

Jhāna and the Path to Liberation:

Early Buddhist Texts and Later Theravāda Interpretations

by Timothy Jones

Student number: 2406208

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Ancient Religions

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

September 2026

Word count: 16,303

Abstract

This dissertation examines how jhāna has been understood, systematised and reinterpreted from its presentation in the Pāli Nikāyas through later Theravāda literature and modern meditation traditions. It investigates how differing accounts of jhāna's experiential depth shape interpretations of its relationship with insight and its importance for liberation.

Using comparative textual analysis, the study surveys selected early Buddhist discourses, Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*, and Burmese meditation traditions associated with Ledi, Mahāṣī and Pa-Auk Sayadaw. It then considers the contrasting teachings of Ajahn Brahm and Leigh Brasington alongside scholarly debates involving Keren Arbel and Bhikkhu Anālayo. Particular attention is given to the relationship between concentration and insight and the textual and experiential authorities invoked by different interpreters.

The study argues that the persistence of the canonical fourfold formula coexists with substantial changes in its conceptual and practical interpretation. The Nikāyas situate jhāna within a wider path of ethical discipline, mindfulness and wisdom, while the *Visuddhimagga* develops a more elaborate framework for its cultivation. Modern traditions offer competing accounts of the concentration required for insight, and contemporary debates concern both the characteristics of jhānic experience and its liberative function.

The dissertation concludes that meditative depth alone should not be equated with liberating wisdom, although jhāna retains a prominent position within the Buddhist path. Questions about its role in liberation require clarifying what jhāna denotes within the tradition under discussion. Its history consequently reveals how textual continuity might sustain diverse interpretations of Buddhist meditation.

Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

Declaration Form

1. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Name: **Timothy David Jones**

Date: **30/09/2026 (30th September 2026)**

2. This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MA - Ancient Religions

Name: **Timothy David Jones**

Date: **30/09/2026 (30th September 2026)**

3. This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references.

A bibliography is appended.

Name: **Timothy David Jones**

Date: **30/09/2026 (30th September 2026)**

4. I hereby give consent for my dissertation, if accepted, to be available for photocopying, inter- library loan, and for deposit in the University's digital repository

Name: **Timothy David Jones**

Date: **30/09/2026 (30th September 2026)**

Supervisor's Declaration.

I am satisfied that this work is the result of the student's own efforts.

Signed: ...M. Cobb.....

Date: ...30/9/2026.....

Contents

Introduction – p. 5

Part 1

Chapter 1: Pali canon descriptions – p. 10

Chapter 2: Jhāna in the Gradual Training – p. 13

Chapter 3: The four Jhāna states – p. 18

Chapter 4: Jhāna as Right Concentration – p. 21

Chapter 5: The Arūpa Attainments/Jhāna – p. 24

Part 1 Summary – p. 28

Part 2

Chapter 6: Buddhaghosa, the *Visuddhimagga*, and the Systematisation of Jhāna – p. 29

Chapter 7: Burmese Vipassanā: Ledi, Mahāsī, and Pa-Auk Sayadaw – p. 35

Chapter 8: Modern Debates (What is Jhāna, and is it Liberative?) – p. 42

Conclusion – p. 51

Bibliography – p. 54

Introduction

Jhāna meditation occupies both a prominent and contested position within Buddhist meditation. In the Pāli Nikāyas, the four jhānas appear repeatedly within descriptions of the Buddhist path, are closely associated with sammā-samādhi or right concentration, and feature in important accounts of the Buddha's own progress towards awakening¹. At first sight, this recurring formula might suggest a relatively stable and easily definable practice. Yet the subsequent history of Buddhist meditation presents a considerably more complicated picture. Later Theravāda literature developed increasingly detailed explanations of how jhāna is cultivated and what degree of concentration it entails, while modern meditation traditions have produced strikingly different interpretations of both its experiential features and its necessity for liberation². Contemporary teachers using the same term may describe states ranging from relatively accessible forms of concentrated joy and tranquillity to profound absorptions in which ordinary sensory experience and discursive thought are held to cease altogether³. The role assigned to these states also differs considerably. Jhāna may be presented as an optional support for insight, as an indispensable foundation for it, or, in some recent scholarly interpretations, as itself an integral manifestation of the process conventionally identified as insight⁴. The difficulty is therefore not simply determining whether jhāna is important within Buddhism. Its importance in many early Buddhist accounts is difficult to dispute. The more significant questions concern what precisely is meant by jhāna, how its interpretation has changed, and what role it is thought to play in the attainment of liberating knowledge.

This work examines the historical and interpretative development of jhāna from its presentation in selected early Buddhist texts through later Theravāda systematisation and into modern meditation traditions. The central question this research aims to answer is: How has jhāna been understood, systematised and reinterpreted from its presentation in the early Buddhist texts through later Theravāda and contemporary meditation traditions, particularly in relation to its experiential depth and its role in insight and liberation? Three subsidiary questions guide this

¹ Rupert Gethin, 'The Jhānas in the Buddhist Path to Liberation: The Theravāda Perspective', in *Meditación y contemplación: Caminos hacia la paz (Budismo Theravada y mística teresiana): Meditation and Contemplation: Pathways to Peace (Theravada Buddhism and Teresian Mysticism)*, ed. by Francisco Javier Sancho Fermín (Grupo Editorial Fonte, 2019), pp. 177–206 (pp. 180–181).

² Gethin, 'The Jhānas in the Buddhist Path to Liberation' in *Meditación y contemplación*, ed. by Sancho Fermín, pp. 184–90; Terje Sparby and Matthew D. Sacchet, 'Toward a Unified Account of Advanced Concentrative Absorption Meditation: A Systematic Definition and Classification of Jhāna', *Mindfulness*, 15 (2024), 1375–94 (pp. 1375–76)

³ Sparby and Sacchet, 'Toward a Unified Account of Advanced Concentrative Absorption Meditation', pp. 1376, 1381.

⁴ Sparby and Sacchet, 'Toward a Unified Account of Advanced Concentrative Absorption Meditation', p. 1375; Natalie Quli, 'Multiple Buddhist Modernisms: Jhāna in Convert Theravāda', *Pacific World*, 3rd ser., 10 (2008), 225–49 (pp. 230–232); Keren Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation: The Four Jhānas as the Actualization of Insight* (Routledge, 2017), pp. 1–2.

investigation. First, how do the Pāli Nikāyas describe the structure and function of jhāna within the Buddhist path? Second, to what extent do later Theravāda traditions preserve, elaborate or transform this canonical presentation? Third, how and why have modern interpreters arrived at substantially different conclusions concerning what qualifies as jhāna and whether it is necessary for, preparatory to, or intrinsically involved in liberating insight?

The history of jhāna cannot be accurately described either as the preservation of an unchanged meditative technique or as the replacement of an original practice with later innovations. The fourfold canonical formula remains remarkably persistent, but the conceptual and practical architecture surrounding it changes substantially. The early Nikāyas embed jhāna within the gradual training and associate the four states with right concentration, while providing comparatively limited practical detail concerning the precise methods through which these attainments are produced⁵. Later Theravāda exegetical literature, particularly Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (fifth century CE), situates this formula within a far more elaborate system of meditation objects, mental factors, preparatory stages, meditative signs and distinctions between levels of concentration⁶. Modern Theravāda traditions then reinterpret this inherited system in different ways, with some reducing the degree of concentration considered necessary before the cultivation of insight, while others restore profound absorption to a prominent position⁷. Contemporary disagreements consequently concern not merely the importance of jhāna but the very state to which the term refers and the textual or experiential authority by which its meaning should be established.

Methodologically, this study uses comparative textual and historical analysis. Early Buddhist discourses are examined in their received textual form rather than treated as transparent records of the historical Buddha, while later Theravāda and modern sources are compared to identify continuities, developments and reinterpretations in the understanding of jhāna. Scholarly interpretations are evaluated against both primary texts and competing secondary literature.

The study begins with the early Buddhist materials preserved in the Pāli Nikāyas. Particular attention is given to discourses in which the relationship between jhāna and the wider path is especially clear, including the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (DN 2), *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (MN 26), *Cūḷahatthipadopama Sutta* (MN 27), *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (MN 36), *Mahā-Assapura Sutta* (MN 39), *Anupada Sutta* (MN 111), *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* (MN 117), and relevant material

⁵ Rupert Gethin, 'On the Practice of Buddhist Meditation According to the Pali Nikāyas and Exegetical Sources', *Buddhismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 9 (2004), 201–21 (pp. 202–03).

⁶ Gethin, 'The Jhānas in the Buddhist Path to Liberation' in *Meditación y contemplación*, ed. by Sancho Fermín, pp. 184–90.

⁷ Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 137–39; Quli, 'Multiple Buddhist Modernisms', pp. 229–36.

concerning right concentration in the Saṃyutta Nikāya. Going forward these will often be referred to and referenced in their abbreviated forms, as is common scholarly convention.

These sources are examined alongside modern scholarship, particularly the work of Rupert Gethin, Keren Arbel, Bhikkhu Anālayo, Alexander Wynne and Johannes Bronkhorst, who offer a wide range of differing views. Gethin stresses substantial continuity between the Nikāyas and later Theravāda traditions, whereas Arbel challenges the conventional separation of jhāna and insight by interpreting the four jhānas as stages in the actualisation of insight itself⁸. Anālayo disputes this stronger reading while also tracing historical developments in Buddhist absorption⁹. Wynne and Bronkhorst situate early Buddhist meditation within the wider ancient Indian contemplative environment, while Braun and Quli show how inherited Theravāda categories were reconfigured in Burmese and modern meditation movements¹⁰.

The *Visuddhimagga* provides the central source for the next discussion, which examines the later Theravāda systematisation of jhāna. Buddhaghosa's treatment of meditation does considerably more than repeat the canonical fourfold formula. It distinguishes access and absorption concentration, classifies numerous meditation objects according to the attainments they can produce, develops the role of the nimitta or meditation sign, analyses jhāna in terms of constituent mental factors, and places individual meditative attainment within a larger programme involving temperament, teacher-pupil instruction, purification and progressive mastery¹¹. These developments have generated considerable scholarly disagreement. Some have interpreted them as evidence of substantial transformation between early canonical and later commentarial jhāna, while others understand them primarily as the more explicit formulation of practices and theories already implicit within earlier Buddhist materials¹². This dissertation does not assume in advance that increased conceptual precision necessarily corresponds either to a wholly new meditative experience or to perfect continuity with the Nikāyas. Instead, the question

⁸ Gethin, 'On the Practice of Buddhist Meditation According to the Pali Nikāyas and Exegetical Sources', pp. 216–17; Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 1–2, 156–57.

⁹ Bhikkhu Anālayo, 'On the Supposedly Liberating Function of the First Absorption', *Buddhist Studies Review*, 33.1–2 (2016), 271–80 (pp. 274–78); Bhikkhu Anālayo, 'A Brief History of Buddhist Absorption', *Mindfulness*, 11.3 (2020), 571–86 (pp. 571, 583).

¹⁰ Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism (Routledge, 2007), pp. 8–23, 42–44; Johannes Bronkhorst, *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, 2nd edn (Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), pp. 87–90; Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, pp. 137–45, 160–62; Quli, 'Multiple Buddhist Modernisms', pp. 237–41.

¹¹ Gethin, 'The Jhānas in the Buddhist Path to Liberation' in *Meditación y contemplación*, ed. by Sancho Fermín, pp. 184–90.

¹² Roderick S. Bucknell, 'Reinterpreting the Jhānas', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 16.2 (1993), 375–409 (pp. 389–390); Gethin, 'On the Practice of Buddhist Meditation According to the Pali Nikāyas and Exegetical Sources', pp. 216–217.

of continuity and change is treated as a historical problem requiring comparison between the textual systems.

The modern Theravāda material examined towards the end of the discussion further complicates any simple model of development. Particular attention is given to the Burmese meditation revival and the teachings associated with Ledi Sayadaw, Mahāsī Sayadaw and Pa-Auk Sayadaw. These traditions illustrate different ways of negotiating the inherited relationship between samatha, samādhi and vipassanā. The history is not adequately described as a straightforward decline of jhāna followed by its modern revival. Ledi and Mahāsī contributed to influential systems in which full absorption ceased to be a universal prerequisite for insight, yet these systems continued to employ categories and maps of progress substantially indebted to Abhidhamma and commentarial traditions¹³. Pa-Auk, conversely, gives deep concentration, nimitta and jhāna a much more prominent practical role while nevertheless acknowledging a route of pure insight in which prior absorption is not universally required¹⁴. The resulting disagreements concern not whether concentration matters, but the form, depth and timing of the concentration considered sufficient for liberating insight.

This historical background provides the context for the dissertation's final major discussion, that being the contemporary disagreement concerning the nature and function of jhāna itself. Ajahn Brahm and Leigh Brasington provide especially revealing examples. Both regard jhāna as an important component of the Buddhist path, yet the states they describe differ markedly¹⁵. This dissertation consequently treats contemporary disagreement over jhāna as both an experiential and definitional problem. Different interpretations reflect divergent claims about what happens within the meditative state, but they also reflect different judgments regarding the sources through which authentic Buddhist practice should be reconstructed. Commentarial authority, the early discourses, inherited teacher–student traditions and individual meditative experience are weighted differently by different interpreters.

Although the history of jhāna/dhyāna extends across Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna and East Asian Buddhism, this study focuses on the Pāli and Theravāda trajectory, drawing on wider ancient Indian traditions only where they illuminate the origins and status of particular meditative attainments. This narrower scope permits a more detailed examination of the processes through

¹³ Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, pp. 137–139, 160–162.

¹⁴ Pa-Auk Sayadaw, *Knowing and Seeing: Talks and Questions-and-Answers at a Meditation Retreat in Taiwan*, 2nd edn (Buddha Dharma Education Association, 2000), pp. 151–53; Quli, 'Multiple Buddhist Modernisms', p. 230.

¹⁵ Sparby and Sacchet, 'Toward a Unified Account of Advanced Concentrative Absorption Meditation', pp. 1376, 1381

which a relatively concise early textual formula became the subject of increasingly complex systems of practice and competing modern interpretations.

