2

The text itself is arranged around the three trainings of sīla, samādhi and paññā and uses the Abhidhamma method of analysis in its composition. The two processes of samatha and vipassanā are described in great detail. The former leads to samādhi, a state in which the mind dwells calmly and evenly on a given object. The latter is considered to be the quintessential “Buddhist” component of meditation, giving rise to liberating insight and wisdom that leads to nibbāna.

The schema of Theravāda meditation has been critically studied by many scholars, as the texts show some inconsistencies. There has been much discussion, for instance, on what seem to be twin soteriological goals mentioned as the culmination of the two processes of samatha and vipassanā, which are irreconcilable in their definition. Early concerns were raised by Louis de la Vallee Poussin (1936-37)3 and have been dwelt on subsequently by other scholars such as Griffiths (1981) and Gombrich (2006). Within the broad scheme for the path, there have also been questions raised about the discrepancy in the description of the first rūpa jhāna as recorded in Sutta literature and Abhidhamma treatises, notably by Griffiths (1983), Stuart-Fox (1989), and Bucknell (1993).

As mentioned earlier, samatha is a practice of developing concentration as a result of which the mind dwells with single-pointed focus on a given object; vipassanā leads to insight that results in experiential knowledge of things as they are (yathābhūta nāṇa dassanam). In the cultivation of samatha, the Visuddhimagga gives a detailed explanation of forty meditation objects, their suitability for persons of different types and the method of using them to cultivate practice.4 He develops the meditation with the earth kasiṇa to

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1 See Nāṇamoli (2010:xxiii-xliv) for a survey of biographical material on Buddhaghosa.
2 Ehara, N.R.M., Soma Thera, Kheminda Thera (trans), The Path of Freedom by the Arahant Upatissa. Ceylon: Roland Weerasuria, 1961, p. xxxvi. See also Analayo (2010), n. 21
elaborate on cultivation of samādhi, the pinnacle of which is reflected in the attainments known as jhānas and the four formless attainments. Beyond these, there is also an attainment known as nirodha samāpatti, which is described as the enjoyment of nibbāna here and now, but only attainable by an arhat and an anāgāmin.5

The jhānas are mentioned in a fairly standard manner in Sutta literature and Buddhaghosa follows the same pattern:

1. “Quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unprofitable things, he enters upon and dwells in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with happiness and bliss born of seclusion.”6
2. “With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, he enters upon and dwells in the second jhāna, which has internal confidence and singleness of mind without applied thought, without sustained thought with happiness and bliss born of concentration.”7
3. “With the fading away as well of happiness as well he dwells in equanimity, and mindful and fully aware, he feels bliss with his body; he enters upon and dwells in the third jhāna, on account of which the Noble Ones announce: ‘He dwells in bliss who has equanimity and is mindful.’”8
4. “With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief he enters upon and dwells in the fourth jhāna, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and has purity of mindfulness due to equanimity.”9

Rūpa jhānas are so called because of the dependency of the attainment on an object with material form and a meditator who attains to these jhānas is reborn in the form realm.

Buddhaghosa states that the meaning of “quite secluded from sense desires, secluded from unprofitable things...” in the attainment of the first jhāna refers to the suppression of five hindrances of desire for objects of the five senses (kāmacchanda), and that of ill-will (byāpāda), sloth and torpor (thīnamiddhā), restlessness and worry (uddhacca-kukkucca), and doubt (vicikicchā) respectively. These hindrances must be abandoned as they obstruct or are incompatible with the five jhāna factors, namely applied thought (vitakka), sustained thought (vicūra), happiness (pīti), bliss (sukha)10 and unification of mind ( cittassa ekākkīgata). He quotes from the Peṭakopadesa to show the correlation between the hindrances and the five jhāna factors as follows: “Concentration is incompatible with lust, happiness with ill-will, applied thought with stiffness and torpor, bliss with agitation and worry, and sustained thought with uncertainty.”11

Notably, however, it is not just the hindrances which are overcome. As the meditator progresses with cultivating samādhi, he also stills or surmounts the grosser of

