

The Role of Absorption for Entering the Stream

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Abstract

The main purpose of this article is to explore the topic of the degree or type of concentration required in order to be able to attain stream-entry. The exploration of this topic begins by surveying references to concentration (*samādhi*), perhaps better translated as “composure” or “collectedness,”¹ and to unification (*ekagga/ekāgra* and *ekodi/ekoti*) of the mind in Pāli discourses and their *Āgama* parallels, in order to ascertain their scope of meaning. After a critical examination of selected arguments advanced in support of the belief that the attainment of absorption (*jhāna/dhyāna*) is indispensable for progress to stream-entry, the role and importance of absorption is contrasted with that of mindfulness in the early Buddhist scheme of deliverance.

Introduction

The inquiry informing the present investigation has its starting point in a somewhat accidental outcome of a detailed survey of roles and functions of mindfulness in the early discourses.² In the course of that research, in particular when reviewing the role of mindfulness in the noble eightfold path, it became evident to me that definitions of the adjacent factor of right concentration exhibit noteworthy variations. These are significant, as they put into question the prevalent assumption, shared previously by myself, that the standard way of defining right concentration is by way of attainment of the four absorptions. Yet, not a single occurrence of this type of definition in an early discourse finds support in the parallel versions. In contrast, instances of a differently worded definition, which instead speaks of unification of the mind cultivated in conjunction with the other seven path factors, do receive support from parallel versions.³

The perspective that emerges from comparative study in this way seems to me to make practical sense. The key question of what turns concentration into the “right” type need not be a matter of mere strength and instead must be due to its alignment with the directive input provided by right view and the meditative environment resulting from a cultivation of the other path factors. The early discourses convey the impression that absorption attainment as such was already known before

the advent of the Buddha,⁴ something that appears to be also implicit in his pre-awakening apprenticeship under the teachers Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, given that the attainments of nothingness and of neither-perception-nor-nonperception taught by them do seem to require mastery of absorption.⁵ Yet, due to lacking the all-important perspective of right view, from an early Buddhist perspective mastery of absorption by the predecessors of the Buddha would not merit being reckoned the “right” type, simply because of not leading to complete liberation from *dukkha/duḥkha*. Such liberation requires that any absorption attainment be situated within the context of the noble eightfold path.

The impression that the idea of equating absorption attainment with right concentration would be the outcome of a somewhat later development then led me to investigate if similar tendencies can be found elsewhere. This is indeed the case, as a comparative study of selected early discourses reveals evidence for a promotion of absorption attainment as something crucial, even indispensable, to progress on the path to awakening (discussions of the “path” in the present article intend the mundane path and not the commentarial notion of a supramundane path).⁶ Such assessment is not meant in any way to deny that many early discourses do accord a special place to absorption attainment and repeatedly commend its achievement. Relevant instances of such commendations are indeed supported by the parallels. The point is only that at times a tendency manifests in some reciter traditions to overstate the importance of absorption.

Building on the above, in the present article I intend to follow up the implications of the alternative definition of right concentration, which speaks of aligning unification of the mind with the other path factors. My interest in what follows is to investigate, first of all, the compass of references to concentration and unification of the mind in early Buddhist texts in order to ascertain if, and to what degree, this corresponds to or else differs from absorption attainment. This then leads me on to the question of how far mastery of absorption is required for progress to the first level of awakening, stream-entry.

Unification of the Mind

Pāli exegesis treats the term *ekodi* (Sanskrit *ekoti*) as conveying basically the same meaning as *ekagga* (Sanskrit *ekāgra*).⁷ Following this indication, my survey below covers both terms as ostensibly complementary expressions of the notion of “mental unification.”

The standard description of the second absorption explicitly mentions such unification of the mind, presumably reflecting its prominence when the factors specific to the first absorption, *vitakka* and *vicāra*, have been left behind. Although *vitakka* elsewhere stands for plain “thought,” in the context of absorption I understand it to represent an “application” of the mind (with *vicāra* then functioning as a “sustaining” of the same).⁸

Regarding these standard descriptions of the four absorptions, it is a recurrent feature that at times they explicitly mention qualities which have already been established earlier.⁹ In other words, the reference to unification of the mind in the standard description of the second absorption need not be taken to imply that such unification is completely absent with lower levels of concentration. This suggestion finds confirmation in passages that explicitly mention unification of the mind as a quality present during the first absorption.¹⁰

A reference to the Buddha’s own attainment of the first absorption, as part of an account of his pre-awakening cultivation of the mind, shows an interesting minor variation in this respect. In the version extant in Chinese, his actual attainment of the first absorption comes with the indication that he had a “constantly unified mind.”¹¹ The Pāli version already mentions his possession of a “concentrated and unified mind” when listing the qualities that enabled him to attain the first absorption.¹² This could be taken to convey that unification of the mind needs to be already established in order to be able to attain the first absorption.

Such a conclusion would receive support from another Pāli discourse without known parallels, which relates the same expression “concentrated and unified mind” to meditating in any of the four postures, including when walking.¹³ Since during walking it will not be possible to remain completely free from cognizing various things through the physical senses, it follows that here the idea of being “concentrated” and having a “unified mind” acquires a sense that goes beyond the type of concentration and mental unification relevant to absorption experience, at least in the way this is described in the early discourses. Although what degree of concentration deserves to be reckoned an “absorption” is a debated topic, it seems to me that the early discourses point to a state of deep immersion that would not be compatible with cognizing the type of sensory experiences that one would have while walking.¹⁴

The same perspective holds good for yet another Pāli discourse without known parallels, which commends paying thorough attention when hearing teachings. The description of paying such attention comes with an explicit reference to having a unified mind.¹⁵ This confirms the impression that, in its Pāli usage, unification of the mind is not confined to actual absorption attainment.

The circumstance that these two Pāli discourses lack parallels weakens their strength as testimonies for early Buddhist thought, although it needs to be kept in mind that such absence does not in itself imply lateness. It can simply be a reflection of the vagaries of oral transmission and the fact that a complete set of discourses is at present only extant from the Theravāda reciter lineage.¹⁶

In fact, indications in other Pāli passages that are firmly supported by their parallels confirm the impression that the early discourses do not consider unification of the mind to be confined to absorptive levels of concentration only. One example is a description of avoiding excessive thinking in the anticipation that this would tire the body and afflict the mind. The implementation of this realization then leads to concentrating and unifying the mind in order to prevent it becoming afflicted.¹⁷ Although this eventually leads over to absorption attainment, it seems reasonable to read the reference to unification here to apply also to levels of concentration and unification before such attainment,¹⁸ when the mind has simply become still and free of thought.

Another Pāli passage and its Chinese parallel offer a range of methods for overcoming unwholesome thoughts. The presentation follows an ascending trajectory, in the sense of presenting each subsequent method as a way of dealing with the same situation if the preceding one has not been successful.¹⁹ This shows that the instructions serve to address a situation where the mind is quite obsessed with unwholesome thoughts and overcome by these to such an extent that a sustained effort is needed to emerge from this predicament. Yet, such an escape leads quite directly over to concentrating and unifying the mind.²⁰ Once again, even though this can of course be taken all the way up to absorption attainment, it seems reasonable to understand the description to be also applicable to a mind that has just recovered from being in the firm grip of strong defilements, even if that has not yet led to absorption attainment.

The same reasoning would be applicable to another passage extant in Pāli and Chinese, which relates successful sense restraint to becoming concentrated and gaining unification of the mind.²¹ Since this contrasts to someone overcome by defiled reactions in relation to sensory experiences, the main point made in this passage does not appear to be confined to full absorption attainment, as it also seems relevant to a situation where one is no longer carried away by what happens at any sense door. Another passage preserved in Pāli, Chinese, and Tibetan conveys a similar sense, describing how the mind of a trainee is not overwhelmed by sense experiences and becomes unified and concentrated.²² This passage also does not require bringing in absorption attainment in order to enable a meaningful reading.

The above suggestions find further confirmation in a passage, extant in Pāli and Chinese, which describes being physically attacked with fists, stones, or knives. Yet, the monastic experiencing such violence trains to remain with a mind that is concentrated and unified.²³ In such a situation, it would hardly seem meaningful to expect the monastic to attain absorption. It would follow that here the reference to being concentrated and having unification of the mind would be intending a level of these mental qualities well before actual absorption attainment.

Proceeding briefly beyond the early discourses, it is perhaps also of interest that the *Vibhaṅga*, an Abhidharma work that is comparatively early compared to other texts in the third basket, besides relating unification of the mind to each of the absorptions,²⁴ also employs the same term in relation to sensory experiences.²⁵ This shows that, from the perspective of this work as well, unification of the mind is broader in compass than absorption attainment.

Concentration

Several of the passages taken up above already involve a reference to concentration alongside unification of the mind. These show that the former can have a broad compass just as much as the latter, both going beyond actual absorption attainment. The same is particularly evident in a basic division of the Buddhist path of practice into the three aggregates of virtue, concentration, and wisdom. A Pāli discourse and its parallels extant in Chinese and Tibetan agree that the aggregate of concentration comprises right mindfulness alongside right concentration.²⁶

The relation to mindfulness that emerges from the above indication also appears to stand in the background of a reference, found in a Pāli discourse and in its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, to the four establishments of mindfulness as a form of “concentration” (*samādhi*/定).²⁷ Here the practice of the four establishments of mindfulness leads on to absorption, rather than being in itself already an attainment of absorption.

Another Pāli discourse and its *Samyukta-āgama* parallel recommend the cultivation of the four *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthānas* to newly ordained monastics, with the additional specification that this should be done in such a way as to concentrate the mind (the Pāli version additionally also refers to unification).²⁸ Since these monastics have just gone forth, it could hardly be assumed that all of them must have acquired mastery of absorption previously. Instead, the injunction can reasonably be taken to convey that the term *samādhi* can indeed comprise the practice of the four establishments of mindfulness. In both versions, such practice has the explicitly stated purpose of leading to knowledge of the body, feeling tones, mental states, and dharmas, that is, of the objects of the four establishments of mindfulness. Neither discourse refers to absorption at all.