Part 1

Chapter 1: Pali canon descriptions

Before we begin our examination of the development and reinterpretation of jhāna meditation practices in later Buddhist traditions, it is first necessary to establish how exactly jhāna is presented in the early Buddhist texts themselves. As a result, this chapter will focus primarily on selected discourses from the Pāli Nikāyas, particularly those in which jhāna appears in relation to the noble eightfold path, including its role in the gradual training (anupubbasikkhā), the abandonment of the five hindrances (pañca nīvaraṇāni), right concentration (sammā samādhi), and the cultivation of insight (vipassanā). The purpose of this chapter is not to reconstruct with certainty the exact meditative experience of the historical Buddha, nor to assume that the Nikāyas provide a simple, unmediated record of earliest Buddhist practice. Rather, the aim is more modest and textually grounded: to identify the recurring patterns by which the early Buddhist tradition represents jhāna and to clarify the role that these meditative states play within that tradition's account of the path to enlightenment.

This approach is necessary because jhāna is not a stable or self-explanatory category across Buddhist history. As scholars such as Anālayo have emphasised, Buddhist understandings of meditative absorption underwent significant development and reinterpretation from early Buddhism through later Theravāda and modern meditation movements¹⁶. For this reason, it is important to specify what kind of jhāna is under discussion before making claims about its function or meaning. This is especially relevant in relation to the distinction often made in modern scholarship and practice between 'sutta-jhāna' and later commentarial or 'Visuddhimagga-style' jhāna¹⁷. Although such distinctions should not be accepted uncritically, they are helpful, and they remind us that the jhāna of the early discourses must be examined in its own textual contexts before it is compared with later scholastic or practitioner traditions.

The terminology itself also requires caution. Anālayo notes that the Pāli term jhāna, like Sanskrit dhyāna and Chinese 禪 (Chán), can be used in ways that overlap with 'absorption,' 'meditation,' 'concentration,' or 'meditative attainment.' He further observes that the related verb jhāyati can sometimes simply mean 'to meditate'¹⁸. This does not mean that the technical four-jhāna formula should be flattened into a vague notion of meditation in general. In many key passages, the

¹⁶ Anālayo, 'A Brief History of Buddhist Absorption', p. 571.

¹⁷ Anālayo, 'A Brief History of Buddhist Absorption', p. 583.

¹⁸ Anālayo, 'A Brief History of Buddhist Absorption', p. 572.

context clearly points to a specific meditative attainment. However, it does mean that the term should not be treated as though its later technical meaning is always already present in every early occurrence. As such, it is important to keep in mind that we will be distinguishing between *jhāna* as a broad term associated with meditation or absorption and the more specific fourfold *jhāna* formula repeatedly found in the *Nikāyas* with which this discussion is concerned.

It is also important to avoid reading the early texts exclusively through later Theravāda categories. Later meditation manuals, most famously Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*, provide a highly systematised account of concentration, meditation objects, access concentration, absorption concentration, and the *nimitta*¹⁹. These categories became deeply influential, but they are not always explicit in the *Nikāyas* themselves. They will therefore be discussed in detail later in the dissertation rather than imposed on the early materials at the outset. Keren Arbel's study is useful here because she explicitly seeks to analyse the fourfold *jhāna* model as it is depicted in the Pāli *Nikāyas* rather than by relying primarily on later Theravāda commentarial interpretations. Her work is especially helpful for this discussion because it challenges the assumption that the *jhānas* are merely absorptive states separate from insight, arguing instead that the four *jhānas* and what later traditions call *vipassanā* are integral dimensions of a single path-process²⁰.

At the same time, Arbel's interpretation should be used critically rather than simply adopted as the conclusion from the outset. In fact, there are many issues with her conclusion. Anālayo directly challenges the stronger claim that absorption itself should be identified with liberating insight²¹. The early texts do place *jhāna* in close relation to awakening, but they also require careful attention to the wider path-context in which *jhāna* appears. As such, it would be helpful to use Arbel to illuminate the insight-related dimensions of the *jhānas*, while remaining cautious against over-identifying *jhāna* with liberation itself.

The broader doctrinal framework for this analysis is supplied by the structure of the Buddhist path. Buddhist practice is commonly organised as a gradual progression from good conduct and moral discipline toward the cultivation of concentration and wisdom through meditative development²². Buddhist meditation contains many complementary aspects, such as calm, *samatha*, and insight, *vipassanā*, being associated respectively with concentration, *samādhi*, and wisdom, *paññā* or *prajñā*²³. This framework is important because the *jhānas* are not presented in the *Nikāyas* as isolated mystical experiences. They appear within a wider soteriological structure.

¹⁹ Gethin, 'The *Jhānas* in the Buddhist Path to Liberation', pp. 184–90.

²⁰ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 1–4.

²¹ Anālayo, 'On the Supposedly Liberating Function of the First Absorption', pp. 274–75.

²² Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, OPUS (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 83–84.

²³ Gethin, *The Foundations*, pp. 174–75.

Ethical restraint prepares the mind, the hindrances are abandoned, the mind becomes concentrated and purified, and this purified mind is then capable of knowledge and liberation.

The primary texts that are helpful for this discussion will therefore consist of discourses where this structure is especially clear. Dīgha Nikāya 2, the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, provides one of the most important accounts of the gradual training, moving from moral discipline and sense restraint through the abandonment of the hindrances and the four jhānas toward higher knowledge²⁴. Majjhima Nikāya 27 and Majjhima Nikāya 39 provide related accounts of the path of training, while Majjhima Nikāya 36 is crucial for the Buddha's own recollection of the first jhāna as the path to awakening²⁵. MN 111 will be used carefully for its more analytical presentation of meditative states, while SN 45.8 is important because it defines right concentration in terms of the four jhānas²⁶.

The central argument is therefore that, in the early Buddhist texts, jhāna is presented as structured, ethically conditioned, and soteriologically significant. It is structured because the four jhānas form a progressive sequence, moving from seclusion and joy toward equanimity and purified mindfulness. It is ethically conditioned because the attainment of jhāna is repeatedly preceded by moral restraint, sense restraint, and the abandonment of the five hindrances. It is soteriologically significant because major path narratives place jhāna immediately before liberating knowledge, and because the Buddha's own awakening narrative gives the first jhāna a decisive role in the discovery of the middle way. The following sections will substantiate this argument by examining first the place of jhāna in the gradual training, then the structure of the four-jhāna formula, and finally the relationship between jhāna, awakening, and the related but distinct arūpa attainments.

²⁴ 'DN 2: Sāmaññaphalasutta', trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral <https://suttacentral.net/dn2/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026].

²⁵ 'MN 27: Cūḷahatthipadopamasutta', trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral <https://suttacentral.net/mn27/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026]; 'MN 39: Mahāassapurasutta', trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral <https://suttacentral.net/mn39/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026]; 'MN 36: Mahāsaccakasutta', trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral <https://suttacentral.net/mn36/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026].

²⁶ 'MN 111: Anupadasutta', trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral <https://suttacentral.net/mn111/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026]; 'SN 45.8: Vibhaṅgasutta', trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral <https://suttacentral.net/sn45.8/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026].

Chapter 2: Jhāna in the Gradual Training

The early textual presentation of jhāna shows that it is rarely introduced as an isolated practice. In several major Nikāya passages, jhāna appears within a wider sequence of training that begins with ethical transformation and culminates in liberating knowledge. This pattern is especially clear in the so-called gradual training formula, where the practitioner first encounters the teaching, develops faith, goes forth into the renunciant life, undertakes moral discipline, restrains the senses, cultivates mindfulness and clear comprehension, becomes content with simplicity, abandons the five hindrances, and only then enters the four jhānas²⁷. The significance of this sequence is that jhāna is not presented merely as a technique of concentration, but as the meditative result of an already transformed mode of life.

The *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* provides one of the clearest examples of this structure. In this discourse, the Buddhist path is presented to King Ajātasattu as the ‘fruit of the ascetic life,’ and the attainment of jhāna is carefully positioned within a progressive account of training²⁸. The sequence begins not with meditation technique, but with hearing the Dhamma and gaining confidence in the Buddha’s teaching. This leads to renunciation, moral discipline, restraint in bodily and verbal conduct, and the adoption of a simplified monastic life. Only after this ethical and practical foundation has been established does the discourse describe the practitioner guarding the sense doors, maintaining mindfulness and clear comprehension, and dwelling in contentment²⁹. The movement into seclusion and the abandoning of the hindrances then immediately precede the first jhāna. This placement is significant because the first jhāna does not arise out of concentration practice alone. It arises from a mind already shaped by ethical restraint, renunciation, and freedom from immediate obstruction.

This gradual pattern supports Gethin’s account of Buddhist meditation as part of a broader path in which conduct, concentration, and wisdom are mutually related rather than separate religious activities. In this framework, moral discipline is not merely a preliminary social rule-system that can be left behind once ‘real’ meditation begins. Rather, morality conditions the mind by weakening those forms of desire, aversion, agitation, and confusion that prevent deeper collectedness. The gradual training formula therefore presents sīla not simply as external behaviour, but as part of the cultivation of a mind capable of jhāna. This is why the movement

²⁷ DN 2; MN 27; MN 39

²⁸ DN 2

²⁹ DN 2

from moral discipline to meditative absorption is not accidental. Ethical purification and meditative stillness are structurally linked³⁰.

The *Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta* reinforces this same point. There, too, the path begins with the appearance of a Tathāgata, the hearing of the teaching, the arising of faith, and the decision to go forth³¹. The discourse then follows a familiar pattern: moral discipline, guarding the sense faculties, mindfulness and clear comprehension, contentment, seclusion, abandonment of the hindrances, and the four jhānas. This recurrence across more than one discourse suggests that the gradual training was not a marginal or accidental arrangement, but a stable way of imagining the Buddhist path. In MN 27, the disciple does not immediately possess full certainty but comes to know the truth of the path progressively through practice and attainment. Jhāna therefore functions within a process of verification. It is part of the experiential unfolding of the path rather than a detached mystical episode.

The *Mahā-Assapura Sutta* adds another important dimension by linking this structure specifically to the identity of the renunciant. The discourse addresses what is required of those who call themselves *samaṇas* and brahmins, insisting that such a title must be fulfilled by actual practice rather than by outward designation alone³². In this context, jhāna appears as part of the full discipline expected of the serious practitioner. The text moves through moral purification, restraint, mindfulness, and the abandonment of hindrances before describing the four jhānas. This implies that jhāna is not presented as an optional refinement added to Buddhist practice from outside. It belongs to the very logic of the renunciant path. To live as a *samaṇa* is not simply to withdraw socially, but to cultivate a mode of body, speech, and mind that can culminate in meditative absorption and knowledge.

Arbel emphasises that, in the Nikāyas, the jhānas are not meditative states attainable independently of other path-factors. She argues that the standard path descriptions place jhāna after the cultivation of *sīla*, sense restraint, mindfulness, and clear comprehension, and after the abandonment of the five hindrances. On this basis, she rejects the view that the jhānas are simply concentration states produced by focusing on a neutral object. Whether or not one accepts the full strength of Arbel's wider argument that the jhānas are the actualisation of insight, her point about their path-context is persuasive: the Nikāyas repeatedly present jhāna as dependent upon a broader ethical and contemplative formation. The first jhāna, in particular, is not merely the

³⁰ Gethin, *The Foundations*, pp. 83–84, 173–74.

³¹ MN 27

³² MN 39

beginning of a meditation sequence. It is the point at which prior training becomes experientially embodied³³.

This also helps explain why the five hindrances stand immediately before jhāna in the gradual training formula. The practitioner enters jhāna only after abandoning sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt³⁴. These hindrances are expressions of precisely the affective and cognitive patterns that Buddhist practice seeks to overcome. Sensual desire and ill will correspond to attachment and aversion, while sloth, agitation, and doubt obstruct the clarity and steadiness required for insight. It is perhaps best to understand the hindrances as immediate defilements of the mind, with an often cited example being that the hindered mind is unable to see clearly, just as disturbed or contaminated water cannot provide a clear reflection³⁵. Within this framework, the abandoning of the hindrances is not merely a preparation for concentration, it is already part of the transformation of perception and conduct that makes liberating knowledge possible.

The gradual training passages therefore suggest a model in which jhāna is both conditioned by and continuous with the preceding elements of the path. It is conditioned by them because jhāna requires the practitioner to have already cultivated restraint, mindfulness, and freedom from the hindrances. But it is also continuous with them because jhāna intensifies and stabilises the very qualities that the preceding stages cultivate. Moral discipline restrains unwholesome bodily and verbal action, sense restraint reduces the mind's outward dispersal, mindfulness and clear comprehension stabilise awareness, contentment weakens craving, seclusion removes immediate distractions, the abandonment of the hindrances clears the mind of obstruction, and jhāna then gathers these developments into a concentrated and purified state of experience.

The gradual training formula should not, however, be treated as the only way in which the Nikāyas imagine contact with jhāna. MN 36 complicates any overly linear reading, since the Buddha recalls entering the first jhāna as a child while sitting in the shade of a jambu tree during his father's work³⁶. This episode suggests that the capacity for jhānic experience is not presented exclusively as the product of formal monastic training. At the same time, the passage does not overturn the gradual-training model. The childhood experience is remembered retrospectively and becomes significant only when the Bodhisatta, after rejecting self-mortification, recognises it as pointing toward the path to awakening. Anālayo notes that the episode applies the standard

³³ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 47–50.

³⁴ DN 2; MN 27; MN 39

³⁵ Gethin, *The Foundations*, pp. 175–76.

³⁶ MN 36

description of the first absorption to an earlier experience, even though the child would hardly have understood it as the first in a fourfold meditative sequence³⁷. The point, however, is not that ethical and contemplative training are unnecessary, but that the Nikāyas preserve a more complex picture. Jhāna can be encountered spontaneously, yet its full Buddhist significance emerges when it is integrated into the path of renunciation, purification, and liberating knowledge.

This has important implications for how jhāna should be interpreted in the early texts. If jhāna is read apart from the gradual training, it can appear as a specialised meditative achievement that might be compared with other altered states of consciousness across religious traditions. Read within the gradual training, however, it appears as a meditative state integrated into a specifically Buddhist framework. A form of collected experience shaped by renunciation, virtue, mindfulness, and the overcoming of unwholesome tendencies. This does not mean that every element of jhāna was necessarily unique to Buddhism, nor that Buddhist meditation developed in isolation from wider ancient Indian practices. It does mean, however, that the Nikāyas integrate jhāna into a distinctively Buddhist framework. What matters in these passages is not absorption as such, but absorption as the fruit of a disciplined path and as a condition for liberating knowledge.

Anālayo's caution about the historical variability of absorption is useful at this point. Since Buddhist traditions developed different understandings of jhāna across time, it would be misleading to assume that later technical models are already fully present in the gradual training formula³⁸. The Nikāya passages do not describe jhāna through the later apparatus of access concentration, counterpart signs, or detailed meditation-object theory. Instead, they describe jhāna in relation to seclusion, the abandonment of unwholesome states, joy and happiness, collectedness, mindfulness, and equanimity. In the gradual training, therefore, jhāna is not yet a rigid, scholastic science of meditation. It is an attainment embedded within a narrative path of ethical and existential transformation.

