

Plumbing the Depths of Absorption (*jhāna*)

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative study of passages from Pāli discourses and their *Āgama* parallels relevant to ascertaining to what extent the attainment of the four absorptions (*jhāna/dhyāna*) was considered in early Buddhist literature an exceptional and profound experience requiring considerable meditative expertise.

Introduction

The main purpose of the present article is to ‘plumb the depths’ of absorption, in the sense of studying to what degree absorption (*jhāna/dhyāna*) features in the early Buddhist discourses as an experience requiring a substantial degree of concentrative proficiency. The usage of the translation “absorption” in the following exploration is not meant to predispose the reader toward a particular interpretation of the phenomenological properties of *jhāna/dhyāna*, since in English language usage one can be *absorbed* in thought or in some activity, so that the term “absorption” is not necessarily confined to the absence of thought and total stillness of the mind.¹ The alternative of using the Pāli term *jhāna* is in fact not without drawbacks, as this term occurs at times with the meaning of “meditation” in general, rather than designating more specific states of concentration, usually listed as a set of four. An example occurs in the *Gopakamoggallāna-sutta*, where the term *jhāna* designates a form of meditation in which the mind is overwhelmed by the five hindrances, which obviously is far from being a state of absorption.² Another example is the injunction *jhāyatha*, which is used in Pāli discourses to enjoin the cultivation of meditation in general and is clearly not confined to commending the attainment of absorption.³ In order to avoid possible confusion of such usage with the type of *jhāna* that in Pāli discourses and their parallels is regularly distinguished into a first, second, third, and fourth type, it seems to me preferable to use the term “absorption” for designating the four types of *jhāna/dhyāna*.⁴

In what follows, I begin with a brief survey of the listing of the four absorptions and immaterial spheres and then proceed to the Buddha’s pre-awakening cultivation of absorption, reports of which contain

much relevant information. Then I relate what has emerged in this way to passages that have a general bearing on the nature of absorption. In other publications, I have already examined a range of textual material relevant to assessing the nature of absorption, which in the present context, whenever opportune, I will just reference and summarize, in an attempt to strike a middle path between failure to cover central points and constant repetition of the same material in different publications. Thus, a full evaluation of my presentation in the present article would need to take into consideration the more detailed coverage given to selected topics elsewhere.

The Four Absorptions and Immaterial Spheres

To get started, I will take a brief look at standard listings of the four absorptions.⁵ These usually proceed in ascending order from the first to the fourth; they often continue beyond that to the four immaterial spheres. Now, the bare fact of being listed one after the other does not necessarily imply a gradual, step-by-step progression in actual meditation practice. For example, the four immaterial spheres occur in a listing of the eight deliverances (*vimokkha*),⁶ where these four are preceded by three deliverances that do not correspond to the four absorptions. It does not follow, however, that this constitutes an alternative approach to the cultivation of the four immaterial spheres.⁷ The Pāli description of these eight deliverances employs a reference to a complete “passing beyond,” “overcoming,” or “surmounting,” *samatikkama*, for each of the four immaterial spheres but not for the preceding three deliverances. This shift in usage thus begins with first immaterial sphere only, indicating that its attainment requires completely surmounting all perceptions of form. The second immaterial sphere in turn requires completely surmounting the first, the third immaterial sphere completely surmounting the second, the fourth immaterial sphere completely surmounting the third, and the cessation of perception and what is felt (*saññāvedayitanirodha*)—being the last in the list of deliverances—requires completely surmounting the fourth immaterial sphere.⁸ A *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to such a listing testifies to a similar terminological shift,⁹ here expressed with 度, which can render *samatikrama* and related terms like, for example, *atikrama*, *tāraṇa*, *pāragata*, etc.¹⁰ A Sanskrit fragment parallel to another instance of such a listing indeed employs *samatikrama* in the same manner, that is, starting with first immaterial sphere and thus after having covered the first three deliverances.¹¹ A *Dīrgha-āgama* version of the same instance also concords, using the same 度 already mentioned above.¹²

The terminological shift evident in these versions appears to be intentional, and the most straightforward reading of its employment would be that, whereas the four immaterial spheres, together with the cessation of perception and what is felt, are a meditative progression, building on each other, the same does not hold for the first three deliverances. In other words, closer inspection of the listing of eight deliverances brings to light indications that the issue at stake was not to depict an alternative route to reaching the immaterial spheres and eventually the cessation of perception and what is felt. In fact, there is no reason why listings of meditative attainments or experience should in principle be confined to those that build on each other in a single practice progression, as such listings can bring together different items depending on whatever topic has been chosen for giving a teaching.

The same principle is also evident with a discussion of the progressive cessation of five types of feeling tones, which proceeds through the four absorptions but then does not mention any of the four immaterial spheres and instead turns directly to the cessation of perception and what is felt.¹³ This does not entail that this passage envisages attainment of cessation to be possible without a cultivation of the four immaterial spheres.¹⁴ Instead, the circumstance that these four are not mentioned is simply due to the perspective adopted in this discourse. With the attainment of the fourth absorption all pleasant and unpleasant feeling tones have already ceased, and the same condition continues with each of the four immaterial spheres. Hence, from the viewpoint of feeling tones only the cessation of perception and what is felt is worth being explicitly mentioned, as with that even neutral feeling tones cease.

An example of a similar type can be seen in a discussion of six types of tranquilizations. In this case, too, the degree of tranquilization achieved with the fourth absorption continues through the four immaterial spheres, wherefore the discourse proceeds from the former directly to the cessation of perception and what is felt.¹⁵ These examples reflect the importance of closely examining the context of a particular passage,¹⁶ a need to which I will come back in the course of my exploration.

A different perspective emerges on closely examining the standard descriptions of the two sets of four absorptions and of the four immaterial spheres. Each of these descriptions makes it clear that the members of each set build on each other, in the sense that each set is meant to provide a description of an actual meditative progression. For example, the standard description of the attainment of the second absorption indicates

that this requires overcoming factors characteristic of the first absorption and thus clearly builds on its prior attainment;¹⁷ the same holds for an attainment of the second immaterial sphere, which builds on the prior attainment of the first immaterial sphere, etc.

It is not immediately evident, however, if the series of four absorptions forms the basis for the meditative cultivation of the four immaterial spheres. Expressed more succinctly: is an attainment of the fourth absorption required for being able to attain the first immaterial sphere of infinite space? An answer to this query can be found in the *Laṭukikopama-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel. The main topic of the parallels is the need to overcome fetters, whose exploration leads up to an exposition of deep levels of concentration.¹⁸ The parallels establish explicit relationships between each of the attainments they list, making it clear that one leads over to the next. This presentation comes with a clear-cut indication that the attainment of the first immaterial sphere requires surmounting the fourth absorption, just the same way as the attainment of the fourth absorption is based on surmounting the previous three (and the attainments of the higher immaterial spheres are based on surmounting the respective lower immaterial sphere). In order to indicate this, the *Laṭukikopama-sutta* employs the same notion of surmounting, *samatikkama*, mentioned earlier, and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel has indeed the corresponding 度.¹⁹ In other words, this listing shows that the meditative progression continues from the fourth absorption to the first immaterial sphere, similar to the progression from one immaterial sphere to another. This confirms that attaining the immaterial spheres indeed requires mastery of the four absorptions.

The same is also evident in another discourse extant in Pāli, which compares an attempt to reach a higher concentrative attainment without having properly mastered the lower one(s) to a foolish cow that tries to get to a spot on a mountain without having firmly planted her foot in the place where she is, being as a result unable to get to where she wants to go or even to return safely to where she had been. The discourse makes it clear that this much applies not only to proceeding from one of the four absorptions to the next, but also to proceeding from the fourth absorption to the first immaterial sphere.²⁰

The need to master the fourth absorption for being able to attain the first immaterial sphere is also implicit in listings of the nine successive abidings (*anupubbavīhārā*) found in two Pāli discourses as well as in a parallel extant in Chinese in the former case and in Tibetan in the latter.²¹

In this way, it seems indeed to be the case that from the viewpoint of the early discourses listings of the four absorptions and the four immaterial spheres reflect an actual progression of practice.

The Buddha's Practice with Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta

Taking into account the context is again relevant to the report of the Buddha's pre-awakening period of apprenticeship under two teachers, Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. Before exploring this in more detail, I would like to clarify that my attempt in what follows is not to pretend certainty about what really happened on the ground in ancient India. Instead, I am merely trying to piece together information relevant to assessing the early Buddhist perception of the nature of an absorption.

A report of the Buddha's period of apprenticeship features in the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel. After a brief reference to his going forth, the Buddha describes in detail his successful achievement of the sphere of nothingness under Āḷāra Kālāma, followed by him mastering the sphere of neither-perception-nor-nonperception under Uddaka Rāmaputta. The narrative does not mention any prior cultivation of the four absorptions or of the first two immaterial spheres of infinite space and infinite consciousness. Now, as mentioned above, the standard descriptions of the immaterial spheres make it clear that the attainment of nothingness would require prior cultivation of the first two immaterial spheres, and the *Laṭukikopama-sutta* and its parallel, together with the discourse on the simile of the foolish cow and listings of nine successive meditative abidings, provide fairly clear indications that mastery of the fourth absorption would be required for abiding in the first immaterial sphere. In fact, the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* introduces its references to the attainment of the sphere of nothingness by explicitly mentioning the need to go beyond the sphere of infinite consciousness.²² Thus, at least in this version, the need for prior practice comes up explicitly, even though without providing a full coverage by mentioning the four absorptions and the first immaterial sphere as well.

The actual teaching in the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its parallel starts with the Buddha announcing his chosen topic to be the contrast between an ignoble quest and the noble quest for freedom from the predicaments of old age, disease, and death. In other words, the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* does not appear to be meant to provide a comprehensive biography of the Buddha's progress to awakening. Instead, it takes up episodes from that progress which are relevant to the chosen topic of the noble quest.²³

Now, the account of the future Buddha's apprenticeship under Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta serves to illustrate the topic of such a noble quest. Both Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta were reportedly deeply impressed by the achievement of the Buddha-to-be and invited him to become a teacher of their disciples. Yet, he realized that the respective attainments were not the solution to his quest for freedom. Rather than accepting the invitation, he decided to continue in his search for total freedom. For these two episodes to serve the function of illustrating the noble quest, there is no need to bring in explicitly any prior attainment of the four absorptions or of the lower two immaterial spheres.

The main point made with the report given in this way in the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel aligns with teachings elsewhere that nothing short of full awakening deserves to be the final goal. Rather than settling for some lesser achievement, the Buddha exemplifies this orientation with his own case. Of central importance here is the revelation that he had reached the acme of meditative accomplishment presumably known at that time in the ancient Indian setting. Not only had he become equal to his teacher Ālāra Kālāma, but in the case of Uddaka Rāmaputta he had even become superior, as only Uddaka's father Rāma had achieved the attainment of neither-perception-nor-nonperception.²⁴ Yet, the Buddha-to-be was not satisfied with that. This appears to be the key message.

The contextual setting conveys that the account must be about the actual attainment in each case, rather than a thematically related meditative experience that could in principle be accessed with considerably lower levels of concentration. This is clear from the already-mentioned reference in the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the need to go beyond the sphere of infinite consciousness. Although such a reference is not found in the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta*, the Pāli version contains another indication that reflects the same state of affairs. The relevant indication takes the form of a reflection of the Buddha-to-be that each of the two attainments he had mastered only leads to rebirth in the corresponding realm.²⁵ This implies that the idea is indeed that he had gained the actual attainments.²⁶

The same also fits the report of the invitation for him to become a teacher. The *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel agree that the Buddha recognized the high honor and respect that these invitations conveyed,²⁷ which in view of the superior hierarchical positioning of a spiritual teacher in the ancient Indian setting is indeed remarkable.

This in turn implies that, from the viewpoint of the textual accounts, he must have reached an extraordinary accomplishment. In the report of the onset of his apprenticeship, Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta feature to all appearances as the sole leaders of the respective groups. The formulation of the invitation to become a co-teacher or even the main teacher, with its emphasis on the Buddha-to-be having become an equal or even superior, in turn suggests that other disciples had not reached the actual attainment. Otherwise, it would have been natural for them to have been invited to the position of a co-teacher as well. This much is particularly evident in the case of Uddaka Rāmaputta, who had not even realized the attainment himself. In this way, the third and fourth immaterial spheres clearly feature in the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel as extraordinary attainments.