A Pāli discourse and a parallel extant in Tibetan distinguish between different modes of cultivating *samādhi*, one of which leads to the destruction of the influxes: contemplating the impermanent nature of the five aggregates of clinging. In spite of being clearing an insight-related form of practice, such contemplation is explicitly designated as a cultivation of concentration (*samādhībhāvanā*/ting nge 'dzin bsgom pa).²⁹

Another relevant Pāli passage describes, in agreement with a parallel extant in a partially preserved *Ekottarika-āgama* collection, *samādhi*/定 gained from walking meditation.³⁰ The parallels agree in indicating that such *samādhi* will last for a long time. The description clearly intends the cultivation of a form of concentration that is the outcome of walking meditation, and such concentration receives a particular highlight for its potential duration. Although walking meditation can of course build a foundation for later absorption attainment, the passage as such conveys a sense of “concentration” that seems broader than absorption, which in fact is not mentioned in either of the two versions.

The same sense appears to be relevant to a description of mindfulness of the body undertaken in relation to the four postures or alternatively in relation to various bodily activities. The Pāli and Chinese versions of such a description agree in indicating that this type of practice leads to the

mind becoming concentrated (the Pāli version also mentions unification of the mind).³¹ In a subsequent part of their presentation, both discourses explicitly take up the four absorptions as alternative modes of arriving at the same result, which implies that the present description would not be intending absorption attainment.

Another relevant reference occurs in the context of listing five different occasions for the breakthrough to liberation to occur. Four of these relate to the teachings, when one either listens to a teaching, gives a teaching oneself, recites a teaching, or reflects on a teaching.³² Each of these four occasions results in concentrating the mind. Such concentration could hardly be confined to the attainment of absorption. Although one may imagine that while hearing a talk someone may stop listening and then enter absorption, the same would not be a meaningful scenario for the other occasions listed, since entry into absorption would interrupt the giving of a teaching or its recitation.³³ Instead, in line with the broad range of meanings of the term concentration evident from some of the other passages surveyed above, it seems more reasonable to allow for a level of concentration that does not involve full entry into actual absorption to be possible when listening to a teaching, giving a teaching, reciting a teaching, or reflecting on a teaching.

The broad compass of the term concentration that emerges from these few selected examples prevents opting for a simple equation of any reference to *samādhī* as necessarily intending absorption attainment. Instead of carrying a precisely circumscribed technical meaning of this type, the term can at times convey just the general sense of the absence of distraction.³⁴ It follows that, when a particular passage refers to “concentration,” the burden of proof is with those who wish to interpret it as a reference to absorption.

The upshot of the above would then be that in the early discourse the usage of both “unification of the mind” and “concentration” does not appear to be confined to absorption attainment. It follows that the definition of right concentration as unification of the mind cultivated in conjunction with the other seven path factors—this being the definition that receives support from parallel versions—is indeed broader in scope than the definition that lists the four absorptions.

The Path to Stream-entry

The path to stream-entry is of course the noble eightfold path. This eightfold path is the “stream” gained by one who has attained stream-

entry.³⁵ Hence, the definition of right concentration by way of listing the four absorptions can easily lead to the impression that mastery of absorption is indispensable for progress to stream-entry.³⁶ An example already mentioned in my previous comparative study of definitions of right concentration (Anālayo 2019a: 34) is the reasoning by Bhikkhu Thanissaro (1996/1999: 248) that “the attainment of at least the first level of jhana is essential for all four levels of Awakening,” based on the common impression that “the attainment of stream-entry has eight factors, one of which is right concentration, defined as jhana.” In fact, according to his assessment, “jhana is the heart of the streamwinner’s path.”³⁷

A similar position is evident in the assertion by Bhikkhu Sujato (2001/2012: 140) that “jhāna is necessary for all the stages of noble liberation. The noble path has eight factors. Jhānas are one of those factors. Only with fulfillment of all eight factors can one be considered to be on the path.” In fact, according to Bhikkhu Sujato (2001/2012: 139) “it seems that the attainment of right samādhi may itself be equivalent to entering the way.”³⁸ From this perspective, questioning the indispensability of absorption attainment for progress to stream-entry can come to be viewed as putting into question the whole noble eightfold path, hence Bhikkhu Sujato (2001/2012: 157) reasons: “Suggesting that one of the path factors may be optional introduces a fuzziness to the path ... Playing around with the key path factors unleashes a further host of theoretical difficulties. If one path factor is optional, what of the others?”

The influence exerted by the idea that right concentration is equivalent to the four absorptions can even affect the methodology adopted for studying the textual material. Bhikkhu Sujato (2001/2012: 97) reasons: “samādhi as a crucial support for liberation means right samādhi, which is the four jhānas. When we come across other descriptions of the path that refer to or imply samādhi in less explicit terms, we should therefore infer that jhāna is meant.” In this way, any reference to concentration can be viewed as a reference to absorption. The basis for this procedure appears to be precisely the assumption that right concentration equals absorption attainment.³⁹

Given that comparative study of the early Buddhist discourses has by now shown that this idea probably reflects a later development, arguments based on this assumption are no longer compelling. For example, the above suggestion that not cultivating concentration up to absorption level amounts to playing around with one of the key

path factors by considering it only optional no longer holds, as levels of concentration below absorption attainment can fulfil the role of the eighth path factor. The same applies to various instances of what Bhikkhu Sujato (2001/2012: 88) has aptly called “dependent liberation,” that is, listings of the qualities and practices that in a causal sequence lead up to gaining liberation. Thus, the need for right concentration in order to gain knowledge and vision in accordance with reality does not imply “that jhāna is a necessary condition for stream-entry,” as proposed by Bhikkhu Sujato (2001/2012: 97). The reason is simply that right concentration requires unification of the mind cultivated in conjunction with the other seven path factors, which can happen at levels of mental composure that fall short of full absorption attainment. For the same reason, the need to fulfil the aggregate of concentration in order to be able to fulfil the aggregate of wisdom also does not depend on the ability to attain absorption.⁴⁰ Such examples show the degree to which the overall perspective changes once right concentration is freed from being confined to absorption attainment.

In addition to this fundamental clarification, in what follows I will critically survey three additional arguments made by Bhikkhu Sujato (2001/2012) to buttress the same point, the first two of which in fact do not involve the term concentration and thus are anyway in need of examination. One such argument relates to the seven successive stages of purification, where the need to purify the mind leads to purification of view, and that in turn leads to purification by overcoming doubt.⁴¹ Since another discourse employing closely similar formulations explains that the vision of the four noble truths purifies view and attainment of the four absorptions purifies the mind,⁴² based on which Bhikkhu Sujato (2001/2012: 100) affirms “the necessity of jhāna as the purification of mind that precedes” purification of view and the subsequent purifications.

A problem with reading purification of view in the context of the seven successive stages of purification as representative of stream-entry is that, at this stage, the next purification of overcoming doubt has still to be reached. Bhikkhu Sujato (2001/2012: 99f) reasons that the sequence of the three purifications of view, overcoming doubt, and knowledge and vision of what is the path and what is not the path could be read to be “detailing the sequence in which these fetters are abandoned during the course of vipassanā culminating in the vision of the four noble truths.” This unfortunately conflicts with the explicit indication in the early discourses that the relevant fetters are eradicated simultaneously at the moment of stream-entry itself.⁴³ It follows that the explanations given in the other

Pāli discourse employing similar but slightly different terminology are not readily applicable to the scheme of seven purifications in the way proposed above. In other words, this scheme does not provide decisive support for the idea that absorption is indispensable for reaching stream-entry.

Another argument advanced by Bhikkhu Sujato (2001/2012: 139) relies on combining two passages, leading to the conclusion that those on the path to stream-entry, even though they “do not have the formless liberations,” yet, “they are repeatedly declared to possess the spiritual faculty of samādhi, i.e. jhāna.” The second argument is weakened by the fact that, according to a Pāli discourse and its Chinese and Tibetan parallels, only arahants possess each of the five faculties fully, as these are increasingly weaker for those on lower levels of awakening.⁴⁴ In other words, the definition of the spiritual faculty of concentration in terms of the four absorptions does not offer a straightforward indication that stream-entry requires mastery of absorption.

A significant perspective on the spiritual faculty of concentration emerges from the *Mahāsaḷāyatanika-sutta* and its parallels, which describe the cultivation of knowledge and vision in relation to the six sense-spheres, concluding that one who undertakes such practice thereby comes to be endowed with the five faculties.⁴⁵ This presentation implies that the practice of a form of insight meditation can result in the fulfilment of the faculty of concentration.

In relation to the factors of the noble eightfold path, the *Mahāsaḷāyatanika-sutta* and its parallels explicitly indicate that path factors like right action and right livelihood need to have been developed earlier.⁴⁶ No such specification is made regarding the development of concentration. In fact, according to the *Mahāsaḷāyatanika-sutta* and its Tibetan parallel the mode of practice described in this way brings into being tranquility and insight in conjunction.⁴⁷ This leaves hardly any room for assuming that absorption must have been cultivated earlier, which would correspond to the alternative approach of cultivating tranquility first and then turning to insight. In sum, the *Mahāsaḷāyatanika-sutta* and its parallels put into perspective the idea that the spiritual faculty of concentration requires mastery of absorption, conveying the impression that there is an alternative way of achieving the same.

Regarding the other passage, according to which those on the path to stream-entry lack the ability to enter the immaterial attainments (or the “formless liberations”), Bhikkhu Sujato (2001/2012: 139) notes that

“nowhere is jhāna included among the qualities that they lack.” If I understand him correctly here, the argument would be that the passage in question implicitly conveys that those on the path to stream-entry possess the ability to enter absorption. This then leads Bhikkhu Sujato (2001/2012: 140) to reasoning that, since one on the path to stream-entry is bound to realize the fruit of stream-entry in the same life, “even if prevented from practicing by, say, grave illness or sudden death, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that they need not further develop their meditation after the entry to the path,” since at that point “the conditions for stream-entry are already fulfilled, requiring only time to bear their fruit.” In other words, even just being on the path to stream-entry would already require absorption abilities.

