



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Concentration or Insight: The Problematic of Theravāda Buddhist Meditation-Theory

Author(s): Paul Griffiths

Source: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Dec., 1981), pp. 605-624

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1462452>

Accessed: 14/07/2009 13:47

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=oup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Oxford University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Concentration or Insight: The Problematic of Theravāda Buddhist Meditation-Theory

Paul Griffiths

More than forty years ago Louis de La Vallée Poussin wrote: “On peut, sans imprudence, discerner dans les sources Bouddhiques deux théories opposées . . . la théorie qui fait du salut une oeuvre purement ou surtout intellectuelle; la théorie qui met le salut au bout des disciplines ascétiques et extatiques” (1936–37:189–90). He was, if anything, understating the case. It will be the thesis of this paper that not only are there to be found in the Pali sources two distinct and to some degree opposed theories of what salvation is, but that there are also two separate and uneasily combined sets of meditative practices leading to these different goals. This thesis is, of course, nothing new. The Theravāda tradition itself has recognized it since the earliest times and has proposed various ways of combining the two types of meditative practice and reconciling the two soteriological goals. This paper will examine some of these attempts at reconciliation and combination as they appear in the Pali canon and in Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga*, and will argue that from the point of view of the uncommitted observer of the tradition such attempts remain, finally, unsatisfactory. The canonical and commentarial literature will be treated here as a unity, not because of any lack of appreciation of the integrity of each body of literature, but because the thrust of this paper is structural and philosophical rather than historical, and for such purposes differentiation between canon and commentary is of small importance.

Both modern Theravādin apologetic and contemporary Western scholarship have also been aware of this problem, and have suggested various ways of solving—or more often sidestepping—the issue. Some comments

Paul Griffiths is a Ph.D. candidate in the Buddhist Studies program at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He holds a Bachelor’s degree in Theology and a Master’s degree in Classical Indian Religion from the University of Oxford.

will be offered about these attempts in passing, but no comprehensive review will be offered; the emphasis of this paper will be firmly upon the problems apparent in the primary sources. It should be noted at the outset, though, that, despite the creative work which has been done in this field during the last two decades (cf. for some examples Cousins; Johansson, 1969, 1979; King; Schmithausen, 1976, 1979; Swearer), the questions raised by such pioneers as La Vallée Poussin and Stcherbatsky half a century ago have yet to be given the attention they deserve.

Finally, some suggestions will be made about the wider implications of this problem for our general understanding of what Buddhist soteriology is actually all about.

The Pali sources, then, show quite clearly that there are two different types of meditative practice available to the Buddhist. On the one hand, there is *samādhi/samatha bhāvanā*, and on the other, *vipassanā/paññā bhāvanā*. If we translate *bhāvanā* (a causative form derived from *bhāveti*, meaning “to cause to come to be,” “to develop,” “to inculcate,” “to beget,” “to produce,” etc.) as “(mental) development” or, more simply, “meditation”—which is clearly what it denotes in this sphere of discourse—then we have a contrast between concentration/tranquillity meditation and insight/wisdom meditation. The whole of the *Visuddhimagga*, essentially a meditation handbook, is arranged under the threefold *śīla-samādhi-paññā* scheme, and we find the distinction between concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*) made also at many points in the canon. We must ask: What are the differences between these two types of meditative practice? What kind of psychological states are they intended to produce? Towards what soteriological goal do they aim the practitioner?

1. Concentrative Meditation

Both in the Pali canon and in the *Visuddhimagga* we find precise scholastic definitions of the nature, aims, and techniques involved in this kind of meditative practice. The presentation here will largely follow Buddhaghosa, who in turn follows and systematizes the canonical data. Buddhaghosa defines concentration (*samādhi*) in the following way: “Concentration is skilful one-pointedness of mind (*kusalacittakaggatā*). . . . [It is] the centering (*ādhāna*) of mind and its concomitants (*cittacetāsikānaṃ*) evenly and correctly on a single subject (*ekārammaṇe*). Therefore it is that psychological state (*dhamma*) by means of which the mind and its concomitants remain undistracted and unscattered (*avikkhipamānā* . . . *avipakiṇṇā*) evenly and correctly upon a single object. This is to be understood as the act of concentrating (*idam samādhānan ti veditabbaṃ*)” (Vism. 3.2–3). This is clear enough. Concentrative meditation is a process by which the awareness is narrowed down from its usual wide spectrum to a specific single point (*ekārammaṇa*), just as a searchlight beam can be focused from a very wide and diffuse area

of illumination to a small and intense spot of light. This is a kind of meditation designed to exclude unwanted stimuli from awareness, to reduce the content of consciousness, and ultimately to issue in a state in which the mind has no content whatever, in which all sensory input, all perception, and all cognition and intellection have come to a complete halt. This state, at which the practice of concentrative meditation is aimed, is variously labeled in the texts; most commonly it is called *saññā-vedayita-nirodha*, the cessation of cognition and sensation. *Saññā* means the reception and assimilation of all external stimuli, thus “cognition.” *Vedayita* means “what has been felt,” not just in the sense of emotional reaction but in the wider sense of all sensation whatever. The state of *saññā-vedayita-nirodha* is also called by the equivalent term *nirodha-samāpatti*, the attainment of cessation. The idea is that the range and content of consciousness is progressively narrowed down by concentrative techniques until it ceases to have any content at all—and the searchlight beam winks out of existence.