The significance of this can be seen in the position jhāna occupies in the sequence. It comes after the abandonment of the hindrances, but before the higher knowledges and the destruction of the taints. In DN 2, for example, the mind that has passed through the jhānas is later described as purified, bright, malleable, wieldy, steady, and imperturbable, and it is from this condition that the practitioner directs the mind toward knowledge³⁹. Jhāna therefore functions as a hinge

³⁷ Anālayo, 'A Brief History of Buddhist Absorption', pp. 575–76.

³⁸ Anālayo, 'A Brief History of Buddhist Absorption', pp. 571, 583.

³⁹ DN 2

between preparation and liberating cognition. It is the culmination of the ethical and contemplative training that precedes it, and the basis for the liberating knowledge that follows. This positioning will become especially important later, when considering the Buddha's own awakening narrative in MN 36, but even within the gradual training formula itself, jhāna already appears as a decisive stage in the path.

Thus, the gradual training passages establish one of the central claims of this discussion. Early Buddhist jhāna should not be understood as a free-standing technique or as a purely private mystical experience. It is presented as the meditative culmination of a comprehensive religious discipline. The practitioner who enters jhāna has already undergone a process of ethical restraint, sense discipline, mindfulness, contentment, seclusion, and purification from the hindrances. In this context, jhāna is not separate from the Buddhist path, but rather, it is one of the path's most concentrated expressions. At this point, it is likely helpful for us to define the internal structure of the four-jhāna formula itself.

Chapter 3: The four Jhāna states

Having established that jhāna is embedded within the gradual training, it is now necessary to examine the internal structure of the four-jhāna formula itself. Across the Nikāyas, the four jhānas are described in highly standardised terms, appearing in substantially similar form in discourses such as the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, the *Mahā-Assapura Sutta*, and the *Vibhaṅga Sutta*'s definition of right concentration⁴⁰. This repetition suggests that the formula had become a stable way of expressing the progressive refinement of meditative experience. However, the formula should not be treated merely as a list of increasingly intense trance states. Its structure shows a gradual transformation in the quality of experience, from seclusion and joy, toward equanimity, stillness, mindfulness, and neutrality.

The first jhāna is entered when the practitioner is 'quite secluded from sensual pleasures' and 'secluded from unskillful qualities'⁴¹. This opening is crucial. The first jhāna is not defined simply by concentration upon an object, but by a withdrawal from sensuality, and from unwholesome mental states. The associated feelings are described as pīti and sukha, often translated as joy or rapture, and pleasure, happiness, or ease. These are said to be 'born of seclusion,' which indicates that the pleasure of the first jhāna is not sensual pleasure but a different kind of happiness produced by renunciation and mental purification. Arbel argues that the first jhāna marks a turning point in the path, as the practitioner discovers a form of pleasure independent of sensual gratification⁴². This is significant for early Buddhist soteriology, as the first jhāna offers an experiential alternative to the ordinary pursuit of pleasure through the senses.

The first jhāna is also described as accompanied by vitakka and vicāra. These terms are difficult to translate precisely. Sujato renders them as 'placing the mind and keeping it connected', while Gethin gives the approximate renderings 'application of thought' and 'examining'⁴³. Regardless, this is useful because it prevents the first jhāna from being imagined as completely thought-free. The first jhāna may still contain a directed or applied element of mental activity. Yet this does not mean that it is ordinary thinking either. The formula distinguishes it from sensual and unwholesome mental activity, so vitakka and vicāra should be understood as refined mental functions operating within a purified meditative state. The first jhāna is therefore neither ordinary thinking nor complete silence of thought, it is a secluded and joyful meditative state in which vitakka and vicāra remain present.

⁴⁰ DN 2; MN 39; SN 45.8

⁴¹ DN 2; MN 39

⁴² Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 61–62, 74.

⁴³ Gethin, *The Foundations*, p. 181.

The second jhāna is defined by the subsiding of vitakka and vicāra. The formula describes it as possessing internal confidence or clarity, unification of mind, and joy and happiness born of concentration rather than seclusion. This marks an important shift. In the first jhāna, joy and happiness arise from withdrawal from sensuality and unwholesome states. In the second, they arise from samādhi itself⁴⁴. The stilling of vitakka and vicāra also suggests that the mind no longer needs the same kind of active placing and sustaining. Arbel interprets this as a movement towards a non-discursive and broadened field of awareness, in which the mind is no longer structured by the more deliberate activity present in the first jhāna⁴⁵. Whether or not one accepts every detail of this interpretation, the textual movement is clear. The second jhāna represents a deeper collectedness in which discursive mental activity has significantly subsided.

This shift from the first to the second jhāna is important, as it shows that the jhānic progression is not simply ‘more concentration’ or ‘more bliss.’ Each jhāna is marked by the presence and absence of particular qualities. The first retains vitakka and vicāra, the second abandons them. The first is born of seclusion, the second is born of concentration. This kind of internal differentiation suggests that the jhānas were understood as distinct modes of experience, not simply degrees on a single scale of depth. The formula is therefore both phenomenological and doctrinal. It describes what the meditative state is like, but it also shows which qualities are to be transcended as the practitioner progresses.

The third jhāna involves another decisive transformation. Here pīti, rapture or joy, fades away, while sukha remains⁴⁶. The practitioner is described as dwelling equanimous, mindful, and clearly aware, experiencing happiness with the body. This stage is especially important because it undermines any simple idea that jhāna is primarily about ecstatic joy. The movement from the second to the third jhāna involves the calming of rapture. What becomes prominent instead is upekkhā, equanimity, together with mindfulness and clear awareness. The pleasure of the third jhāna is therefore quieter and more balanced than the energetic joy of the earlier attainments. This reads as a further deconditioning of reactivity⁴⁷. The practitioner no longer clings even to the intense joy of meditative concentration, but comes to abide in a more stable and observant mode of awareness.

⁴⁴ DN 2; MN 39

⁴⁵ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, p. 94.

⁴⁶ DN 2; MN 39

⁴⁷ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 120–21.

The fourth jhāna completes this movement. It is described as the abandoning of pleasure and pain, following the earlier disappearance of joy and grief, and as a state of neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, with purity of mindfulness due to equanimity⁴⁸. This is the culmination of the fourfold sequence. The affective energy of pīti has already faded in the third jhāna. Now, even sukha, pleasant feeling, is abandoned. What remains is not blankness, but purified mindfulness and equanimity. The fourth jhāna is therefore not the most blissful state in the sequence, but the most balanced and purified, with scholars like Arbel interpreting the fourth jhāna as a condition of pure non-reactive and lucid awareness⁴⁹. This highlights that the culmination of the jhāna formula is not ecstatic absorption but a clarified, equanimous presence.

MN 111, the *Anupada Sutta*, can deepen this analysis, but it needs careful handling. The discourse presents Sāriputta as entering and emerging from successive meditative attainments and discerning the phenomena present within them⁵⁰. This is useful because it complicates the view that jhāna is simply a blank or unconscious trance. The text suggests a form of refined awareness in relation to meditative states. However, MN 111 is also unusual in its detailed listing of factors within the first jhāna, and as such, it has been noted that some aspects of the text may potentially reflect relatively late or early-Abhidhammic development⁵¹. For this reason, MN 111 should not be used as the sole basis for defining jhāna. It is better used as supporting evidence that the tradition could analyse jhānic experience in detail, while the standard four-jhāna formula in texts such as DN 2 and MN 39 remains the main foundation.

The four-jhāna formula presents a carefully structured transformation of experience. The first jhāna establishes a form of joy and happiness independent of sensuality, the second deepens this into non-discursive concentration, the third calms rapture and foregrounds equanimity, mindfulness, and clear awareness and the fourth abandons pleasure and pain and culminates in purified mindfulness and equanimity. This structure supports the central claim of this discussion, early Buddhist jhāna is not merely concentration, nor merely bliss, nor merely trance. It is a progressive purification of consciousness that moves from seclusion to collectedness, from joy to equanimity, and from affective refinement to the purified awareness that can serve as the basis for liberating knowledge.

⁴⁸ DN 2; MN 39; SN 45.8

⁴⁹ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 143–45.

⁵⁰ MN 111

⁵¹ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 98–99.

Chapter 4: Jhāna as Right Concentration

The preceding sections have examined where jhāna appears in the gradual training and how the fourfold jhāna formula is structured. A further issue remains: why these four meditative states are treated as right concentration, sammā-samādhi, rather than simply as powerful experiences of concentration or absorption. This distinction matters because the Nikāyas do not present concentration as valuable merely because it is deep, stable, or pleasant. Concentration becomes ‘right’ insofar as it is integrated with the other factors of the Buddhist path.

The most direct textual basis for identifying jhāna with right concentration is found in definitions of the Noble Eightfold Path. In SN 45.8, right concentration is defined through the four jhānas. The practitioner enters and abides in the first, second, third, and fourth jhānas, and this is called right concentration⁵². On this reading, the fourfold jhāna formula is not peripheral to the path, but gives the standard meditative content of its final expression. This supports the claim that the four jhānas occupy a central place in early Buddhist path-structure. They are not presented merely as extraordinary mystical experiences, nor as optional states detached from Buddhist doctrine, but as the paradigmatic form of cultivated concentration.

In the Nikāyas, sammā-samādhi is closely associated with, and in important passages effectively designated by, the attainment of the four jhānas. This is significant because it gives the four jhānas a central place within the received Pāli presentation of the Noble Eightfold Path. If right concentration is one of the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, and if right concentration is defined as the four jhānas, then the jhānas cannot easily be dismissed as merely optional or extrinsic meditative states. Even if one does not yet adopt the stronger claim that the jhānas actualise insight, the more basic point is difficult to ignore. Namely, the Nikāyas repeatedly give the four jhānas a central role in defining the Buddhist path⁵³.

However, this identification should not be handled too rigidly. MN 117, the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta*, gives a complementary definition of noble right concentration. Rather than simply listing the four jhānas, it describes right concentration as unification of mind supported by the other seven path factors: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness⁵⁴. This is important because it clarifies that right concentration is

⁵² SN 45.8

⁵³ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 92–93.

⁵⁴ ‘MN 117: Mahācattārīsakasutta’, trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral <https://suttacentral.net/mn117/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026].

not merely concentration considered in isolation. It is concentration supported and conditioned by the other factors of the path. In other words, the ‘rightness’ of right concentration depends on the wider ethical, cognitive, and contemplative formation of the practitioner.

This allows for a more nuanced account of jhāna’s place in the Nikāyas. On the one hand, the four jhānas are used to define right concentration. On the other hand, right concentration itself is supported by the whole Noble Eightfold Path. The jhānas therefore should not be imagined as a self-contained technique that could be detached from right view, moral conduct, effort, and mindfulness. Gethin’s account of the path is useful here, since he emphasises that Buddhist practice involves the gradual transformation of view, intention, speech, action, effort, mindfulness, and concentration into the noble path factors⁵⁵. From this perspective, concentration is not ‘right’ simply because the mind is unified. It is right because that unification arises within, and is directed by, the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

Arbel makes a similar point when discussing MN 117. She stresses that right concentration depends on the development of the other seven path factors, and that right mindfulness in particular supports samādhi rather than being secondary to it⁵⁶. This is especially important for avoiding a false opposition between mindfulness and jhāna. If the four jhānas are understood as right concentration, and if right concentration is supported by right mindfulness, then the Nikāyas do not require us to treat mindfulness and jhāna as unrelated practices with separate goals. Rather, they appear as interdependent aspects of the path. For the present chapter, it is enough to observe that the canonical definition of right concentration already embeds jhāna within the wider path.

Anālayo’s comparative work adds a useful nuance to this discussion. He notes that the equation of right concentration with the four absorptions is not equally secure in every early Buddhist textual context, and that some parallel traditions preserve a definition of right concentration closer to the MN 117 model: unification of mind endowed with or supported by the other path factors⁵⁷. This does not undermine the importance of the four-jhāna definition in the Pāli Nikāyas, but it does warn against treating the matter as too simple. The received Pāli textual tradition preserves both a specific meditative definition of right concentration, expressed through the four jhānas, and a broader path-definition, expressed through unification of mind supported by the other seven factors.

⁵⁵ Gethin, *The Foundations*, pp. 83–84.

⁵⁶ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 92–93.

⁵⁷ Anālayo, ‘A Brief History of Buddhist Absorption’, pp. 579–80.

These two definitions need not be treated as contradictory. The four-jhāna definition identifies the characteristic meditative form of right concentration with the MN 117 definition explaining the conditions that make concentration ‘right.’ One describes what right concentration looks like as an attainment, while the other describes how it is embedded within the path. This distinction helps prevent two opposite errors. The first error would be to reduce jhāna to a neutral or non-Buddhist technique of absorption. The second would be to make jhāna bear too much interpretive weight too early, as though the mere presence of absorption automatically settled all questions about insight and liberation. The Nikāyas present jhāna as central, but they present it as central within a path.

The significance of this is mainly definitional and contextual. In the early textual presentation, the four jhānas are closely connected with sammā-samādhi, and sammā-samādhi is inseparable from the Noble Eightfold Path. Therefore, jhāna should be understood not merely as concentration, but as right concentration. A cultivated unification of mind shaped by right view, ethical conduct, right effort, and right mindfulness. If the four jhānas are the paradigmatic form of right concentration, then they need to be distinguished carefully from other advanced meditative attainments, especially the arūpa attainments. These formless states are often placed after the four jhānas in meditative sequences, but they do not occupy exactly the same role in definitions of the path.

Chapter 5: The Arūpa Attainments/Jhāna

The relationship between the four jhānas and the four arūpa attainments requires particular attention. The arūpa attainments are a further set of advanced meditative states, and are known as the sphere of infinite space, the sphere of infinite consciousness, the sphere of nothingness, and the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. They are often placed after the four jhānas in meditative sequences, and for that reason they are sometimes loosely referred to as ‘formless jhānas.’⁵⁸ However, this terminology is potentially misleading. In the Nikāyas, the fourfold jhāna formula has its own distinctive structure, affective progression, and role in the definition of right concentration. The arūpa attainments are closely related to advanced meditation, but they should not simply be collapsed into the same category.