Unlike the Pāli passage in question, the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel defines those on the path to stream-entry without bringing in the immaterial spheres (or the “formless liberations”).⁴⁸ A closer inspection of the Pāli discourse makes it fairly probable that the reference to the immaterial spheres is a recitation error, carried over from the preceding distinction between types of trainees based on whether they are able to achieve the immaterial spheres or not.⁴⁹ In addition to the indication provided by the Chinese parallel, this suggestion finds support in the corresponding definitions provided in the *Puggalapaññatti*, which also does not mention the immaterial spheres in relation to those who are on the path to stream-entry.⁵⁰ The *Puggalapaññatti* stands out among the works included in the Theravāda Abhidhamma collection for not introducing a distinctly novel perspective on the main topic it covers, instead of which it primarily assembles passages from the discourses.⁵¹ In other words, this text seems to be a comparatively early member of the Abhidhamma collection. In the present case, it appears to testify to a time in the transmission of definitions of noble beings when the apparent textual error in the Pāli discourse had not yet occurred.⁵²

An additional point to be taken into account here is that the result of the presentation in the Pāli version fails to make sense. There is no reason why those on the path to stream-entry should in principle be unable to attain the immaterial spheres, something that is possible even for worldlings. It could well be that someone already accomplished in such practices joins the Buddhist fold and then embarks on the path to stream-entry. Such a person would then become one on the path to stream-entry who is able to attain the immaterial spheres. In sum, the relevant passage is clearly not reliable, and it certainly does not imply

that those on the path to stream-entry must invariably be endowed with the ability to attain absorption, just because a lack of such ability is not explicitly mentioned.

Unlike the previous two arguments, the third argument to be taken up here does involve the term concentration, as it is based on the succinct statement in a Pāli discourse that “concentration is the path; lack of concentration is a bad path.”⁵³ Bhikkhu Sujato (2001/2012: 134) presents this together with the indication, found in another discourse, that following the bad path (*kummagga*) prevents abandoning the three fetters (that are to be overcome by stream-entry).⁵⁴ This then leads to the following conclusion by Bhikkhu Sujato (2001/2012: 135): “If the ‘path’ by which these three fetters are abandoned by the stream-enterer is, or more modestly, includes *samādhi*, then those on the path to stream-entry must also possess *samādhi* ... If they possess *jhāna* it follows as a matter of course that those at higher stages will too.” The last part of his reasoning would first of all require establishing that the reference to concentration equals absorption attainment. In other words, the statement that identifies concentration as the path requires contextualization, in order to arrive at a proper assessment of its import.

Now, this statement occurs at the end of a detailed survey of the six powers of the Tathāgata. Two Chinese parallels extant in the same *Samyukta-āgama* have only this detailed survey of the six powers; they do not have a counterpart to the final part of the Pāli discourse, which indicates that the gaining of these six powers relies on concentration.⁵⁵ This leaves open the possibility that this part is a later addition.

Nevertheless, just taking the Pāli discourse at face value, the passage in question indicates that concentration is required for achieving the six powers of the Tathāgata, which include recollection of past lives and the divine eye. That such abilities indeed require considerable concentrative mastery is probably beyond dispute. Thus, in this case the type of concentration under discussion can indeed be identified as calling for mastery of absorption. However, the stipulation as such is not about the requirements for arrival at stream-entry, as it instead concerns the six powers of the Tathāgata.

The ability to recollect one’s past lives and achieve the divine eye also feature as part of a specific modality of becoming an arahant, by way of the three higher knowledges (*tevijjā/trividyā*). Also included in the alternative of acquiring all six supernormal knowledges (*abhiññā/*

abhiññā), recollection of one's past lives and the divine eye regularly feature together with the destruction of the influxes as the final goal in descriptions of the gradual path in the early discourses.⁵⁶ For this reason, it is entirely natural that such descriptions regularly mention the four absorptions. But arahants freed by wisdom do not need to achieve these two higher knowledges (let alone the five supernormal knowledges) in order to reach full awakening. Judging from a Pāli discourse and several of its parallels, the latter mode of approach appears to have been in fact the more common one.⁵⁷

The above contextualization shows that the identification of *samādhi* as the path, in addition to not being supported by parallels from other reciter traditions, concerns a rather specific context, namely the path to gaining the six powers of the Tathāgata. It is not a pronouncement about the path to stream-entry. The expression "bad path" (*kummagga*) as what prevents abandoning the three fetters to be overcome with stream-entry can in turn more fruitfully be related to a passage in the *Itivuttaka*, where the same expression stands for indulging in defiled thoughts.⁵⁸ Such indulgence would indeed be an obstacle to progress to stream-entry.

In sum, the progression through the seven stages of purification does not imply that absorption attainment is necessary for gaining stream-entry. The stream-entrant's spiritual faculty of concentration does not seem to be confined to absorption attainment, and the indication that those on the path to stream-entry lack the ability to enter the immaterial spheres fails to make sense and seems to be the result of a textual error. The indication that "concentration is the path," besides lacking support from its parallels, concern the six powers of the Tathāgata instead of stream-entry.

The Roles of Mindfulness and Absorption

In what follows I intend to complement the above survey and my previous research on definitions of right concentration with a more general consideration of the implicit evaluation of the four absorptions and of the four establishments of mindfulness in the early Buddhist scheme of liberation. Before embarking on a survey of some relevant instances, I would like to clarify that the point at stake here is by no means to deny that the early discourses repeatedly mention the absorptions and commend their cultivation. An example in point are descriptions of the gradual path, already mentioned above, which regularly list the four absorptions, yet these only rarely mention the four establishments of

mindfulness and the seven awakening factors do not appear to come up explicitly at all in such contexts.⁵⁹ Without in any way intending to turn a blind eye on the evident importance of absorption attainment that emerges in this way in a range of early discourses, let alone attempting to devalue such practice in any way, the purpose of what follows is only to explore whether absorption attainment is really as overarching central as has at times been asserted.

A starting point for such exploration can be the description of what motivated the Buddha-to-be to set out on his quest for awakening. According to the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, his quest was for freedom from old age, disease, and death, as well as from sorrow and defilement.⁶⁰ Hence, it seems reasonable to see what the early discourses present as the means for achieving such a quest: Is it the four absorptions or rather the four establishments of mindfulness that one should rely on for facing the predicament of old age, disease, and death, as well as for overcoming sorrow and defilements?

Regarding the quest for freedom from defilements, it is noteworthy that two Pāli passages, which accord a central role to absorption in this respect, do not receive support from their parallels. One of these passages takes the form of an exchange between the Buddha and a lay disciple on the obstruction caused by sensual desire. In the Pāli version, what leads beyond sensual desire is when the noble disciple experiences non-sensual joy and happiness, or something even more peaceful,⁶¹ which appears to intend absorption attainment. Yet, this particular statement does not receive support from its Chinese parallels.⁶² Now, it is indeed the case that the experience of non-sensual forms of joy and happiness during deep concentration can divest sensual pleasures of their former attraction. Nevertheless, what the parallels agree on is a highlight on the potential of penetrative insight into the predicament of sensuality as the means to go beyond sensual desire.

The other Pāli passage concerns the function of tranquility and insight, indicating that the former leads to developing the mind, and that in turn issues in abandoning lust.⁶³ A Chinese discourse instead relates tranquility to virtue, although in this case the status of this Chinese discourse as a parallel is uncertain.⁶⁴

Whatever may be the final word on this last passage, another discourse extant in Pāli and Chinese unmistakably describes monastics attaining the first, second, third, or even the fourth absorption but then, due to

excessive socializing, becoming overwhelmed by sensual desire and eventually disrobing.⁶⁵ The whole purpose of this exposition is precisely to illustrate that attaining the four absorptions does not necessarily result in a substantial transformation of the mind, as excessive socializing may lead to what, from the early Buddhist perspective, is the direst misfortune for a monastic: disrobing. The descriptions in both versions do not give the impression that the monastic in question had not gained the full attainment of the respective absorptions. Instead, the conclusion to be drawn from this discourse would be that absorption attainment may at times not suffice for addressing the challenge of overcoming sensuality.

The above indication can be contrasted with a Pāli discourse, according to which a monastic well trained in the four establishments of mindfulness will be immune to the temptation to disrobe.⁶⁶ The discourse explains that, even if someone should offer wealth to encourage the monastic to return to the lay life, this will not be successful because the cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness has ensured that the mind is firmly inclined toward seclusion. This compares to the river Ganges flowing toward the east, which even a great crowd of people, armed with baskets and shovels, cannot make flow toward the west. The same illustration of the impossibility of getting a seriously practicing monastic to disrobe recurs in another Pāli discourse and its Chinese and Tibetan parallels, where the overcoming of sensuality results from contemplation of the impermanent nature of the five aggregates of clinging and from seeing the peril in sensual pleasures.⁶⁷ Such practices seem to offer a promising approach for going beyond the danger of becoming overwhelmed by lust and consequently disrobing, thereby confirming the impression that absorption attainment need not be considered as offering the sole possible practice for overcoming sensuality.

The above description of disrobing even after having attained the four absorptions is not the only instance showcasing potential limitations of excessive reliance on deep concentration.⁶⁸ Before proceeding to another instance, however, I would like to come back briefly to the point made at the outset of this section, namely that the early discourses repeatedly commend the cultivation of absorption. It follows that occasional spotlights on potential drawbacks of absorption attainment need to be read alongside such passages, which make it clear that the point at issue is not to warn against such cultivation in principle. Instead, the purpose appears to be more specifically to ensure that the development of absorption can make its contribution to progress on the path by avoiding such problems.

Another case concerning potential drawbacks, reported in a Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallel, involves a monastic who has fallen ill. On being visited by the Buddha, this monastic reveals his preoccupation that, due to the disease, he was no longer able to attain concentration as earlier. The passage uses an expression that according to the commentary intends the fourth absorption.⁶⁹ In the Pāli version, the Buddha is on record for dryly commenting that those recluses and brahmins who regard concentration as the essence of their practice will give rise to such preoccupation.⁷⁰ According to the Chinese version, even those recluses and brahmins should not have such preoccupations.⁷¹ The parallels agree that the Buddha followed up by offering instructions on the cultivation of insight in relation to the five aggregates of clinging.

A contrast to the case of this monastic becoming agitated on losing his earlier concentrative abilities due to physical disease could be found in the report, extant in Pāli and Chinese, of how a lay disciple successfully faced a serious disease by relying on the four establishments of mindfulness.⁷² The same potential emerges as well in the case of the monk Anuruddha, again an instance recorded in both Pāli and Chinese.⁷³ The latter case is particularly remarkable, as Anuruddha was a highly accomplished meditator with considerable concentrative skills. Yet, when having to face illness he reportedly opted for the cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness, rather than for absorption attainment.