The Buddha's Pre-awakening Absorption Practice

Although the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel do not refer to the Buddha's pre-awakening cultivation of the four absorptions, ostensibly reflecting their thematic orientation, the same does come up in considerable detail in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel. According to the narrative context, Anuruddha and his two companions Nandiya and Kimbila had difficulties in their meditation practice, as they perceived light and saw forms, but these then disappeared again. In order to provide guidance to them, the Buddha reports his own struggle with one after the other in a list of eleven subtle defilements (*upakkilesa*), each responsible for the disappearance of light and forms. After overcoming each of these subtle defilements one by one, he was eventually able to cultivate concentration with *vitakka* and *vicāra*—two factors of the first absorption to which I will return below—then concentration without *vitakka* but still with *vicāra*, and then concentration without both. This implies that the prior struggle with various subtle defilements must have taken place at a level of concentration lower than that of the first absorption.²⁸

The list of eleven subtle defilements does not include the first two of the five hindrances, sensual desire and aversion, which suggests that the onset of this prolonged struggle with various subtle defilements would have been based on having already overcome, temporarily at least, gross manifestations of these two. The presentation in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallel implies that, even at a time of no longer having to counter the first two hindrances of sensual desire and aversion, there is still quite a lot of meditative work to do before being able to arrive just at a level of

concentration corresponding to the first absorption. This concords with indications found elsewhere among the discourses that already the first absorption is a condition characterized by the achievement of unification of the mind.²⁹

Particularly noteworthy is that the description given in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallels feature a protagonist who certainly did not lack meditative expertise, namely the Buddha himself. Moreover, the circumstance that Anuruddha and his two companions are on record for having had encountered similar problems shows that difficulties in reaching just the first absorption were not uncommon and were to be expected. In fact, the Buddha's detailed report of his own struggle is clearly based on the assumption that this will benefit them, in the sense that they can be expected to need his guidance in order to be successful in their attempts to progress to a level of concentration equivalent to the first absorption. This is particularly noteworthy in the case of Anuruddha, who later was to become foremost among disciples for his exercise of the divine eye, which relies on high mastery of concentration.³⁰

The step-by-step overcoming of the subtle defilements by the Buddha-to-be gives the impression that in actual practice this must have taken place over a prolonged period of time. Once these subtle defilements had been overcome, another problem was that at times he perceived light but did not see forms or else saw forms but did not perceive light, or that one of these was limited. Encountering each of these different problems in his meditation, and eventually overcoming them, happened according to both versions during days and nights.³¹ These indications stand in direct contrast to the suggestion by the Pāli commentary that the meditative development of concentration described in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* (and its parallel) took place during the last watch of the night of the Buddha's awakening.³² This is clearly unconvincing, as a meditative cultivation taking place over days and nights cannot be fitted into a part of a single night. Instead, the future Buddha's meditative development of concentration could find a much more appropriate placing before his time with Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta.³³

In other words, in order to make sense of the narrative of the Buddha's pre-awakening meditation practices, it does not seem necessary to dismiss the fairly well-established requirement of mastery of the four absorptions for being able to enter the attainments taught by Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. The problem with such an interpretation is simply that it conflicts with relevant canonical material. Instead, a more simple and

straightforward solution can be found by not following the unconvincing commentarial allocation of the future Buddha's gradual cultivation of absorption, reported in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* (and its parallel), to the night of awakening, and instead allocate it to an earlier time. In this way, the needed ability to attain absorption can be accounted for, serving as a basis for cultivating the attainments taught by Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta.

The description in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallel can be explored further with the help of another Pāli discourse, found in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, which has a parallel located in the *Madhyama-āgama* collection directly after its parallel to the *Upakkilesa-sutta*. The Pāli and Chinese versions of this other discourse depict in detail the practice of the Buddha-to-be once he had successfully mastered concentration and stabilized both light and forms. Based on that, he was able to gather various types of information regarding celestials, such as, for example, their life span.³⁴ The parallels speak from the outset of *those* celestials, even though these have not been introduced before, which suggests that these correspond to some of the earlier mentioned *forms* experienced in meditative vision.

Now, the investigation of various aspects of those celestials features as part of his quest for freedom from the predicaments of human existence.³⁵ His cultivation of absorption may thus have been part of an attempt to find out if there are other realms where one will be free from old age, disease, and death. Such an approach would be in line with a perspective typical for the ancient Indian setting as well as early Buddhist thought, where particular meditative attainments are seen as closely interrelated with corresponding realms of existence.³⁶

What emerges in this way suggests that a placing of the Buddha's pre-awakening cultivation of absorption prior to the time of his gaining the attainments taught by Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta would result in a natural evolution of his quest. Based on the realization that freedom from the human predicament requires leaving behind sensuality, he goes forth. Having at least temporarily overcome sensuality, he gradually cultivates absorption attainment, a cultivation that may have been, at least in part, informed by a search for some celestial resolution to the human predicament.³⁷ Yet, this search proves unsuccessful, as he finds that those celestials have not gone beyond *saṃsāra*, that they are also subject to death. Next, he realizes the attainment of nothingness promoted by Āḷāra Kālāma. Yet, on successfully cultivating this attainment, he

finds that this, too, does not lead out of *saṃsāra*, and the same holds for the attainment that underpins Uddaka Rāmaputta's teaching. At this point, he has explored all the possibilities of escaping from the round of deaths and rebirths through concentrative attainments with their corresponding realms. Hence, next he shifts gears by discarding this approach and instead tries to make his way to freedom through ascetic self-mortification.

On the Eve of the Buddha's Awakening

The *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* and a parallel extant in Sanskrit fragments report that, once he realized that the alternative road of asceticism also failed to lead him to the goal of his quest, in the course of trying to find another approach to liberation the Buddha-to-be recollected an experience of absorption from his youth.³⁸ In both versions, the memory comes right after he has been reflecting whether there may be another way to realize his aspiration for awakening.³⁹ The contextual setting makes it perhaps understandable why he does not recall the cultivation of his absorption experiences described in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallel, as these appear to have formed part of an earlier approach that he had already discarded as not capable of leading him to freedom from the human predicament. For finding a new, alternative approach, he needed to go beyond what he had already found to be insufficient for leading him to awakening.

As mentioned above, his investigation of various aspects of celestial forms of existence, based on having stabilized his experiences of light and forms through deepening concentration, appears to have been part of his search for a way of transcending *saṃsāra*. In contrast, an absorption experienced in his youth would have been just the bare experience as such, unrelated to his quest and without carrying any metaphysical associations. Recollecting that would have facilitated dissociating bare absorption attainment from metaphysics and seeing it simply as a powerful tool for mental cultivation.

Although indications regarding his age when this experience of the first absorption should be understood to have happened differ considerably,⁴⁰ the fact remains that the account in the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* and its parallel implies that the Buddha-to-be, at least on this single occasion in his youth, easily gained the first absorption, whereas in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallel he went through a prolonged struggle to achieve the same. When comparing these two contrasting accounts, the "principle of

embarrassment” could be relied on, which according to Nattier (2003: 65) implies that, when a text reveals “something that is quite unflattering to the group or the position that he or she represents, there is a high degree of probability that the statement has a basis in fact.” As an example, she mentions the story of the Buddha’s unsuccessful attempt to mediate the Kosambī quarrel, even being told by his own monk disciples that he should leave them alone.⁴¹ As she points out, this “narrative hardly paints a positive picture of the members of the early Buddhist community—nor of the degree of authority of the Buddha himself!”

When viewed from the perspective of this principle of embarrassment, the description in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallel of the Buddha’s prolonged struggle with defilements to achieve just the first absorption is hardly flattering. In contrast, for him to achieve the same in his youth, and to all appearances without any preparation, is clearly something exceptional. According to the *Milindapañha*, he was only one month old and attained all four absorptions at that time.⁴² This provides a testimony to a tendency to enhance the marvelous nature of this episode, in line with a general tendency to eulogize the Buddha that becomes ever more prominent with the passage of time after his final Nirvana.⁴³

An emphasis on the marvelous nature of this episode can be seen in the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the *Acchariyabbhutadhamma-sutta*, which enhances its wondrous nature by reporting that the shadows of other trees moved, yet the shadow of the tree under which the Buddha-to-be was seated remained still to provide shade for him.⁴⁴ This report comes in close proximity to another marvel, also reported in the Pāli version, according to which the Buddha-to-be was able to walk right after being born.⁴⁵ Needless to say, this is not a pronouncement on general abilities of infants in ancient India, but much rather a marvel specific to the Buddha. The same holds for the report of his attainment of the first absorption in his youth, in the sense that this is also a specific feat related to him personally, reflecting his exceptionally high spiritual potential, rather than being a statement regarding the general ability to attain the first absorption with ease.⁴⁶ Moreover, even in his case this attainment appears to have been a unique occurrence, rather than being something he could repeat at will.

In this way, in addition to the principle of embarrassment, another point to be kept in mind emerges when comparing the youth episode in the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* and its parallel with the report of the gradual over-

coming of subtle defilements in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallel. The report in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallel on the gradual overcoming of obstructions to concentration is clearly meant to be generally applicable and repeatable, as the very reason for its delivery is to help Anuruddha and his companions navigate their difficulties in stabilizing their concentration. That is, in this case the Buddha's individual experiences are generalizable, in the sense that they reflect challenges in reaching the first absorption that according to the contextual setting are expected to hold for others as well.

Although this episode comes with a specific element in the form of perceiving light and seeing forms, another Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallels report that Mahāmoggallāna had difficulties in stabilizing the second absorption and needed the Buddha's personal intervention to be successful in this respect.⁴⁷ According to another Pāli discourse of which no parallel is known, he already encountered such difficulties in relation to stabilizing the first absorption.⁴⁸ Be it the first or the second absorption, his difficulties in this respect are remarkable. Mahāmoggallāna had reportedly become a stream-enterer already before meeting the Buddha,⁴⁹ which implies that in the present episode he was no longer a worldling, and eventually he became foremost among monks in psychic powers, which require high mastery of concentration.⁵⁰ In other words, his case appears to be another example of a practitioner indubitably possessing high potential in matters of concentration who nevertheless struggles just to gain the second, or even just the first, absorption.

The case of Mahāmoggallāna implies that already in early Buddhist literature the ability to attain absorption at will was considered extraordinary and requiring considerable meditative dedication and expertise; this is clearly not a perspective that only emerges with commentarial exegesis. Yet another discourse offers additional support to the perspective that emerges in this way. The parallel versions report that the Buddha made a point of proclaiming that he is himself able to abide in the first absorption as long as he wishes, and Mahākassapa is able to do the same,⁵¹ followed by repeating the same proclamation in relation to a range of higher meditative attainments. Formulating such a statement just for the first absorption would hardly make much sense unless such ability was indeed viewed as an outstanding achievement in its own right.

The *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* and its parallel report that the future Buddha's recollection of an experience of the first absorption in his youth led him to the conclusion that this could be, or even is, the path to awakening.⁵²

Notably, the ensuing narrative does not convey the impression that the first absorption as such is already the path to awakening. In fact, such an interpretation would imply that already in his youth the Buddha-to-be was acquainted with the path to awakening, which would not fit naturally with the reports of his sustained quest to find such a path after his going forth.

According to the ensuing narrative in the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* and its Sanskrit parallel, the Buddha-to-be took nourishment, then attained the four absorptions, and then the three higher knowledges. The parallels agree in singling out only the three higher knowledges for a special treatment by way of indicating that each of these resulted in overcoming ignorance and gaining knowledge, in overcoming darkness and arousing light.⁵³ In the case of the same indication found in the *Bhayabherava-sutta*, the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel also agrees in qualifying already the future Buddha's recollection of past lives to be a matter of dispelling ignorance and overcoming darkness.⁵⁴ There is thus agreement among different sources that, instead of singling out the first absorption for a special treatment, the spotlight is rather on the role of recollection of past lives, the divine eye, and the destruction of the influxes as the most crucial aspects leading to the breakthrough to awakening. Judging from the mode of presentation adopted, which features as a report given by the Buddha himself, the first absorption mainly functioned as a lead over from taking nourishment to the eventual attainment of the fourth absorption, as part of an attempt to recover his physical and mental strength.