The distinction matters because the four jhānas and the arūpa attainments are described in different ways. The four jhānas are defined primarily by the changing quality of the meditative mind: seclusion, vitakka-vicāra, pīti, sukha, unification, mindfulness, equanimity, and the eventual purity of mindfulness and equanimity⁵⁹. The arūpa attainments, by contrast, are defined through increasingly subtle spheres or objects of experience: infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, and neither-perception-nor-non-perception⁶⁰. This difference in description suggests that the two sets are not merely eight stages of one identical process. They are related forms of meditative refinement, but the texts do not present them in exactly the same conceptual terms.

The *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* is especially important for this question. In MN 26, the Bodhisatta studies under Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta before his awakening. Āḷāra Kālāma is associated with the sphere of nothingness, while Uddaka Rāmaputta is associated with the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. The Bodhisatta masters these attainments, but rejects them as insufficient because they do not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, peace, direct knowledge, awakening, or nibbāna⁶¹. The significance of this passage is not that the arūpa attainments are valueless. Rather, it shows that advanced meditative attainment is not identical with awakening. The Bodhisatta can master extremely refined states and still judge them to be inadequate as final goals.

⁵⁸ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 3, 174–76.

⁵⁹ DN 2; MN 39; SN 45.8

⁶⁰ ‘MN 26: Pāsārāsīsutta’, trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, SuttaCentral <https://suttacentral.net/mn26/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026]; MN 111

⁶¹ MN 26

Wynne's discussion of the Buddha's two teachers is useful here because it situates these attainments within the wider history of early Indian meditation. Wynne argues that the accounts of Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta are historically significant and that they point to a form of pre-Buddhist or non-Buddhist meditative training that the Bodhisatta encountered before his awakening⁶². He is particularly interested in the fact that the early Buddhist sources preserve the memory of the Bodhisatta learning the sphere of nothingness and the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception from teachers outside the Buddhist community. For the purposes of this discussion, the key point is that the arūpa attainments appear in the texts as part of a broader ancient Indian meditative environment, not simply as straightforward extensions of the distinctively Buddhist four-jhāna formula.

Bronkhorst develops a more strongly reconstructive account, arguing that the formless attainments may represent meditative material incorporated into Buddhism from non-Buddhist traditions⁶³. In relation to the four jhānas and the formless attainments, Bronkhorst argues that the differences between the two sets are too large to allow an easy assimilation. He notes that the nine successive states place the four jhānas first, then the four formless attainments, and finally the cessation of perception and feeling. Bronkhorst interprets this arrangement as an attempt to place two originally distinct groups of meditative states one after the other⁶⁴.

Arbel draws on this kind of distinction to criticise the common tendency to treat the four jhānas and the arūpa attainments as phenomenologically equivalent. She argues that the association is partly caused by the fact that some suttas place the arūpa attainments immediately after the four jhānas, but that this sequence does not prove that both sets have the same nature. She also notes that the arūpa attainments appear in other meditative models, such as the eight liberations, where the four jhānas are not included in the same way. This is significant because it prevents us from assuming that the arūpa attainments always depend upon, or simply continue, the four-jhāna sequence. The textual tradition is more varied than a single linear model suggests⁶⁵.

Anālayo, however, gives a slightly different emphasis. He points out that several early discourses do present the four absorptions and the four immaterial spheres as a meditative continuum, with the first immaterial sphere reached by passing beyond the fourth absorption⁶⁶. This means that

⁶² Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 8–23, 42–44.

⁶³ Bronkhorst, *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, pp. 87–90.

⁶⁴ Bronkhorst, *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, p. 90.

⁶⁵ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 176–77.

⁶⁶ Anālayo, 'A Brief History of Buddhist Absorption', pp. 574–75.

the arūpa attainments cannot be treated as wholly unrelated to jhāna either. In some contexts, they are clearly arranged as a progression beyond the fourth jhāna. The point, therefore, is not to sever the two sets completely, but to distinguish relation from identity. The arūpa attainments may be continuous with the four jhānas in some meditative sequences, but they are not simply the same thing under another name.

This distinction also helps clarify the role of the arūpa attainments in this discussion. Our current concern is the canonical presentation of jhāna, not the full history of all Buddhist meditative attainments. The arūpa states are relevant because they mark the boundary of the four-jhāna model. They show that the Nikāyas recognise meditative states more refined than the fourth jhāna, but they also show that such refinement does not automatically equal liberation. MN 26 is decisive on this point, as the Bodhisatta's mastery of the highest formless attainments available through his teachers does not satisfy his search for awakening⁶⁷. In this sense, the arūpa attainments function as a useful contrast. They are meaningful, subtle, and important, but their presence in the tradition does not reduce the specific role of the four jhānas as right concentration.

The safest terminology, therefore, is to refer to these states as arūpa attainments, arūpa samāpattis, or formless attainments, rather than 'formless jhānas.' The latter phrase risks obscuring the distinctive features of the four-jhāna formula and the separate history of the formless states. It may also import later systematising assumptions into the early texts too quickly. In the present dissertation, the four jhānas will refer specifically to the standard sequence culminating in purity of mindfulness and equanimity. The arūpa attainments will be treated as related but distinct meditative attainments that appear in some sequences after the four jhānas and in other contexts as part of broader ancient Indian contemplative practice.

The boundary between the four jhānas and the arūpa attainments is therefore important for our overall argument. The early Buddhist texts present jhāna as central to the path, especially through its role in gradual training and right concentration. Yet they also preserve a wider meditative landscape in which other profound attainments are known, practised, adapted, and sometimes judged insufficient. This suggests that early Buddhism did not simply reject advanced non-Buddhist meditation, nor did it identify meditative depth with liberation as such. Instead, it incorporated and reinterpreted meditative attainment within a specifically Buddhist framework. The four jhānas remain central because of their connection with right concentration and the path.

⁶⁷ MN 26

The arūpa attainments remain important because they clarify the limits of concentration when separated from awakening.

Part 1 Summary

The basic presentation of jhāna in early Pāli Nikāya passages, at this point, has been fairly established. Rather than appearing as an isolated meditation technique, jhāna is repeatedly embedded within wider accounts of the Buddhist path. In the gradual training, it arises after ethical discipline, sense restraint, mindfulness, contentment, seclusion, and the abandonment of the five hindrances. This suggests that jhāna is not presented simply as concentration in a neutral sense, but as a meditative attainment conditioned by adopting the Buddhist way of life.

The four-jhāna formula shows that jhāna is structured as a progressive refinement of meditative experiences. The first jhāna introduces a form of joy and happiness born from seclusion rather than sensuality. The second deepens this into a more unified concentration. The third marks the fading of rapture and the emergence of equanimity, mindfulness, and clear awareness. The fourth culminates not in heightened pleasure, but in pure mindfulness and equanimity.

Part 1 has also argued that the four jhānas occupy a central position in early Buddhist path-structure because they are closely associated with sammā-samādhi, or right concentration. At the same time, right concentration should not be understood as a self-contained meditative technique. As the wider path-context shows, concentration is ‘right’ because it is supported by right view, ethical conduct, right effort, and right mindfulness. This prevents jhāna from being reduced either to a neutral technology of absorption or to a mystical experience detached from Buddhist soteriology.

Finally, the arūpa attainments clarify the boundaries of jhāna. Although they are often placed after the four jhānas in meditative sequences, they are better understood as related but distinct formless attainments rather than simply as ‘formless jhānas.’ Their presence in the Nikāyas shows that early Buddhism recognised a wider landscape of advanced meditative states, some of which were associated with non-Buddhist or pre-Buddhist contemplative traditions. Yet it is also clear that these meditative refinements alone are not identical with awakening.

Part 2

Chapter 6: Buddhaghosa, the Visuddhimagga, and the Systematisation of Jhāna

The descriptions of jhāna examined in the preceding chapters are strikingly consistent in their basic formulation, yet they provide surprisingly little practical instruction concerning how the meditator is actually supposed to attain these states. The standard account of the Buddhist path found throughout the Nikāyas moves rapidly from the meditator sitting down and establishing mindfulness to the abandonment of the hindrances and attainment of the four jhānas, without describing in detail the techniques by which this transition is accomplished. Later accounts attempting to systematise jhāna consequently provide considerably more information concerning the actual practice of meditation, although the scarcity of such detail in the earlier texts may itself reflect the expectation that practical instruction was transmitted personally from teacher to pupil rather than exhaustively recorded in texts⁶⁸. It is against this background that Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* assumes particular importance. Prominent scholars such as Rupert Gethin have described it as providing the most detailed and comprehensive surviving ancient Buddhist account of the development of jhāna⁶⁹.

It would, however, be misleading to treat this increased detail simply as the personal innovation of Buddhaghosa. Gethin emphasises that the works associated with Buddhaghosa should be understood as attempts to ‘sum up and fix’ a commentarial tradition that had developed over several preceding centuries, rather than as the creation of a single author working independently⁷⁰. The significance of the *Visuddhimagga* for the history of jhāna therefore lies less in the invention of an entirely new meditative system than in the unusually thorough organisation and articulation of an inherited tradition. The relationship between these analytical developments and earlier Abhidhamma literature will be considered below. The *Visuddhimagga* nevertheless represents an important stage in their consolidation into a coherent account of the path.

The systematic character of Buddhaghosa's approach is apparent from the beginning of his treatment of concentration (samādhi) in Chapter III. Having stated that concentration had previously been dealt with only briefly and was therefore difficult both to understand and to

⁶⁸ Gethin, ‘On the Practice of Buddhist Meditation According to the Pali Nikāyas and Exegetical Sources’, pp. 202–03.

⁶⁹ Gethin, ‘The Jhānas in the Buddhist Path to Liberation’, p. 184.

⁷⁰ Gethin, ‘On the Practice of Buddhist Meditation According to the Pali Nikāyas and Exegetical Sources’, p. 203 n. 6.

develop, Buddhaghosa proceeds through a series of explicit questions: what concentration is, in what sense it is concentration, its characteristics and functions, the different kinds of concentration, its defilement and purification, how it is developed, and the benefits of its development⁷¹. Concentration itself is defined as the profitable ‘unification of mind’, in which consciousness and its associated mental factors remain evenly established upon a single object without distraction or scattering. Its characteristic is non-distraction, its function the elimination of distraction, and its manifestation non-wavering⁷². Rather than merely identifying a sequence of meditative attainments, the *Visuddhimagga* attempts to classify the psychological processes by which they are produced.

This tendency is particularly apparent in Buddhaghosa's division of concentration into numerous types. Most important for the present discussion is the distinction between access concentration (*upacāra-samādhi*) and absorption concentration (*appanā-samādhi*), although concentration is additionally classified as mundane and supramundane, accompanied or unaccompanied by happiness, inferior, medium or superior, and according to both fourfold and fivefold schemes of *jhāna*⁷³. The distinction between access and absorption is especially consequential. Gethin notes that this terminology is not found as such in the canonical description of the *jhānas*⁷⁴. In Buddhaghosa's account, however, access denotes a stage at which the five hindrances have been suppressed and the factors associated with *jhāna* are present, but have not yet acquired the stability characteristic of full absorption. Buddhaghosa compares the instability of access concentration to a young child repeatedly falling after being placed upon its feet. In absorption, however, the relevant factors have become sufficiently strong for concentration to continue without interruption⁷⁵.

The *Visuddhimagga* also embeds *jhāna* within a much more comprehensive system of meditation practices. Buddhaghosa enumerates forty meditation subjects: ten *kaṣiṇas*, ten forms of foulness, ten recollections, four divine abidings, four immaterial states, the perception of repulsiveness in food, and the defining of the four elements⁷⁶. These subjects are not interchangeable. Some are said to produce only access concentration, while others are capable of producing absorption and, among the latter, different objects support different levels of *jhāna*⁷⁷. The ten *kaṣiṇas* and mindfulness of breathing can support all four *jhānas*, whereas contemplation of foulness and mindfulness of the body lead only to the first. The first three divine abidings can support the first

⁷¹ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, trans. by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, 4th edn (Buddhist Publication Society, 2010), III.1, p. 81. Subsequent references to this edition are given as ‘Vism’ by chapter and section number.

⁷² Vism III.2–4

⁷³ Vism III.5–25

⁷⁴ Gethin, ‘The Jhānas in the Buddhist Path to Liberation’, p. 187.

⁷⁵ Vism IV.32–33

⁷⁶ Vism III.104–05

⁷⁷ Vism III.106

three jhānas, while equanimity is associated with the fourth⁷⁸. As such, what appears in the Nikāyas largely as a recurring sequence of four attainments becomes situated within a detailed map of meditative objects, aptitudes and possible outcomes.

This systematisation extends to the circumstances of practice and to differences between individual meditators. Buddhaghosa instructs the prospective practitioner to remove impediments, seek out a suitable place for meditation and approach a ‘good friend’ (kalyāṇamitta), who acts as the giver of the meditation subject (kammaṭṭhāna-dāyaka)⁷⁹. An appropriate subject is then selected in accordance with the practitioner's temperament. Buddhaghosa's account distinguishes dispositions associated with greed, hatred and delusion as well as faith, intelligence and speculative tendencies, and seeks to match meditation practices to these underlying characteristics⁸⁰. The resultant picture is consequently not merely a theoretical description of altered states of consciousness, but something approaching a structured programme of meditative training in which environment, teacher, personality, meditation object and degree of concentration are interrelated.

The *Visuddhimagga* also analyses the jhānas in terms of discrete constituent factors. In the fourfold model used by Buddhaghosa, the first jhāna consists of five factors: applied thought (vitakka), sustained thought (vicāra), happiness or joy (pīti), bliss (sukha), and concentration or unification. The second is defined by the disappearance of the first two factors, the third by the further disappearance of pīti, and the fourth by the abandonment of sukha in favour of equanimous feeling⁸¹. The *Visuddhimagga* additionally gives a fivefold model, in which the transition represented by the second jhāna in the fourfold scheme is divided into two stages: one in which vitakka alone has been transcended and another in which both vitakka and vicāra have disappeared⁸². The jhānas are therefore treated not simply as four narratively described experiences but as combinations of mental factors whose presence or absence permits increasingly fine distinctions between levels of concentration.