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6 Nāṇamoḷi (2010, IV:79).
7 Ibid. IV:140.
8 Ibid. IV: 153
9 Ibid. IV: 183
The Pāli (from the Romanized version, Āṭṭhakathā Series, 51, 2008) reads:
First jhāna: Vivicc’eva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkaṁ savicūraṁ vivekajāṁ pītisukhaṁ paṭissamaññā jhānaṁ upasampajja viharati.
Second jhāna: Vitakkavicūraṁ vūpasamā ajjhattattā sampasādanaṁ cetaso ekodibbāvaṁ avitakkaṁ avicūraṁ samādhiyaṁ pītisukhaṁ duttiyaṁ jhānaṁ upasampajja viharati.
Third jhāna: Pūnā ca virāgā upekkhako ca viharati sato ca sampajjāno sukhañca kāyeṇa paṭissāvavedeti, yañgam tam ariyā ācikkhanti upekkhako satimā sukhatvāhī ti tatthi vajānaṁ jhānāṁ upasampajja viharati.
Fourth jhāna: Sukhassa ca pāhānā dukkhasa ca pāhānā pubb’eva somanassadomanassānaṁ atthagaṁā adukkhamasukhaṁ upekkhiṇisatiḥpūraṁ upekkhīsattātiḥ upekkhīsasampajja viharati.
10 In modern translation pīti is generally translated as zest and sukha as happiness. However, as Nāṇamoḷi translates pīti as happiness and sukha as bliss, that is the version used here.
11 Nāṇamoḷi (2010, IV:86)
the jhāna factors as he seeks to develop more refined mental states. In the attainment of the second jhāna, therefore, vitakka and vicāra are abandoned and the state is defined by happiness, bliss, and singleness of mind. The Visuddhimagga also mentions that with the abandoning of vitakka and vicāra, the meditator’s mind is suffused with internal confidence (sampasādanam), a more tranquil version of faith. The reason it is called internal confidence is to distinguish it from the preliminary level of faith present in the first jhāna, which is disturbed by the mental activity of vitakka and vicāra. To attain the third jhāna, he abandons pīti and we find there is a mention of three mental concomitants that do not comprise the jhāna factors. These are equanimity (upekkhā), mindfulness (sati) and full awareness or clear comprehension (sampajañña). The fourth jhāna is marked by equanimity and a feeling of neither pain-nor-pleasure.

Beyond these form-sphere jhānas lie the arūpas, as they are referred to in the Suttas. Unlike the rūpa jhānas which are numerically designated, these attainments are described by the names of their objective spheres (āyatanāni). There are four: the sphere of infinite space (ākāśaṁcāyatana), the sphere of infinite consciousness (viññānaṁcāyatana), the sphere of nothingness (ākiñcāṇāyatana) and the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception (nevasaṁnāsaṁnāyatana). They possess the same factors as the fourth rūpa jhāna, i.e. equanimity and the feeling of neither pain-nor-pleasure. However, they are arūpa because the meditator now wishes to abandon the material sphere: “...one who wants firstly to develop the base consisting of boundless space sees in gross physical matter danger through the wielding of sticks etc., because of the words: ‘It is in virtue of matter that wielding of sticks, wielding of knives, quarrels, brawls and disputes take place; but that does not happen at all in the immaterial state,’ ...”

We know from the Āriyapariyesana Sutta13 that the Buddha attained the third and fourth formless attainments when he trained with two masters, Āḷāra Kāḷāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, before striking off on his own. However, he had rejected these attainments as they did not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to Awakening, nor to Unbinding.14 Instead, they led to reappearance in the dimension of nothingness and the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception.

Just as in the case of the rūpa jhānas the formless attainments are also recorded in more or less standard terms, which Buddhaghosa follows (given below) but there is a marked difference in the manner in which the meditator progresses through this series, as we will see.