The conclusion that emerges in this way does not in any way imply a dismissal of the importance of the role of absorption attainment, which is clearly a requirement just as much as taking food again, and without these awakening would not have been possible. Nevertheless, the progression of the narrative confirms the impression that the role of the first absorption at this juncture needs to be contextualized, as it does not just represent the whole path to awakening. In its narrative setting, the memory of the first absorption experience in his youth appears to have the crucial function of clarifying that the pleasures of concentration need not be feared. This decisively undermines the axiomatic assumption underpinning ascetic practices that the path to freedom must be a painful one,⁵⁵ and such undermining forms a necessary insight for arriving at the definite decision to give up asceticism.

In fact, the Sanskrit parallel to the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* precedes the episode of recollecting the former experience of the first absorption with a set of three similes depicting the need for wood to be dry in order to

be usable for making a fire, which lead up to the insight that dwelling free from sensuality is the key requirement for progress to awakening, independent of whether one engages in ascetic practices or not.⁵⁶ In the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta*, these three similes rather occur before the account of the future Buddha's ascetic practices. This placing seems incoherent, as the insight depicted in this way would make an undertaking of ascetic practices appear superfluous. As already pointed out by Bhikkhu Bodhi in Ñāṇamoli (1995/2005: 1229n387), it seems that in the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* "the narrative sequence of the sutta has become jumbled. The appropriate place for the simile ... would be at the end of the Bodhisatta's period of ascetic experimentation," a suggestion confirmed by the Sanskrit parallel.⁵⁷ From this perspective, the relationship of the memory of the first absorption to the path to awakening appears to be indeed closely related to the decision to abandon the undertaking of asceticism, in the sense that it was in particular this decision that opened up the path to awakening, which the future Buddha then pursued by way of recollecting his past lives and cultivating the divine eye.

Now, the spotlight provided in the above discourses on recollection of past lives and the divine eye needs to be considered within its narrative context, as elsewhere discourses indicate that these two higher knowledges are not necessarily liberative. Recollection of past lives can according to the *Brahmajāla-sutta* and its parallels lead to adopting an eternalist view,⁵⁸ and the divine eye can according to the *Mahākammavibhaṅga-sutta* and its parallels result in mistaken ideas about the workings of karma.⁵⁹ In other words, even these two higher knowledges are not necessarily the path to awakening, let alone being awakening itself. It follows that they deserve to share the attributes of dispelling ignorance and darkness with the third knowledge, the destruction of the influxes, because from the viewpoint of the Buddha as the speaker of this part in the *Bhayabherava-sutta* and the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* (together with their parallels) it is with these higher knowledges that he had fully, irreversibly embarked on the path to his awakening.

In line with the standard description of this type of higher knowledge, the future Buddha's recollection of past lives involved recalling his former name and clan, the type of food eaten, and the type of pleasure and pain experienced, and that much in relation to a high number of former lives.⁶⁰ This in turn suggests that the future Buddha's memory of an experience of the first absorption in his youth, which in its narrative setting forms part of a review of the approaches to awakening he had undertaken so far, is significant not just because it concerns an absorption attainment

aloof from sensuality but also because it involves a recollection of a past experience as such. The narrative progression shows that this led to an extension of such recollection from the time of his youth in his present life to former lives, and it is such extension that according to the relevant discourses indeed deserves to be reckoned as the path that led him to awakening.

The above thereby provides an additional perspective on why a youth experience should acquire such significance at the present juncture of events, rather than an absorption attained later, after his going forth. This appears to be because it involves a memory from a comparatively more distant past in his present life, before his going forth, and due to that could motivate the decision to pursue memories of the past even further by recollecting former lives. Such an extension of memories of past experiences to former lives in turn prepared the ground for his awakening.

From the viewpoint of my main topic of ascertaining the depth of absorption attainment in early Buddhist thought, recalling various details from past lives must involve a conceptual or reflective dimension of the mind, that is, some form of thought appears to be required. It would hardly be possible to have such memories in a mind that is completely free from any thinking activity. This is significant in view of the fact that according to the *Bhayabherava-sutta* and its parallel the earlier progression through the four absorptions by the Buddha-to-be involved, in line with the standard description, leaving behind *vitakka* with the attainment of the second absorption.

The significance of the term *vitakka* in descriptions of absorption attainment is a debated issue. Elsewhere I have presented arguments in support of taking *vitakka* to refer just to an act of mental application that need not involve fully fledged thinking activity.⁶¹ One of several relevant indications in this respect relates to the description in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallel, mentioned above, according to which the Buddha-to-be developed concentration without *vitakka* but still with *vicāra*.⁶² If *vitakka* is understood to be “thought” and *vicāra* consequently some form of “pondering,” “considering,” or “reflecting,” it becomes difficult to understand what this level of concentration could be. Once thought has been left behind, there would not seem to be much scope for pondering, considering, or reflecting.

If *vitakka* is instead understood as an application of the mind and *vicāra* as a sustaining of the mental condition of composure, however, then a type of concentration without *vitakka* but still with *vicāra* can more easily be understood from the perspective of actual practice. It can then refer to a stage in the cultivation of gradually deepening concentration when the comparatively gross effort to apply the mind (*vitakka*) to the object of concentration is no longer needed but there is still a need to keep it there, to sustain (*vicāra*) it on the object. With further deepening of concentration, this much can then also be left behind. The gradual development of concentration that emerges in this way makes it appear more probable that already *vitakka*, as a characteristic of the first absorption, would be of a fairly refined nature, rather than being confined to ordinary thinking.⁶³

For the present passage, however, differences in interpreting the significance of *vitakka* are of less importance, since even if the term is taken to refer to conceptual thought, this much is overcome with the second absorption and for this reason has been left behind well before arrival at the concentrative depth of the fourth absorption. Yet, in the total absence of thought, a form of contemplation that involves recollecting what name and what type of experiences one had in the past would hardly seem possible. It follows that cultivating recollection of past lives would require emerging from the attainment of the fourth absorption and, in a condition that is still well saturated by the influence of the prior absorption experience, direct the mind toward such recollection. Such still being saturated with the depth of concentration reached earlier appears to find expression in the *Bhayabherava-sutta* and its parallel in the indication that the future Buddha's cultivation of recollection of past lives took place "with the mind thus concentrated" or "relying on this concentrated mind."⁶⁴

Activities Possible During Absorption Attainment

The account of the Buddha's cultivation of the four absorptions, followed by his recollection of past lives, already provides a significant perspective on what activities are possible while still immersed in absorption attainment. Another episode relevant to the same topic of what a meditator can do while in absorption attainment would be the account of the monk Godhika's suicide. The relevant Pāli discourse reports that he had attained a temporary liberation of the mind for six times and lost it again.⁶⁵ According to the commentary, the reference is to a mundane attainment (*lokiyasamāpatti*),⁶⁶ as opposed to a supramundane

attainment, and thus would presumably intend some form of absorption. On attaining the same temporary liberation of the mind for the seventh time, Godhika decided to commit suicide to prevent a seventh instance of loss. This could give the impression that he committed suicide while being in actual absorption attainment.⁶⁷

Notably, in the PTS edition by Feer (1884/1991: 121n1) the relevant part comes with a note pointing out that the reference to falling away a sixth time and then attaining it a seventh time is only found in the Burmese manuscript used for this edition. On the alternative reading that emerges in this way, Godhika is not in the actual attainment when committing suicide.⁶⁸ A similar situation emerges with the presentation in one of the two *Samyukta-āgama* parallels, where he decides to commit suicide after the sixth instance of loss, to prevent a seventh instance of losing the attainment.⁶⁹ Here, too, he is not in the attainment; in fact, a seventh instance of attaining is not mentioned at all. In the other *Samyukta-āgama* version, he decides to commit suicide should he lose the attainment a seventh time.⁷⁰ In this case, his suicide also does not happen while in the attainment, but rather after having lost it for a seventh time. In a parallel extant in Tibetan, after a sixth loss of the attainment he also decides to commit suicide in order to prevent a seventh loss, so that here, too, he is not in the actual attainment.⁷¹ In this way, consultation of the parallels supports the impression that the present episode does not describe an act of suicide committed while in an absorbed state of mind.⁷² This concords with what has emerged thus far regarding the nature of absorption, which in early Buddhist thought does not seem to feature as a mental condition in which one would be able to take hold of a knife and kill oneself.

Another instance relevant to assessing what type of activities are possible during absorption attainment occurs in the *Mahāsuññata-sutta* and its parallels, which describe a meditation practice that leads up to abiding in internal and external emptiness as well as in imperturbability, a term that usually refers to the mental condition achieved with a successful attainment of the fourth absorption.⁷³ The parallel versions then continue by describing various activities, including what conversations such a practitioner may engage in. Now, the three versions agree in introducing such conversations with the indication that the practitioner abides in the earlier described abiding of emptiness and imperturbability.⁷⁴ This could hardly be intending to convey that these conversations take place while still in the full attainment of imperturbability.

Another relevant episode involves the Buddha himself, found in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* of which no parallel appears to be known.⁷⁵ The pertinent passage presents his attainment of the four absorptions as examples of his partaking of a celestial type of high and luxurious bed, in contrast to an actual bed that is high and luxurious, which he does not use. The Buddha explains that, when he is in such a condition, even his walking is of a celestial type.⁷⁶ This could give the impression that he remained in his absorption attainment, including that of the fourth absorption, even when getting up and walking.

According to another Pāli discourse and its parallels, breathing ceases with the attainment of the fourth absorption.⁷⁷ This could be meant literally. The *Mahāvedalla-sutta* explicitly compares the breathless condition occurring due to attainment of the cessation of perception and what is felt (*saññāvedayitanirodha*) to the similarly breathless condition of a corpse.⁷⁸ At least in the case of the cessation of perception and what is felt, it is thus quite certain that breathing should be understood to have completely stopped. Since the attainment of cessation appears to require prior cultivation of the fourth absorption (as well as of the four immaterial spheres), it is possible that the corpse-like condition of absence of breathing should be understood to occur already when the fourth absorption is attained.

But even if one were to assume that the indication regarding the cessation of breathing in the case of the fourth absorption is only meant figuratively—in the sense that, due to the depth of concentration reached at this point, it is no longer possible to feel the breath subjectively at all—such a condition would still not be compatible with engaging in actual walking. The last is too gross an activity to be identifiable as a condition where the breath can no longer be felt at all. In other words, in the case of the discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* without a known parallel, the most straightforward interpretation would be that the Buddha's celestial walking involves a continuity of the general degree of mental calmness reached with the fourth absorption rather than assuming that it is actually possible to walk while immersed in the full attainment. In terms of the imagery on which this presentation is based, it seems fair to propose that the Buddha needs to get up from his celestial bed in order to be able to walk. While walking, he then continues to partake of the celestial quality of the earlier "bed," even though in itself his walking differs from his earlier reclining.

The suggestion that an experience of absorption has an after-effect,⁷⁹ in that the tranquil condition resulting from the absorption experience may continue to saturate experiences had after emerging from the actual attainment, could be explored further with an episode in the *Naḷakapāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel. The relevant passage occurs in the context of an instruction given by the Buddha when Anuruddha and his companions had just ordained.⁸⁰ The Buddha recommends that they should cultivate the happiness that is secluded from sensual pleasures and unwholesome states, a reference the commentary understands to intend absorption attainment.⁸¹ Such cultivation is meant to ensure that their minds will not succumb to various defilements. According to the Pāli version, their minds will not become overwhelmed by the five hindrances.⁸² The Chinese version adds that they will be able to avoid overeating and becoming depressed, and also be able to bear hunger and thirst, cold and heat, various insects, offensive speech, being beaten with sticks, or encountering a painful disease.⁸³ Despite differing formulations, both versions seem to have an after-effect in mind. This is particularly evident with the additional stipulations in the *Madhyama-āgama* version, which are hardly about something regularly experienced while being in absorption attainment. The same also fits the context, as the recommendation in the *Naḷakapāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel is meant to inspire Anuruddha and his companions in their living of the monastic life, with the spotlight more naturally being on general benefits of cultivating the happiness of seclusion that go beyond what is experienced while being in an actual attainment.