The historical significance of this analysis has been debated. Scholars such as Martin Stuart-Fox argue that the concept of discrete ‘jhāna factors’ reflects a characteristically Abhidhammic mode of analysis. He further proposes that the inclusion of one-pointedness (ekaggatā) among the factors of the first jhāna may have arisen from a scholastic desire to establish a symmetrical correspondence between the five hindrances and five jhāna factors, although this is of course

⁷⁸ Vism III.107

⁷⁹ Vism III.28, 57–73

⁸⁰ Vism III.74; Vism III.121–22

⁸¹ Vism III.21; IV.104–09

⁸² Vism III.25; IV.198–202

difficult to prove definitively⁸³. Stuart-Fox himself concedes that conclusive historical evidence for precisely how the alteration occurred is unavailable and presents his reconstruction as hypothetical⁸⁴. The textual evidence is also less straightforward than a simple distinction between ‘Sutta’ and ‘Abhidhamma’ might suggest. Peter Harvey notes that a five-factor analysis of the first jhāna, including citt’ekaggatā, occurs within the *Majjhima Nikāya* itself, while other passages display forms of analysis similar to those developed more fully in the Abhidhamma⁸⁵. Stuart-Fox, by contrast, regards such passages as reflecting comparatively late Abhidhammic influence upon the Sutta material⁸⁶. It is therefore safer to remain cautious here, rather than to assume a sharp and uncontested boundary between two completely distinct systems. There seems to be some overlap.

Perhaps the most distinctive and influential feature of the *Visuddhimagga*’s practical presentation, in addition to the jhāna factors, is the role assigned to the nimitta, or meditation ‘sign’. This process is illustrated particularly clearly through Buddhaghosa’s treatment of the earth kasiṇa in Chapter IV. The practitioner first attends repeatedly to a physical disk and learns it well. After sufficient practice, the object can be reproduced mentally with the eyes closed, becoming the ‘learning sign’ (uggaha-nimitta)⁸⁷. With further development, the five hindrances are suppressed and the learning sign gives rise to the ‘counterpart sign’ (paṭibhāga-nimitta), described as vastly more purified than the original appearance. Buddhaghosa stresses that this counterpart sign is not itself a physical coloured or shaped object but a mode of appearance produced through developed perception. Within the system presented here, the arising of this latter sign coincides with access concentration. From this point the practitioner cultivates and guards the sign until the greater stability of absorption is attained⁸⁸.

Gethin identifies the nimitta as one of the most striking features of Buddhaghosa’s account. In the sequence, the external object becomes a visualised acquired sign and eventually a purified counterpart sign, the latter marking the threshold of absorption. Although the precise sequence is not applicable in identical form to every meditation object, the transformation of the object at the level of access concentration plays a substantial role in the commentarial account⁸⁹. The significance of this development should not be understated. The canonical four-jhāna formula describes the changing cognitive qualities of successive attainments, whereas the *Visuddhimagga* provides an elaborate account of the meditative procedure by which concentration upon an object

⁸³ Martin Stuart-Fox, ‘Jhāna and Buddhist Scholasticism’, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 12.2 (1989), 79–110 (p. 83, pp. 98–101).

⁸⁴ Stuart-Fox, ‘Jhāna and Buddhist Scholasticism’, p. 98.

⁸⁵ Peter Harvey, ‘The Four Jhānas and their Qualities in the Pali Tradition’, *Buddhist Studies Review*, 35.1–2 (2018), 3–27 (p. 4)

⁸⁶ Stuart-Fox, ‘Jhāna and Buddhist Scholasticism’, pp. 89–90.

⁸⁷ *Vism* IV.22–30

⁸⁸ *Vism* IV.31–34

⁸⁹ Gethin, ‘The Jhānas in the Buddhist Path to Liberation’, pp. 189–90.

is progressively transformed and stabilised before full absorption is reached.

This difference has encouraged some scholars to regard the commentarial model as substantially different from the jhāna of the Nikāyas. As Roderick Bucknell observes, the specific sequence involving uggaha-nimitta, paṭibhāga-nimitta, upacāra-samādhi and appanā-samādhi is not explicitly described in the Nikāyas at all⁹⁰. He accepts Buddhaghosa's account as a plausible description of a genuine sequence of concentrative experiences, but argues that identifying the culmination of this sequence with the first jhāna creates difficulties when it is compared with his reconstruction of the earlier Nikāya scheme⁹¹. As stated previously, Stuart-Fox similarly interprets features such as the five-factor analysis and the fivefold scheme as evidence of scholastic development⁹². Such arguments make clear that systematisation cannot automatically be treated as a neutral process in which Buddhaghosa simply adds practical instructions to an otherwise unchanged canonical account.

At the same time, we must be cautious about drawing the opposite conclusion: that the *Visuddhimagga* describes an entirely different meditative experience. Anālayo acknowledges that the Theravāda presentation employs terminology unknown in the early discourses and differs from them in several respects, but cautions that this does not necessarily establish that the resulting experience of absorption was substantially different⁹³. Gethin adopts a stronger position of continuity, preferring to understand these sorts of texts as elaborations on theories of meditation already articulated within the Nikāyas⁹⁴. The disagreement is therefore partly one of historical interpretation. The additional classifications and terminology of the Abhidhamma and commentarial tradition are undeniable, but whether these represent a transformation of jhāna itself or the formalisation of practices and understandings that earlier texts left underexplained remains contested. However, it seems likely to be a little of both.

What can be established more securely is that Buddhaghosa's treatment substantially changes the level of precision at which jhāna is discussed. The comparatively compact canonical formula is incorporated into a larger theoretical and practical architecture encompassing classifications of concentration, meditation objects, individual temperament, teacher-pupil instruction, the progressive suppression of the hindrances, access and absorption, the five jhāna factors, meditation signs and the controlled progression through increasingly refined states. Even after attainment, the *Visuddhimagga* envisages further cultivation through five forms of mastery:

⁹⁰ Bucknell, 'Reinterpreting the Jhānas', p. 390.

⁹¹ Bucknell, 'Reinterpreting the Jhānas', pp. 389–90.

⁹² Stuart-Fox, 'Jhāna and Buddhist Scholasticism', p. 83, pp. 98–101.

⁹³ Anālayo, 'A Brief History of Buddhist Absorption', p. 583.

⁹⁴ Gethin, 'On the Practice of Buddhist Meditation According to the Pali Nikāyas and Exegetical Sources', pp. 216–17.

adverting to the jhāna, entering it, determining its duration, emerging from it, and reviewing it at will⁹⁵. In this sense, the principal contribution of the commentarial tradition is not merely to preserve the canonical fourfold formula, but to embed it within an extensive technology of meditation. This systematisation would become highly consequential for later Theravāda understandings of what qualifies as jhāna and how it is to be attained, and provides the necessary background for the sharply differing interpretations encountered in modern Theravāda meditation traditions.

⁹⁵ Vism IV.131–36

Chapter 7: Burmese Vipassanā: Ledi, Mahāsī, and Pa-Auk Sayadaw

The systematisation of meditation found in the *Visuddhimagga* provided later Theravāda Buddhism with an extensive framework within which the relationship between concentration and liberating insight could be understood. However, this did not clearly demonstrate that every practitioner needs to develop the same degree of concentration before turning to insight. This flexibility became particularly significant within the Burmese meditation revival, where influential traditions increasingly ceased to treat full absorption (jhāna) as a universal prerequisite for beginning insight practice⁹⁶. Interestingly, though, this development did not necessarily entail rejection of the inherited commentarial framework. Mahāsī's system, for example, retained the seven purifications and an explicitly Abhidhammic analysis while substantially changing the practical role assigned to concentration and jhāna⁹⁷.

The underlying tension between concentration and insight did not itself originate in nineteenth-century Burma. Paul Griffiths argues that the Pāli sources contain two distinct, and imperfectly reconciled, models of meditation and liberation: one centred upon samādhi or samatha, and another upon vipassanā and paññā⁹⁸. Richard Gombrich similarly identifies several possible understandings of the relationship between concentration and insight within the texts, such as: concentration may be regarded as a necessary preparation for understanding; both may be required but cultivated with different emphases; they may be conceived as alternative routes; or insight may ultimately be regarded as sufficient while concentration alone cannot produce liberation⁹⁹. Importantly, these are scholarly reconstructions rather than an uncontested history of early Buddhist meditation. What they establish for the present discussion is that the modern Burmese privileging of insight developed against an already complicated textual background.

Considerable caution is also required when speaking of the 'decline' of jhāna or the rise of the 'Vipassanā movement,' since both expressions risk presenting Theravāda meditation as historically more uniform than the evidence shows. Cousins argues that the lineage of present-day insight meditation cannot presently be traced beyond nineteenth-century Burma, and regards insight meditation as a distinct method as probably a revival based substantially upon textual

⁹⁶ Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, pp. 137–39; L. S. Cousins, 'The Origins of Insight Meditation', in *The Buddhist Forum, IV: Seminar Papers 1994–1996*, ed. by Tadeusz Skorupski (School of Oriental and African Studies, 1996), pp. 35–58 (pp. 47–48).

⁹⁷ Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, pp. 160–62.

⁹⁸ Paul Griffiths, 'Concentration or Insight: The Problematic of Theravāda Buddhist Meditation-Theory', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 49.4 (1981), 605–24 (p. 605)

⁹⁹ Richard F. Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2006), pp. 114–15.

sources, particularly the *Visuddhimagga*¹⁰⁰. Skilton, Crosby and Pyi Phyo Kyaw likewise emphasise the considerable historical diversity of Theravāda meditation and argue that most meditation traditions currently practised are predominantly text-based revivals whose traceable histories extend no earlier than the nineteenth century, while warning against assumptions of uninterrupted transmission from the time of the Buddha¹⁰¹. It is therefore more accurate to speak of the de-emphasis of full absorption within particularly influential modern Theravāda movements than of jhāna simply disappearing from Theravāda Buddhism.

Within this more restricted historical claim, the work of Ledi Sayadaw occupies a central position. Erik Braun situates Ledi's promotion of meditation within the profound transformation of Burmese Buddhism under colonial rule. Although interest in meditation was already present in nineteenth-century Burma, Braun argues that Ledi's writings constituted the first pervasive and influential call for widespread practice, especially among the laity. His concern for the preservation of teachings was expressed not only through morality and textual learning but through the extension of practices traditionally associated more strongly with experienced monastics to ordinary lay Buddhists¹⁰².

The role of the Abhidhamma in this development is particularly important. Braun argues that Ledi transformed an elite, text-centred Abhidhammic education into a practical basis for meditation. Knowledge of Abhidhamma categories instructed practitioners in what they should observe within immediate experience, allowing conceptual learning and meditative observation to reinforce one another. In Braun's interpretation, the simplification of practice through attention to objects, combined with the possibility of dispensing with very long absorptive meditation sessions, made meditation more accessible and portable for lay practitioners immersed in ordinary social life. He therefore describes Ledi's achievement as creating the conditions from which meditation could eventually become a mass phenomenon¹⁰³. This modern Burmese development is interesting in that the Abhidhammic analysis itself provided an intellectual framework through which meditative experience could be observed and interpreted.

Jhāna nevertheless underwent a significant change in status within this system. Ledi explicitly allowed practitioners who were unable or unwilling to complete the time-consuming development of deep absorption to proceed to insight at a substantially lower level of concentration. Braun notes that in Ledi's scheme the practitioner could ideally cultivate the jhānas, but could also move into vipassanā from a lower jhāna, from access concentration, or

¹⁰⁰ Cousins, 'Origins of Insight Meditation', pp. 41–42.

¹⁰¹ Andrew Skilton, Kate Crosby and Pyi Phyo Kyaw, 'Terms of Engagement: Text, Technique and Experience in Scholarship on Theravada Meditation', *Contemporary Buddhism*, 20.1–2 (2019), 1–35 (p. 5)

¹⁰² Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, pp. 124, 145–46.

¹⁰³ Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, pp. 142–45.

even from the relatively low level of ‘momentary concentration’ (khaṇika-samādhi) involved in successfully maintaining attention upon the breath. Ledi himself still regarded prior jhāna as the preferable course where attainable, but his significant innovation lay in insisting that inability to attain absorption did not prevent the practitioner from beginning insight practice¹⁰⁴. The practical consequence was considerable. Meditation that had often been regarded as exceptionally difficult could now be presented as an attainable undertaking for ordinary lay Buddhists.

The collective institutionalisation of this development occurred more fully in the generations following Ledi. Braun stresses that Ledi himself did not establish mass residential meditation centres and that his own ideal remained substantially one of individual practice, while later teachers and students created specialised institutions devoted to collective meditation¹⁰⁵. Ingrid Jordt describes the subsequent mass lay meditation movement as a major reconfiguration of Burmese Buddhist practice. At centres such as the Mahāsī Thathana Yeiktha, laypeople undertook intensive courses aimed not merely at merit-making but at progressing through successive insight experiences associated with the path to liberation. Monks remained the teachers of Dhamma, but the expectation that serious meditative attainments belonged primarily to monastics was substantially weakened. Jordt thus presents the vipassanā movement as simultaneously meditative, institutional and social. The relationship between the saṅgha and laity itself was altered by the emergence of large numbers of lay practitioners pursuing advanced meditation¹⁰⁶.

The teaching of Mahāsī Sayadaw represents one of the clearest and most influential examples of the resulting de-emphasis of jhāna. Mahāsī's method centres initially upon observation of the rising and falling movement of the abdomen before expanding attention to bodily activities, feelings, thoughts and sensory events. Experiences are initially identified through brief mental labels, allowing the practitioner to observe the psychophysical process with increasing precision¹⁰⁷. The method remains deeply indebted to the *Visuddhimagga*. It follows the seven purifications and retains a strongly Abhidhammic perspective. Its major departure lies in its extensive promotion of ‘pure’ or ‘dry’ insight (suddhavipassanā) supported by khaṇika-samādhi rather than by pursuing the cultivation of full absorption¹⁰⁸.

¹⁰⁴ Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, pp. 137–39.

¹⁰⁵ Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, p. 144.

¹⁰⁶ Ingrid Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power* (Ohio University Press, 2007), pp. 15–21.

¹⁰⁷ Bhikkhu Anālayo, ‘The Dynamics of Theravāda Insight Meditation’, section I, ‘Three Insight Meditation Traditions’, *Insight Journal* (2015) <https://www.buddhistinquiry.org/article/the-dynamics-of-theravada-insight-meditation/> (unpaginated) [accessed 29 September 2026]

¹⁰⁸ Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, pp. 160–62.

This claim created an interesting problem. If the seven purifications are successive, then purification of mind (*citta-visuddhi*) must precede the higher insight knowledges, yet the commentarial definition of this purification had traditionally been associated with access or absorption concentration. Cousins explains that Mahāsi responds by treating sufficiently strong momentary concentration as capable of fulfilling the function of access concentration. Momentary concentration is therefore not conceived of as a single weak state. At progressively stronger levels it can suppress the five hindrances and, in advanced insight, become comparable to absorption even though its objects arise and disappear from moment to moment¹⁰⁹. As such, the disagreement may be subtler than ‘concentration’ and ‘no concentration.’ Mahāsi does not eliminate samādhi from the path, but rather, he contests the proposition that samādhi must first take the specific form of sustained jhānic absorption and suggests an alternative, more accessible approach to concentration.