- “With the complete surmounting (samatikkama) of perceptions of matter, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, with non-attention to perceptions of variety, [aware of] ‘unbounded space,’ he enters upon and dwells in the base consisting of boundless space”15
- “By completely surmounting (samatikkama) the base consisting of boundless space, [aware of] ‘unbounded consciousness,’ he enters upon and dwells in the base consisting of boundless consciousness.”16
- “By completely surmounting the base consisting of boundless consciousness, [aware that] ‘There is nothing,’ he enters upon and dwells in the base consisting of nothingness”17

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12 Ibid. X:1.
13 M i 160
14 Ibid. nāyam dhammo nibbidāya na virāgāya na nirodhāya na upasamāya na abhiññāya na sambodhāya na nibbānāya sañvattati, yāvedeva ākiñcaññāyatanuppattiyo; and further: ... yāvedeva nevasaṁnānaṁsaṁnāyatanūpapattiyo
15 Nānamoli (2010, IX:12)
16 Ibid. IX:27
• “By completely surmounting the base consisting of nothingness he enters upon and dwells in the base consisting of neither perception nor non-perception”.

The distinction between the rūpa jhānas and the formless attainments is made in the following aspects:

• The nature of the object: in the rūpa jhānas the object remains the same through all four. In the case of the formless attainments, however, the meditator progressively moves from a gross object to a more and more refined one.

• The meditator abandons the gross jhāna factors as he progresses through the rūpa jhāna. However, the formless attainments have the same factors present as the fourth jhāna.

• The verbs used to describe the attainments are markedly different: enter into (upasampajjati) and dwell or abide (viharati) are used for both, form-sphere and formless attainments; however, in the case of the formless attainments we find, additionally, the term “surmounts” (samatikkama) used in the context of going beyond, overcoming.

• The nature of the attainment: the rūpa jhānas are marked by the attenuation of the hindrances, purification of mindfulness and development of equanimity. The formless attainments are concerned with more subtle activity of perception and consciousness itself and the Sallekha Sutta mentions them as peaceful abidings.

In the Visuddhimagga, Buddhaghosa describes the manner in which the formless attainments are to be cultivated as follows:

• Ākāsānañcāyatana: “He adverts again and again to the sign of space left by the removal of the kasiṇa as “space, space,” and strikes at it with thought and applied thought. As he strikes adverts to it again and again and strikes at it with thought and applied thought, the hindrances are suppressed, mindfulness is established and his mind becomes concentrated in access.

• Viññānañcāyatana: “He should give it attention, review it and strike at it with applied and sustained thought.”

• Ākiñcañcāyatana: “Without giving [further] attention to that consciousness, he should [now] advert again and again in this way, “there is not, there is not,” or “void, void,” or “secluded, secluded,” and give his attention to it, review it, and strike at it with thought and applied thought.”

• Nevasaññāsaññāyatana: “He should advert again and again to that attachment of the base consisting of nothingness that has occurred making non-existence its object.

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17 Ibid. IX:36
18 Ibid. IX:36
19 Gunaratana (2002: 93) explains that “The factors in each higher attainment are subtler than those in its predecessors, more peaceful and more sublime, but they do not differ in number or in their essential nature.”
20 M i 40.
22 Ibid. X: 25. The Pāli reads (as above, p. 325):…punappuṇaṁ āva-jitabbaṁ manasiñcātabbaṁ paccavekkhitabbaṁ takkāhaṁ viññāhaṁ kātābbaṁ.
23 Ibid. X:33. The Pāli reads (as above, p. 327): Taṁ viññāhaṁ anāṁsaṁkāritvā “nāthi nāthi” ti vā “sūṇaṁ sūṇaṁ” ti vā “vivittāṁ vivittan” ti vā punappuṇaṁ āvajjatābbaṁ, manasiñcātabbaṁ, paccavekkhitabbaṁ, takkāhaṁ viññāhaṁ kātābbaṁ.
adverting to it as “peaceful, peaceful.” And he should give his attention to it, review it and strike at it with thought and applied thought.”

The point to be noted in these explanations is that they mention the meditator strikes at the object with thought (takka) and applied thought (vitakka). This appears strange because it is inconsistent with the descriptions we have seen earlier, of the cultivation of rūpa jhānas. For one, the faculties of applied thought (vitakka) and sustained thought (vicāra) are very clearly abandoned in the cultivation of the second rūpa jhāna. Here we find the mention of takka and vitakka, but to the extent that they refer to the mental activity of thought, it is still a point to be noted. Secondly, we have seen that the attainments, both in the form sphere and the formless sphere, are sequentially cultivated. We also know that the fourth rūpa jhāna is identical to the formless attainments in terms of mental factors present. It is therefore not clear how takka and vitakka are available to the meditator, that too in all four of the formless attainments.