The perspective that emerges in this way is in turn relevant to various descriptions of cultivating liberating insight based on absorption attainment, such as, for example, when this requires analyzing absorption attainment in terms of the five aggregates and then contemplating each of these from a variety of insight-related perspectives.⁸⁴ Such descriptions could in principle be read in two ways: either they require withdrawal from the absorption attainment, or else insight is developed while the practitioner is still immersed in the attainment of absorption. Yet, given that the absorption factors *vitakka* and *vicāra* are by definition absent from the higher absorptions, there does not seem to be much scope left for engaging in the thought activity required for a reflective type of insight while being still in one of these higher absorptions.

A discourse at times quoted as providing explicit support for the assumption that insightful reflection is possible during an actual attainment of absorption is the *Anupada-sutta*, which depicts Sāriputta cultivating

insight into absorption attainments.⁸⁵ Following a listing of the mental factors of a particular absorption, the *Anupada-sutta* states that Sāriputta's cultivation of insight into the respective attainment took the following form: "Indeed, in this way these states, which have not been, come into being; having been, they disappear."⁸⁶ Now, when these states "have not been" or else when they "disappear," Sāriputta is obviously not yet or no longer in the absorption attainment, as that requires the presence of the mental factors listed earlier. It follows that the cultivation of insight described in the *Anupada-sutta* covers what is experienced on the verge of entering the absorption and right after emerging from its fully fledged attainment.

The Extraordinary Nature of Absorption Attainment

The report in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its parallel of Anuruddha and his companions struggling to attain a level of concentration that fell short of the first absorption can be complemented with the report of another encounter they had with the Buddha at a time when they had successfully mastered the challenges of attaining absorption. The Buddha inquires whether by now they have been able to achieve a "superhuman state" (*uttarimanussadhamma*), in reply to which Anuruddha mentions the first and then the higher absorptions.⁸⁷

The implication of the notion of a "superhuman state" can be explored further with the help of the report in a Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallel that a brahmin ridiculed the claim by some recluses and brahmins to have reached such a superhuman state, on the grounds that according to him this is impossible for someone born a human.⁸⁸ In other words, the term "superhuman," in its use in this context, should be taken literally as referring to something rather extraordinary that is indeed beyond the reach of average human beings.⁸⁹

The notion of such a superhuman state also features in the different *Vinayas* in relation to monastics intentionally making false claims to having attained such a state, as a consequence of which they incur a *pārājika* and have irrevocably lost their higher ordination.⁹⁰ This much holds for a claim to have attained absorption.⁹¹ These *Vinaya* passages reflect a conception of absorption as an extraordinary attainment that is quite literally superhuman.⁹² This much already holds for the first absorption, which in the *Sandaka-sutta* features as a superb distinction for the sake of which it is worth living the holy life under the Buddha.⁹³ Besides being superhuman, absorption attainment also leads the one who accomplishes it beyond the reach of Māra.⁹⁴

In line with such pointers to the quite literally extra-ordinary nature of absorption attainment, a relevant indication is that one who has attained absorption will no longer mentally register any hearing of sound.⁹⁵ This indication is of considerable significance for evaluating the depth of absorption. According to the narrative setting in both versions of the relevant discourse, senior monastics decided to leave the monastic dwelling place in which they were staying in the anticipation that a group of visitors about to arrive to see the Buddha will be noisy. In both versions, these senior monastics reflect that the Buddha has identified sound as a “thorn” to absorption.⁹⁶ The term “thorn” here clearly designates an obstacle, otherwise there would have been little need for these senior monastics to leave. Once the visitors have left again, the Buddha approves of the action taken by these senior monastics and then takes that as a starting point for giving a listing of different thorns. The narrative context shows that the ensuing enumeration of thorns takes as its point of departure the idea that sound is a disturbance to absorption attainment, rather than being compatible with it.

As already pointed out in the context of a detailed discussion of absorption attainment and the hearing of sound in Anālayo (2017a: 141f), the actual listing of thorns in the two parallel versions shows some differences, giving the impression that an original exposition concerned with thorns to absorption has been expanded, as a result of which the significance of the qualification of being a thorn is not always as straightforward as it would have been earlier.⁹⁷

At any rate, the statement on absorption and sound is clearly the starting point of the whole exposition, rather than a possible result of some later expansion, and its indication is best read in relation to what both versions identify to be thorns to higher absorptions. These are factors or qualities that need to be absent during the respective attainment, such as, for example *vitakka* and *vicāra* in the case of the second absorption. It follows that what the parallels designate as a thorn to a particular absorption must be absent during the respective attainment, and if such a thorn occurs then this means that the attainment has been lost. The context leaves no room to argue that one can hear sound while being in the first absorption, or that *vitakka* and *vicāra* can be present in the second absorption, etc. The implication is that, from a practical perspective, one who hears sound has indeed—even if only for a moment—lost absorption attainment.⁹⁸ In other words, very occasional brief hearing of sound could just imply that an attainment of the first absorption has not been fully stabilized. However, more or less continuous hearing of

sound is a clear sign that the attainer is not in what in early Buddhist thought was considered to be the first absorption, just as an experience of concentration in which *vitakka* and *vicāra* are present falls short of what according to early Buddhist thought is the second absorption.

The situation could be illustrated with the example of deep sleep.⁹⁹ Expressed in terms of the imagery used in the discourse under discussion, sound could also be reckoned a thorn to such sleep. Hearing sound makes it difficult to fall asleep and, precisely because being full asleep is not compatible with hearing sounds, loud enough noise will have the effect of waking one up and interrupt the condition of being in deep sleep. In this way, hearing sound implies that at that time one is not deep asleep. In the same way, hearing sound implies that at the same time the mind is not in absorption attainment, be that because one has not yet reached such attainment or else due to having briefly or even for a longer time lost it.

Although hearing is not compatible with full attainment of absorption, the discourses provide similes illustrative of absorption attainment that give the impression that a bodily dimension of the experience of absorption would still be present.¹⁰⁰ Such experience appears to take place at a more subtle and superior level compared to the ordinary dimension of feeling the body. With the successful attainment of the first immaterial sphere of infinite space, a practitioner then goes completely beyond any vestige of bodily experience or inner visions of form, however subtle these may have been during prior absorption attainment. Involvement with sense doors such as the ear, however, must have been left behind much earlier, when attaining just the first absorption.

Conclusion

The above survey would have shown the need to contextualize any statement found in a particular discourse regarding absorption attainment in order to assess its import accurately. The difficulties inherent in the early Buddhist textual material, such as those related to the nature of absorption attainment, may explain the position taken by several scholars and meditation teachers that absorption features in the early Buddhist discourses as a mental condition within easy reach, as the five senses still operate and thinking is possible.¹⁰¹ Such an impression can indeed arise based on consulting selected passages in isolation, although the above examination will hopefully have provided a broader background for evaluating the significance of such passages.

In previous publications I have examined two trajectories that appear to have been particularly influential in the spread of different practice traditions and teachers promoting various levels of concentrative depth that are within easy reach of the average practitioner in the contemporary setting as amounting to fully fledged attainment of absorption or *jhāna*. Although there can be considerable variations among the respective conceptualizations of what characterizes the first absorption, a point of convergence appears to be an interpretation of *vitakka* as reflecting the presence of thinking during the first absorption and the affirmation that such attainment is compatible with hearing sounds. One of the two trajectories apparently responsible for this trend results from polemics in response to the belief that absorption attainment is required in order to be able to attain stream-entry.¹⁰² The other trajectory takes the form of authentication strategies employed in support of a self-styled approach to insight meditation.¹⁰³

The point of my present exploration is not to discourage the practice of such “easy *jhāna*” in principle. What the material surveyed here does put into question is claims—ostensibly influenced by the above-mentioned polemics and authentication strategies—that the level of concentration reached with such an easy approach corresponds to what the early discourses associate with the first to the fourth absorptions. As far as I am able to tell this is not correct, and the promotion of an easy access to *jhāna* needs to be recognized as an innovation that forms part of Buddhist modernism rather than being a revival of an early Buddhist practice.¹⁰⁴ Once even the Buddha himself, as well as outstanding disciples like Anuruddha and Mahāmoggallāna, are on record for having had difficulties reaching the first (or the second) absorption, it is hardly compelling to propose that the average meditator in the contemporary world, with its manyfold tendencies to foster and inculcate distraction of the mind, can achieve the same with ease.

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Abbreviations

AN	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
D	Derge edition
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
Jā	<i>Jātaka</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
Mil	<i>Milindapañha</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Mp	<i>Manorathapūraṇī</i>
P	Peking edition
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
SĀ	<i>Saṃyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	<i>Saṃyukta-āgama</i> (T 100)
SN	<i>Saṃyutta-nikāya</i>
Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsinī</i>
T	Taishō edition (digital edition by CBETA)
Th	<i>Theragāthā</i>
Up	<i>Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā</i>
Vin	<i>Vinayapiṭaka</i>

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Notes

- 1 Based on surveying a range of different possible translations, Cousins 1973: 116 (who personally prefers not to translate the term *jhāna*) concludes that “meditation” would be “the most literal rendering,” although potentially misleading, whereas “absorption” would be “the least misleading translation.”
- 2 MN 108 at MN III 14,1.
- 3 See Anālayo 2025: 204n31 and 460n29.
- 4 Such a confusion manifests at times in Polak 2011 and 2024; for examples see the discussions mentioned in the previous note.
- 5 A comparative survey of descriptions of the four absorptions can be found in Meisig 1990.
- 6 On these eight deliverances see in more detail Anālayo 2009b.
- 7 This has been proposed by Thanissaro 2012: 229, who translates the first three and then concludes that these “provide an alternative route to the formless attainments,” adding that “this alternative route may explain why the Buddha, prior to his awakening, was able to reach the formless attainments when studying under Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, without at the same time passing through the four *jhānas*.”
- 8 AN 8.66 at AN IV 306,15: *sabbaso rūpaññānaṃ samatikkamā ... sabbaso ākāśānañ-cāyatanam samatikkamma ... sabbaso viññāṇañcāyatanam samatikkamma ... sabbaso ākiñcaññāyatanam samatikkamma ... sabbaso nevaññānāsaññāyatanam samatikkamma*. No discourse parallel appears to be known for AN 8.66.
- 9 MĀ 163 at T I 694b₁ (parallel to MN 137 at MN III 222,15).
- 10 See Hirakawa 1997: 427f.
- 11 Stache-Rosen 1968: 193f (parallel to DN 33 at DN III 262,3).
- 12 DĀ 9 at T I 52b₁₄. Another parallel, T 12 at T I 232c₂₃, just lists the names of the four immaterial spheres instead of describing their attainment, wherefore it of course has no reference to any surmounting.
- 13 SN 48.40 at SN V 215,28; the parallel Up 3109 at D 4094 *ju* 199a₇ or P 5595 *tu* 227b₂ instead speaks of signless concentration. This results in a problematic form of presentation, as neutral feeling tones still continue in signless concentration and only come to an end with the cessation of perception and what is felt.
- 14 Here I am compelled to disagree with Stuart 2013: 33, according to whose assessment the Pāli version of SN 48.40 “explicitly describes a meditator ascending through the fourth *dhyāna* and then entering cessation,” that is, without progress through the four immaterial spheres.
- 15 SN 36.11 at SN IV 218,1 and its parallel in Up 6010 at D 4094 *nyu* 6b₃ or P 5595 *thu* 38b₂ (on the latter see Dhammādinna 2020: 557); another parallel, SĀ 474 at T II 121b₂₊₁₀ does not have a counterpart to this particular series of progressive tranquilizations but only to the prior exposition in SN 36.11 at SN IV 217,4+18, which takes up the related topics of the gradual cessation of formations and the gradual stilling of formations, where due to the slightly different angle taken up for discussion the actual expositions cover the four immaterial attainments.
- 16 Stuart 2013: 37 considers SN 36.11 and SN 48.40 to “indicate that even at the time of redaction of the Pāli Canon, its redactors were aware of somewhat irregular meditative sequences.” As far as I can see, this assessment may be in need of revision.
- 17 Even this principle is questioned by Polak 2024: 354 who, in reference to “meditators who regularly stay in the higher *jhānas*,” wonders “[w]hy would they still need to always go through the clearly imperfect first *jhāna*?” The textual sources clearly convey the impression that it takes a gradual transition, however brief it may be, to proceed from ordinary daily life experience to the higher absorptions. This would explain why even the Buddha, on the even of his final Nirvana, followed this gradual procedure starting with the first absorption; on this episode see in more detail Anālayo 2014a.
- 18 A failure to take this contextual setting of MN 66 and MĀ 192 into account can be seen in Polak 2024: 40, who argues that “[i]t is problematic whether from the perspective of the texts following the *Sāmaññaphala* pattern or the texts containing the Bodhisattva

narrative such as the *Bodhirājakumāra-sutta*, the fourth *jhāna* is ‘not enough’ and needs to be transcended, because in these texts it was clearly enough to attain a state of mind conducive to realization of the knowledge of the exhaustion of the influxes (*āsava*).” The presentation in MN 66 and MĀ 192 is not about what level of concentrative strength is enough to gain realization, but much rather about highlighting that any level of concentration falls short of being in itself the final realization, that is, any concentrative attainment, including the fourth absorption, does on its own not yet equal the destruction of the influxes.