This psychological state is mentioned frequently in the canonical texts and in the *Visuddhimagga* (Vism. 23; MN 1.296ff). It is clear also that it is the culminating point of the entire *jhāna system*, a hierarchically arranged series of states of consciousness which are characterized by increasing abstraction and narrowing of the range and content of consciousness until the total cessation of all its activities is attained in the *nirodha-samāpatti*. The nature of this psychological state, the intended aim of *samādhi-bhāvanā*, is made very clear by a debate in MN (Majjhima Nikāya) over the difference between a dead man and one who is in the state of *saññā-vedayita-nirodha*. In the *Mahāvedallasutta* Koṭṭhita interrogates Sāriputta and asks: “What is the difference, reverend one, between that dead thing which is passed away and the monk who has attained the cessation of cognition and sensation (*saññā-vedayita-nirodha*)?” (MN 1.296). Sāriputta replies to the effect that in a dead man the activities of the body (*kāyasankhārā*, defined at MN 1.301 as inbreathing and outbreathing), those of speech (*vācāsankhārā*, defined at MN 1.301 as *vitakka-vicāra*), and those of the mind (*cittasankhārā*, defined at MN 1.301 as *saññā-vedayita*) have all ceased, as also have vitality (*āyus*), body heat, and the operations of the sense organs. Sāriputta goes on to say: “But the monk who has attained the cessation of cognition and sensation, although his bodily activities have stopped and subsided, although his vocal activities have stopped and subsided, although his mental activities have stopped and subsided, his vitality is not entirely destroyed, his heat is not allayed, his sense-organs are purified. This, reverend one, is the difference between a dead thing, passed away, and that monk who has obtained the cessation of cognition and sensation” (MN 1.296). We can see from this that the difference between a dead man and one in the state of *saññā-vedayita-nirodha* lies not in what is going on in his head or body—the answer for both, apparently, is nothing—but in his potential for such activities in the future. Death is irreversible, Sāriputta is telling us, and the *nirodha-samāpatti* is not. In

modern psychological terminology we might describe *saññā-vedayita-nirodha* as a state of cataleptic trance in which the subject shows no response to external stimuli; the processes of his autonomic nervous system (respiration, heartbeat, etc.) have slowed to an almost imperceptible minimum, and he is incapable of initiating or responding to any action.

Buddhaghosa devotes a considerable amount of space to this psychological state towards the end of the *Visuddhimagga*. Its position in his system will have to be further discussed—he makes it one of the benefits of developing wisdom—but for the present it is sufficient to point out that he defines the *nirodha-samāpatti* as: *anupubbanirodhavasena cittacetasikānaṃ dhammānaṃ appavatti* (23.18), i.e.: “the non-occurrence of states of mind together with their concomitants as a result of successive cessation.” Buddhaghosa tells us that this state is only available to nonreturners and *arahants* who have already mastered the “eight attainments,” that is, the eightfold *jhāna* system, and who at the same time have their *āsavas* or defilements destroyed and are possessed of the two powers (*dve balāni*), which in their turn are defined as *samatha* (tranquillity) and *vipassanā* (insight). The attainment of *saññā-vedayita-nirodha* is explicitly denied to all those—even *arahants*—who are *sukkhavipassaka*, that is, those who possess only insight and not tranquillity also. Ñānamoli (824) translates “bare-insight workers,” which doesn’t quite get the flavor. A sterile and desiccated intellectuality is what is meant, and Buddhaghosa clearly means this to have negative connotations. Such men, even though they are *arahants*, cannot attain the state of *saññā-vedayita-nirodha*. This is an important point and will be considered further.

For Buddhaghosa, then, insight into the nature of things is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the attainment of the *nirodha-samāpatti* (23.31). It is somewhat difficult to see why this should be so when it has already been clearly demonstrated that the *nirodha-samāpatti* is the complete cessation of all consciousness whatever. Buddhaghosa even goes on to precisely identify this state with *nibbāna* itself: “Why do they attain it? [i.e., the *nirodha-samāpatti*]. Becoming dissatisfied with the arising and dissolution of the formations they attain it, thinking: becoming without consciousness here and now (*diṭṭhe va dhamme acittakā hutvā*), reaching the cessation which is *nibbāna* (*nirodhaṃ nibbanaṃ patva*), we shall live in happiness” (23.30). We may usefully compare this precise identification of *saññā-vedayita-nirodha* with *nibbāna*—or at least with *nibbāna* in-life, that direct experience of the final state which is available to a man here and now/1/—with a similar identification in *Ānguttara Nikāya* (AN 4.454)./2/ Here too *saññā-vedayita-nirodha* is identified with *diṭṭhadhammanibbāna*, and here too it is combined with wisdom (*paññā*). This is an example of an attempt to relate and reconcile the necessity for intellectual insight with an idea of *nibbāna* which is clearly quite opposed to any such concept, centering as it does on an attempt to clear the mind of all intellectual content. We shall return to it.

So far then, we have looked briefly at what is meant by the development of concentration (*samādhi-bhāvanā*) as defined in the Pali canon and in the *Visuddhimagga*. We have seen that it is a narrowing of the range of awareness, a reduction in the content of consciousness, a progressive exclusion from the mind of both external and internal stimuli. We have also looked at what is said about the ultimate aim of such meditative practice; this is *saññā-vedayita-nirodha*, the complete cessation of all conscious awareness and of all reactions to external stimuli, a condition which Louis de La Vallée Poussin has called a “crise cataleptique” (1936–37:212), and Friedrich Heiler has referred to as “völlige Apathie” (21). We have seen that this state is also explicitly identified with *nibbāna*. It is now necessary to look very briefly at the means used to attain this aim.

Concentrative meditation is usually expounded both in the Pali canon and the *Visuddhimagga* by means of reference to a hierarchically structured series of states of consciousness called the *jhānas*. This is the Pali form of the Sanskrit *dhyāna* (Chinese *Ch’an*; Japanese *Zen*) and is usually translated simply as “meditation.” However, in the Theravāda sources it has a somewhat more specialized meaning than the more general *bhāvanā*, which we are already translating as “meditation,” and for that reason, as well as the fact that it is difficult to find an English equivalent which is not too clumsy to be used, I shall leave the term untranslated. Its semantic content should become clear from what follows. In the Pali sources (and in much of the surviving Sanskrit literature of the Indian Mahāyāna) there are a number of different classificatory systems used to describe what the *jhānas* are. There are sometimes said to be four, sometimes five, sometimes eight, and sometimes nine of them. I shall not attempt to describe or disentangle these different systems here; to do so would take a great deal of space and is not strictly relevant for our purposes.³ I shall accept as standard the system of four *jhānas* of form (*rūpajhānas*), four formless *jhānas* (*arūpajhānas*), and one final attainment (*samāpatti*), which is *saññā-vedayita-nirodha* and is not strictly speaking a *jhāna* at all. This makes in all a ninefold series, often referred to as the nine attainments (*samāpatti*).