Proceeding from the topic of disease to death, once again the practice recommended in a Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallel for facing the time of one's own death is the four establishments of mindfulness.⁷⁴ Another Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallel recommend the same form of practice as a refuge when facing the death of others.⁷⁵ I am not aware of any passage that recommends taking refuge in the four absorptions in a comparable manner.

The transformative potential of the four establishments of mindfulness also finds reflection in the report, extant in a Pāli discourse and several Chinese parallels, that right after his awakening the Buddha identified the four *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthānas* as the direct path to the final goal.⁷⁶ This in turn may well reflect the Buddha's own gradually growing insight into the potential of mindfulness, gained during his quest for awakening.⁷⁷ In fact, the potential of the four establishments of mindfulness is not just to facilitate facing the various predicaments surveyed above, but more

importantly to lead to Nirvana and therewith to a lasting transformation of the mind. This potential can best be surveyed with the help of some summary statements of the path of practice.

One of these summary statements takes the form of indicating that all Buddhas of past, present, and future times will achieve awakening by overcoming the five hindrances, establishing themselves well in the four establishments of mindfulness, and cultivating the seven factors of awakening.⁷⁸ This stipulation does not explicitly mention absorption attainment.

The need for absorption attainment is indeed conspicuously absent in the report of the awakening of the previous Buddha Vipassī. The *Mahāpadāna-sutta* and its Sanskrit parallel agree in reporting that, after having gone forth, he went into seclusion, contemplated dependent arising, and through contemplating the impermanent nature of the five aggregates of clinging realized awakening.⁷⁹ Another parallel extant in Chinese differs insofar as it does not mention contemplation of the five aggregates, so that here his awakening takes place just through contemplation of dependent arising.⁸⁰ Alongside such differences, however, it seems that at the time of the coming into existence of these reports the role of mastery of the four absorptions was not yet considered sufficiently important to merit explicit mention even when it comes to depicting the path to Buddhahood.

Returning to the topic of attaining stream-entry, an overcoming of the five hindrances can in principle take place while listening to a discourse. A telling example involves the conversion of the Jain follower Upāli. The path of purification in the Jain tradition places considerable emphasis on asceticism and the expiation of past deeds through self-inflicted pain. In fact, Upāli's teacher is on record for doubting even the possibility of experiencing a state of mind corresponding to the second absorption.⁸¹ In the ancient setting, the type of asceticism advocated by the Jains stands in opposition to the pleasurable path of meditative absorption. Given this background, it can safely be assumed that, as a staunch follower of the Jains, Upāli should be envisioned as a practitioner of the type of ascetic constraints appropriate for a Jain householder rather than a practitioner of absorption. Nevertheless, during his first encounter with the Buddha, leading to his conversion, he reportedly attained stream-entry, his mind becoming free from the five hindrances.⁸² This type of episode, extant from different reciter traditions, quite clearly conveys the possibility of reaching stream-entry independent of the ability to attain absorption.

It ties in with the following observations by Bhikkhu Bodhi (2002: 42 and 62):

In fact, several texts show the breakthrough to stream-entry as occurring to someone without any prior meditative experience, simply by listening to the Buddha ... A number of texts on stream-enterers and once-returners imply that they do not possess the *Jhānas* as meditative attainments which they can enter at will. Though it is obvious that disciples at the lower two levels may have *jhānic* attainments, the latter are not declared to be an integral part of their spiritual equipment.

Relating the third of the three conditions fulfilled by all Buddhas to stream-entry, according to a Pāli discourse and its Chinese and Sanskrit parallels the seven awakening factors can be cultivated while listening to and reflecting on a teaching.⁸³ However, another Pāli discourse defines the awakening factor of concentration as involving either the presence of *vitakka* and *vicāra* or their absence.⁸⁴ As mentioned above, these two factors are present in the first absorption and need to be left behind in order to attain the second absorption. Now, the Chinese and Tibetan parallels to the Pāli definition of the awakening factor of concentration do not refer to these two mental factors, instead of which they mention concentration and the sign (*nimitta*) of concentration.⁸⁵ This seems to be a preferable way of defining the awakening factor of concentration, given that it can be cultivated while listening to a teaching.

In fact, cultivating the awakening factors ideally takes place with all seven coexisting in the mind, after their step-by-step arousal. This means that tranquility and concentration coexist with investigation, which makes it improbable that the tranquility and concentration in question are of the absorptive type. Moreover, according to the *Mahāsaḷāyatānika-sutta* and its parallels, already mentioned above, the cultivation of knowledge and vision in relation to the six sense-spheres can lead to the fulfilment of the awakening factor of concentration.⁸⁶ Rather than being confined to absorption attainment, it seems indeed that an insight-related type of ‘concentration’ can fulfil the role of the sixth of the seven awakening factors.

Among the seven awakening factors, mindfulness occupies the first and foundational position. It is also the only one whose cultivation is always required.⁸⁷ The other six fall into two groups of three; depending on the present condition of the mind, the cultivation of one of these two groups should be given priority. In case the mind tends towards sluggishness, the group of tranquility, concentration, and equipoise is not commendable,

instead of which the group of investigation-of-dharmas, energy, and joy is commendable. In other words, with each of these six, including the awakening factor of concentration, there can be an excess and this should be avoided. Only the awakening factor of mindfulness is commendable at all times. It follows that, from the viewpoint of a cultivation of the awakening factors, mindfulness has a more important role to play than concentration.

Another listing, found regularly in the discourses, assembles thirty-seven essential qualities and practices considered to be (in later idiom) “pertinent to awakening” (*bodhipakkhiya/bodhipākṣika*).⁸⁸ These include the otherwise less prominent four bases of success (*iddhipāda/rddhipāda*), and it also doubles the same five qualities by listing them separately as the five spiritual faculties (*indriya*) and the five spiritual powers (*bala*). These two features convey the impression that the underlying idea is not to restrict the presentation to the most essential points, and some degree of excess was evidently tolerated. Nevertheless, the list does not include the four absorptions as another scheme in its own right. These only occur as the implicit sense assumed, according to more detailed expositions, by references to concentration as one of the qualities in the sets that make up this listing. It follows that, at the time of the coming into existence of this list, the four absorptions were not considered to merit explicit mention, on a par with the four establishments of mindfulness, etc., in this listing of qualities and practices pertinent to awakening, which often serves as a succinct summary of teachings on the path to liberation. It is only in later times, as part of an apparent tendency to invest absorption attainment with increasing importance, that the four absorptions came to be added as a set to the list of qualities pertinent to awakening in some reciter traditions.⁸⁹

Last not least to be taken up as an important summary statement of the practice is the noble eightfold path itself. Given that by now it has become clear that right concentration does not equal attainment of the four absorptions, my discussion of this topic will not be just about the contrast between absorption and mindfulness. Instead, a point to be pursued would be the importance of right concentration vis-à-vis the other seven path factors. As a basis for such evaluation, it needs to be kept in mind that the sequence of listing the eight path factors does not seem to reflect an increasing importance, with the last factor of right concentration becoming the most important one. Instead, the sequence rather appears to convey how they build on each other. Here right view, standing in first place, serves as the forerunner of the other path factors and provides the foundation for their arising.⁹⁰ The *Mahācattārīsaka-*

sutta and its parallels, whose exposition starts off precisely on the topic of right concentration, explicitly highlight this foundational role of right view in relation to the other path factors.⁹¹ Another Pāli discourse illustrates the role of right view as a precursor by comparing it to the dawn as the harbinger of the rising of the sun.⁹²

When viewed from the perspective of an actual cultivation of the noble eightfold path, the responsibility of right view is to ensure that the other path factors, including concentration, are of the right type.⁹³ The *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta* and its parallels provide a spotlight on this role, indicating that, out of the whole set of eight factors, right view provides the crucial discernment between right and wrong path factors.⁹⁴ This then combines with the right effort to cultivate the former and overcome the latter, and with right mindfulness performing the task of monitoring such cultivation and overcoming. In contrast to these three path factors, right concentration is not accorded a comparable role in relation to the actual cultivation of the factors of the noble eightfold path. It follows that this is yet another instance where the role of mindfulness appears to be more important than the role of concentration (although right view is of course still more important).

The main implication of the circumstance that right concentration features as the last of the eight factors appears to be, as explicitly stated in definitions of right concentration that are shared by different reciter traditions, that concentration needs to be situated within the framework of a cultivation of all of the other seven factors in order to become of the “right” type. The most important factor of the noble eightfold path, however, seems to be right view as the one factor that provides support for all the others.

Particularly noteworthy here is that right view is a member of the aggregate of wisdom. Contrary to the usual sequence of listing morality, concentration, and wisdom, the noble eightfold path places the factors related to wisdom at its outset.⁹⁵ This needs to be kept in mind in any evaluation of individual path factors. Contrary to the role accorded to absorption attainment by Bhikkhu Thanissaro (1996/1999: 248) and Bhikkhu Sujato (2001/2012: 139), quoted above, endowment with right view, rather than with right concentration, would merit being considered “the heart of the streamwinner’s path” or the “equivalent to entering the way.” Such a consideration would concord well with an alternative term used at times in the discourses to designate a stream-enterer as one who is “endowed with view” (*ditṭhisampanna*).⁹⁶ In other words, even though

the stream-enterer is of course endowed with all eight path factors, the one factor that deserves a special highlight is right view. Although concentration is important as one of the eight factors, it is not the most important one of these.

Conclusion

References in the early discourses to concentration and unification of the mind cannot be taken to intend absorption attainment unless this is clearly indicated by the context. Arguments in favor of the need to attain absorption in order to gain stream-entry remain unconvincing, being often influenced by what comparative research suggests to be a later definition of right concentration by way of equating this path factor with the attainment of the four absorptions.

Alongside providing these clarifications, the above discussion is not meant to present a unilateral endorsement of completely sidestepping the cultivation of mental tranquility. Instead, it intends to offer a middle path between the two extremes of “insight only” on the one side and “absorption only” on the other. The early discourses clearly place considerable emphasis on the cultivation of concentration leading up to absorption. From the perspective of these texts, any meditation practice aimed at the growth of liberating insight should be complemented with at least some cultivation of tranquility. The *brahmavihāras*, for example, can offer much toward ensuring a balanced growth of insight. The point is only that any cultivation of tranquility can be undertaken free from the belief that a certain level of absorptive strength must be reached, failing which one is barred from the realization of stream-entry.