- 19 MN 66 at MN I 455,20 and MĀ 192 at T I 743b27; see also Anālayo 2020a: 574. To be precise, MĀ 192 here uses 過度, for which Hirakawa 1997: 1158 lists as possible Sanskrit equivalents *vy-ati-√kram*, *śamatikrama*, *śamatikramaṇa*, *ava-√tī*, *niryāṇa*, and *pramocayati*.
- 20 AN 9.35 at AN IV 420,8. The parts preserved in a parallel extant in the form of a Gāndhārī manuscript testify to the existence of this discourse in another transmission lineage but unfortunately do not cover this passage; see Jantrasrisalai, Lenz, Lin, and Salomon 2016: 39.
- 21 See DN 34 at DN III 290,3 (abbreviated) and one of its parallels, T 13 at T I 240a5 (the coverage of topics in the parallel versions of DN 34 at times differs, and in the present case the parallel DĀ 10 does not cover the topic of the nine successive abidings). The other example is AN 9.32 at AN IV 410,1 and its parallel Up 2039 at D 4094 *ju* 70a4 or P 5595 *tu* 78b3. The need for mastery of the fourth absorption that emerges here and from the reference in the previous note applies to the specific case of the fully fledged attainment of the immaterial sphere of infinite space (and infinite consciousness). Meditative perceptions of infinite space and infinite consciousness as such are already available at lower stages of concentrative mastery, which is evident from the standard listing of ten *kaṣiṇas*. However, it would follow from the above presentations that the cultivation of such perceptions of space or of consciousness as a totality would not suffice to enable progress to the fully fledged attainment of the third and fourth immaterial sphere.
- 22 MĀ 204 at T I 776b12+22+24.
- 23 Repetitions of this episode in other Pāli discourses in the *Majjhima-nikāya* also do not mention the four absorptions and the first two immaterial spheres; see MN 36 at MN I 240,26, MN 85 at MN II 93,19, and MN 100 at MN II 212,1. This may reflect the circumstance of these discourses taking over the existing text from MN 26. In fact, in MN 36 and MN 85 the episode under discussion does not appear to be required for the main teaching, which seems to be mainly related to the account of the Buddha’s pre-awakening ascetic practices, leaving open the possibility that the part found in MN 26 could indeed have been added subsequently. Judging from what a comparative study of MN 100 suggests (see Anālayo 2011a: 581f), the same may hold for MN 100. Out of these four occurrences, it is thus clearly in MN 26 where the same episode has by far the closest relationship to the main teaching, making it fair to propose that it could have originated in this discourse and then been integrated into the others.
- 24 This difference has already been discussed by Skilling 1981.
- 25 MN 26 at MN I 165,12 and 166,31.
- 26 The same is also evident in the references in MN 26 at MN 164,25 and 166,8 to *sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja vihāsiṃ*, which conveys an actual realization of what he had earlier mastered only on a theoretical level. The parallel MĀ 204 at T I 776b20 and c19 also highlights that he gained realization, 得證彼法, which similarly must be referring to the actual attainment in both cases.
- 27 MN 26 at MN I 165,8 and 166,28 as well as MĀ 204 at T I 776b29 and 776c28; see also fragment 331v8 and 332v1, Liu 2010: 154 and 163.
- 28 For a brief discussion of the meanings carried by the term *samādhi* in its use in Pāli discourses see Anālayo 2003: 72f. Kumāra 2022: 47 objects to my use of the translation “concentration,” after having explained that *samādhi* stands for composure and unification of the mind, noting that “right after the above (and elsewhere in his book), he uses ‘concentration’ for *samādhi* ... No explanation given” (italics as in the original). This is

- not quite correct, as in Anālayo 2003: 3n1 I explained that I mostly adopt the translation of MN 10 by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, who uses “concentrated” for *samāhita* (1995/2005: 150), so it is natural that elsewhere I adopt the corresponding “concentration” for *samādhi*. Moreover, the present instance pertains to a general policy of mine to give preference to adopting existing translation terminology rather than trying to coin new terms, as the latter risks becoming confusing to readers of various books written by authors with different translation preferences. In cases where I deem the standard translation terminology to be seriously misleading—as is the case for rendering *dukkha* as “suffering”—my chosen procedure is to explain the meaning in English and then use the Indic term. In the case of *samādhi*, however, the translation “concentration,” although not ideal, is in my view acceptable, especially if readers are alerted to the various nuances the term can carry.
- 29 See Anālayo 2019b: 2346–2348. This puts into perspective the assumption by Polak 2024: 259n84 that, even though the *Upakkilesa-sutta* shows “that the first *jhāna* is difficult to achieve,” it does not follow that the first absorption “implies a considerable level of concentration, at least in the more modern sense of one-pointedness.” It is not clear to me what he intends with the reference to a “more modern sense,” but reaching *ekaggatā*—a term sometimes translated a “one-pointedness” but in my view better rendered as “unification”—clearly features as characteristic of the level of concentration reached with the first absorption; see Anālayo 2019b: 2346–2348.
- 30 AN 1.14 at AN I 23,20 and EĀ 4.2 at T II 557b9; see also T 126 at T II 831a22 and Anālayo 2017a: 126.
- 31 MN 128 at MN III 161,6 and MĀ 72 at T I 539a6.
- 32 Ps IV 209,26.
- 33 See also Anālayo 2017b: 47.
- 34 AN 8.64 at AN IV 303,19 and its parallel MĀ 73 at T I 540a5.
- 35 MN 128 at MN III 162,24 and MĀ 72 at T I 539b7 culminate in a reference to the Buddha’s attainment of awakening, which implies that the investigation of the *devas* took place before that. Just to be clear, it does at the same time not imply that his awakening took place immediately after the meditative cultivation just described. This can be seen with similar indications related to other forms of meditative cultivation or insight that eventually culminated in his awakening; for a survey of examples in the *Samyutta-nikāya* see Anālayo 2023: 1–9.
- 36 See the general discussion in Gethin 1997 and the following comment in Gethin 2019: 192: “Given that for Indian Buddhist thought the cosmological order of beings is a reflection of the psychological order of mental states, and *vice versa*, *jhāna* gives access to, and in some cases perhaps even represents an encounter with the powerful ... divine beings, the brahmās of the world of pure form.”
- 37 This much would be in line with the report in the *Brahmajāla-sutta* of non-Buddhist recluses and brahmins mistaking absorption attainment for being a realization of Nirvana; see DN 1 at DN I 37,1 and its parallels DĀ 21 at T I 93b20, T 21 at T I 269c22, T 1548 at T XXVIII 660b24, Weller 1934: 58,3 (§191), and Up 3050 at D 4094 *ju* 152a4 or P 5595 *tu* 175a8. Polak 2011: 167 argues that “the *Brahmajāla Sutta* cannot be considered as an adequate description of the non-Buddhist views,” wherefore he considers the present indication to be unreliable, which moreover he sees as standing in contrast to “a *sutta* in Aṅguttara Nikāya in which each of the four *jhānas* is described as ‘a Nibbāna here and now’ (*diṭṭhadhammanibbāna*: AN 9.51/IV.454).” Regarding the supposed unreliability of the discourse for failing to provide an adequate description of non-Buddhist views, this appears to rest on a misunderstanding of what the *Brahmajāla-sutta* is meant to achieve. Its purpose is not to provide descriptions of views, but much rather an analysis of the epistemological grounds, *vattu*, that lead to the arising of views: see, e.g., Anālayo 2009a: 190f. The supposed contrast with AN 9.51 in turn dissolves on a closer reading of this discourse, as each of the four absorptions deserves the epithet *diṭṭhadhammanibbāna* merely in a provisional manner, *pariyāyena*; it is only the destruction of the influxes that features as definitely deserving the same epithet, *nippariyāyena*; see AN IV 454,18. Moreover, the survey in AN 9.51 does not contain an assertion of a self, unlike the

- case of DN 1, which qualifies each absorption in this way: *ettāvatā kho, bho, ayaṃ attā paramadiṭṭhadhammanibbānaṃ patto hoti ti*; see at DN I 37,³⁺¹⁴⁺²⁶ and DN I 38,2. The same problem of needing to pay closer attention to the actual wording emerges again in relation to another two discourses in the same collection, AN 4.123 and AN 4.124, which according to Polak 2011: 169 “stand in direct conflict with each other, and cannot be at any rate reconciled.” The former describes differences between attainers of absorption that are reborn in the corresponding Brahmā realm. One type of such attainer will, subsequent to this life, be reborn even in lower realms, the other type will proceed to final Nirvana instead. Polak 2011: 168 comments that “[t]his sutta makes no distinction between the *jhāna* practiced by the Buddhists and the non-Buddhists. The only difference seems to lie in the result: non-Buddhists go to hell, while the Buddhists attain Nibbāna.” Apart from the minor issue that hell is not the only rebirth option mentioned for the former type, the discourse clearly indicates that the distinction is between the worldling and the noble disciple: AN II 126,²⁹: *ayaṃ kho, bhikkhave, viśeso ayaṃ adhippayāso idaṃ nānākaraṇaṃ sutavato ariyasāvakaṃ assutavatā puthujjanaṃ, yadidaṃ gatiyā uppattiyaṃ sati*. This is not equivalent to the distinction between non-Buddhists and Buddhists, as the latter could also be worldlings. The dire prospect of a lower rebirth is only overcome with the attainment of stream-entry. The depiction in AN 4.123 is thus not in conflict with the indication in AN 4.124 that cultivating insight into absorption can lead to rebirth in a Pure Abode, explicitly qualified at AN IV 128,¹⁹ as a rebirth that is not shared with worldlings, *ayaṃ, bhikkhave, uppatti asādhāraṇā puthujjanaṃ*.
- 38 Ireland 1998: 194f takes this to imply that the Buddha-to-be would have gained the immaterial spheres under Ājāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta without having already achieved mastery of the four absorptions. This reasoning, which in the meantime appears to have gained some popularity, overlooks the indications discussed at the outset of this article (see above notes 19 to 21) that mastery of the fourth absorption is a necessary condition for attaining even just the first immaterial sphere.
- 39 MN 36 at MN I 246,³⁰: *siyā nu kho añño maggo bodhāyā ti?* Fragment 336v5, Liu 2010: 221: *k(a)t(a)m(a)s(cā)sau m(ā)rgaḥ syāt katam(ā) pratipat alaṃ jñānāya alaṃ darśanāya alaṃ anuttarāyā samyaksambodhaye*.
- 40 Anālayo 2017b: 81f. One way of reading the episode as such would be to relate it to accounts of children who appear to be able to recall past lives and avail themselves now of abilities learned at that time in the past, which at the latest with the onset of puberty they then lose. I need to acknowledge, however, that a reading of his attainment as a reflection of abilities developed in a previous life is conjectural.
- 41 See MN 128 at MN III 153,¹², MĀ 72 at T I 535b²⁰, and EĀ 24.8 at T II 629a¹¹, and for a survey of further accounts of the Kosambī quarrel Anālayo 2011a: 731f.
- 42 Mil 289,²⁶.
- 43 The same tendency could already have been at work in the version of this episode found in MN 36 and its parallel. In other words, it is in principle possible that at an earlier stage the story was just about an experience of happiness and joy secluded from sensuality, a reference to which became formalized in the course of transmission with the help of the standard description of the attainment of the first absorption. I need to acknowledge, however, that there does not appear to be any textual evidence indicative of the existence of such an earlier version, so that this is just an unproven hypothesis. Nevertheless, within the narrative context of in MN 36 and its parallel a memory of some form of non-sensual happiness and joy would suffice for the realization that such happiness is not related to sensuality. That is, the context does not depend on a fully-fledged absorption attainment. As already noted in Anālayo 2011a: 242f, the context suggests that “the point at stake is not the first *jhāna* as such. The decisive insight obtained by the bodhisattva at this point rather appears to be that the happiness experienced during *jhāna* need not be feared, as this happiness is aloof from sensual attraction,” in other words, “[t]he decisive insight at the present junction of events thus appears to be that happiness per se is not a problem, as wholesome types of happiness can be conducive to awakening. This shift of perspective throws into relief the all-important distinction between what is wholesome and what is

unwholesome, a distinction that runs like a red thread through the early discourses.” For achieving such insight, a full attainment of the first absorption would not be indispensable, as a level of concentration corresponding to what in the Pāli commentaries features as access concentration could in principle perform the same function.