Much could be said about these states of consciousness; all that can be offered here is a very brief summary. The four *jhānas* of form are those states of consciousness which become progressively more empty of intellectual and emotional contents. To take an example: the first *rūpāvacarajhāna* is described as a psychological condition which has five factors: reasoning (*vitakka*), reflection (*vicāra*), joy (*pīti*), happiness (*sukha*), one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*). By the time the fourth *jhāna* of form has been attained, the only factors remaining are equanimity (*upekkha*) and one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*); the rest have been removed from the mind by means of concentrative exercises. Moving on from there to the *arūpāvacarajhānas* the mind becomes still more empty, entering first the sphere of boundless space (*ākāśānañcāyatana*), then the sphere of boundless consciousness (*viññānañcāyatana*), then

to the sphere of nothingness (*ākāṅkāṇhāyatana*) and to the sphere of neither cognition or noncognition (*nevasaññāsaññāyatana*), ending finally in *saññāvedayita-nirodha*, the ninth and final attainment, which is *nibbāna-in-life*.^{/4/}

The ninefold *jhāna*-structure, then, describes a series of states of consciousness of increasing abstraction. The mind is first emptied of all emotional content, then of all discursive thought and reaction to external stimuli, and finally of any content whatever. Buddhaghosa gives descriptions of the types of exercise which can be used to attain this end, showing in detail how the mind can be trained to ascend from its “normal” state of clutter and distractedness to the final states of complete emptiness, clarity, and passivity. In the final attainment, the *nirodha-samāpatti*, the mind becomes like a perfectly clear pool of water; it reflects nothing back from the outside, has nothing within it to obstruct the rays of the sun, and is totally without movement. The techniques used to attain this end are too numerous and complex to be described in any detail here; the whole of the middle section of the *Visuddhimagga* (3–14) is devoted in one way or another to these techniques and their effects. There is space here to mention only one in outline, that which Buddhaghosa calls *kaṣiṇa* meditation (4.21ff). This consists of taking a specific material object—in the case of the earth *kaṣiṇa* a clay disc, in the case of the blue *kaṣiṇa* blue flowers, and so forth—and sitting about eight feet from it on a small chair (4.26). The meditator then concentrates on the meditation object until an eidetic image of it can be recalled at will whether or not the external object is present. Briefly, this is a means by which external stimuli can be interiorized, a psychotropic technique by means of which all mental activity can be brought to a single point and concentrated there—in the case of the earth *kaṣiṇa* upon a clay disc. Buddhaghosa says that this technique can take the meditator as far as the fourth *jhāna* of form only, and that to enter upon the formless *jhānas*, further and partially different techniques are necessary.

To summarize our findings thus far: It has been suggested that in the Theravādin presentation of *samādhi bhāvanā* we have a number of psychotropic techniques, the practice of which brings about a gradual ascent through a hierarchically structured series of states of consciousness. These states of consciousness are increasingly empty and abstract at the upper levels of the hierarchy, increasingly withdrawn from external stimuli and internal discursive thought, culminating finally in the cessation of all sensation, cognition, and intellection, a state of contentless consciousness which is for all practical purposes quite indistinguishable from death. This state is frequently presented in the texts, both canonical and commentarial, as the final soteriological goal of the practicing Buddhist.^{/5/} That is, it is assimilated to, and sometimes precisely identified with, *nibbāna*.

There is unfortunately no space here to discuss in detail the kinds of psycho-physiological change likely to be induced in the meditator by the practice of this type of concentrative technique. It may be tentatively suggested

that EEG readings obtained from a meditator who had reached *saññā-vedayita-nirodha* would be characterized by high amplitude alpha waves which would not be susceptible to blocking by external stimuli. It seems possible, though, that the trance state referred to by the Pali phrase *saññā-vedayita-nirodha* might have still more in common with that of a long-term coma patient. But in the absence of further research, both empirical and theoretical, this must remain speculative./6/ The broad outlines of both the techniques and results of *samādhi bhāvanā* should now be clear, and this is sufficient for our purposes.

2. Insight Meditation

The second of the two types of meditative practice is that aimed at developing insight into the nature of the universe as it really is—which means, in this context, as it is conceived by developed Buddhist doctrine. Fortunately, we need to devote rather less space to expounding this type of meditation than was the case for concentrative meditation. This is largely because *vipassanā bhāvanā*, insight meditation, is regarded by contemporary Theravādin orthodoxy as Buddhist meditation *par excellence*, the only kind which really counts and the only kind which leads to *nibbāna*. That this is not the whole picture we have already seen in what has been said about *samādhi-bhāvanā*, but the centrality of insight meditation to most modern expositions of Theravāda does mean that much less needs to be said about it. Descriptions are available in any modern introduction (e.g., Rahula, 1967; Nyānaponika).

We may take *vipassanā* (insight) and *paññā* (wisdom) as equivalent terms. They are used interchangeably in the texts in the kinds of context which concern us. Buddhaghosa once again defines for us with some precision exactly what wisdom is: “Wisdom has the characteristic (*lakkhaṇa*) of penetrating the defining essence of things (*dhammasabhāvapaṭivedha*); its function (*rasa*) is to abolish the darkness of delusion (*mohandhakāra-viddhaṅsana*) which obscures the defining essence of things; its manifestation (*paccupaṭṭhāna*) is absence of delusion (*asammoha*). Because of the words: ‘One who is concentrated knows and sees things as they really are’ (*samāhito yathābhūtaṃ jānāti passati*), concentration is its immediate cause (*padaṭṭhāna*)” (14.7). The key term in this definition is *yathābhūta*, combined very frequently throughout the Pali literature with *ñāṇa* or *dassana*. Translated somewhat freely as “knowledge or vision in accordance with reality,” this is the full and proper definition of *paññā*, wisdom, the desired aim of the man who practices insight meditation. Such a man can see the defining essence, the own-being (*sabhāva*) of everything, and his vision is no longer obscured by the threefold fault of passion (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). Buddhaghosa tells us that wisdom is manifested in the wise man as absence of delusion.