The approach to meditation practice in the early discourses reflects a remarkable degree of flexibility and an overall emphasis on practitioners becoming self-reliant. The best approach to successful mental culture is an open one, enabling each practitioner to adjust flexibly to personal needs and inclinations, based on having established a foundation in virtue and right view. Some may opt for cultivating the absorptions, and this is perfectly in keeping with what the early discourses convey. It would be absurd to look down in any way on absorption attainment, given its potential benefits (which the present article, due to limitations of space, has not been able to explore in more detail). The overall point of the above examination is thus not to invite a denigration of absorption but only to clarify that its attainment need not be considered an indispensable requirement for anyone aspiring to enter the stream.

Abbreviations

AN	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
D	Derge edition
DĀ	<i>Dirgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
Dhs	<i>Dhammasaṅgaṇī</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
EĀ ²	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 150A)
It	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Mp	<i>Manorathapūraṇī</i>
Nidd I	<i>Mahāniddesa</i>
P	Peking edition
Pp	<i>Puggalapaññatti</i>
SĀ	<i>Saṃyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	<i>Saṃyukta-āgama</i> (T 100)
SĀ ³	<i>Saṃyukta-āgama</i> (T 101)
SHT	Sanskriethandschriften aus den Turfanfunden
SN	<i>Saṃyutta-nikāya</i>
Sn	<i>Sutta-nipāta</i>
Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsinī</i>
T	Taishō edition (digital)
Up	<i>Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā</i>
Vibh	<i>Vibhaṅga</i>

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Notes

- 1 See Anālayo 2003: 72. Here and elsewhere, for ease of reading I adopt the more common translation rather than trying to establish new translation terminology.
- 2 Published as Anālayo 2020b.
- 3 Originally published as Anālayo 2019a, with a revised version incorporated in Anālayo 2022a.
- 4 Anālayo 2017: 163–171.
- 5 See Anālayo 2020a: 574f.
- 6 See Anālayo 2022a: 149–172.
- 7 Nidd I 478,¹³ (commenting on Sn 962): *ekodī ti ekaggacitto*.
- 8 See in more detail Anālayo 2017: 123–128 and 2019b: 2345f.
- 9 See the detailed discussion in Anālayo 2019b, which already contains several references taken up below.
- 10 One example is a listing of the five factors of the first absorption in MN 43 at MN I 294,³¹ MĀ 210 at T I 788c₂₀, and Up 1005 at D 4094 *ju* 8a₂ or P 5595 *tu* 8b₈ (note that the last two are strictly speaking parallels to MN 44; this is a case of differing allocation of topics in MN 43/44 and their parallels). Pande 1957: 134 considers both MN 43 and MN 44 to be late, as their “discussions take place in [a] dry philosophical and dogmatic atmosphere, and involve essays in precise definition and fine distinctions ... The whole presupposes considerable doctrinal development, and shows very clearly the tendencies of scholastic systematization,” moreover, the “Buddha is not a participant in either of the discussions.” The proposed reasoning is unconvincing. Those topics taken up MN 43 and MN 44 that are covered in similar ways in their parallels do not show evident signs of a doctrinal development distinctly later than early Buddhist thought in general. Other discourses also reflect a concern in early Buddhist thought with precise definitions and fine distinctions. Moreover, non-participation by the Buddha is not in itself a sign of lateness, just as reports of his participation are not a sign of earliness. An example in case is MN 111, considered by Pande 1957: 138 to be also late, which has the Buddha as its speaker. This discourse is directly relevant to the present topic, as it also lists unification of the mind as a factor present in the first absorption; see MN 111 at MN III 25,¹⁵. In the case of MN 111, however, there are indeed specific reasons to consider the discourse to be late, as it employs terminology otherwise only found in later texts and its listing of the constituents of each absorption shows signs of having combined two different lists, the second and ostensibly later one of the two reflecting a typically Abhidharmic concern with comprehensive coverage; see in more detail Anālayo 2014b: 100–110 and 2020c: 25–28. It needs to be noted, however, that the reference to unification of the mind occurs in what appears to be the earlier list, rather than being part of the apparent addition. Further examples for Pāli discourses that explicitly relate unifying the mind to the first absorption are SN 40.1 at SN IV 263,²¹ and MN 122 at MN III 111,²⁰, with parallels in MĀ 191 at T I 738b₂₅ and Skilling 1994: 206,³; see in more detail Anālayo 2019b: 2346f.
- 11 EĀ 31.1 at T II 666b₁₂: 恒若一心.
- 12 MN 4 at MN I 21,³³: *samāhītaṃ cittaṃ ekaggaṃ*.
- 13 AN 4.12 at AN II 14,²³: *samāhītaṃ cittaṃ ekaggaṃ*; see also It 4.12 at It 119,³.
- 14 See in more detail Anālayo 2017: 109–150, 2019b, and 2022a: 184–197.
- 15 AN 5.151 at AN III 175,⁴: *ekaggacitto*. Bhikkhu Sujato 2001/2012: 150 reasons, regarding the indication that in this way *bhabbo nīyāmaṃ okkamituṃ kuśalesu dhammesu sammattaṃ*, that the last term “‘rightness’ means the noble eightfold path, including *jhāna*; and the *samādhi* of one practicing for stream-entry is the spiritual faculty of *samādhi* ... This passage therefore seems to imply *jhāna* attained either before or during the talk itself. If so, this strongly supports the necessity of *jhāna* for entering the path.” The term *sammatta* does indeed regularly refer to the noble eightfold path in other contexts. However, elsewhere Bhikkhu Sujato 2001/2012: 41 takes the position that “*jhāna* occurs based on mind-consciousness only, without the diversity of sense consciousness; and this mind-consciousness knows just one thing.” Without going into the complex topic of the

relationship between absorption attainment and the five senses, the assessment as such conflicts with the assumption that it is possible to attain absorption while listening to a talk, which of course requires hearing through the ear sense door and paying attention to what is being heard, lest it be forgotten and thereby irretrievably lost in the ancient oral setting. In other words, one would have to stop listening in order to enter an absorption, but that would not be a plausible reading in view of the explicit indication in the discourse that such unification of the mind is one of five qualities relevant to *suñanto saddhammaṃ*, “listening to the good teaching.” It follows that the proposed reasoning would only really work for the commentarial notion of a supramundane *jhāna*, in the sense that while listening one briefly experiences the breakthrough to one of the stages of awakening and this momentary breakthrough takes place with a concentrative strength corresponding to absorption attainment. In fact, the commentarial gloss at Mp III 292,¹¹ does bring up the notion of the “path” explicitly, and this intends the supramundane path. Yet, as clarified by Brahmāli 2007, the historically later notion of supramundane absorption, experienced at the time of the breakthrough to awakening, needs to be differentiated from the idea that mundane absorption is a necessary means for arriving at this breakthrough.

- 16 See Anālayo 2022b: 47–50.
- 17 MN 19 at MN I 116,¹⁴: *ajjhataṃveva cittaṃ sañṭhapemi sannisādemī ekodikaromī samādahāmi, taṃ kissa hetu: mā me cittaṃ ūhanī ti* and its parallel MĀ 102 at T I 589b22: 常住在內止息，一意得定，令不損心。
- 18 Note that MN 19 at MN I 117,⁶ continues at a subsequent point with the same description as the one found in MN 4 at MN I 21,³³, quoted above in note 12.
- 19 For a practical exploration of the instructions given in this discourse see Catherine 2022.
- 20 MN 20 at MN I 119,¹³: *ajjhataṃveva cittaṃ santiṭṭhati sannisīdati ekodihoti samādhiyati* and its parallel MĀ 101 at T I 588a19: 在內止息，一意得定。
- 21 SN 35.205 at SN IV 196,²³ and its parallel SĀ 1169 at T II 312c5.
- 22 SN 35.134 at SN IV 125,¹⁹: *samāhitaṃ cittaṃ ekaggaṃ* and its parallels SĀ 212 at T II 53c26: 常定一心 and Up 6061 at D 4094 *nyu* 31a6 or P 5595 *thu* 67b5: *rtse gcig par ... ting nge 'dzin*; see also the discussion of the formulation found in Up 6061 in Dhammadinnā 2016: 68f notes 14+15.
- 23 MN 28 at MN I 186,¹⁶: *samāhitaṃ cittaṃ ekaggaṃ* and its parallel MĀ 30 at T I 465a3: 安定一心。
- 24 Vibh 257,³⁰, 258,³⁹, 260,¹², and 261,¹⁹ defines each of the four *jhāna* as involving *cittassa ekaggatā* (together with the respective absorption factors), and the same term recurs in the definition of *samādhiyaṃ* in Vibh 258,²⁴.
- 25 Vibh 297,³¹; for a similar usage see Dhs 29,¹⁹ (*kusala citta*) and 80,²⁷ (*akusala citta*). On the broad conception of unification of the mind in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* see also Gethin 1992: 315–317.
- 26 MN 44 at MN I 301,⁸, MĀ 210 at T I 788c11, and Up 1005 at D 4094 *ju* 7b5 or P 5595 *tu* 8b4. The parallels differ, however, regarding the allocation of right effort; see the discussion in Anālayo 2011: 279–281.
- 27 AN 8.63 at AN IV 300,²⁴: *kāye kāyānupassī viharissāmi ... ayaṃ samādhi* and MĀ 76 at T I 543c13: 觀內身如身 ... 如此之定。Bhikkhu Sujato 2001/2012: 52 reasons: “Here, satipaṭṭhāna is treated simply as *jhāna*. This probably refers to *jhāna* developed using one of the exercises included in the four satipaṭṭhānas.” The proposed reasoning is not convincing, as both texts quite straightforwardly refer to each of the four establishments of mindfulness as a *samādhi*/定 in itself.
- 28 SN 47.4 at SN V 144,²⁰: *kāye kāyānupassino viharatha ātāpino sampajānā ekodibhūtā vippasannacittā samāhita ekaggacittā kāyassa yathābhūtaṃ nāṇāya* and SĀ 621 at T II 173c17: 身身觀念住，精勤方便，不放逸行，正智，正念，寂定於心，乃至知身。Sujato 2001/2012: 51 reasons that this shows “that satipaṭṭhāna, far from being separate from or opposed to *samatha*, is in fact indistinguishable from it.” Although it is true that *satipaṭṭhāna* has a considerable potential to support the cultivation of concentration or tranquility (see also Anālayo 2019b), this does not make it indistinguishable from *samatha* (on the case of MN 125 see Anālayo 2006: 17f). Similarly unconvincing is the following