- 44 MĀ 32 at T I 470c16.
- 45 MN 123 at MN III 123,18 and MĀ 32 at T I 470b28.
- 46 Pace Bronkhorst 2012: 189: “The Buddha’s childhood memory, whatever its historical value, suggests that certain people may attain this stage while totally relaxed and on their own.”
- 47 SN 21.1 at SN II 273,24 and SĀ 501 at T II 132a23.
- 48 SN 40.1 at SN IV 263,18.
- 49 Vin I 42,1, with parallels in the *Catuspariṣat-sūtra*, Waldschmidt 1962: 384 (28c.9), the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, T 1428 at T XXII 799a4, the *Mahāvastu* of the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravāda *Vinaya*, Marciniak 2019: 72,10 (or Senart 1897: 62,10), the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya*, T 1421 at T XXII 110b20, and the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1444 at T XXIII 1027c12. The agreement among these texts from different transmission lineages provides strong evidence for the early Buddhist perspective on what it takes to attain stream-entry.
- 50 AN 1.14 at AN I 23,18 and EĀ 4.2 at T II 557b6; see also T 126 at T II 831a19.
- 51 SN 16.9 at SN II 210,24 and its parallels SĀ 1142 at T II 302a18, SĀ² 117 at T II 416c24, and T 190 at T III 867a5. The parallels agree in continuing in the same vein with each of the higher absorptions and other meditation attainments. Although the reference to the first absorption is thus conditioned by the context, it would nevertheless have been possible to list all four absorptions together and then make the proclamation about the ability to attain these at will, or else it would have been possible to start just with the immaterial attainments. In other words, it seems fair to take seriously the fact that the exposition makes such a statement individually for each of these attainments, beginning with the first absorption, and this in turn only really makes sense if already the attainment of the first absorption was considered sufficiently exceptional to merit being highlighted in this way.
- 52 The formulation in MN 36 at MN I 246,36 is more affirmative in this respect, *eso va maggo bodhāyā ti*, compared to the one found in Liu 2010: 223: *syāt s. m(ār)gaḥ sā pratipat alam jñānāya alam darśanāya (alam anuttarāyāi samyaksambodha)ye*.
- 53 MN 36 at MN I 248,15: *avijjā vihatā vijjā uppannā tamo vihato āloko uppanno* and Liu 2010: 233: *ajñānaṃ viḡataṃ vijñānaṃ samutpannaṃ tamo vidhāntam ālokaḥ prādurbhūto ’vidyā viraktā vidyā cotpannā*.
- 54 MN 4 at MN I 22,24: *avijjā vihatā vijjā uppannā tamo vihato āloko uppanno* and EĀ 31.1 at T II 666c1: 除其無明，無復闇冥。
- 55 In MN 85 at MN II 93,15 the Buddha acknowledges that during the time before his awakening he had himself subscribed to the premise that the happiness (of liberation) is to be reached through pain; the same premise features in MN 14 at MN I 93,36 as a position taken by the Jains, providing the rationale for their engaging in ascetic practices.
- 56 Liu 2010: 217f: *ye kecic chramaṇā vā brāhmaṇā vā kāmēṣu kāyena vyapakṛṣṭā viharanti ... cittena [ca], teṣāṃ yaḥ kāmēṣu cchandaḥ kāmēṣu snehaḥ kāmāpremaḥ kāmālayaḥ kāmāniyantiḥ kāmādhivasānaṃ tat teṣāṃ cittaṃ na paryādāy(a tiṣṭha)ti, kiṃ cāpi te nemāṃ evaṇrūpāṃ ātmopakramikāṃ d(u)hkhāṃ tīvrāṃ kharāṃ kaṭukāṃ amanāpāṃ vedanāṃ vedayante, atha ca punas te ... [a]lam jñānāya ... [a]lam darśanāya... [a]lam anuttarāyāi samyaksam(bodh)aye*. For ease of reading, erroneous negations found in the original, marked by the editor with the help of { } as requiring elision, have been elided.
- 57 The part corresponding to the quote from the Sanskrit version given in the previous note occurs in MN 36 at MN I 242,10; see also Anālayo 2011a: 235–237 and 2022b: 226n207. A detailed comparative study of the three similes can be found in Wolf 2023. In full appreciation of his informative contribution, I find myself unable to follow his proposed conclusion, Wolf 2023: 218, “that self-mortification was not originally connected with the three similes.” This goes beyond what the actual textual evidence suggests, evident from the report by Wolf 2023: 205 himself that “the final statements in the similes, that ascetics

- are incapable of enlightenment unless the condition of physical and mental seclusion is fulfilled, even if they indulge in *the painful practice of self-mortification*, is common to all versions of the episode” (italics added). Once this element is found in all versions, and in the placing it has in the Sanskrit version quoted in the previous note fits its context, there seems to be hardly any basis for considering it to be a later addition. As I tried to articulate in Anālayo 2022b: 167–180, an attempt to proceed beyond the textual evidence in order to arrive at some form of earlier, unattested stage in development, a sort of original or pre-canonical form of presentation, is problematic from a methodological perspective.
- 58 DN 1 at DN I 13,¹¹ and its parallels DĀ 21 at T I 90a⁹, T 21 at T I 266a¹⁴, Weller 1934: 16,¹³, and Up 3050 at D 4094 *ju* 143a⁷ or P 5595 *tu* 164b⁶.
- 59 MN 136 at MN III 210,⁹ and its parallels MĀ 171 at T I 707b⁷ and Up 5004 at D 4094 *ju* 264b⁴ or P 5595 *thu* 7b¹.
- 60 MN 4 at MN I 22,¹¹ and EĀ 31.1 at T II 666b²⁴. In the case of the corresponding presentation in MN 36 at MN I 248,¹, the relevant description in the Sanskrit fragment, Liu 2010: 232, is unfortunately abbreviated. Judging from the report of the Buddha’s recollection of past lives in the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, Gnoli 1977: 117,²⁹, it seems safe to assume that the full text would have been similar to the other versions.
- 61 Anālayo 2017a: 123–128. Cousins 2022: 16 comments on *vitakka* and *vicāra* that “in Buddhist usage they are given a distinct meaning that is followed also by the *Yogasūtra* [I 17]. The first denotes the directing of the mind to an object of thought or imagination, while the second indicates rather the subtle exploration that retains the object and makes it clearer.” Polak 2024: 237 refers to the third and fourth method for mind-reading listed in AN 3.60 at AN I 171,⁴—the third of which relies on thinking and reflecting, *vitakkayato vicārayato*, whereas the fourth concerns one who has gained concentration without *vitakka* and *vicāra*, *avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ samādhiṃ sampāpānassa*—arguing that “*vitakka* in both cases referred to the same type of mental phenomena, i.e., thinking.” Yet, the discourse expounds four different approaches that do not stand in a necessary relationship to each other; the first relies on some external sign, *nimitta*, and the second on hearing sound made by people or celestials. Given that there is no internal connection between these methods other than that the discourse lists each new method by first setting aside the previously mentioned one(s), there is no reason why the descriptions of the third and fourth method could not use the term *vitakka* in different senses.
- 62 See also Anālayo 2011a: 738n262 and 263 for a discussion of the formulation used in MĀ 72 as well as for other occurrences of this threefold listing of concentration. Cousins 2022: 39 considers this mode of presentation to reflect a “pre-Buddhist classification of concentration into three kinds which the Buddha reformulated into the system of the four *jhānas*.”
- 63 This could be supported with an indication found in AN 3.100 at AN I 254,²⁹ that thoughts related to the Dharma, *dhammavitakka*, gained after leaving behind worldly thoughts, only lead to a type of concentration that is neither peaceful nor sublime, that has not gained full tranquilization and has not arrived at unification, *so hoti samādhi na c’ eva santo nappaṇīto nappaṭipassaddhaladdho na ekodibhāvādhigato*. Although full tranquilization and peacefulness will only be reached with the fourth absorption, already the first absorption is characterized by unification; see Anālayo 2019b: 2346–2348. This suggests that even the type of *vitakka* that is related to Dharma fails to yield a level of concentration corresponding to the first absorption, which in turn makes it fair to assume that the type of *vitakka* that is characteristic of the first absorption would have to be beyond thinking activity altogether. See also the apparently corresponding formulation in the parallel SĀ 1246 at T II 341c¹⁷: 不得寂靜勝妙, 不得息樂, although what follows the quoted part does not fit the context particularly well.
- 64 MN 4 at MN I 22,⁹: *evaṃ samāhite citte* and EĀ 31.1 at T II 666b²³: 以此三昧之. According to Polak 2024: 87, however, “after having emerged from absorption,” in his view “the qualities of calm and concentration connected with the achieved *jhāna* ... are simply not present, or are greatly diminished.” The indication found in M 4 and EĀ 31.1 suggests that this is not necessarily the case, as calm and concentration can continue to

saturate a condition of the mind that is no longer fully absorbed due to engaging in a form of contemplation that involves thought. As Shulman 2014: 21n45 correctly points out, the relevant Pāli expression in MN 4 “clearly states that the mind is in *samādhi*,” although then he reasons that this “suggests that what is now being described is happening in the state just described, i.e. in the fourth *jhāna*.” The proposed reasoning does not give sufficient recognition to the problem that any abiding in the fourth absorption must be free of *vitakka* and thus seems hardly compatible with the type of conceptual engagement required for recollection of past lives.

- 65 SN 4.23 at SN I 121,2 (the PTS edition has the alternative and less probable reading *samādhikaṃ cetovimuttiṃ*; see Anālayo 2011b: 162n36).
- 66 Spk I 183,2.
- 67 According to Wynne 2022: 112, “Godhika committed suicide whilst in a meditative absorption he considered to be tantamount to liberation.”
- 68 A reference to a seventh instance of the attainment is not reflected in the commentary, making it possible that the alternative reading could be an ancient one. Although on this reading his falling away a sixth time is not explicitly mentioned in the narrative, it comes up in Godhika’s reflection. In this way, the resultant narrative is still a coherent one, and it implies that at the time of reflecting he is no longer in the sixth instance of the attainment. The more recent edition of the same discourse by Somaratne 1998: 265, however, concords with the Burmese manuscript reading.
- 69 SĀ 1091 at T II 286a9: 乃至六反, 猶復退轉。我今當以刀自殺, 莫令第七退轉。
- 70 SĀ² 30 at T II 382c14: 六返退失, 若更退失, 以刀自割。SĀ² 30 at T II 382c19 then reports Māra reflecting that if this monk attains it for a seventh time, he will certainly kill himself and escape from Māra’s dominion, 若第七得, 必自傷害, 出魔境界。This is best read in conjunction with the already quoted prior indication, in the sense that a seventh attainment will be followed by a seventh loss, and the suicide is to be expected after that. Māra’s expectation that the monk will escape from his dominion by committing suicide features also in SĀ 1091 at T II 286a17; the same holds for a third parallel, Up 6064 at D 4094 *nyu* 32b3 or P 5595 *thu* 69a6. This indication in the three parallels puts into perspective the reasoning by Wynne 2022: 111 that the discourse “portrays the Buddha and Māra against type: it really should be Māra tempting Godhika to commit suicide, just as he tempts the Buddha to enter final Nirvana ... the Buddha’s justification of Godhika’s suicide is directly contrary to the tradition of Māra tempting the Buddha to enter final Nirvana,” as in the present case “Māra tries to stop Godhika killing himself, whereas the Buddha does not intervene and then defends Godhika’s suicide by twice stating that the wise do not desire life. Had the Buddha followed his own advice, he would surely have entered final Nirvana immediately after the enlightenment at Uruvelā.” Now, the overarching concern of Māra, in the way he features in early Buddhist literature, is to prevent anyone from escaping from his dominion. In a narrative setting where the Buddha has already successfully escaped and also been requested by Brahmā to teach, Māra’s concern is to prevent the Buddha from teaching others, in the anticipation that such teaching activity will lead to many more successfully escaping from his dominion, and this then motivates his attempt to convince the Buddha to pass away. In the case of Godhika, however, the same concern of Māra to counter anyone’s attempt to go beyond his dominion requires instead preventing the planned suicide. Understood in this way, the same basic motivation can in different contexts find expression in either commending death (to prevent the Buddha teaching others) or trying to prevent suicide (to thwart Godhika’s anticipated escape from Māra’s domain).
- 71 Up 6064 at D 4094 *nyu* 32a4 or P 5595 *thu* 68b6. I introduced the present Tibetan version, together with SĀ 1091 and SĀ² 30, in Anālayo 2011b: 162n36 as “parallels” to SN 4.23. Wynne 2022: 108f references the relevant pages in my article—as well as in a republication of the same, Anālayo 2015—but nevertheless speaks just of SĀ 1091 as “[t]he Chinese SĀ parallel,” without mentioning the existence of the other two parallels. Since these other two parallels support his position regarding the incorrect PTS reading *samāyikaṃ cetovimuttiṃ*, this must be an oversight due to a less than careful reading