The term vitakka is etymologically linked to takka and the editors of the PED observe that in earlier works, vitakka and vicāra were used to denote emphatic thinking; that they were distinguished as two separate terms as the study of terminology advanced in the Sangha. Generally, vitakka is mentioned in a pair, with vicāra, as it is in the description of the attainment of the second rūpa jhāna. Both these are classified as cetasika in the Abhidhamma, in the occasional (pākiṇṇaka) category of the ethically variable factors (aññasamānacetasika). This means that by themselves, these two factors are neither wholesome (kusala) nor unwholesome (akusala); their moral quality is determined by the presence of other cetasikas in that moment of citta, particularly the presence (or absence) of the three roots of greed (lobha), hatred (dosa) and delusion (moha).

In the Visuddhimagga, Buddhaghosa describes these two factors at length. Using the Abhidhamma method of delineating the characteristic (lakkhaṇa), function (rasa), manifestation (paccupaṭṭhāna) and proximate cause (padaṭṭhāna), he explains them as follows, in Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Manifestation</th>
<th>Proximate Cause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vitakka</td>
<td>Directing the mind to the object</td>
<td>Strike and thresh at the object</td>
<td>Not mentioned, but can be assumed to be the object of meditation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(ārammane citassa abhiniropana)</td>
<td>(ūhana, connected with āhananā'pariyahanana)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicāra</td>
<td>Continued pressure on the object</td>
<td>To keep conscious mental states</td>
<td>As above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(occupation with) the object</td>
<td>anchored on the object.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(āramman’ānumajjana)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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²⁴ Ibid. X.40. The Pāli (as above, p. reads:...manasikaritvā “sāva abhāvaṃ ārammanaṃ katvā pavattiḥ ākīrṇaṃ aññasamānacetasikā ātassā sanāt” ti punappunarāvajjītabbā, manasikātabbā, paccavekkhitabbā, takkāhatā vitakkāhatā kātabbā.
²⁵ PED (1924) Vol. 7, p. 620
²⁶ ṇānāmoḷi (2010, IV.88-92)
The difference between these two mental factors is explained using numerous similes, in Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vitakka</th>
<th>Vicāra</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Striking a bell</td>
<td>Ringing a bell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bee diving towards a lotus</td>
<td>Bee hovering over the lotus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bird flapping its wings as it is about to fly</td>
<td>Bird gliding through the air</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hand that grips a dish</td>
<td>Hand that rubs it with powder, oil and woollen pad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting hand of potter after he spins the wheel with a stroke of his stick</td>
<td>The hand that moves back and forth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pin that stays fixed in the centre while drawing a circle</td>
<td>Pin that revolves around it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These similes make it clear that vitakka is an initial response to the object, an “interference of consciousness” while vicāra is a “more quiet, being near non-interference of consciousness”.

In the attainment of the second rūpa jhāṇa, we find there is emphasis on the fact that it is free from both vitakka and vicāra:

- “With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, he enters upon and dwells in the second jhāṇa, which has internal confidence and singleness of mind without applied thought, without sustained thought with happiness and bliss born of concentration…”

Buddhaghosa explains that the presence of applied and sustained thought in the first jhāṇa hinders full development of internal confidence (ajjhattaṁ sampāḍanaṁ), like “water which is ruffled by ripples and wavelets.” He then goes on to explain the repetition of terms (underlined above) with regard to applied thought and sustained thought as follows:

- The first phrase refers to the fact that after the first jhāṇa, the subsequent ones are attained by surmounting gross factors.
- It also clarifies that internal confidence and singleness of mind come about with the stilling of applied and sustained thought and not just their absence.
- The second phrase explains that the second jhāṇa is without these two factors.

In the context of such detailed and precise explanation of terminologies, it is difficult to explain why the formless attainments have the factors of thought and applied thought available to the meditator.