suggestion by Sujato 2001/2012: 57: “Reading straightforwardly from the suttas, contemplation of feelings in *satipaṭṭhāna* requires the experience of *jhāna*.” The argument concerns contemplation of pleasant or neutral feeling tones that are of an unworldly type (*nirāmisa*). Yet, the different feeling tones are listed as alternatives, evident from the use of the conjunction *vā*; see MN 10 at MN I 59,¹⁷. It follows that undertaking contemplation of feeling tones does not depend on covering all of the different types listed. Besides, in the context of the present contrast between *sāmisa* and *nirāmisa*, it does not seem reasonable to confine *nirāmisa* to the feeling tones experienced during absorption, as there can be unworldly feeling tones of the pleasant and neutral type experienced when not being in absorption, such as when cultivating insight, and these would certainly also merit being included in the second *satipaṭṭhāna*. Moreover, unworldly feeling tones of a painful type are quite obviously not related to absorption. It seems preferable to understand the instructions to convey that *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation is *also* relevant to the experience of absorption, but apart from that still has a broad field of other potential applications. The same basic perspective also holds for contemplation of the mind, which covers ordinary as well as higher states of mind. It is not convincing to assume that the terms used for the latter are “all terms for *jhāna*,” as proposed by Sujato 2001/2012: 58, as the terminology employed allows for different possible interpretations; see Anālayo 2003: 179f. There is also no indication in the instructions that contemplation concerned with the first types of mental states listed in the discourse is “necessarily coarse and incomplete,” as suggested by Sujato 2001/2012: 58, as the instructions proceed from the presence of one of the three root defilements to mindfully noting their absence, which can be quite refined and complete. It is also not the case, as assumed by Sujato 2001/2012: 40 regarding the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, that “[s]ince they are included in the ‘section on *samādhi*,’ rather than the ‘section on wisdom,’ their primary purpose is to lead to the attainment of *jhāna*, as the final factor of the path: right *samādhi*.” Apart from the by now untenable equation of right concentration with absorption attainment, the inclusion of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in the aggregate of concentration simply reflects the broad compass of meaning of *samādhi*. The main purpose of *satipaṭṭhāna*, however, is much rather to lead to awakening; see in more detail Anālayo 2022a: 198–207.

- 29 AN 4.41 at AN II 45,²⁵ (see also DN 33 at DN III 223,¹⁷) and Up 8032 at D 4094 *nyu* 76a6 or P 5595 *thu* 121b1.
- 30 AN 5.29 at AN III 30,3: *caṅkamādhigato samādhi ciraṭṭhītko hoti* and EĀ² 20 at T II 879a8: 為行者易得定意, 已得定意為久.
- 31 MN 119 at MN III 89,³¹ and 90,⁹: *cittam santiṭṭhāti sannisīdati ekodihoti samādhīyati* and its parallel MĀ 81 at T I 555a16+23: 得定心.
- 32 DN 33 at DN III 241,³ (also DN 34 at DN III 279,⁹ and AN 5.26 at AN III 21,⁸), with parallels in Sankrit fragments, Stache-Rosen 1968: 149, DĀ 9 at T I 51c3, and T 12 at T I 230c7; see also Collins 1992: 126f, Anālayo 2009b, Pāsādika 2017, and Dhammadinnā 2021: 116f.
- 33 Bhikkhu Sujato 2001/2012: 151 reasons that “there is no particular reason to suppose that the attainment of *samādhi* must be simultaneous with hearing the Dhamma, etc. Rather, hearing the Dhamma, etc., is the spark for the development of *samādhi*.” This suggestion is not compelling, as the description much rather suggests that concentration, etc., arise while hearing (on which see also above note 15), teaching, reciting, or reflecting.
- 34 An example would be MN 4 at MN I 20,¹⁰ and EĀ 31.1 at T II 666a17, which agree in qualifying those who are unconcentrated as also having a scattered mind, *asamāhitā vibbhanācittā*/意亂不定. Although this description eventually leads on to absorption attainment, in the present context ‘being concentrated’ features as one out of several qualities facilitating living in a forest without succumbing to fear, which can be taken to intend simply a mental condition that is not scattered.
- 35 SN 55.5 at SN V 347,²⁶ and its parallel SĀ 843 at T II 215b18. My concerns in what follows are confined to the topic of progress to stream-entry and thus differ from, e.g., Somaratne 2019 investigating whether mastery of absorption is needed for the final goal of full liberation.

- 36 An example of the influence exerted by the definition of right concentration by way of the four absorptions is Shankman 2008: 17: “It is not merely concentration, but right concentration, that is indispensable. Right concentration is *jhāna* ... Therefore it is important to understand what *jhāna* is and how to attain it.” In the same vein, in the preface to the book *Right Concentration, A Practical Guide to the Jhānas* Brasington 2015: xi offers the following assessment: “In teaching the eightfold path, the Buddha defined right concentration to be the *jhānas*.” These two quotes exemplify a common tendency, in contemporary circles, to see the definition of right concentration by way of the four absorptions as the central premise for promoting the importance of cultivating *jhāna*.
- 37 The reference given in support for this assessment mentions “§106”, which leads me to a translation of text from MN 117 by Bhikkhu Thanissaro 1996/1999: 179–183. I assume that the reference should rather be to the ensuing discourse, §107 in Bhikkhu Thanissaro 1996/1999: 183, which has a translation of an extract from SN 55. It is not clear to me, however, how this extract could be taken to convey the idea that “*jhāna* is the heart of the streamwinner’s path.”
- 38 The part leading up to the quote by Bhikkhu Sujato 2001/2012: 139 gives me the impression that his position is based on the positioning of right concentration as the last factor in the noble eightfold path.
- 39 I have difficulties reconciling the taking of such a position with the discussion by Bhikkhu Sujato 2001/2012: 16f of instances where *samādhi* does not refer to *jhāna*, leading up to the acknowledgement that “*samādhi* may have a broader meaning on occasion,” hence a consultation of the context is needed (2001/2012: 21). It thus seems to be indeed the case that a reference to concentration (or even right concentration) cannot be read as invariably implying absorption attainment.
- 40 AN 5.22 at AN III 15,23; taken up by Bhikkhu Sujato 2001/2012: 93.
- 41 MN 24 at MN I 149,36: *cittavisuddhi yāvadeva dīṭṭhivisuddhathā, dīṭṭhivisuddhi yāvadeva kaṅkhāvitaraṇavisuddhathā*, MĀ 9 at T I 430c29: 以心淨故, 得見淨; 以見淨故, 得疑蓋淨, and EĀ 39.10 at T II 735a1: 由心清淨, 得見清淨; 由見清淨, 得至除猶豫清淨. The term usually employed for the fetter overcome by stream-entry is *vicikicchā/vicikitsā*, a term that can alternatively designate the fifth hindrance (which may explain the terminology adopted in MĀ 9). The Pāli term used for the fourth purification is instead *kaṅkhā*. Nevertheless, this term also occurs in SN 24.1 at SN III 203,24, for example, to designate the removal of doubt by a stream-enterer (also in SN 24.2–18).
- 42 AN 4.194 at AN II 195,19+28. The definitions of purification of view in the parallels SĀ 565 at T II 148c27, Up 6082 at D 4094 *nyu* 48a7 or P 5595 *thu* 88a7, and in the parts preserved in SHT VIII 1839R, Bechert and Wille 2000: 36, do not refer to the four noble truths, instead of which they take up the spheres of liberation (*vimuttāyatana/vimuktyāyatana*; on which see above note 32).
- 43 Sn 231: *sahā v’ assa dassanasampadāya, tayassu dhammā jahitā bhavanti: sakkāyadīṭṭhi vicikicchitaṇ ca, sīlabbataṇ vā pi yad atthi kiñci*, with a counterpart in the *Mahāvastu*, Senart 1882: 291,23: *sarvaiva yasya darśanasampadāyo, trayo sya dharmā jahitā bhavanti, satkāyadrṣṭvīvicikitsitaṇ ca, sīlavratam cāpi yad asti kiṃcit*. The same basic indication can also be found in AN 3.92 at AN I 242,20.
- 44 SN 48.18 at SN V 202,15 and its parallels SĀ 652 at T II 183a26 and Up 2010 at P 5595 *tu* 57a3 or D 4094 *ju* 52b1. The suggestion by Sujato 2001/2012: 135 that weak possession of the faculty of concentration would still involve some degree of absorption ability even by one who is only on the path to stream-entry is not necessarily compelling. The presentations in SN 48.18 and its parallels simply do not give clear indications regarding the precise form taken by the faculty of concentration in the case of different levels of trainees.
- 45 MN 149 at MN III 289,13, SĀ 305 at T II 87c4, and Up 4006 at D 4094 *ju* 205a4 or P 5595 *tu* 234a4. Bhikkhu Sujato 2001/2012: 34, after translating the relevant part of MN 149, comments: “As always, the practice requires ‘right *samādhi*’, i.e. the four *jhānas*.” Besides relying on the no longer tenable equation of right concentration with absorption attainment, the passage actually presents the path factor of right concentration as an outcome of the meditation practice described rather than as a prerequisite.