of my discussion. The same would perhaps also explain his failure to take into account the clarification offered in the same footnote, Anālayo 2011b: 162n36, that “what can be gathered from other discourses regarding the nature of absorption attainment makes it fairly clear that it would not have been possible for him [i.e., Godhika] to take hold of a knife and kill himself while in such an attainment”; the republished version of this statement in Anālayo 2015: 248n36 comes with references in support of this assessment to Anālayo 2014b and the (at the time of publication still forthcoming) 2016b.

- 72 The evidence that emerges in this way puts into perspective the conclusion by Wynne 2022: 113 that “[t]he *Godhika Sutta* can only be regarded as a strange sort of neo-Vedāntic polemic.” Wynne 2022: 112f extends his conclusion to other suicide episodes, reasoning that, “if the account of Godhika’s suicide was a polemic work of neo-Vedāntic Buddhist meditators, we can suppose that the accounts of Channa’s and Vakkali’s suicides were in some way a response to it.” His assessment of these two cases is also far from compelling. Although in the context of my present study it is not possible to treat the matter exhaustively, the discourse accounts of Channa’s suicide make it fairly clear that he was considered an arahant at the time of committing suicide; see Anālayo 2010: 131 (an article quoted by Wynne 2022). According to Wynne 2022: 86, Channa’s reference to having “served” the Buddha, MN 144 at MN III 264,23 and SN 35.87 at SN IV 57,23: *pariṇiṇṇo*, looks like “a tacit acknowledgement by Channa that he was in a problematic position but tried to explain it away by virtue of his service to the Buddha. All this points towards Channa’s unenlightened and even problematic disciplinary status.” Yet, the same declaration of having “served” the Buddha functions in MN 73 at MN I 497,5 as an announcement of having become an arahant; see also Th 604, 656, 687, 792, 891, 918, 1016, 1050, 1088, and 1185, where the same *pariṇiṇṇo* features in what are similarly statements of arahant-hood. This leaves hardly much room for taking it in the case of Channa to convey a substantially different meaning. Regarding the case of Vakkali, Wynne 2022: 98 comments on the *Samyukta-āgama* report of the Buddha’s indication that Vakkali’s death will be good and that his future will also be good: “Assuring Vakkali that his future state will be good is an explicit statement that he will continue in the realm of transmigration.” Yet, the phrase 後世亦善 used in SĀ 1265 at T II 346c28 to predict Vakkali’s good future recurs in an admonition to a sick monk in SĀ 1025 at T II 268a7, similarly preceded by a reference to a good death. The sick monk passes away after the admonition, and the Buddha declares that he had realized Nirvana and attained the highest, that is, he passed away as an arahant. This shows that the phrase in question does not function as an indicator of continuity in the realm of transmigration. Several other aspects of Wynne 2022 would in principle merit a more detailed, critical discussion, which due to a lack of space I will have to leave for another occasion. Nevertheless, the above should suffice for the time being to show that the proposed interpretations are in need of revision, and the same holds for the envisaged conflict between early Buddhist proponents of a neo-Vedāntic vision, according to which final liberation can be reached through death in an absorption state, and their opponents.
- 73 Ps IV 161,14 confirms the applicability of this sense to the present context.
- 74 MN 122 at MN III 113,13: *iminā vihārena viharato bhāsāya cittaṃ namati*, MĀ 191 at T I 739a25: 行此住處心, 若欲有所說者, and Skilling 1994: 228,3: *de gnas pa ’dis gnas pa na, gal te gtaṃ la sems ’jug par gyur na*.
- 75 The lack of a parallel is in itself not sufficient reason for dismissing a particular Pāli discourse in principle, since the absence of a parallel can at times simply result from the circumstance that we have access to all four discourse collections only from the Theravāda reciter tradition, and it is always possible that a parallel to a particular Pāli discourse was allocated to a collection that is no longer extant; see in more detail Anālayo 2018. Polak 2024: 30n7 extends this principle to become “the fact that we know of no extant parallel of a particular text *or group of text* by itself does not automatically imply that it is a late addition” (italics added). The situation is a bit different when it comes to a group of texts, as in such a case absence of a parallel provides stronger evidence, although of course still not carrying any “automatic” implication. The reason is that, whereas

we do not have a complete set of four discourse collections from more than one reciter tradition, we do have more than one complete, individual collection from different reciter traditions. Thus, structural differences between parallel versions of individual collections provide fairly strong evidence, comparable to differences between parallel versions of an individual discourse. An illustrative example are the collections of long discourse, where the collections extant in Pāli and Sanskrit adopt a division into three but the Chinese *Dirgha-āgama* has a fourfold division, and the fourth part has no known parallel in terms of content as well. Combined with other supportive evidence, what emerges in this way makes it highly probable that this part is a later addition; see Anālayo 2014c: 35–44. Another example is the *Jhāna-saṃyutta* (SN 53), where the absence of such a collection in the *Samyukta-āgama* combines with other evidence to show that this Pāli *Samyutta* is quite probably a later addition; see Anālayo 2022a: 153–155. Evidence supportive of this conclusion here again concerns the content, as that just combines the standard description of the four absorptions with a repetition series used in other parts of this final section of the *Samyutta-nikāya* for items like the noble eightfold path, the awakening factors, etc. In relation to the unexpected association of the four absorptions with repetition series used otherwise for practices that early Buddhist thought relates directly to awakening, Polak 2024: 30n7 argues that “the association of the development of the four *jhānas* with the ultimate soteriological goals of early Buddhism is to some extent implied by the message of other similarly structured *saṃyuttas*, which associate the same soteriological outcomes with the development of the set of factors generally considered to be uniquely Buddhist, such as the noble eightfold path and the seven factors of awakening.” This seems to put things on their head, since it is precisely such unbecoming association that supports the impression of the lateness of the *Jhāna-saṃyutta*. Another relevant comment by Polak 2024: 32 concerns the “traditional view that the *jhānas* are meditative states practiced by non-Buddhists,” reasoning that this “would imply that if non-Buddhists attain the four *jhānas*, then they must also possess, or have direct access to several supposedly exclusively Buddhist factors, such as the right view, right mindfulness, *paññā* and knowledge and vision.” Since this traditional view concords with relevant early Buddhist textual evidence (see Anālayo 2017a: 163–171, 2022a: 191–193, and 2025: 268n24), the above reasoning supports the impression of the lateness of the *Jhāna-saṃyutta* (SN 53), as its presentation would indeed imply that, by dint of merely attaining absorption, non-Buddhists would be in possession of the path to Nirvana as conceived in early Buddhist thought.

- 76 AN 3.63 at AN I 182,²⁷: *evaṃbhūto caṅkamāmi, dibbo me eso tasmim samaye caṅkamo hoti*.
- 77 SN 36.11 at SN IV 217,⁸ (repeated in SN 36.15), SĀ 474 at T II 121b₄, and Up 6010 at D 4094 *nyu* 6b₂ or P 5595 *thu* 38b₁; see also AN 10.72 at AN V 135,³ and MĀ 84 at T I 561a₉. The comment by Wynne 2022: 105n37 on a qualification of the fourth absorption as involving a stopping of the breath as being “of course a commentarial understanding of what attaining the fourth *jhāna* involves” seems to be made in lack of awareness of the present type of indication, found already among the discourses.
- 78 MN 43 at MN I 296,¹³ and Up 1005 at D 4094 *ju* 8b₄ and P 5595 *tu* 9b₄ (the last is actually a parallel to MN 44) indicate that the cessation of breathing—here referred to as the cessation of the bodily formations—is a condition shared by a corpse and by one who has attained the cessation of perception and what is felt. The main Chinese parallel to MN 43, MĀ 211, does not cover this particular topic.
- 79 The same suggestion would also hold for MN 38 at MN I 270,⁹ which shifts from an account of the gradual path, taken up to the fourth absorption, to describing mental balance with sensory experiences. Polak 2011: 49 reasons that “[t]his passage makes it very clear that in the state of the fourth *jhāna*, the senses of the meditator are not coming to a halt. On the contrary, they are functioning in a smooth, continuous way.” However, a description of the four absorptions is not found at this juncture in the parallel MĀ 201 at T I 769c₁₄, and a closer inspection of MN 38 supports the impression that the gradual path account of the attainment of the four absorptions has been added to this version; see Anālayo 2011a: 255f (also Anālayo 2017a: 40n44 and 2021: 35). This illustrates a basic

problem in the attempt by Gregorz Polak to arrive at a “reconstruction of early Buddhist soteriology” (so the title of his work), which needs to be based on a comparative study of parallel versions transmitted by other reciter tradition rather than just on consulting Pāli discourses in combination with subjective distinctions between early and late.

- 80 On variations in the listings of his companions see Anālayo 2011a: 370n165.
 81 Ps III 181,7.
 82 MN 68 at MN I 464,5, which is preceded by the stipulation *vivekaṃ, anuruddhā, kāmehi vivekaṃ akusalehi dhammehi pītisukhaṃ adhigacchati*, with the additional option of something more peaceful than that. In Anālayo 2003: 85 I explained that this passage implies that, “[n]ot only does absorption attainment entail the temporary removal of the hindrances, it also makes it much more difficult for them to invade the mind on later occasions,” adding in note 85 that MN 68 at “MN I 463 explains that the mind of one who has had *jhānic* experiences will no longer be overwhelmed by the hindrances.” Kumāra 2022: 131 criticizes this assessment as follows: “The verbs in the Pāli text—*adhigacchati* (reach) and *tiṭṭhati* (stay)—are all in simple present tense. In no way can they support Āyasmā Anālayo’s interpretation with the perfect tense of ‘has had’.” Now, my reference to “one who has had *jhānic* experiences” is of course a paraphrase and not a translation. Although *adhigacchati* is indeed in the present tense, the question at stake here is not so much the grammar but the connotations conveyed by the verb itself. The implication of the term here appears to be that the practitioner reaches absorption experiences in principle, that is, it does not seem to refer to just being in an absorption attainment but rather to an ability to reach such attainment in general. For being in an actual attainment of absorption, the Pāli discourses usually employ rather the phrase *upasampajja viharati*. As particularly evident with the parallel MĀ 77 (reference in the next note), the concern of the present description does indeed seem to be about an after-effect of mastery of absorption.
 83 MĀ 77 at T I 545a5.
 84 An example is AN 9.36 at AN IV 422,21 and its parallel Up 3020 at D 4094 *ju* 113b3 or P 5595 *tu* 130a5.
 85 Examples of such assessments are Gunaratana 2007: 67f, Johnson 2019: 95, Shankman 2008: 85, and Gethin 2020: 40.
 86 MN 111 at MN III 25,20: *so evaṃ pajānāti: evaṃ kira me dhammā ahutvā sambhonti, hutvā paṭivedentī ti*. The significance of this presentation has already been noted by Vetter 1988: 69. On MN 111 see in more detail Anālayo 2017a: 117–123 and 2020b: 25–30.
 87 MN 31 at MN I 207,27, which additionally speaks of a distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of noble ones, *alamariyañāṇadassanavisesa*, and MĀ 185 at T I 730a28, which instead refers additionally to a distinction in peaceful happiness and tranquil abiding, 差降安樂住止. MĀ 185 also abbreviates and presents the four absorptions together, whereas MN 31 takes up the first absorption on its own and only after that turns to the next higher absorption.
 88 MN 99 at MN II 201,2 and its parallel MĀ 152 at T I 668a25.
 89 Another relevant indication concerns more specifically the second absorption as a state free from *vitakka* and *vicāra*, which according to SN 41.8 at SN IV 298,21 and its parallel SĀ 574 at T II 152c8 was considered an impossibility by the leader of the Jains.
 90 On the legal implications of *pārājika* see Anālayo 2016a and 2019a.
 91 Vin III 91,30, with parallels in the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, T 1428 at T XXII 578b27, the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya*, T 1421 at T XXII 9c25, the Mahāsāṅghika *Vinaya*, T 1425 at T XXII 261a12, the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1442 at T XXIII 676c23, and the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1435 at T XXIII 12c9. The parallels show considerable variations in their respective listings, which seem to testify to stages of growth in the interpretation of the significance of what constitutes a claim to having reached a superhuman state.
 92 This puts into perspective the position taken by Bucknell 1993: 405 that a “negative consequence of Buddhaghosa’s complex account of *jhāna* was that mastery of the higher *jhānas* was made to seem a superhuman attainment.” The textual evidence surveyed here shows that this consideration was already in place well before the time of Buddhaghosa.