The aim of insight meditation, the development of wisdom, is, of course, enlightenment, but a rather different kind of enlightenment from that which we have discussed in our presentation of concentrative meditation. Here, in the context of insight meditation, *nibbāna* receives the usual schematic definition of being the destruction of *rāga*, *dosa*, and *moha*; the end of suffering; the absence of rebirth; the breaking of the chain of conditioned coproduction (*paticcasamuppāda*) which defines the whole of phenomenal existence; the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*), unmade (*akata*), unborn (*ajāta*), deathless (*amata*) state of eternal bliss in which the enlightened man fully knows and understands the threefold characteristic (*tilakkhaṇa*) of all conditioned things—that they are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and without self. It is coolness, the blowing out of the flame of passion, the dispassionate awareness and understanding of the universe through the categories of Buddhist philosophy, especially the four truths and the twelvefold chain of conditioned coproduction. The aim of insight meditation is above all an awareness *that*, an awareness which has content. It perceives and understands things as existing in such-and-such a way, while at the same time being quite detached from such a perception. In terms of Pali grammar it is an awareness which can be contained within a *ti* clause, a discursive and intellectual understanding. That wisdom is discursive in this sense, and that its ultimate development in the state of *nibbāna* is also discursive, is shown in a multitude of ways in the Pali literature. One of Buddhaghosa's rarely quoted parables (Vism. 14.4–5) demonstrates it very well. He says that knowing (*jānana*) is present in cognition, intellection, and wisdom but that in cognition it is at a low level, in intellection at an intermediate level, and in wisdom at a high level. Cognition is like a child without discretion (*ajātabuddhidāra-ka*), who, on finding a heap of coins, sees only their external shape and configuration, not realizing that they are valuable as well as beautiful. Intellection is like a villager (*gāmikapurisa*) who knows also that the coins are reckoned valuable for human use and enjoyment. Wisdom is like a money-changer (*heraññika*) who knows all that the child and villager know but can also tell by looking at the coins, weighing, smelling, and tasting them, exactly which coins are counterfeit and which genuine, precisely where each of them was made, and by whom, and what the value of each is. It is this last kind of extensive and precise discursive awareness about things which is characterized as *paññā*, and which insight meditation is designed to develop to its highest degree.

To describe *paññā* awareness might be objected to on the grounds that it has too intellectual a connotation. I do not intend to suggest, however, that to possess *paññā* is merely a question of having some specific items of knowledge present to one's mind. On the contrary, there is an essential element of "seeing as" as well as "knowing that" in *paññā*. Not only does one know, for example, that the universe is composed of *dharmas*, instantaneous events which have no independent or enduring existence, but one

actually perceives the universe in this way. The possessor of *paññā* is a man who has learned to dissolve the mentally-constructed solidities and continuities of the universe of normal perception, and to perceive in their place the causal flux described by Buddhist Abhidhamma philosophy. Thus the “seeing as” and “knowing that” components of *paññā* are vitally interrelated, and this is the meaning of the frequent use of the compound *yathābhūta-ñāṇa-dassana* in the Pali literature: not only does one know the way things are, but one directly perceives the known reality. Concept and reality become fused in the highest development of *paññā* which we are discussing here; the use of the term “discursive” is meant to stress that, although the element of vision is important, the element of knowing is never completely transcended in the *vipassanā/paññā* complex of ideas.

To summarize our conclusions thus far about the nature of *paññā*, the goal of insight meditation: We have suggested that wisdom is a type of dispassionate discursive knowledge and vision, that insight meditation (*vipassanā bhāvanā*) is a meditative technique designed to inculcate and develop it, and that the end of such development—*nibbāna*—is in this context conceived as a kind of continuous dispassionate cognitive/intellectual vision of the universe as a causally conditioned flux of point-instants in which there is no continuing principle of individuality. The means used to achieve this kind of conscious awareness is simply a continuous attempt to internalize the categories of Buddhist metaphysics and to make those categories coextensive with the way one perceives the world. The whole of the second half of the *Visuddhimagga* is devoted to this process, expounded by means of the seven purities. The very titles of the last five of these purities (Vism. 18–22) give an excellent overview of what it means to develop *paññā*. The first is the purification of view (*diṭṭhi-visuddhi*), stressing the knowledge aspect of *paññā*; then comes purification by overcoming doubt (*kankhā-vitarāṇa-visuddhi*), followed by the purification of knowing and seeing what is the path and what is not *maggāmagga-ñāṇadassana-visuddhi*), and the purification of knowledge and vision of the way (*patipadā-ñāṇadassana-v.*); the culmination is straightforward knowledge and vision (*ñāṇadassana-v.*), the defining characteristics of wisdom. One way of developing this knowledge and vision—among many—is to contemplate an object under the fundamental Buddhist category of impermanence. One might take a tree as the object of this meditation and think of it as growing from seed to maturity and then decaying again into rotteness and death. One might do the same with a man or a mountain. Alternatively, one might have to learn to contemplate things under the characteristic of their inherent unsatisfactoriness in order to combat undue attachment to the beauties of the universe; very similar is the well-known series of meditations on the loathsomeness of the body. At higher levels of competence one would have to learn to internalize the whole complex system of classification which goes to make up the Abhidhamma; this would involve not only the four truths, three factors, and

twelfefold chain, but also the complex Abhidhammic psychology, which analyzes each mental event into its constituent factors and shows how it arises and passes away.