This distinction is important because the modern Vipassanā movement itself remained highly diverse. Anālayo's comparison of three influential modern Burmese-derived traditions makes the point especially clearly. Mahāsi, S. N. Goenka and Pa-Auk Sayadaw employ different primary objects. Anālayo classifies their principal satipaṭṭhāna emphases respectively as bodily postures, feeling, and the elements. Additionally, they also devote very different amounts of formal practice to tranquillity. His comparative table characterises Mahāsi as employing no separate formal development of tranquillity, Goenka as employing some, and Pa-Auk as employing much. Yet all three employ the Theravāda scheme of successive insight knowledges as a map of progress¹¹⁰. This shared framework itself has a history. Anālayo traces increasingly elaborate schemes of insight knowledge through the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, *Vimuttimaggā*, *Visuddhimaggā* and later Abhidhamma literature rather than treating their use by modern teachers as simply a transcription of the early discourses¹¹¹.

Otávio Vieira's comparison of Mahāsi, Goenka, Mogok and Pa-Auk similarly presents the central difference as one of how much concentration is deliberately developed and when. Vieira presents Mahāsi as developing concentration within the process of moment-to-moment insight; Goenka and Mogok employing a comparatively short preparatory period of samatha; and Pa-Auk as the concentration-intensive pole of this comparison, describing his method as aiming at the four jhānas before proceeding to vipassanā¹¹². However, as discussed below, Pa-Auk's own account qualifies this picture by explicitly recognising a pure-insight route¹¹³. Regardless, the frequently encountered description of a singular ‘Vipassanā movement’ obscures what was, in

¹⁰⁹ Cousins, ‘Origins of Insight Meditation’, pp. 47–48.

¹¹⁰ Anālayo, ‘Dynamics of Theravāda Insight Meditation’, section I, figs 1–2 and accompanying discussion.

¹¹¹ Anālayo, ‘Dynamics of Theravāda Insight Meditation’, section II, ‘The Insight Knowledges’.

¹¹² Otávio Vieira, ‘The Interface of Samatha and Vipassanā in the Insight Meditation Methods of Goenka, Mahāsi, Mogok and Pa Auk’, *Estrema: Revista Interdisciplinar de Humanidades*, 2.2 (2023), 186–212 (p. 186)

¹¹³ Pa-Auk Sayadaw, *Knowing and Seeing*, pp. 151–53.

reality, an internal Burmese debate over the proper relationship of tranquillity and insight.

Pa-Auk Sayadaw is especially significant for the present study because his teaching represents a powerful reassertion of the kind of highly systematised concentration practice examined in the previous section, while remaining part of the same wider Burmese meditation environment. Quli notes that Pa-Auk accords authority not only to the canon but also to the commentaries and subcommentaries, with the *Visuddhimagga* occupying an especially important position. He teaches both a pure-insight route and a route employing jhāna, although for most practitioners he recommends cultivating jhāna before proceeding to vipassanā¹¹⁴. This distinguishes him sharply from Mahāsi without making him simply the negation of the Burmese insight tradition.

Pa-Auk's own book, *Knowing and Seeing*, makes this textual allegiance explicit. He describes the system taught at Pa-Auk Meditation Centre as based upon the Pāli Buddhist texts and the *Visuddhimagga*, and defines Buddhist meditation as encompassing both samatha and vipassanā within the development of the Noble Eightfold Path¹¹⁵. In the concentration route, mindfulness of breathing is developed through increasingly stable attention until a learning sign (uggaha-nimitta) and subsequently a counterpart sign (paṭibhāga-nimitta) arise. Stable concentration on the counterpart sign leads first to access and then to absorption concentration, from which the jhānas are developed¹¹⁶. The continuity with the *Visuddhimagga* material is unmistakable, and nimitta, access, absorption, jhāna and the successive purifications become practical stages and goals within a contemporary training system.

In Pa-Auk's presentation, however, jhāna remains a means to insight rather than being synonymous with liberation. Vipassanā requires the analysis of mentality and materiality, their causal relationships, and their impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and the absence of self. The practitioner proceeding through concentration emerges from jhāna and uses the resulting stability of mind to investigate these conditioned phenomena¹¹⁷. In his description, jhāna functions metaphorically as a fortified place to which the meditator can retreat when fatigued by the work of insight before returning with renewed clarity¹¹⁸. Concentration purifies the mind through the suppression of the hindrances and progressive refinement of the jhāna factors, whereas vipassanā performs the distinct task of seeing mentality and materiality and their causes¹¹⁹.

¹¹⁴ Quli, 'Multiple Buddhist Modernisms', p. 230.

¹¹⁵ Pa-Auk Sayadaw, *Knowing and Seeing*, pp. 14–15.

¹¹⁶ Pa-Auk Sayadaw, *Knowing and Seeing*, pp. 20–26.

¹¹⁷ Pa-Auk Sayadaw, *Knowing and Seeing*, pp. 150–53.

¹¹⁸ Pa-Auk Sayadaw, *Knowing and Seeing*, pp. 124–25.

¹¹⁹ Pa-Auk Sayadaw, *Knowing and Seeing*, pp. 244–45.

Crucially, it must be noted that the sources do not support describing Pa-Auk as teaching that full jhāna is absolutely obligatory for every practitioner. His own account explicitly recognises the suddha-vipassanā-yānika, the practitioner whose vehicle is pure insight. Such a practitioner can begin with four-elements meditation and develop the degree of access or momentary concentration required to discern material phenomena. Pa-Auk states that if one can clearly perceive ultimate mentality-materiality and its causes without prior samatha, then further samatha practice is unnecessary. If one cannot do so, then they should cultivate an appropriate tranquillity practice until concentration is sufficiently strong. He likewise answers explicitly that supramundane states can be attained with access concentration rather than absorption¹²⁰. Quli's account, in which Pa-Auk teaches both pure vipassanā and jhāna while generally recommending the latter first, is therefore closely consistent with Pa-Auk's own presentation¹²¹.

However, this point also exposes a genuine disagreement within some of the secondary literature we have been discussing. Jordt characterises Pa-Auk as adopting an exceptionally literal reading of the *Visuddhimagga* and describes him as requiring mastery of its extensive range of meditation exercises before vipassanā¹²². Vieira similarly presents him as the extreme concentration-oriented pole of the modern Burmese spectrum¹²³. Yet, contrary to this, Pa-Auk's own text expressly allows a pure-insight route without prior jhāna¹²⁴. It seems that the conclusion Jordt and Vieira come to is therefore not supported by primary evidence. The safer conclusion is therefore not that Pa-Auk requires the four jhānas universally, but that his system gives them an unusually prominent and highly developed role among modern Theravāda (particularly Burmese) traditions. He also treats deep concentration as the preferred preparation for many meditators, and retains a non-jhānic route where sufficient insight concentration can nevertheless be established. This distinction is important for avoiding an artificial binary between 'Mahāsī without concentration' and 'Pa-Auk requiring absorption'. In actuality, both systems require concentration, but they conceptualise its necessary form and depth very differently.

The broader historical development can consequently be understood neither as the straightforward disappearance of jhāna nor as a simple rejection of the commentarial tradition. Ledi and Mahāsī helped create enormously influential modes of practice in which full absorption ceased to function as the gateway through which every practitioner had to pass before undertaking insight. Yet these movements retained Abhidhammic categories, the seven purifications and increasingly elaborate maps of insight inherited through the commentarial tradition. Griffiths interpreted the modern prominence of satipaṭṭhāna and insight as evidence of

¹²⁰ Pa-Auk Sayadaw, *Knowing and Seeing*, pp. 151–53.

¹²¹ Quli, 'Multiple Buddhist Modernisms', p. 230.

¹²² Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, p. 228 n. 12.

¹²³ Vieira, 'Interface of Samatha and Vipassanā', pp. 203, 206.

¹²⁴ Pa-Auk Sayadaw, *Knowing and Seeing*, pp. 151–53.

a wider devaluation of the classical samādhi exercises¹²⁵. Read as a characterization of Theravāda as a whole, however, this formulation is probably too sweeping given the historical diversity documented by Cousins and by Skilton, Crosby and Kyaw¹²⁶. Nevertheless, it identifies an important tendency within several influential modern insight traditions.

Pa-Auk therefore occupies an especially revealing position within this history. He is not simply a survival from an unchanged premodern jhāna tradition. Skilton, Crosby and Kyaw caution precisely against assuming such uninterrupted lines of meditative transmission and stress the importance of textual revival in modern Theravāda practice¹²⁷. At the same time, neither is Pa-Auk best understood as rejecting the Burmese Vipassanā revival. His system accepts the same fundamental importance of insight and employs many of the same commentarial structures, while restoring intensive samatha, nimitta and jhāna as a much more prominent preparatory function¹²⁸. Quli accordingly places Pa-Auk within what she terms a ‘mainstream modernism’, combining the modern emphasis on widespread meditation practice with a strong commitment to the authority of the wider Buddhist textual tradition¹²⁹.

The Burmese history demonstrates how dramatically the practical meaning of the canonical term jhāna could depend upon the wider architecture into which it was inserted. In the *Visuddhimagga*, jhāna had, rightly or wrongly, been situated within a meticulous programme of access, absorption, meditation signs and graduated mastery. Ledi made it possible for practitioners to enter insight without completing that programme and Mahāsī developed this possibility into an influential system in which momentary concentration could perform the necessary preparatory function. Meanwhile, Pa-Auk reasserted the practical value of deep absorption without entirely denying the possibility of pure insight. Rather than a simple historical movement from ‘jhāna’ to ‘vipassanā’ and back, modern Burmese Theravāda produced competing solutions to the same inherited lingering question. How concentrated must the mind become before liberating insight can be effectively developed?

¹²⁵ Griffiths, ‘Concentration or Insight’, p. 618.

¹²⁶ Cousins, ‘Origins of Insight Meditation’, pp. 35–42; Skilton, Crosby and Kyaw, ‘Terms of Engagement’, pp. 1, 5.

¹²⁷ Skilton, Crosby and Kyaw, ‘Terms of Engagement’, p. 5.

¹²⁸ Pa-Auk Sayadaw, *Knowing and Seeing*, pp. 14–15, 20–26; Quli, ‘Multiple Buddhist Modernisms’, p. 230.

¹²⁹ Quli, ‘Multiple Buddhist Modernisms’, p. 237.

Chapter 8: Modern Debates (What is Jhāna, and is it Liberative?)

The modern revival of jhāna practice has not produced a single agreed interpretation of what the four jhānas are. Rather, contemporary Theravāda contains strikingly different accounts of both their experiential features and their true function within the Buddhist path. The disagreement concerns more than the degree of concentration required to enter jhāna. It extends to whether thought can occur within it, whether sensory awareness remains, whether a nimitta is required, whether the body can still be perceived, how vitakka and vicāra should be understood, and, most significantly, whether jhāna merely prepares the mind for liberating insight or is itself part of the process by which insight is actualised¹³⁰. Sparby and Sacchet's recent comparative study of modern meditation manuals asks whether practitioners using the same word jhāna are necessarily describing the same kind of state at all. They find substantial differences, particularly concerning thought, intentional investigation, sensory perception, nimitta, the presence of self and the depth of absorption¹³¹.

These differences should be situated within the wider history examined in the preceding sections. The Burmese Vipassanā movements had demonstrated that full absorption could be considerably de-emphasised without abandoning the pursuit of liberation, while Pa-Auk represented a strong modern reassertion of intensive concentration practice¹³². In Western Theravāda environments, however, jhāna itself increasingly became the object of renewed interest. Quli observed that although the dry-insight model had been particularly influential among American convert Buddhists, jhāna practice had begun to enjoy a marked revival, accompanied by retreats, books and competing claims concerning the authority of particular interpretations¹³³. Sparby and Sacchet likewise note that recent meditation manuals represent a significant development in making detailed descriptions of jhāna available to lay practitioners, while simultaneously revealing major discrepancies among teachers who all identify their methods with the Theravāda tradition¹³⁴.

Two particularly revealing contemporary interpretations are those of Ajahn Brahm and Leigh Brasington. Both present jhāna as important to the Buddha's path to awakening, although they

¹³⁰ Leigh Brasington, *Right Concentration: A Practical Guide to the Jhānas* (Shambhala, 2015), ebook, unpaginated, ch. 8, 'Insight Practice'; Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, p. 156

¹³¹ Sparby and Sacchet, 'Toward a Unified Account', pp. 1376, 1382.

¹³² Sparby and Sacchet, 'Toward a Unified Account', p. 1377; Quli, 'Multiple Buddhist Modernisms', p. 230.

¹³³ Quli, 'Multiple Buddhist Modernisms', pp. 225–26.

¹³⁴ Sparby and Sacchet, 'Toward a Unified Account', pp. 1375–76.

describe substantially different meditative experiences under the same name¹³⁵. For Ajahn Brahm, jhāna is an exceptionally deep state in which the ordinary sensory and volitional world has entirely disappeared. His practical sequence proceeds from present-moment awareness through silent awareness and increasingly refined attention to the breath, culminating in the appearance of a nimitta and entry into jhāna¹³⁶. The nimitta emerges only once awareness of the body, thought and ultimately the five senses has been relinquished. Brahm insists that a genuine nimitta appears after the breath itself has disappeared from awareness, when the external senses and inner verbal commentary have ceased and the meditator experiences a purely mental object, frequently perceived as an intense light¹³⁷.

The resulting jhāna is consequently much more than unusually stable attention. In Brahm's description, the five senses are completely inactive, thought is impossible and the meditator enters an inner realm in which ordinary bodily awareness no longer operates. Sparby and Sacchet summarise this model as one in which there is no possibility of thought or decision-making, no perception of ordinary time, no five-sense activity, and awareness is restricted to an unmoving experience of bliss¹³⁸. They accordingly classify Brahm among the modern exponents of a deep, nimitta-based interpretation of jhāna. Their survey identifies Brahm's *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond* specifically as a nimitta-based system deriving from his training under Nai Boonman and Ajahn Chah¹³⁹. Brahm's account therefore resembles the strongly absorptive interpretation encountered earlier in the commentarial and Pa-Auk systems, but his treatment of jhāna and insight requires an important qualification. He does not claim that insight occurs while the meditator is absorbed in jhāna. On the contrary, he explicitly states that the jhānas are too still for contemplation to take place. Their importance in the attainment of insight lies in what they do to the mind. Through suppressing the five hindrances for a prolonged period, jhāna leaves the practitioner after emergence with an exceptionally clear, powerful and stable mind in which deep insight becomes possible¹⁴⁰.