- 46 MN 149 at MN III 289,7 and SĀ 305 at T II 87c1 also assign speech to this category, unlike Up 4006 at D 4094 *ju* 205a2 or P 5595 *tu* 234a1, the last being presumably the result of a transmission error.
- 47 MN 149 at MN III 289,16 and Up 4006 at D 4094 *ju* 205a4 or P 5595 *tu* 234a4.
- 48 MĀ 195 at T I 752a6+17.
- 49 MN 70 at MN I 478,4+18 distinguishes the *diṭṭhipatto* from the *kāyasakkhī* by qualifying the former as follows: *ye te santā vimokkhā atikkamma rūpe āruppā te na kāyena phusitvā viharatī* (for the *kāyasakkhī* the same formula lacks the negation). The use of this formula may have stimulated the reciters to repeat just the negative formula when reciting definitions of lower types of noble persons, as a result of which at MN I 479,5+19 the *dhammānūsārī* and the *saddhānūsārī* came to be explicitly qualified as lacking the experience of the immaterial spheres. Yet, this repetition no longer fulfils a purpose compared to its earlier use, when it served as a contrast to the affirmative mode, the two together serving to distinguish between the *kāyasakkhī* and the *diṭṭhipatto*.
- 50 Pp 15,12+21 (repeated at 29,14 and 74,8+12).
- 51 Norman 1983: 102 explains: “Despite its presence in the Abhidhamma-ṭīṭaka, the Puggala-paññatti owes much, in both form and content, to the Sutta-ṭīṭaka ... This possibly supports the view that the Puggala-paññatti is the earliest of the Abhidhamma texts.” According to von Hinüber 1996/1997: 70, the compiler of the *Puggalapaññatti* “limited his efforts to a collection of material from other parts of the canon without developing any ideas of his own on the concept of [a] person. Therefore, it is impossible to relate Pp to the history of philosophical ideas and to other Abhidhamma texts in order to arrive at a relative date.”
- 52 The same type or recitation error may also explain another difference between the parallel versions in regard to the definition of the *ubhatobhāgavimutto* and the *paññāvimutto*, which according to MN 70 at MN I 477,25+33 revolves around the ability or inability to enter the immaterial attainments, whereas according to MĀ 195 at T I 751b14+20 such arahants are able or not able to experience the eight deliverances or emancipations (八解脱); on these eight see also Anālayo 2009a. Notably, the definition given in MĀ 195 corresponds to Pp 14,21+25. The presentation relating the *ubhatobhāgavimutto* to the eight deliverances receives further support from DN 15 at DN II 71,18 and two of its parallels, DĀ 13 at T I 62b25 and MĀ 97 at T I 582b2; another and unrelated discourse taking the same position is SĀ 936 at T II 240a12. In sum, it seems fairly probable that the unique presentation in MN 70 is a result of the basically same recitation error mentioned above in note 49, involving the erroneous recitation of the standard phrase describing the immaterial spheres with the difference that, instead of being merely an addition in the case of the *dhammānūsārī* and the *saddhānūsārī*, in the present instance it would presumably have replaced a reference to the eight deliverances. At any rate, an intentional agenda imagined to be at work here by Kuan 2013: 62f and 69, involving a re-interpretation of the notion of the *paññāvimutto* and, in response to that, an invention of the notion of the *ubhatobhāgavimutto*, does not offer a convincing explanation. Room needs to be granted for the natural vagaries of oral transmission, instead of assuming that all variations must be intentional and hence require an explanation in terms of some polemical or sectarian move; see also Anālayo 2022b and below note 57.
- 53 AN 6.64 at AN III 420,28: *samādhi maggo, asamādhi kummaggo*. The same passage comes up also in the following argument by Bhikkhu Sujato 2001/2012: 37: “Not only here do the suttas, emphasizing that ‘samādhi is the path’, stand jhānas in the place of the path as a whole.” The passage preceding this assessment offers a translation of an extract from DN 28 at DN III 113,19, which contrasts the Buddha’s gaining of the four absorptions to the two extremes of indulgence in sensuality and self-mortification. Here, absorption attainment appears to represent the experience of wholesome types of joy and happiness; it does not seem to stand in place of the path as a whole.
- 54 AN 10.76 at AN V 145,4: *ayonisomanasikāraṃ appahāya, kummaggasevaṇaṃ appahāya, cetaso linattaṃ appahāya, ime kho, bhikkhave, tayo dhamme appahāya abhabbo sakkāyadūṭṭhiṃ pahātuṃ vicikicchāṃ pahātuṃ silabbataparāmāsaṃ pahātuṃ*. Parallels in a Sanskrit fragment, Chung and Fukita 2020: 207f, and in SĀ 346 at T II 96a1 similarly list

- cultivation of the wrong path, *kumārgasevanam*/習近邪道, as one of the three conditions that prevent an overcoming of the three fetters.
- 55 SĀ 686 at T II 187b27 and SĀ 687 at T II 187c13.
- 56 This tendency in Pāli versions of the gradual path is quite evident in the survey provided by Bucknell 1984: 34, although this pattern differs at times in the Chinese parallels; see Gethin 2020.
- 57 According to SN 8.7 at SN I 191,22, MĀ 121 at T I 610b25, T 63 at T I 862a4, and SĀ 1212 at T II 330b24, 320 out of a congregation of 500 arahants belonged to this category (= 64%). Another parallel, SĀ² 228 at T II 457c11, arrives instead at the count of 230 out of 500, which could be the result of a textual error. Kuan 2013 considers the absence of this listing of arahants in yet another parallel, EĀ 32.5, to reflect an earlier version of the discourse. This forms part of his argument that the notion of an arahant liberated both ways is a later development. However, in the case of this particular Chinese *Āgama* it would seem wise not to draw definite conclusions too quickly. One problem is that the translation was based on an oral recitation, and the reciter had forgotten the summary verses (*uddāna*); see T II 549a17. This means that he was no longer in full mastery of the collection, making it possible that a lapse of memory could have occurred elsewhere. This possibility is pertinent to the present case, as it involves the simple absence in EĀ 32.5 at T II 677b7 of such a listing of arahants, which could indeed result from a lapse of memory. Moreover, the Chinese translation of the *Ekottarika-āgama* underwent considerable reworking of the material in China; see Anālayo 2013, 2014/2015, and 2015. Hence, it seems wise to follow the warning by Dhammajoti 2015: 27f: “We simply do not have any accurate record of its original translation. It is therefore risky to put too much weight on the content or form of a given *sūtra* in this collection in arguing for it being the ‘original form’ of a canonical discourse, on the basis of its often briefer description or absence of a particular list (such as that of the seven types of noble persons),” followed by noting that the commentary on the *Ekottarika-āgama*, T 1507 at T XXV 30c8, explicitly refers to arahants liberated both ways: 羅漢心解脫者, 俱解脫. This seriously undermines the scenario envisaged by Kuan 2013.
- 58 It 4.11 at It 117,16: *yo vitakkaṃ vitakkeṭṭi, pāpakaṃ gēhanissitaṃ, kummaggam paṭipanno so, mohaneyyesu mucchito, abhabbo tādiso bhikkhu, phutṭhum sambodhimuttamaṃ*; which is preceded by a detailed description of how someone indulges thoughts of sensuality, ill will, and harming rather than overcoming them.
- 59 A gradual path account that explicitly mentions the four *satipaṭṭhānas* can be seen in MN 125 at MN III 136,4 and its parallel MĀ 198 at T I 758b3; for a listing of studies of the gradual path see Anālayo 2021a: 30n39.
- 60 MN 26 at MN I 163,10 and MĀ 204 at T I 776a26; the former stands alone in also mentioning freedom from birth.
- 61 MN 14 at MN I 91,27.
- 62 MĀ 100 at T I 587b10 and T 55 at T I 850b29 have a distantly related statement applicable to the Buddha himself; see also the corresponding statement in T 54 at T I 849a8, which has even less in common with MN 14.
- 63 AN 2.3.10 at AN I 61,6.
- 64 EĀ 20.7 at T II 600b2. Although Akanuma 1929/1990: 279 lists EĀ 20.7 as a parallel to AN 2.3.10, the case is not straightforward, as EĀ 20.7 introduces tranquility and insight as two qualities cultivated by a forest-dwelling monastic, rather than two qualities contributing to knowledge. A subsequent part of EĀ 20.7 then brings in bodhisattvas, which is clearly a later addition in line with other such instances in this collection; see Anālayo 2013b. Nevertheless, this part could be just a textual expansion of a discourse that otherwise stays well within the thought of early Buddhism. The first part does broach the topic of the functions of tranquility and insight respectively and, at least to that extent, parallels AN 2.3.10. Regarding the latter, EĀ 20.7 indicates that this stands for insight into the four noble truths and liberation from the influxes.
- 65 For the case of the fourth absorption, the relevant passage occurs in AN 6.60 at AN III 396,13 and MĀ 82 at T I 559a3; see in more detail Anālayo 2017: 112–114. Nevertheless, as already noted in Anālayo 2003: 85n85, one who gains non-sensual joy and happiness