Perhaps the simplest and most effective way of developing *paññā* described in the Pali canon is that of *satipaṭṭhāna*, the practice of mindfulness. Essentially, this consists in paying continuous and precise attention (*manasikāra*) to each and every event, both internal and external, as it occurs. At first this is a nonjudgmental awareness; typically it may begin with observation of in- and out-breathing, progress from there to observation of the movements of the body, the arising and passing away of thoughts, the forming of intentions, and so forth. The point of this meditative exercise is that it chops up mental and physical events into discrete and yet interrelated events; the whole of one's physical and mental universe dissolves into a fluid series of point-instants, each event becomes momentary, and the connecting solidarities provided by the concepts of individuality, permanence, and so on, very rapidly vanish. It is, as anyone who has tried it will testify, an extremely effective way of training the awareness to perceive the universe in accordance with the categories of the Abhidhamma, and may be taken as a paradigm example of how insight meditation operates./7/

To summarize what we have discovered about the meditative practices and soteriological aims included under the heading of insight meditation: *Vipassanā bhāvanā* is a series of techniques which involves paying attention to a particular phenomenon or series of phenomena using one or more of the categories of Buddhist metaphysics as a framework for understanding. Its aim is to open out the individual's awareness until he can learn to become fully and continuously aware of the universe as it really is. Such awareness appears to be a kind of detached, emotionless, intuitive vision of the nature of things as a flux of causally conditioned point-instants (Johansson, 1969), an awareness which has disposed of the interpretative concepts of selfhood, permanence, pleasure and pain, and yet an awareness which remains essentially discursive in that it can be verbalized. There is nothing ineffable about wisdom for a Theravādin (Gimello:192–93). The aims and results of this kind of meditative practice are, therefore, radically opposed to those of *samādhi bhāvanā*, or concentrative meditation; there we had a series of increasingly abstract states of consciousness, culminating in the complete cessation of sensation, cognition, and intellection; here we have a progressive opening-out of the individual's awareness to include and comprehend the whole universe under the categories of transience, emptiness, and unsatisfactoriness. Sensation, cognition, and intellection are not brought to a halt as in the final stage of concentrative meditation, but instead are developed and, as it were, "*paññised*"—imbued with wisdom. The methods and aims of each kind of practice—both equally prominent in the texts—are radically at odds, and it is difficult to see how they can be reconciled. Therein lies the problem.

3. The Relationship Between Concentration and Insight

The Theravāda tradition is itself aware of this problem, and makes its own attempts at reconciling the two types of meditative practice and the two soteriological goals. These attempts are not always mutually consistent, and the tradition does not appear to be certain whether and to what extent both types of meditation are necessary for the attainment of *nibbāna*. We have already seen that Buddhaghosa regards the practice of insight meditation and the concomitant attainment of wisdom as a necessary but not sufficient condition for the attainment of *saññā-vedayita-nirodha* (607). Regarded from the other angle, we have seen that he regards concentration as the occasion or immediate cause (*padatṭhāna*) of wisdom, and that he quotes with approval the frequently repeated canonical statement: "One who is concentrated knows and sees things as they really are" (e.g., AN 5.3). These statements are not quite as strong as those which suggested that one could not reach *saññā-vedayita-nirodha* without some admixture of insight in one's practice; they seem only to suggest that concentration (through to what degree is not specified) would be a considerable help in the practice of insight meditation.

If we look elsewhere in the canon we find statements that say wisdom can be attained quite without the help of the *jhānas*, much less of their culmination, the attainment of cessation. For example, in the *Mahāsatipatṭhānasutta*, in both its DN and MN forms, we find the clear implication that *nibbāna* can be attained by the practice of mindfulness alone without the concentrator games involved in *samādhi-bhāvanā*. *Saññā-vedayita-nirodha* is not attained by mindfulness because it simply does not fit into such a context; the soteriological goal of *saññā-vedayita-nirodha* is not coherent with the methods and aims of *satipatṭhāna*. Similarly, many of the standard descriptions in the canon of the meditative path leading to enlightenment mention only the four *jhānas* of form (*rūpajhānas*), and then only as a kind of limbering-up exercise for the mind, a way of making it supple and preparing it for the effort needed to gain insight into the real nature of the universe in the way that has been described in our section on insight meditation. In contexts of this type the more developed concentration exercises are either bypassed altogether or used only as a kind of preliminary in the service of the wider goal of insight. They are not used as a means to gain the attainment of cessation because, as we have suggested, this soteriological goal is inappropriate in the context of insight meditation. It is in this context that the many references to the *jhānas* as preparatory and purificatory should be placed. Concentration here only rids the mind of defilements. It does not itself have soteriological effects./8/

The converse, however, is not true. So far as I am aware, in contexts where *samādhi-bhāvanā* dominates and the soteriological goal aimed at is that of *saññā-vedayita-nirodha*, we rarely find *paññā* bypassed altogether as

we have seen *samādhi* on occasion to be. It is usually, as it were, injected at the last moment, and *nibbāna* is reached by a final burst of wisdom, sitting somewhat uneasily in a context where the subject under discussion is the progressive bringing to a halt of all conscious processes whatever. For example, in AN 4.454, at the conclusion of a section dealing with the ascent through the eight *jhānas* (*rūpa* and *arūpa*) culminating in the attainment of *saññā-vedayita-nirodha*, we find the following formula: “Once again, a monk going quite beyond the sphere of neither-cognition-nor-non-cognition (eighth *arūpajhāna*), enters and remains in the cessation of cognition and sensation (*saññā-vedayita-nirodha*). Understanding (*paññāya*) and seeing (*disvā*), his impurities are destroyed (*āsavā parikkhinā honti*)” (AN 4.454). Another formula, also used frequently to describe the attainment of liberating insight concurrently with the realization of *saññā-vedayita-nirodha* is: *paññāya ca me disvā āsavā parikkhayaṃ agamaṃsu* (e.g., AN 4.438–48). This last-minute injection of wisdom and the vocabulary of insight meditation is, to say the least of it, surprising. It is not explained in the texts how *paññā*—which we have already determined to be a discursive and conscious awareness of the reality of things—can possibly enter into a psychological state where discursive awareness is by definition ruled out. We have here, I think, one of the more uneasy results of the Buddhist scholastic mania for neat classifications. The thinking may have gone something like this: wisdom, intuitive insight into the nature of things, is the *sine qua non* of Buddhist enlightenment, at least in terms of the Abhidhamma, and so even in contexts where it seems most unlikely that enlightenment was originally conceived in any such terms, wisdom must be injected. The result is an unsatisfactory combination of two radically different kinds of soteriology.