The Visuddhimagga Mahāṭīkā (Paramatthamaṇjūṣā) makes no comment on this aspect. When takka and vitakka are mentioned, they appear in the Pathavīkasiṇiddesavaṇṇanaṁ and not in the Āruppanīddesavaṇṇanaṁ, as would have been expected. As such, it does not help in resolving this riddle. Gunaratana’s study of the jhāṇas is exhaustive in its scope and although the aspect under consideration in this paper is recorded for the spheres of infinite space and of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, he does not offer any explanatory comment. This is also the case with a more recent

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27Ibid. IV:89.
28 Vitakka-vicāraṁ vūpasamā ajjhāṭṭaṁ sampāḍanaṁ cetaso ekodi-bhāvaṁ avitakkaṁ avicāraṁ, saṁādhijāṁ-pūṭi-sukhaṁ dutiyaṁ jhānaṁ upasampajja viharati.
29 Nāṇamoḷi (2010, IV:144)
30 Vsm-mht, p. 147. Takkāhaṁ vitakkaṁ takkanato, savisesaṁ takkanato ca “takko, vitakko”ti ca evaṁ laddhanāmena bhāvanācittasaṁpayaṁ itena sammiriṁkappena āhananaparīhānanakkiccena aparāparāṁ vattamāṇena kammaṭṭhasaṁ itaṁ vai, pariyāhataṁ kātabbāṁ, balappattavitakko manasikāro bhuḷuṁ pavattetabboti attho.
study by Shaw (2006:177) who mentions this aspect of adverting to the object in the
description of the attainment of the sphere of infinite space.

In order to look for a possible explanation, we would need access to the sources
Buddhaghosa used for his compilation. It has been mentioned earlier that there is reason
to believe Buddhaghosa was familiar with the Vimuttimagga, based on a comment
Dhammapala makes in his Visuddhimagga Mahāṭikā.32 The Vimuttimagga does not
contain any reference to takka or vitakka in the cultivation of the formless attainments
and hence could not have been his source for this particular formulation of the practice.
Another possible explanation could be that the formless attainments were quite a different
series altogether, as suggested by Norman (1990), although in the context of another
issue.33 If that possibility is extended to the issue under consideration in this paper, it
implies that the method of instruction by the Buddha’s teachers, Āḷāra Kāḷāma and
Uddaka Rāmaputta did not envisage a graduated development from the rūpa jhāna
through to the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; that this was a later
development as the formless attainments were absorbed into the Buddhist path. It would
also imply that the method was preserved in the old commentaries, which comprised the
corpus of materials Buddhaghosa worked on. Needless to say, this can only remain a
hypothesis, as the materials Buddhaghosa used are not available to us for investigating
this further.

At this point, it would also be useful to study the experience of meditation
practitioners, in an attempt to find correlation between theory and practice. Since the
method taught by Pa-Auk Sayadaw is the only tradition that systematically teaches
attainment of jhānas and the formless attainments, a reference to his writing would be
useful. In a collection of lectures which have been published,34 the Sayadaw describes the
formless attainments largely as a process of observing the inherent dangers of the earlier
meditative attainment because of its proximity to the next earlier one; he also reflects on
the more peaceful abiding that characterizes the attainment sought to be cultivated. He
makes no mention of striking at the object with thought and applied thought in the
process of cultivating the formless attainments. Two senior disciples of the Sayadaw were
interviewed and they gave somewhat different answers to the query.

One was emphatic in stating that it is not possible for vitakka or vicāra to be
present in the formless states, as these states are highly subtle and the factors too coarse.
In his opinion, should either of the factors indeed arise in the higher jhānas, the meditator
would experience them as physical pain. In response to the query as to what brings the
mind to the object and retains it there once the two factors have been abandoned, he said
it was cetanā and manasikāra, two cetasikas which are classified as universals as they are
present in all cittas. The second respondent stated vitakka was present in the cultivation of
the formless attainments, but it was qualitatively different from the one that marks the
attainment of the first jhāna and is stilled in the attainment of the second.