His frequently used analogy is that of a powerful flashlight. Study of Dhamma supplies the map, but the mind empowered by jhāna supplies sufficient illumination to penetrate what that map describes. Intellectual knowledge without such mental power cannot, in Brahm's account, become sufficiently penetrating insight. Conversely, concentration without knowing where to

¹³⁵ Ajahn Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond: A Meditator's Handbook* (Wisdom Publications, 2006), ebook, unpaginated, ch. 12; Brasington, *Right Concentration*, Introduction.

¹³⁶ Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, chs 1–2.

¹³⁷ Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, ch. 2, 'Stage Six: Experiencing the Beautiful Nimitta' and 'The Qualities of a Nimitta'.

¹³⁸ Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, ch. 11, 'The Landmarks of All Jhānas'; Sparby and Sacchet, 'Toward a Unified Account', p. 1381, table 2.

¹³⁹ Sparby and Sacchet, 'Toward a Unified Account', p. 1377, table 1.

¹⁴⁰ Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, ch. 12, 'Upacāra Samādhi-the Immediate Neighbor of Jhāna'.

direct the concentrated mind may likewise fail to produce liberation. Jhāna and wisdom therefore remain distinguishable even while the former is presented as indispensable to the latter¹⁴¹. Brahm accordingly interprets post-jhāna concentration as the normal setting in which profound insight occurs.

This distinction matters because Quli characterises Brahm as taking an unusually exclusive position among contemporary Theravāda teachers. In her analysis he rejects vipassanā without jhāna as an adequate path to awakening and presents jhāna as the only legitimate route. His strong claims for the authority of this interpretation sit alongside acceptance of karma, rebirth, abhiññā, past-life recollection and traditional cosmological realities, even as he also employs modern scientific rhetoric in their defence¹⁴². This exclusivity is sufficiently pronounced that Jack Kornfield's foreword to *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond* explicitly praises Brahm's method while distancing himself from the claim that it constitutes the uniquely authentic path taught by the Buddha, arguing instead for the validity of multiple Buddhist meditative approaches¹⁴³. The disagreement is thus already present within the book itself.

Leigh Brasington, by contrast, deliberately presents a considerably less absorptive model. Following Ayya Khema, Brasington describes the jhānas as altered states produced through concentration but maintains that they are not themselves awakening. Rather, they constitute a means of stabilising and training the mind in preparation for insight¹⁴⁴. Like Brahm, he therefore rejects the idea that jhāna is merely an irrelevant meditative luxury. Yet the actual state he calls jhāna differs substantially from Brahm's. Brasington begins with access concentration. Once this has become sufficiently stable, attention shifts away from the original meditation object (usually the breath) and towards a pleasant sensation. Sustained attention to that pleasantness intensifies until sustained attention to the pleasant sensation develops into the distinctive experience of pīti and sukha. Pīti may manifest as bodily energy, tingling, heat, vibration or an intense upward rush, accompanied by the emotional happiness of sukha. For Brasington, the combination of these factors and sustained attention to them constitutes the first jhāna¹⁴⁵.

¹⁴¹ Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, ch. 12, 'The Flashlight Plus the Map'.

¹⁴² Quli, 'Multiple Buddhist Modernisms', pp. 231–32, 238.

¹⁴³ Jack Kornfield, 'Foreword', in Ajahn Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond: A Meditator's Handbook* (Wisdom Publications, 2006), ebook, unpaginated.

¹⁴⁴ Brasington, *Right Concentration*, Preface, Introduction and ch. 8, 'Insight Practice'.

¹⁴⁵ Brasington, *Right Concentration*, ch. 3, 'Entering the Jhānas'; Brasington, *Right Concentration*, ch. 4, 'First Jhāna'.

Unlike Brahm, Brasington allows thinking to remain present during the first jhāna. For Brasington, the attainment is defined by primary absorption in pīti-sukha, provided that any remaining thought stays in the background and does not distract from the experience¹⁴⁶. He associates this residual mental activity with vitakka and vicāra, which he interprets as thinking and examining rather than initial and sustained application of attention¹⁴⁷. This difference alone demonstrates why descriptions such as ‘the first jhāna’ can conceal profound phenomenological disagreement. Indeed, Brasington makes this disagreement explicit. He argues that the descriptions in the Nikāyas portray a less deeply absorptive first jhāna than that subsequently codified in the Abhidhamma and *Visuddhimagga*. In his reconstruction, later generations progressively deepened the degree of concentration expected of jhāna, reinterpreted vitakka and vicāra, added an increasingly strong conception of one-pointedness (ekaggatā), and eventually arrived at a state in which thought, hearing and bodily perception were excluded. He contrasts this with passages in the suttas in which the body is suffused with pīti and sukha, regarding this as inconsistent with the complete sensory withdrawal characteristic of the later absorptive interpretation¹⁴⁸.

Brasington is therefore not simply teaching an easier version of the same state taught by Brahm. His argument is partly a historical one. He believes that the lighter form better represents the jhāna described in the early discourses, while the very deep absorptions represent a later development. He even applies this interpretation to the modern decline of jhāna, arguing that once jhāna came to be defined according to extremely demanding *Visuddhimagga*-style standards, comparatively few practitioners could attain it, and dry insight consequently became more attractive and practicable¹⁴⁹. Whether that historical reconstruction is convincing is a separate question, but for the present argument its significance lies in showing that contemporary disagreements about jhāna depend partly upon different judgments regarding which strata of the Buddhist tradition should determine its meaning.

The resulting contrast between Brahm and Brasington is therefore sharper than a difference of degree. Brahm's jhāna requires the complete cessation of sensory activity and thought and normally develops through a luminous nimitta. On the other hand, Brasington's first jhāna can retain bodily awareness and a degree of background thought and is entered through intensified pīti-sukha¹⁵⁰. Sparby and Sacchet identify precisely this division across modern manuals, observing that some teachers permit thought during jhāna, while others, including Brahm,

¹⁴⁶ Brasington, *Right Concentration*, ch. 4, ‘First Jhāna’.

¹⁴⁷ Brasington, *Right Concentration*, ch. 11, ‘Vitakka and Vicāra’.

¹⁴⁸ Brasington, *Right Concentration*, ch. 12, ‘First Jhāna’, and appendix 1, ‘Frequently Asked Questions’.

¹⁴⁹ Brasington, *Right Concentration*, appendix 1, ‘Frequently Asked Questions’, discussion of why jhāna is seldom taught.

¹⁵⁰ Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, chs 2, 11; Brasington, *Right Concentration*, chs 3–4.

exclude it entirely. They suggest that one major explanatory factor is the differing authority accorded to the early discourses and to later Abhidhamma/commentarial interpretations. They note that contemporary teachers who favour the suttas over commentarial traditions tend toward lighter models, and those whose practice and interpretations reflect the *Visuddhimagga* describe more radical absorption¹⁵¹.

Nevertheless, we must exercise caution against treating the contemporary landscape as an irresolvable choice in which only one group can possibly be describing genuine jhāna. Attempts have been made to identify a shared experiential structure while distinguishing between different types or degrees of absorption¹⁵². The very need for such a classification demonstrates how unstable the term has become in contemporary usage. Disagreement sometimes reflects genuinely different states being assigned the same traditional label rather than rival descriptions of the same meditative experience.

The disagreement over the depth of jhāna leads directly into an even more fundamental scholarly dispute. That being, whether jhāna should be regarded principally as concentration developed in preparation for insight or whether jhāna itself is an expression of the liberative transformation normally associated with insight. Keren Arbel advances one of the strongest recent arguments for the latter interpretation. Her analysis explicitly challenges the conventional separation between samatha-bhāvanā and vipassanā-bhāvanā when reconstructing meditation in the Pāli Nikāyas. Rather than regarding the four jhānas as absorptions that temporarily withdraw the practitioner from phenomenal experience before a subsequent and distinct practice of insight, she argues that jhāna and vipassanā are integral dimensions of a single process. In her account, the four jhānas are not merely concentration exercises serving as an optional preparation for insight: they are the ‘actualization and embodiment of insight practice’ itself¹⁵³. This interpretation depends upon a phenomenology of jhāna quite unlike Brahm’s. Arbel rejects the assumption that sammā-samādhi in the Nikāyas necessarily denotes one-pointed absorption into an isolated object. She instead describes the jhānic mind as a stable and discerning field of awareness capable of observing the changing of phenomena¹⁵⁴. In this model, concentration does not prevent insight from functioning. Rather, it is precisely the mental stability through which experience can be apprehended with increasing clarity. The progression of the jhānas consequently parallels the maturation of satipaṭṭhāna and the awakening factors rather than preceding them as an independent tranquillity exercise¹⁵⁵.

¹⁵¹ Sparby and Sacchet, ‘Toward a Unified Account’, pp. 1376, 1388–89.

¹⁵² Sparby and Sacchet, ‘Toward a Unified Account’, pp. 1382, 1387–89.

¹⁵³ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, p. 156.

¹⁵⁴ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, p. 94.

¹⁵⁵ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 115–18, 156–57.

For Arbel, the first jhāna already possesses a genuinely transformative function. Its non-sensual pīti and sukha actualise the Buddhist middle way experientially by providing a form of pleasure neither dependent upon sensuality nor upon self-mortification. She argues that this allows the practitioner to weaken or relinquish the deeply conditioned attraction to sensual pleasure and marks a transition from ordinary mindfulness, still subject to the hindrances, towards a more refined mode of observation¹⁵⁶. The later jhānas progressively intensify this transformation. Arbel interprets the movement from the second into the third jhāna, for example, through the development of the awakening factor of equanimity and through increasingly refined observation of the jhānic mind itself¹⁵⁷. The culmination of this process appears in her interpretation of the fourth jhāna. Here mindfulness and equanimity reach a highly purified form in which experience is encountered without ordinary clinging, rejection or identification. For Arbel, this constitutes an experiential actualisation of anattā, although she distinguishes the conditioned and impermanent fourth-jhāna experience from the enduring transformation of awakening¹⁵⁸. On this reading, jhāna is liberative not because concentration mechanically produces an additional insight after the absorption ends, but because the progressive transformation of perception and reactivity within the four jhānas is itself part of what liberating insight means.

Bhikkhu Anālayo, however, directly challenges this interpretation¹⁵⁹. His disagreement is not with the importance of jhāna. Rather, it concerns the stronger proposition that the attainment of absorption possesses liberating wisdom intrinsically. Anālayo first disputes several of the textual and philological arguments supporting Arbel's reconstruction. In particular, he rejects her interpretation of viveka in the first-jhāna formula as indicating discernment, arguing from Pāli, Sanskrit and parallel Chinese and Tibetan materials that the relevant sense is instead separation or seclusion from sensuality and unwholesome states¹⁶⁰. He similarly contests that freedom from the hindrances automatically amounts to wisdom. For Anālayo, suppression of the hindrances is a precondition for the development of wisdom, but the two should not be conflated¹⁶¹.

More fundamentally, Anālayo argues that the early texts contain examples which would be difficult to explain if absorption itself were intrinsically liberating. The *Brahmajāla-sutta* and its parallels associate meditative absorption alone with the formation of mistaken views. Additionally, other texts describe the repeated cultivation of the first jhāna as producing rebirth

¹⁵⁶ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, p. 74.

¹⁵⁷ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 117–20.

¹⁵⁸ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 161–63.

¹⁵⁹ Anālayo, 'On the Supposedly Liberating Function', p. 271.

¹⁶⁰ Anālayo, 'On the Supposedly Liberating Function', pp. 272–73.

¹⁶¹ Anālayo, 'On the Supposedly Liberating Function', p. 274, n. 13.

in a Brahmā realm rather than the more desirable release from rebirth. For Anālayo, such passages demonstrate that absorption and liberating wisdom cannot simply be equated¹⁶². He also argues that even a practitioner who has attained the first jhāna may still succumb to sensual desire, indicating that jhānic suppression of sensuality should not be confused with the irreversible eradication of the underlying tendencies¹⁶³. This point becomes still stronger through Anālayo's treatment of pre-Buddhist absorption. The early Buddhist texts quite demonstrably portray forms of jhāna as already being practised before the Buddha. If the bare attainment of jhāna were itself identical with the distinctively Buddhist liberating insight, it would become difficult to explain how non-Buddhist practitioners could achieve these states without also attaining Buddhist liberation¹⁶⁴. It is therefore sensible to conclude that absorption may be powerful and valuable, while remaining insufficient by itself.

A related issue is addressed in Anālayo's later investigation of whether absorption is indispensable for stream-entry (a term used to describe the point at which someone has begun the irreversible process of eventually attaining arahantship)¹⁶⁵. Here again he cautions against automatically equating every occurrence of samādhi or mental unification with jhāna. His comparative analysis argues that the terminology of the early texts allows for a broader notion of concentration and that definitions of right concentration supported across textual parallels do not always require the four absorptions¹⁶⁶. Consequently, an argument that jhāna must be attained before stream-entry cannot simply proceed from the premise that right concentration is synonymous with the four jhānas. He explicitly notes Brasington's statement that the Buddha defined right concentration as jhāna as an example of the kinds of assumptions he wishes to confront¹⁶⁷. At the same time, Anālayo is careful not to deny the prominent place accorded to absorption in many early discourses. His argument is more against making it universally indispensable, based on insufficient textual grounds¹⁶⁸.

The modern debate consequently operates on two interconnected levels. The first is experiential. In other words, how deep is jhāna? Brahm's sensory shutdown and absence of thought stand at a considerable distance from Brasington's first jhāna, in which bodily pīti-sukha is prominent and some background thought may remain. Arbel moves further from the deep-absorption model by interpreting jhāna as a broad and discerning field capable of observing phenomena, while the

¹⁶² Anālayo, 'On the Supposedly Liberating Function', p. 275.

¹⁶³ Anālayo, 'On the Supposedly Liberating Function', p. 277.

¹⁶⁴ Anālayo, 'On the Supposedly Liberating Function', pp. 277–78.

¹⁶⁵ Bhikkhu Anālayo, 'The Role of Absorption for Entering the Stream', *Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 19 (2022), 1–26 (author's online version, pp. 1–2), <https://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/pdf/5-personen/analayo/roleabsorption.pdf> [accessed 29 September 2026].

¹⁶⁶ Anālayo, 'The Role of Absorption', author's online version, pp. 7–8.

¹⁶⁷ Anālayo, 'The Role of Absorption', author's online version, p. 29, n. 36.

¹⁶⁸ Anālayo, 'The Role of Absorption', author's online version, p. 21.