There are other canonical texts in which the conflict between the two types of meditative practice comes to the fore. The *locus classicus* for this is undoubtedly the debate between Musila and Nārada (SN 2.115ff; cf. Poussin, 1936–37). Musila is the representative of wisdom; he has penetrated to the essential nature of things. Nārada is the representative of concentration, the practitioner of yoga and asceticism. Similarly, in AN 3.355 we hear of an acrimonious debate between monks zealous for *dhamma* (*dhamma-yogābhikkhū*) and meditators (*jhāyīn*). The answer given in this section of the AN is that both ways are valuable. Those who practice concentrative meditation—the *jhāyīns*—are “those who live having touched the deathless sphere with the body.”/9/ Those zealous for *dhamma* are “those who, penetrating by means of wisdom, see the profound goal.” Although the value of both ways is stressed, there is no attempt to explain just how the two are to be related when, as we have seen, the meditative techniques and soteriological goals on each side are so very different and even conflicting./10/

One more oddity needs to be mentioned in the canonical and commentarial attempts to reconcile and combine concentrative meditation and insight meditation. If we look at Buddhaghosa’s list of the benefits of getting

wisdom (*paññā*), we find four such mentioned (23.1ff). The first is the removal of various defilements (*nānākilesaviddhaṅsana*); the second is the partaking of the experience of the noble fruit (*ariyaphalarasānubhavana*); both these are standard and their exegesis will not be entered into here. But the third benefit of attaining *paññā* is *saññā-vedayita-nirodha* (23.16). This is very odd indeed, and as far as I can see Buddhaghosa's explanations do not give any satisfactory account of how it is that the cessation of cognition and sensation can plausibly be said to be a *benefit* of the attainment of insight. All our investigations thus far have pointed to the conclusion that the *nibbāna* realized by insight meditation is simply not the same as the *nibbāna*-in-life (*diṭṭhadhammanibbāna*) which is the result of concentrative meditation, and so it is very difficult to see why Buddhaghosa should wish to make this latter soteriological goal a benefit of insightful understanding. It should be remembered also that this mention of *saññā-vedayita-nirodha* as a benefit of wisdom occurs in the final chapter of the *Visuddhimagga*, at the very climax of the whole vast work. This fact alone should give us pause and make us reevaluate the place given to concentrative meditation and its concomitant psychological states in expositions of Buddhist meditation theory. Finally, we should note that Buddhaghosa follows his mention of the cessation of sensation and cognition with an almost bathetic statement that the achievement of worthiness to receive gifts is the fourth and final benefit of *paññā*. The *Visuddhimagga* does not end on a note of profound spiritual inspiration. Unfortunately, the many problems inherent in assessing the ambiguities inherent in the *Visuddhimagga*'s systems of classification, especially in this case, cannot be further discussed here. The problem has now been adequately delineated and suggestions need to be made about its possible causes.

Before turning to this task, however, we need to look at modern Theravādin orthodoxy on these matters; we should ask what line is taken by modern interpreters of the tradition and whether they have anything to say to the problems we have been discussing. It seems in fact that much the same line is followed by all notable contemporary expositors of the tradition. Both Walpola Rahula (1967:68) and Nyāṇaponika Thera (102ff) say explicitly that the practices of concentrative meditation are not strictly necessary for the attainment of insight, though they may in certain cases be useful. Paravahe-
ra Vajirañāṇa Mahāthera, in his exposition of the *Visuddhimagga*, reflects the confusion of his sources when he implicitly contradicts himself, saying at one point that *samādhi-bhāvanā* is a necessary condition for attaining *nibbāna*, and denying this in another place (18, 343). The main point made by all commentators is that concentration exercises are only valuable in so far as they aid the attainment of insight; they are not given significance for their own sake, and the kind of *nibbāna* that most modern Theravāda practitioners seem to be interested in is that which we have discussed in our section on insight meditation. The attainment of cessation is rarely mentioned, and,

even when it is, usually with no recognition of its function and value in the canonical and commentarial literature. The kinds of practice espoused and taught by modern Theravādins, both in the West and in South Asia, also show this devaluation of the canonical *samādhi* exercises. *Satipaṭṭhāna*, as a paradigm example of insight meditation, forms the center of meditative practice in modern Theravāda, and it is difficult, in either America or Europe, to find Theravādins able and willing to give instruction in the finer points of *kaṣiṇa* meditation or to expound the value of the *nirodha-samāpatti*./11/

We may draw the following conclusions from the material surveyed in the course of this paper:

1. There are presented in the canonical and commentarial texts of Theravāda Buddhism two radically different types of meditative practice which have different psychological effects and issue in different soteriological goals.

2. The texts themselves are aware of this tension and make a number of attempts to resolve it. The classificatory systems which result from these attempts are intellectually unsatisfactory and cannot form the basis for proper meditative practice, as witness the split in modern Theravāda between the proponents and practitioners of concentrative meditation and those who expound and practice insight meditation.

3. Modern Theravādin orthodoxy, which takes the line that concentration is only valuable insofar as it acts as an adjunct to the development of insight and has preliminary purificatory effects, and also plays down the significance of the *arūpa-jhānas* and the *nirodha-samāpatti*, does not satisfactorily resolve the ambiguities and tensions we have uncovered.

4. This whole problem has extremely wide-ranging implications; it affects how we are to think of *nibbāna*, the ultimate soteriological goal of Buddhism. Are we to see it as a psychological state in which discursive thought is not only possible but required, the result of a radical interiorization of Buddhist metaphysical categories, or are we to see it as the blissful cessation of all consciousness whatever, the ending of all pain? Soteriological methods govern soteriological goals; if you practice concentrative meditation you will end up in a different "place" from that reached by practicing insight meditation. So this problem also has important practical implications in determining the choice of meditative techniques for the individual practitioner.