Bucknell 2022: 206 and note 25 also proposes that the qualification *ekaggatā* may have been applied later to descriptions of the first absorption for polemical reasons, namely “to support a view that was gaining ground in the *Saṅgha*: the view that the first *jhāna* was a state of mental concentration,” thereby serving “as a means of persuading monks to accept the otherwise questionable notion that *vitakka-vicāra* is a state of deep concentration.” For the apparent motivation behind this unconvincing assessment of the nature of the first absorption see Anālayo 2022c.

- 93 MN 76 at MN I 521,36 refers to the first absorption as an *ulāra visesa*.
- 94 MN 25 at MN I 159,13 and its parallel MĀ 178 at T I 720a9. Similar to the case of MN 31 and its parallel MĀ 185, mentioned above in note 87, in the present case, too, the *Madhyama-āgama* version abbreviates and presents the four absorptions together, whereas the Pāli version takes up the first absorption on its own and only after that turns to the next absorption. Another instance of relating the first absorption to going beyond the reach of Māra is AN 9.39 at AN IV 433,28, of which no parallel appears to be known.
- 95 See Anālayo 2017a: 137–146. I take the occasion to note and correct a typographical error in Anālayo 2017a: 137 line 12: the second word “that” should be corrected to “has.” I would also like to add to that discussion a brief comment on AN 3.60 at AN I 171,7, which in the context of a listing of different modalities for acquiring knowledge of the minds of others mentions *vitakkayato vicārayato vitakkavipphārasaddaṃ sutvā ādisati*, on which Bodhi 2012: 1647n425 comments that this may intend “a subtle sound supposedly emanated by thought but not expressed verbally.” The corresponding formulation in the parallel MĀ 143 at T I 651a24, 但以他念, 他思, 他說聞聲已, 占他意, refers to the other’s thinking, intending, and speaking, and it is after the last that the reference to having heard the sound falls into place. Whereas the previous modality in MĀ 143 relates just to hearing from celestials and non-humans, the present instance concerns humans (in AN 3.60 humans are already part of the previous modality), and the hearing is clearly relevant just to the activity mentioned last, namely human speech. The absence in MĀ 143 of any reference to hearing the sound of thoughts leaves open the possibility that a transmission error may have occurred in AN 3.60, which could easily have resulted from an accidental repetition of the activity of hearing sound mentioned during the recitation of the previous modality of acquiring knowledge of the minds of others.
- 96 AN 10.72 at AN V 133,25: *saddakaṇṭakā kho pana jhānā vuttā bhagavatā* and MĀ 84 at T I 560c6: 世尊亦說禪以聲為刺.
- 97 This may explain the identification in AN 10.72 at AN V 134,26 of a thorn for living the celibate life to be preoccupation with womenfolk (adopting translations given by Cone 2001: 472 for *upavicāra* and by Rhys Davids and Stede 1921/1993: 528 for *mātugāma*). Note that the term *mātugāma* can at times carry quite uncomplimentary nuances in its use in Pāli—being, for example, the term used to express misogynist views in, e.g., AN 4.80 at AN II 82,34: *kodhano ... issukī ... maccharī... duppañño, ānanda, mātugāmo*, AN 5.230 at AN III 261,5: *yebhuyyena ... mātugāmo tibbarāgo ... pisaṇavāco ... aticārini*, and Jā 536 at Jā V 427,10: *mātugāmo nāma pāpo dussīlo*—differing from the more neutral connotations of the otherwise equivalent term *iṭṭhi/iṭṭhī*. Based on identifying the posing of “a threat to the renouncer’s lifestyle (*brahmacariya*)” as a “major way in which the term *mātugāma* appears in the four *Nikāyas*,” Engelmaier 2014: 29 comments on the case of AN 10.72 that, in view of such connotations, “it is easy to see that *mātugāma* is indeed a threat to the *brahmacariya* or, as one sutta (A V 134) puts it, a thorn.” According to the commentary Mp V 52,1, in the present case preoccupation with womenfolk—which judging from the above would be of the type that indeed can pose a threat to celibacy—leads to close association, *mātugāmūpavicāro ti mātugāmassa samīpacāritā*, which the context suggests being excessively close association. MĀ 84 at T I 561a7 instead speaks of a celibate—both versions are solely concerned with the case of a male—looking at the physical form of women, 見女色. Although the two versions differ, the issue in both cases appears to be inappropriate conduct by a monk presumably infatuated with female charms, with the thorn imagery then expressing the apprehension that this will result in a breach of celibacy. In regard to another “thorn” mentioned in the same context, Arbel 2017: 77n43

- argues that “what is actually said in the sutta” is “that certain things might agitate one who practices certain meditation (for example, if one practices restraining the senses, restless motion of sights is a thorn). This does not mean that one does not hear in the first *jhāna* or that moving sights are not present when one practices restraint.” The reference to “moving sights” appears to be based on a misunderstanding of *visūkadassana*, which functions as a technical term to designate going to see a show or a fair. Precisely due to not being compatible with the cultivation of sense restraint, refraining from *visūkadassana* features among the precepts to be observed already by novices; see Vin I 83,36. The same is also part of the set of eight precepts observed by lay disciples on observance days, on which Harvey 2000/2005: 87 comments that these eight go beyond the five precepts anyway mandatory for lay disciples by involving “forms of self-discipline that reduce stimulating sense-inputs that disturb calm and concentration.”
- 98 Commenting on the thorn to the first absorption, Brasington 2015: 111f states the following: “Far from confirming that you don’t hear in the first *jhāna*, it simply confirms the obvious that trying to meditate in a noisy environment is unlikely to lead to concentration deep enough to enter or to sustain the first *jhāna*.” The proposed reasoning does not seem to be fully coherent, as already noted in Anālayo 2016b: 45n46. If the presence of noise is an obstacle to entering or sustaining the first *jhāna*, which is of course because such noise is being heard, then it would follow that the first *jhāna* indeed requires leaving behind such hearing. Kumāra 2022: 141 in turn argues that, if AN 10.72 “*does* mean one can’t hear any sound upon attaining the first *jhāna*, then sound wouldn’t be a thorn or bother at all. How can sound bother one who can’t hear it? So, actually, saying that sound is a thorn or bother to the first *jhāna* doesn’t mean one can’t hear sound in the first *jhāna*; it means one can!” (italics as in the original). The proposed reasoning disregards the contextual setting and implication of the passage, where hearing sound relates to the first absorption in the same way that *vitakka* and *vicāra* relate to the second, etc. Each of the thorns to particular levels of absorption designates what needs to be left behind for the respective attainment; the occurrence of each thorn implies that such attainment has been lost or not yet achieved. The identification of sound as a thorn to the first absorption in AN 10.72 at AN V 134,26 (similarly found in MĀ 84 at T I 561a7) clearly implies, as stated by Brahm 2006: 273n9, that “sound can disturb the first *jhāna*, but when one actually perceives the sound one is no longer in the *jhāna*.” In the same vein, Kuan 2012: 50 concludes that “sound is not heard by one who attains the first *jhāna*.” The same position is taken by Cousins 2022: 43, in that “[i]t follows that sound is not present in the first *jhāna*.”
- 99 I owe this example to Harvey 2018: 20f: “loud enough sound would disrupt the *jhāna* and end it, as it does with sleep. In deep sleep, one is not hearing sounds, but ... a loud enough sound can impinge on the sleeping mind” such that one wakes up.
- 100 See Anālayo 2017a: 54–60. The term *kāya* as such can at times just convey “personal” experience or realization, especially when it occurs in the instrumental as *kāyena*; see, e.g., Anālayo 2006: 260f. However, the allocation of the similes illustrating absorption experience to the *Kāyagatasati-sutta* and its parallel, MN 119 at MN III 92,25 and MĀ 81 at T I 555b18 (with the latter offering the more compelling presentation of having only the similes; see Anālayo 2011a: 673f), does convey the impression that the human body is intended; see also Kuan 2005: 300, who concludes that “the Sautrāntikas may be right in arguing that there is bodily consciousness and hence bodily *sukha* in the first three *dhyānas*.” The impression conveyed by MN 119 and MĀ 81 would also concord with the indication in AN 9.37 at AN IV 427,13 that a complete transcendence of the five senses only takes place with the attainment of the first immaterial sphere. According to SĀ 559 at T II 146c5, however, in a passage that appears to be a parallel to this section of AN 9.37, such a condition of transcendence is already reached with the first absorption; see also Anālayo 2016b: 47n52. In line with the indication in AN 9.37, MN 43 at MN I 293,29 relates a purified mind-consciousness released from the five faculties to the immaterial spheres (such an indication is absent from its main parallel MĀ 211). Of relevance to this topic is also the standard indication that attaining the first immaterial sphere requires leaving behind perceptions of form and perceptions of resistance; see, e.g., MN 66 at MN

I 455,²¹: *sabbaso rūpasāññānaṃ samatikkamā paṭighasaññānaṃ atthagamā* and MĀ 192 at T I 743b28: 度一切色想, 滅有對想. The reference to perceptions of form may reflect the circumstance that attainment of an absorption can be based on a mental image that, in the early Buddhist analysis, would be considered as pertaining to “form” (Pāli *rūpa*) in the wider sense. The same usage holds, for example, for celestial realms inhabited by Brahmās and their followings. Although these are clearly not types of existence that involve physical bodies made of flesh and bones, they still pertain to the realm of form. Leaving behind perceptions of resistance, *paṭigha*, could in turn be related to the usage in DN 15 at DN II 62,²³ of the same term *paṭigha* to designate contact with form that is experienced by name; see in more detail Anālayo 2017c. Since this presentation is relevant to any type of experience that involves name-and-form, including the four absorptions, the idea informing the standard description of the first immaterial sphere need not be an overcoming of some form of physical resistance but can rather be understood to refer to leaving behind any involvement at all with form, as with the first immaterial attainment name-and-form will be reduced to just the presence of name.

- 101 For a survey of such positions see Sparby and Sacchet 2024. The otherwise informative and balanced nature of this contribution suffers to some extent from the decision of the authors to adopt the distinction between *sutta-jhāna* and *Visuddhimagga-jhāna* as a classificatory scheme, apparently unaware of the fact that this amounts to an endorsement of a polemic strategy. On central developments that have led to the emergence of this polemic strategy see Anālayo 2022a: 117–209 and 2022c. It would be preferable if instead just the neutral classification into light, intermediate, and deep *jhāna*, also employed by the authors, could be relied on for academic research.
- 102 See Anālayo 2022a: 178–197.
- 103 See Anālayo 2022c.
- 104 For example, when Thanissaro 1996/1999: 249 asserts that “what jhana means in the commentaries is something quite different from what it means in the Canon,” then this could perhaps be included in a characterization of his approach by Quli 2008: 234—related to a different position taken by him—as appearing “like a Protestant American version of *jhāna* practice.”