Visuddhimagga-influenced model examined previously conceives jhāna through increasingly complete absorption¹⁶⁹.

The second dispute is arguably more fundamental. What does jhāna actually accomplish? Brasington describes the jhānas as part of the path rather than the goal. The Buddha, in his reconstruction, rediscovered their usefulness but employed them as a preliminary to the insight that produced awakening¹⁷⁰. Brahm similarly distinguishes jhāna from the act of contemplation itself, but regards post-jhāna concentration as necessary for sufficiently deep insight¹⁷¹. Anālayo also insists that absorption can suppress obstacles and provide powerful support without thereby becoming identical with liberating wisdom¹⁷². Arbel, on the other hand, interprets progression through the four jhānas as the gradual embodiment of insight itself¹⁷³.

These positions cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ Buddhism. Quli’s analysis is particularly useful here. She argues that contemporary jhāna teachers embody multiple Buddhist modernisms, differing not simply in meditative technique but in the sources to which they appeal for authority. This mirrors what has already been demonstrated throughout this dissertation. Some schools of thought and practice privilege the commentarial tradition, some seek the supposed original Buddhism of the early textual corpus, while others place comparatively greater weight upon individual practice and experience¹⁷⁴. The disagreement over jhāna is consequently also a disagreement over how Buddhist authenticity itself should be established. The distinction drawn by Sparby and Sacchet between broadly ‘sutta-oriented’ lighter absorption and commentarily influenced deeper absorption captures part of this phenomenon, but even this should not be treated as an absolute taxonomy. Contemporary accounts overlap as well as diverge, and their authors combine textual interpretation, inherited practice traditions and first-person experience in different proportions¹⁷⁵. As such, the study of jhāna cannot truly proceed responsibly while treating the word as a self-explanatory category. Researchers must specify which characteristics are actually present rather than assume that every reported jhāna experience is equivalent.

¹⁶⁹ Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, ch. 11; Brasington, *Right Concentration*, ch. 4; Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, p. 94; Vism. IV.32–33, IV.140.

¹⁷⁰ Brasington, *Right Concentration*, appendix 1, ‘Frequently Asked Questions’, discussion of the Buddha-to-be’s rejection of his teachers’ attainments.

¹⁷¹ Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, ch. 12, ‘Upacāra Samādhi-the Immediate Neighbor of Jhāna’.

¹⁷² Anālayo, ‘On the Supposedly Liberating Function’, pp. 275, 278.

¹⁷³ Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 156–57.

¹⁷⁴ Quli, ‘Multiple Buddhist Modernisms’, p. 241.

¹⁷⁵ Sparby and Sacchet, ‘Toward a Unified Account’, pp. 1376, 1388–89.

For the purposes of the present study, this modern disagreement is important because it exposes the danger of asking simply whether jhāna is necessary for awakening without first determining what jhāna means in a particular interpretative system. If Brahm's jhāna is a state without sensory perception, thought or volitional control, while Brasington's first jhāna permits bodily awareness and residual thought, and Arbel's jhāna involves an increasingly purified perception of the phenomenal field, then apparently conflicting statements about the necessity or liberative value of jhāna may actually be arguments about different phenomena. Even once differences in depth are acknowledged, a fundamental interpretative problem remains. Are the jhānas best understood as states which prepare and empower the mind to acquire liberating knowledge, as Brahm and Brasington maintain in different ways? Or does the fourfold jhānic progression itself embody the transformation in perception and non-reactivity constitutive of insight, as Arbel argues? Anālayo's critique demonstrates that the latter position cannot be assumed simply from the importance accorded to jhāna in the early texts. A state can be indispensable, beneficial or strongly conducive to liberation without itself being sufficient to liberate. The question is not merely whether mindfulness or jhāna should be given priority, nor whether tranquillity must precede insight. It is whether such a distinction accurately reflects the meditative psychology of the Nikāyas at all. The striking divergence between interpretations demonstrates that neither the experience nor function of jhāna can be reconstructed merely by translating the term as 'absorption' and assuming that its meaning is settled. Instead, the relationship between sati, samādhi, jhāna and paññā must ultimately be reconsidered against the early discourses themselves.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined how jhāna has been understood, systematised and reinterpreted from its presentation in the early Buddhist texts through later Theravāda and contemporary meditation traditions. The evidence considered suggests that its history cannot adequately be described either as the uninterrupted preservation of a single meditative technique or as the replacement of an authentic early practice by later innovation. Instead, a recognisable fourfold formula persists while the practical, doctrinal and phenomenological frameworks through which it is understood change substantially. Continuity and reinterpretation therefore occur simultaneously.

The Pāli Nikāyas provide the clearest starting point. Within these texts, jhāna is not presented as an isolated technique but as part of a wider path involving ethical discipline, sense restraint, mindfulness, abandonment of the hindrances and the cultivation of right concentration. Its association with sammā-samādhi gives it an important position within the Noble Eightfold Path, although this does not by itself demonstrate that jhāna is synonymous with liberating insight or universally indispensable for every stage of awakening. The distinction between the four jhānas and the arūpa attainments further demonstrates that meditative depth alone should not be identified automatically with liberation.

Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* represents an important development in how this comparatively concise canonical material is understood. Rather than simply replacing the four-jhāna formula, the commentarial tradition incorporates it into a considerably more elaborate system. Access and absorption concentration, meditation objects, individual temperament, nimitta, jhāna factors and the mastery of meditative attainment provide a technical framework largely absent from the corresponding Nikāya descriptions. It is difficult to demonstrate whether this increasingly detailed system necessarily represents a fundamentally different meditative experience. The safer conclusion is that the *Visuddhimagga* changes substantially the conceptual and practical precision with which jhāna is described, and the resulting framework became profoundly influential upon later Theravāda meditation.

The modern Burmese traditions considered here demonstrate that this inherited framework did not produce a single approach to the relationship between concentration and insight. Ledi and Mahāṣī contributed to systems in which full absorption was no longer a prerequisite for vipassanā, while still retaining concepts deeply indebted to Abhidhamma and commentarial Theravāda. Mahāṣī's use of khaṇika-samādhi is especially significant because it shows that the

relevant disagreement was not simply between meditation systems which valued concentration and those which did not. Rather, it concerned what type and degree of concentration were necessary for insight. Pa-Auk's system provides an illuminating counterpoint by restoring intensive samatha, nimitta and jhāna to a prominent place while nevertheless allowing a route of pure insight without prior absorption. The modern Burmese history is therefore better understood as a series of competing solutions to the problem of how concentrated the mind must become in order to develop liberating insight, rather than as a simple decline and revival of jhāna.

The contemporary debate makes the instability of the category even more apparent. Ajahn Brahm and Leigh Brasington both defend the importance of jhāna while describing markedly different states. Brahm's interpretation requires complete withdrawal from sensory and discursive experience, whereas Brasington permits considerably greater bodily and cognitive activity, particularly within the first jhāna. The disagreement between Arbel and Anālayo concerns an even deeper question, whether jhāna should principally be understood as concentration supporting insight or whether the fourfold progression itself embodies aspects of the transformation normally called insight. The evidence examined here does not justify simply equating absorption with liberating wisdom. The existence of non-Buddhist attainments and textual examples in which absorption does not produce liberation make such an identification difficult to sustain. Yet neither does this reduce jhāna to an incidental or dispensable technique. The early texts repeatedly grant it a prominent place within the path, and later traditions continue to acknowledge that prominence even when full absorption is no longer regarded as necessary.

Perhaps the most significant conclusion of this study is that the question of whether 'jhāna' is necessary for liberation cannot be answered adequately until the meaning of jhāna itself has been established within the particular textual or practice tradition under discussion. A statement concerning the necessity of Brahm's sensory-withdrawn absorption is not necessarily making the same claim as one concerning Brasington's lighter first jhāna, Arbel's insight-bearing jhāna, or the highly systematised absorptions of the *Visuddhimagga*. Apparent disagreements can consequently concern different experiences as much as different judgments about the same experience. They also reflect competing sources of authority: the early discourses, Abhidhamma and commentarial literature, inherited meditation lineages, and individual meditative experience.

The history of jhāna is consequently also a history of Buddhist interpretation. The persistence of the fourfold formula has not prevented disagreement concerning how it should be practised, what it feels like, how deeply absorbed the meditator must become, or what relationship it bears to vipassanā and liberating wisdom. Rather than revealing a single practice either faithfully preserved or progressively corrupted, the material examined here demonstrates an ongoing

process in which inherited textual formulations are repeatedly interpreted within changing contexts. Jhāna has remained recognisably connected to its early Buddhist formulation while acquiring considerably different meanings within different traditions. It is precisely this combination of textual continuity and interpretative diversity that explains why one of the most frequently repeated meditative formulas in early Buddhist literature remains one of the most contested practices in Buddhism today.

Bibliography:

Early Buddhist and commentarial texts:

Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga*, trans. by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, 4th edn (Buddhist Publication Society, 2010)

‘DN 2: Sāmaññaphalasutta’, trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, *SuttaCentral*
<https://suttacentral.net/dn2/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026]

‘MN 26: Pāsārāsisutta’, trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, *SuttaCentral*
<https://suttacentral.net/mn26/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026]

‘MN 27: Cūlahatthipadopamasutta’, trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, *SuttaCentral*
<https://suttacentral.net/mn27/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026]

‘MN 36: Mahāsaccakasutta’, trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, *SuttaCentral*
<https://suttacentral.net/mn36/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026]

‘MN 39: Mahāassapurasutta’, trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, *SuttaCentral*
<https://suttacentral.net/mn39/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026]

‘MN 111: Anupadasutta’, trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, *SuttaCentral*
<https://suttacentral.net/mn111/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026]

‘MN 117: Mahācattārīsakasutta’, trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, *SuttaCentral*
<https://suttacentral.net/mn117/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026]

‘SN 45.8: Vibhaṅgasutta’, trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato, *SuttaCentral*
<https://suttacentral.net/sn45.8/en/sujato> [accessed 29 September 2026]

Modern scholarship and meditation literature:

Anālayo, Bhikkhu, 'A Brief History of Buddhist Absorption', *Mindfulness*, 11.3 (2020), pp. 571–86, doi:10.1007/s12671-019-01268-7

Anālayo, Bhikkhu, 'The Dynamics of Theravāda Insight Meditation', *Insight Journal* (2015), <https://www.buddhistinquiry.org/article/the-dynamics-of-theravada-insight-meditation/> (unpaginated) [accessed 29 September 2026]

Anālayo, Bhikkhu, 'On the Supposedly Liberating Function of the First Absorption', *Buddhist Studies Review*, 33.1–2 (2016), pp. 271–80, doi:10.1558/bsrv.31649

Anālayo, Bhikkhu, 'The Role of Absorption for Entering the Stream', *Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 19 (2022), 1–26 (author's version, separately paginated 1–34), <https://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/pdf/5-personen/analayo/roleabsorption.pdf> [accessed 29 September 2026]

Arbel, Keren, *Early Buddhist Meditation: The Four Jhānas as the Actualization of Insight*, Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism (Routledge, 2017)

Brahm, Ajahn, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond: A Meditator's Handbook* (Wisdom Publications, 2006), ebook, unpaginated

Brasington, Leigh, *Right Concentration: A Practical Guide to the Jhānas* (Shambhala Publications, 2015), ebook, unpaginated

Braun, Erik, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (University of Chicago Press, 2013)

Bronkhorst, Johannes, *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, 2nd edn (Motilal Banarsidass, 1993)

Bucknell, Roderick S., 'Reinterpreting the Jhānas', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 16.2 (1993), pp. 375–409

Cousins, L. S., ‘The Origins of Insight Meditation’, in *The Buddhist Forum, IV: Seminar Papers 1994–1996*, ed. by Tadeusz Skorupski (School of Oriental and African Studies, 1996), pp. 35–58

Gethin, Rupert, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, OPUS (Oxford University Press, 1998)

Gethin, Rupert, ‘The Jhānas in the Buddhist Path to Liberation: The Theravāda Perspective’, in *Meditación y contemplación: Caminos hacia la paz (Budismo Theravada y mística teresiana): Meditation and Contemplation: Pathways to Peace (Theravada Buddhism and Teresian Mysticism)*, ed. by Francisco Javier Sancho Fermín (Grupo Editorial Fonte, 2019), pp. 177–206

Gethin, Rupert, ‘On the Practice of Buddhist Meditation According to the Pali Nikāyas and Exegetical Sources’, *Buddhismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 9 (2004), pp. 201–21

Gombrich, Richard F., *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2006)

Griffiths, Paul, ‘Concentration or Insight: The Problematic of Theravada Buddhist Meditation-Theory’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 49.4 (1981), pp. 605–24, doi:10.1093/jaarel/XLIX.4.605

Harvey, Peter, ‘The Four Jhānas and their Qualities in the Pali Tradition’, *Buddhist Studies Review*, 35.1–2 (2018), pp. 3–27, doi:10.1558/bsrv.36750

Jordt, Ingrid, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power* (Ohio University Press, 2007)

Kornfield, Jack, ‘Foreword’, in Ajahn Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond: A Meditator’s Handbook* (Wisdom Publications, 2006), ebook, unpaginated

Pa-Auk Sayadaw, *Knowing and Seeing: Talks and Questions-and-Answers at a Meditation Retreat in Taiwan*, 2nd edn (Buddha Dharma Education Association, 2000)

Quli, Natalie, 'Multiple Buddhist Modernisms: Jhāna in Convert Theravāda', *Pacific World*, 3rd ser., 10 (2008), pp. 225–49

Skilton, Andrew, Kate Crosby and Pyi Phyo Kyaw, 'Terms of Engagement: Text, Technique and Experience in Scholarship on Theravada Meditation', *Contemporary Buddhism*, 20.1–2 (2019), pp. 1–35, doi:10.1080/14639947.2019.1666342

Sparby, Terje, and Matthew D. Sacchet, 'Toward a Unified Account of Advanced Concentrative Absorption Meditation: A Systematic Definition and Classification of Jhāna', *Mindfulness*, 15.6 (2024), pp. 1375–94, doi:10.1007/s12671-024-02367-w

Stuart-Fox, Martin, 'Jhāna and Buddhist Scholasticism', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 12.2 (1989), pp. 79–110

Vieira, Otávio, 'The Interface of Samatha and Vipassanā in the Insight Meditation Methods of Goenka, Mahāsī, Mogok and Pa Auk', *Estrema: Revista Interdisciplinar de Humanidades*, 2.2 (2023), pp. 186–212

Wynne, Alexander, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism (Routledge, 2007)