Ideally this paper should end with a resolution of the whole issue. I shall not attempt one because it does not seem possible, given the present limited state of our knowledge about the psycho-physiological effects of different meditation techniques, together with our still restricted understanding of the categories of the Abhidhamma. The conclusion must be that the tension between the methods and aims of concentrative meditation and those of insight meditation runs very deep in the Theravāda texts and is

mirrored there by another radical tension—that between ignorance (*avijjā*) and desire (*taṇhā*). In the standard formulation of the four truths, the root cause of all suffering is said to be *taṇhā*—craving or lust, literally “thirst.” In the standard formulation of the *paticca-samuppāda* the root cause of the chain of becoming is said to be *avijjā*—ignorance. Clearly, if ignorance is regarded as the root of all evil for the Buddhist, then he should take steps to remedy this condition by gaining insightful knowledge. There is no better way of doing so than the practice of insight meditation, which, as we have seen, results in just such a clarity of knowledge about the universe as would be required to dispose of *avijjā*. If, on the other hand, craving and desire are regarded as the root causes of suffering, then the Buddhist should at once take steps to rid his mind of all desire. Once again, there is no better way of doing this than the practice of concentrative meditation, which, as we have seen, rids the mind first of all emotional content and then of all intellectual content, culminating finally in the supreme desirelessness of the deathless realm, the *nibbāna*-in-life which is the complete cessation of cognition and sensation.

This connection between *taṇhā* and *samādhi* on the one hand and *avijjā* and *vipassanā* on the other is to be found also in the canonical texts. In AN 1.61 we read: “What is the result, O monks, of the development of tranquillity [*samatha*, here equivalent to *samādhi*]? The mind is developed. What is the result of a developed mind? Passion is abandoned [*rāga*, here equivalent to *taṇhā*]. What is the result, O monks, of the development of insight [*vipassanā*]? Wisdom [*paññā*] is developed. What is the result of the development of wisdom? Ignorance [*avijjā*] is abandoned” (AN 1.61). This tension between the desire/concentration complex of thought on the one hand, and the ignorance/insight complex on the other, goes to the very heart of Theravāda Buddhism. On how we resolve it hangs our entire understanding of Buddhist soteriological theory and practice. Perhaps still more important for those concerned to make the practice of Buddhist meditation a real existential possibility is the fact that on the resolution of this fundamental tension depends how Buddhism as a system of spiritual practice is to be communicated. There is here, therefore, not merely a historical issue but also a pressing existential and hermeneutical one.

NOTES

I would like to thank Professor Richard Gombrich of the University of Oxford and Dr. Steve Collins of the University of Bristol for their freely given time and expertise in discussing these issues with me.

/1/ *Ditṭhadhammanibbāna* or *saupādisesanibbāna*. The necessary distinctions are discussed in detail in Vism. 16.67ff.

/2/ *Bhikkhu sabbaso nevasaññānāsaññāyatānaṃ samatikamma saññavedayita-nirodhaṃ upasampajja viharati, paññāya c'assa disvā āsavā parikkhiṇā honti. Ettāvātāpi kho . . . diṭṭhadhammanibbanam vuttam Bhagavatā nippariyāyena.* AN 4.454.

/3/ See DN 1.74–77 for the fourfold classification. See DN 1.183–84, 2.112; MN 1.41, 1.159–60; *Vibhanga* 183–84, 245, for the fivefold classification. See SN 2.222 for the complete ninefold hierarchy. Much has been omitted here; no mention has been made of the *vimokkhas* (DN 3.262), or the *abhibhāyatana*s (DN 2.110, 3.260). Nothing has been said as to the attainment of supernormal powers (*iddhi*) as a result of practicing *samādhi bhāvanā*, nor of Buddhaghosa's distinction between *upacāra* (access) and *appaṇā* (absorption). The presentation given here is schematic in the extreme, though I hope that nothing of importance for the purposes of this paper has been omitted. Fuller details may be found in the relevant sections of Vajirañāna and Barnes.

/4/ It should be noted that Buddhaghosa seems to envisage a distinction between *upacāra* and *appaṇā* for each of the eight *jhānas*. There are problems in determining exactly what he means, but it seems safe to say that the access/absorption distinction is not intended to apply to *saññā-vedayita-nirodha*.

/5/ It should be pointed out here that frequent statements may be found in both canon and commentary to the effect that all *jhānic* states are also instinct with impermanence and unsatisfactoriness, and therefore not of final importance for salvation. We shall also see, when we come to consider the canonical and commentarial attempts at connecting the two types of meditation—*samādhi* and *vipassanā*—that there is almost always a last-minute injection of *vipassanā* in order to enable the *nirodhasamāpatti* to be reached. Such statements certainly indicate that canonical and commentarial orthodoxy regards *vipassanā* as the *sine qua non* of Buddhist enlightenment, but they provide no reasoned answer to the problem under consideration in this paper. This issue will be further discussed in the third section of this paper.

/6/ An excellent review of the current state of research into the psycho-physiological effects of meditative practice may be found in Walsh. It is clear that much remains to be done, though some suggestive discoveries have been made. Anand, Chinna and Singh discovered that yogis in *samādhi*—using techniques essentially similar to those discussed here under the heading of concentrative meditation—showed high amplitude alpha waves on their EEG recordings, and that such waves could not be blocked by external stimuli. That is, the meditators' brain states were simply not altered by what was going on around them. In contrast, Kasamatsu and Hirai discovered that while Zen meditators produce a similar EEG reading to that of *samādhi* practitioners, their alpha rhythms were susceptible to blocking by external stimuli, although this blocking was not reduced by the usual habituation mechanism. That is, if a person in a "normal" state of consciousness is seated in a quiet room and a rhythmic series of loud clicks is played over a sound system to him, then his EEG records marked blocking of alpha rhythms at first, but, as he gets used to the clicks, the blocking is reduced and eventually almost disappears. He has become habituated to the stimulus. In the case of the Zen meditator this does not happen and the alpha blocking remains at a constant level. Unlike either the practitioner of *samādhi* or the person in "normal" consciousness, the Zen meditator is receptive to external stimuli,

but does not become habituated to them. It is clear that the concentrative meditation we are concerned with here is much closer to the yogic *samādhi* than to the Zen state, and there are at least some indications that Zen meditation has fundamental similarities to *vipassanā bhāvanā*. The whole topic needs more work from both the buddhological and psychological angles.