In the Suttas, we find vitakka is also mentioned in contexts other than the
attainment of factor. For instance, in the Dvedhāvitakka Sutta35 the Buddha describes
how, in his practice leading to enlightenment, he divided his thoughts into the two
categories unwholesome (akusala) and wholesome (kusala). The former were marked by

32 See note 2 above.
33 In this case, Norman refers to the record of the Buddha recalling his boyhood experience of the first jhāna, which
then leads him to stop the severe austerities he was practicing and to adopt a more peaceful method, during the process
of which he cultivates the four rūpa jhānas. However, we also know that before embarking on the period of austerities,
he had trained with two masters, Āḷāra Kāḷāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, with whom he had cultivated the spheres of
nothingness and of neither-perception-nor-non-perception respectively. Given that in all textual sources, the formless
attainments are preceded by the rūpa jhānas, the boyhood story seems strange.
34 Knowing and Seeing, revised edition.
35 Mi 114.
the feelings of sense gratification, ill-will and for causing harm. These he suppressed and dispelled, as pondering over them makes the pattern habitual in a man. He then explains the virtues of kusala vitakka, marked by renunciation, absence of ill-will and without any desire to cause harm. It is by reflecting and nurturing these thoughts, when he found mindfulness was established and his body was calm. In this description, the term vitakka is used in the context of thought, as we understand it. By nurturing wholesome thoughts, he had attained to the preliminary requisites for cultivating jhāna.

In the Cuḷavedalla Sutta, Bhikkhuni Dhammadinnā describes both vitakka and vicāra as “vācisaṅkhāra” i.e. activities of speech. She then goes on to explain that having first directed one’s thought, and made an evaluation, one breaks out into speech. In the Rahogata Sutta the Buddha states that speech ceases in the first jhāna. From these two particular accounts we can conclude that vitakka and vicāra refer to the thought process and ideation that precedes speech and that in the attainment of the first jhāna, there is some attenuation of these factors, making them more quiescent, in what must be a result of the concentration developed. At this stage, they perform the function particular to this jhāna, of keeping the mind fixed on the object, in an awareness that is devoid of “thought” as we understand it in the modern context. This is why some translators prefer to use initial and sustained application for these two factors.

As we can see from the two examples above, there is a subtle shift in the meaning of vitakka as it has been used. An even more remarkable shift is mentioned in the Mahā Cattārisaka Sutta where the Buddha explains components of the Noble Eightfold Path in terms of sāsava and anāsava. The term āsava is defined as that which flows (out or on to) and in terms of psychology, to certain kinds of ideas that intoxicate the mind. By extension, sāsava is connected with āsavas and anāsava connotes freedom from them, which is the case of an arhat. Thus, the sāsava expression of each component leads to accumulation of merit (puṇṇabhāgiya) but also lead to acquisitions of “becoming” (upadhivepakka). This is the mundane (lokiya) path the practitioner embarks on, concerned with the five aggregates of clinging. In contrast, the anāsava expression is a factor of the supramundane path (lokuttaramagga). In this Sutta, we find takka and vitakka used as synonyms of right intention (sāmmāsankappa) on the supramundane Path.

Cousins (1992), in his study of vitakka and vicāra, notes that the complete mnemonic register for vitakka in the Dhammasaṅgaṇī is found in the Mahā Cattārisaka Sutta. He discusses the possibility therefore, that this sutta is the source of this register. In the process, however, he fails to note a few points. Firstly, the register in the Dhammasaṅgaṇī has sāmmā sankappa as its seventh item, which leads him to examine a development from gross to more refined as the list progresses from takka to sāmmā sankappa. In the case of the sutta, however, the seventh item is vacīsaṅkhāra, which takes us to Bhikkhuni Dhammadinnā’s explanation mentioned above, where vitakka and vicāra have a decidedly gross nature. Secondly, the Dhammasaṅgaṇī list is for vitakka whereas in the sutta, the list defines sāmmā sankappa. Most importantly, however, he fails to note that in the sutta, the list pertains to factors of the supramundane path and it is this aspect that has considerable implications for what vitakka might mean in this context.