- (an implicit reference to absorption) will be less prone to become overwhelmed by defilements, as evident from MN 68 at MN I 464,3. In a personal communication, Bhikkhu Kumāra has criticized this assessment of MN 68, arguing that the use of the present tense *adhigacchati* in relation to such joy and happiness in the passage in question does not refer to an after-effect and instead should be understood to intend being in the attainment. Rhys Davids and Stede 1921/1993: 28 give as one of the meanings of *adhigacchati* “to come into possession of,” and such a sense of acquisition of an ability would fit the context of MN 68 well, which is not about what happens when being in an absorption attainment but rather about what should be acquired in order to facilitate finding delight in the celibate life in general. This impression finds support in the parallel MĀ 77 at T I 545a5, whose description of the outcomes to be expected of gaining the happiness (here, too, an implicit reference to absorption) clearly intends after-effects, in the form of the ability to bear up with various vicissitudes of life, including hunger, thirst, cold, heat, biting insects, offensive speech, being beaten with sticks, and suffering from strong physical pains: 彼比丘便能忍飢渴, 寒熱, 蚊虻, 蠅蚤, 風日所逼, 惡聲, 捶杖亦能忍之, 身遇諸疾極為苦痛, 至命欲絕, 諸不可樂, 皆能堪耐.
- 66 SN 52.8 at SN V 300,²⁷ Akanuma 1929/1990: 256 lists SĀ 545 as a parallel, but this discourse is substantially different and only shares the same speaker. It describes a tree sloping in one direction, such that, on being cut, it will certainly fall in that direction. This illustrates the inclination toward seclusion and Nirvana of one who cultivates the four establishments of mindfulness. In view of these differences, it seems preferable to consider SN 52.8 to lack a parallel.
- 67 SN 35.203 at SN IV 190,²⁴ and its parallels SĀ 1173 at T II 314b¹³ and Up 6066 at D 4094 *nyu* 35b6 or P 5595 *thu* 73a4. Another instance of the same simile illustrating the impossibility of disrobing concerns cultivation of the noble eightfold path in SN 45.160 at SN V 53,¹⁷. This discourse occurs as part of a repetition series, found at the end of the *Magga-saṃyutta*, for which no parallel is known.
- 68 For further examples see also Anālayo 2017: 114–116.
- 69 Spk II 315,15.
- 70 SN 22.88 at SN III 125,²⁷ *ye te, assajī, samaṇabrāhmaṇā samādhisārakā samādhisāmaññā tesam taṃ samādhim appaṭilabhatam evam hoti: no cassu mayam parihāyāmā ti.*
- 71 SĀ 1024 at T II 267b²³: 若沙門, 婆羅門三昧堅固, 三昧平等, 若不得入彼三昧, 不應作念: 我於三昧退減.
- 72 SN 47.30 at SN V 178,⁷ and its parallel SĀ 1038 at T II 271a¹⁷.
- 73 SN 52.10 at SN V 302,¹⁹ and its parallel SĀ 540 at T II 140c⁷.
- 74 SN 36.7 at SN IV 211,⁴ and its parallel SĀ 1028 at T II 268c²; for a study of the Buddha’s passing away, which gives a prominent place to absorption attainment, see Anālayo 2014a.
- 75 SN 47.13 at SN V 163,¹⁴ and its parallel SĀ 638 at T II 177a⁹.
- 76 SN 47.43 at SN V 185,⁸, SĀ 1189 at T II 322b¹, SĀ² 102 at T II 410b¹², and SĀ³ 4 at T II 494a¹⁹; on the terminology employed in SĀ 1189 see the discussion in Nattier 2007 and on the notion of a “direct path” Anālayo 2022a: 199–206.
- 77 See in more detail Anālayo 2021b and 2022c.
- 78 One example is SN 47.12 at SN V 160,²⁸ and its parallel SĀ 498 at T II 131a¹¹.
- 79 DN 14 at DN II 35,¹⁴ and Waldschmidt 1956: 146.
- 80 DĀ 1 at T I 7c⁶.
- 81 SN 41.8 at SN IV 298,¹² and its parallel SĀ 574 at T II 152c⁵.
- 82 MN 56 at MN I 380,¹ *vinīvaraṇacittam* and its parallel MĀ 133 at T I 630c5: 無蓋心. Bhikkhu Sujato 2001/2012: 146 queries, in relation to such reports in general: “Who was it that knew what stage of enlightenment had been reached by these people at that time?” In the case of MN 56 and MĀ 133, the narrative shows the Buddha being clearly aware of the state of mind of Upāli and giving him on purpose the type of teachings that are usually associated with the breakthrough to stream-entry. In other words, from the emic perspective of the reciters it would of course be the Buddha himself who knew what had happened and later would have passed on that information. The agreement among the parallels in reporting Upāli’s stream-entry provides evidence that should not be too easily

dismissed. It is simply not reasonable to set aside all such narratives as in principle late, as a proper assessment instead requires a comparative study of each. When attainment reports differ, then there is indeed a sound basis for attempting to identify which of these are probably later. Such variations are, however, an integral part of the oral transmission of the early discourses, which has affected the texts in a range of ways, rather than being confined to attainment reports. For this reason, the question of “historical reliability,” raised by Bhikkhu Sujato 2001/2012: 175, affects the whole of the textual corpus; see also Anālayo 2022b: 203. Take the case of Kondañña’s stream-entry during what according to tradition was the Buddha’s first sermon; see SN 56.11 at SN V 423,14 and for a comparative study Anālayo 2012 and 2013a. Here, the Buddha is clearly shown to know that this had happened and express this in words; see SN 56.11 at SN V 424,8. Given that Kondañña and the other four were advocates of asceticism and at first unwilling to grant even the possibility that the Buddha could have reached awakening after giving up asceticism, requiring to be informed that there is an alternative apart from the two extremes of sensual indulgence and asceticism, it seems rather improbable that they had practiced absorption previously. Some versions of the first sermon indicate that a break occurred between the delivery of the teaching on the two extremes and the one of the four noble truths, but that appears to have been a short break and thus probably not sufficient to afford the time needed for learning how to attain absorption. Although the case of Upāli appears to me still stronger in comparison, in the case of Kondañña it still seems fair to read the relevant episode as pointing to stream-entry attained without previous absorption practice. Whatever degree of historical reliability one may be willing to grant to the former case, the same would hold for the latter case, and by implication also for the remainder of the first sermon.

- 83 SN 46.3 at SN V 68,1 and its parallels SHT I 533 V₁₊₆, Bechert and Wille 1989: 215, and SĀ 724, where the relevant section is not fully preserved, for which see SĀ 723 at T II 195a₁₆.
- 84 SN 46.52 at SN V 111,21.
- 85 SĀ 713 at T II 191c₇ and Up 2022 at D 4094 *ju* 61b₆ or P 5595 *tu* 68a₇.
- 86 MN 149 at MN III 289,15, SĀ 305 at T II 87c₄, and Up 4006 at D 4094 *ju* 205a₄ or P 5595 *tu* 234a₄.
- 87 SN 46.53 at SN V 115,6, SĀ 714 at T II 192a₂₂, and Up 7003 at D 4094 *nyu* 53a₆ or P 5595 *thu* 94a₅.
- 88 For a detailed study see Gethin 1992.
- 89 See Anālayo 2022a: 149–152. Although the Theravāda tradition has not taken this step and kept to the listing of just thirty-seven qualities and practices pertinent to awakening, a to some extent similar move can be seen in the apparent creation of a second *Jhāna-saṃyutta* (SN 53); see in more detail Anālayo 2022a: 153–155.
- 90 MN 117 at MN III 76,1, MĀ 189 at T I 735c₈, and Up 6080 at D 4094 *nyu* 46b₁ or P 5595 *thu* 86a₆; see in more detail Anālayo 2022a: 148.
- 91 MN 117 at MN III 71,22: *sammādiṭṭhi pubbaṅgamā hoti*, MĀ 189 at T I 735c₁₃: 正見最在其前, and Up 6080 at D 4094 *nyu* 44b₆ or Q 5595 *thu* 84a₈: *yang dag pa’i lta ba sngon du ’gro ba*.
- 92 AN 10. 121 at AN V 236,19; no parallel appears to be known for this discourse.
- 93 See, e.g., AN 5.21 at AN III 15,4, according to which it is not possible to fulfil right concentration without having fulfilled right view. The basically same indication recurs, e.g., in AN 6.68 at AN III 423,3, which then leads on to noting that it is not possible to abandon the fetters without fulfilling right concentration.
- 94 MN 117 at MN III 71,24, MĀ 189 at T I 735c₂₂, and Up 6080 at D 4094 *nyu* 44a₄ or P 5595 *thu* 83b₄.
- 95 MN 44 at MN I 301,9, MĀ 210 at T I 788c₁₁, and Up 1005 at D 4094 *ju* 7b₆ or P 5595 *tu* 8b₅. Bucknell 2022: 16 considers this presentation problematic, since the usual sequence found in various versions of the gradual path lists first morality, then concentration, and lastly wisdom, wherefore right view as a factor representing wisdom should be placed at the end of the eightfold path. An additional problem identified by Bucknell 2022: 142 is that, compared to the tenfold path, the eightfold path appears to be incomplete, even

though it has such a high status. In an attempt to solve the perceived problems, Bucknell 2022: 151 then proposes a development that has its starting point in an unattested eightfold listing without right view and right intention but with right knowledge and right liberation, followed by a subsequent stage where this was changed into the tenfold path (attested in the discourses) by adding right view and right intention, which was then followed by still another stage that involved deleting the last two items to produce the well-known eightfold path. Yet, both perceived ‘problems’ can be solved in a much simpler manner. The ‘incompleteness’ of the eightfold path can be appreciated based on an indication in MN 117 at MN III 76,7 and its parallels MĀ 189 at T I 736b20 and Up 6080 at D 4094 *nyu* 46b4 or P 5595 *thu* 86b1 (see also SHT V 1125R3, Sander and Waldschmidt 1985: 120), which relates the eightfold path to the trainee and the tenfold path to the arahant (Bucknell 2022: 137 in fact translates the Pāli version of this indication, although seemingly without fully appreciating its implications). It is only natural that the path of the trainee is not yet as completely endowed with path-factors as the path of the arahant. The supposed problem of reconciling the sequence of the factors of the eightfold path with the standard accounts of the gradual path can be solved based on the recognition that the first part of the latter, depicting the arising of a Tathāgata/Buddha and his teaching (which is being heard by a householder) corresponds to the arousal of right view. Such arousal indeed requires listening to someone else and paying careful or thorough attention; see MN 43 at MN I 294,2 (literally: the voice of another) and its parallel MĀ 211 at T I 791a2. The householder’s decision to go forth, depicted next in accounts of the gradual path, can in turn be seen to correspond to right intention, in the sense of the intention to renounce the sensual pleasures of the household life, a decision that from an early Buddhist perspective is indeed a matter of wisdom. In an earlier publication, Bucknell 1984: 12 in fact recognized the correspondence between the initial parts of the eightfold path and the gradual path, although in the meantime he seems to have changed his opinion. Bucknell 2022: 133f then rejects such a correspondence for right intention on the grounds that it is not consistent with the standard definition of right intention, according to which “*nekkhamma-saṅkappa* should be understood as ‘thought of non-sensuality’, a mental state involving ‘renunciation’ of sensuality.” It is not clear to me what the inconsistency here could be, as the decision to go forth is precisely informed by the intention to renounce sensuality (in fact, in his overall conclusions Bucknell 2022: 250 seems to come back to his original position). In sum, just as wisdom gained from hearing the teachings of a Buddha and wholehearted dedication to their practice through the wise decision to go forth is the foundation for the gradual path culminating in the destruction of the influxes, in the same way the wisdom of right view and its practical implementation through right intention set the course for the practice of the eightfold path and its eventual culmination in the right liberation of the tenfold path. Again, just as one’s understanding of the Buddha’s teachings deepens with progressive practice of the gradual path, so one’s right view deepens with progressive practice of the eightfold path.

96 See, e.g., AN 9.20 at AN IV 394,15, where the *ditthisampanno* features in the place of the stream-enterer in a listing of recipients for gifts, followed by the once-returner, the non-returner, etc.