/7/ Buddhaghosa considers *satipaṭṭhāna* in that section of the *Visuddhimagga* where he deals with *samādhi bhāvanā*. This is one more of those classification problems which are considered in the third section of this paper. It is clear enough for our purposes that *satipaṭṭhāna* results in the kind of psychological state which we are here characterizing as the aim of insight meditation.

/8/ E.g., SN 4.79: *samāhite citte dhammā pātubhavanti*. Concentration cleans the mirror of the mind and things can then appear as they really are.

/9/ *Amataṃ dhātum*—clearly *nibbāna*. One more piece of evidence, if any were needed, that *samādhi-bhāvanā* can lead to *nibbāna* and that the *nirodha samāpatti* is assimilated to that state.

/10/ Cf. also AN 6.46, 1.61, DN 3.105. This last is especially interesting for its introduction of the category *ubhata-bhāga-vimutto*, “the man who has been liberated both ways,” that is, by both wisdom and concentration. DN 3.105 mentions only *ubhata-bhāga-vimutto* and *paññā-vimutto*; the possibility of *samādhi-vimutto* does not seem to be envisaged.

/11/ It should be said that concentrative meditation has not been entirely abandoned in Theravāda countries, although it seems to have greatly declined since the rise of the so-called “Burmese *satipaṭṭhāna* method” in the nineteenth century. There appears to be, as one might expect, a fairly radical split between those monasteries and meditation centers where *samādhi bhāvanā* is practiced and those where *vipassanā bhāvanā* holds the stage. Recent accounts may be found in Hamilton-Merritt and Kornfield.

WORKS CONSULTED

The Pali canon is referred to by volume and page of the standard PTS editions, and the *Visuddhimagga* is referred to by chapter and section of the Harvard edition.

Anand, Chinna and Singh
1961

“Some Aspects of EEG Studies in Yogis.” *Electroencephalography and Clinical Neurophysiology* 13:452–56.

Aṅguttara Nikāya
AN

Eds. R. Morris and E. Hardy, 6 vols. London: PTS, 1885–1910.

- Barnes, Michael
1976
The Buddhist Way of Deliverance. Oxford: unpublished B. Litt. thesis.
- Buddhaghosa
Vism.
Visuddhimagga. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950.
- Conze, Edward
1956
Buddhist Meditation. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Cousins, L. S.
1973
"Buddhist Jhāna: its nature and attainment according to the Pali sources." *Religion*:115–31
- Dīgha, Nikāya
DN
Eds. T. W. Rhys-Davids and T. E. Carpenter. 3 vols. London: PTS, 1889–1903.
- Gimello, Robert M.
1978
"Mysticism and Meditation." In *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, edited by S. T. Katz, pages 170–99. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hamilton-Merritt, Jane
1976
A Meditator's Diary. London: Souvenir Press.
- Heiler, Friedrich
1922
Die Buddhistische Versenkung. Munich: Reinhardt.
- Johansson, Rune
1969
The Psychology of Nirvāṇa. London: Allen & Unwin.
1978
The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism. London and Malmo: Curzon Press.
- Kasamatsu and Hirai
1966
"An EEG Study on the Zen Meditation." *Folio Psychiatry & Neurology Japonica* 20:315–36.
- King, Winston
1977
"The Structure and Dynamics of the Attainment of Cessation in Theravāda Meditation." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45/2:707–25.
- Kornfield, Jack
1977
Living Buddhist Masters. Santa Cruz: Unity Press.
- Majjhima, Nikāya
MN
Eds. R. Chalmers and V. Trenckner. 3 vols. London: P. T. S., 1888–99.
- Ñāṇamoli
1956, 1965
The Path of Purification. 2 vols. Colombo: Semage.

- Nyāṇaponika, Thera
1964 *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. London: Hutchinson.
- Oberhammer, Gerhard
1977 *Strukturen Yogischer Meditation: Untersuchungen zur Spiritualität des Yoga*. Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse—Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für Sprachen und Kulturen Südasiens. Heft 13.
- Poussin, L. de La Vallée
1925 *Nirvāṇa*. Paris: Beauchesne.
1936–37 “Musila et Nārada: le chemin du Nirvāṇa.” *Mélanges Chinoise et Bouddhique* 5:189–222.
- Rahula, Walpola
1967 *What the Buddha Taught*. Chester Springs, PA: Dufour.
- Samyutta Nikāya
SN Ed. Léon Feer. 5 vols. London: PTS, 1894–98.
- Santucci, James A.
1979 “Transpersonal Psychological Observations on Theravāda Buddhist Meditative Practices.” *Journal of the International Association for Buddhist Studies* 2/2:66–78.
- Schmithausen, Ludwig
1976 “On the Problem of the Relation of Spiritual Practice and Philosophical Theory in Buddhism.” In *German Scholars on India*, 2:235–50. Bombay: Nachiketa Publications.
1979 “On Some Aspects of the Descriptions of Liberating Insight and Enlightenment in Early Buddhism.” Unpublished paper.
- Stcherbatsky, Th.
1927 *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa*. Leningrad: Office of the Academy of Sciences of the U. S. S. R.
- Strenski, Ivan
1980 “Gradual Enlightenment, Sudden Enlightenment and Empiricism.” *Philosophy East and West* 30/1:3–20.
- Swearer, Donald K.
1972 “Two Types of Saving Knowledge in the Pali Suttas.” *Philosophy East and West* 22/4:355–71.
- Takeuchi, Yoshinori
1972 *Probleme der Versenkung im Ur-Buddhismus*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Vajirañāṇa, Mahathera
1962 *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice*. Colombo: M. D. Gunasena.

Walsh, Roger N.
1979

“Meditation Research: an Introduction and Review.”
Journal of Transpersonal Psychology 2/2:161-74.