36 M i 292
37 vitakketvā vicāretvā pacchā vācaṃ bhindati.
38 S iv 216
39 pathamaṃ jhānaṃ samāpannassa vacā niruddhā hoti
40 M iii 71
41 PED, p.115.
42 Katamo ca bhikkhave, sāmmāsankappo ariyo anāsavo lokuttaro maggaṅgo: yo kho bhikkhave, ariyacittassa anāsavo cittaṃ bhāvayato takko vitakko sankappo appaṇā vyappaṇā cetaso abhiniropanaṃ vacīsāṅkhāro. Āyaṃ bhikkhave, sāmmāsankappo ariyo anāsavo lokuttaro maggaṅgo.
To examine the Sutta further, it is useful to bear in mind the two kinds of wisdom that arise as a result of the two paths. When a practitioner interested in developing serenity embarks on spiritual practice, he strives to establish mindfulness and cultivate the components of the eightfold path, using one from among the various meditation objects. As he overcomes the hindrances and attains to higher levels of concentration, his progress is marked by continuous unification of mind as it withdraws from its discursive tendency. Using this concentration, he embarks upon insight meditation. A practitioner who chooses to cultivate insight, without developing serenity first, goes straight on to analysis of the aggregates. As a result of this exercise, insight wisdom arises, enabling him to see that the aggregates are marked by impermanence, suffering and non-self. This is knowledge of the mundane world (lokiya) and while it rids him of the notion of individuality, it does not result in the eradication of defilements, which is truly his end goal. For that to occur, his practice has to mature fully and stabilize, culminating in what is described as the development of the supramundane (lokuttara) path, where he now has nibbāna as his object. This path is no longer concerned with the five aggregates and refers only to nibbāna and the four paths and fruits of stream-entry, once-returner, non-returner and arhat. It is the final stretch of the journey undertaken and the wisdom that arises on this path leads to nibbāna, removing defilements from the root. The supramundane path transformative at the level of perception and experience; any factors operating on this path would have to be extremely subtle and refined versions, if at all, of the factors that operate on the mundane path.

In the light of the above discussion, we have two possible explanations for the curious use Buddhaghosa makes of the terms takka and vitakka in formless attainments. The guiding principle behind them is inspired by Schmithausen (1981):

“...I presuppose that the texts I make use of are to be taken seriously, in the sense that one has to accept that they mean what they say, and that what they mean is generally reasonable within its own terms. I do not think it justified to make the general assumption that a text or an idea must be inexact or vague merely because it is a religious and not a philosophical one... when there are instances of incoherence, they will have to be taken seriously and will need to be explained (e.g. by reference to textual history...).”

First, the Mahā Cattārisaka Sutta usage of vitakka in the lokuttara context implies a meaning that must be quite different from the ones commonly encountered through the Suttas, where it used either as thought or as a factor of jhāna. The reference must be to a manifestation that is more quiescent, definitely far removed from speech and ideation. While the formless attainments certainly do not constitute the supramundane path, they do refer to states of extreme withdrawal from sense perceptions. It is possible that there is a subtle version of factor we understand as vitakka that is operative at this stage of samādhi as well. If it is so, then it would also tie up with the two different responses that were received from the practitioners of the Pa-Auk Sayadaw method.

The second possibility is, however, more likely. Bearing in mind that the Buddha cultivated the formless attainments at the very beginning of his spiritual journey, the record of their development would, therefore, comprise very early materials in the canon. This suggests two plausible explanations for the issue at hand. First, as tradition maintains that the Buddha rejected these attainments as they did not lead to dispassion and release, it is likely that these records did not receive the same kind of reverential attention for their preservation as his teachings did. The inconsistency we find in Buddhaghosa’s work may

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43 Ānāmoli (2010) Chapter XXIII.2
reflect inaccuracy or corruption in the materials he worked with. Secondly, we can extend the reasoning Rhys-Davids and Stede used in the PED to explain the virtual synonymity of vitakka and vicāra in early materials to this instance as well. The materials Buddhaghosa had at his disposal on this particular matter may reflect a time when the Sangha had not yet begun the delineation of various categories of experience into well-defined matrices that make up the Abhidhamma. At that time, terminology was probably more fluid and lacking in the precision which we find in later work. In addition, with the formless attainments being part of an early “non-Buddhist” experience, they may have inherited descriptive terminologies that they did not wish to alter, leading Buddhaghosa to describe the method of adverting to the object with “thought and applied thought”.

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Abbreviations used:

Pāli texts refer to are the editions of the Pāli Text Society, by volume number and page.

M: Majjhima Nikāya
S: Samyutta Nikāya
Vsm-mhṭ: Visuddhimagga Mahāṭīkā

Bibliography


