

The Second Absorption in Early Buddhist Discourse

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Abstract

Based on the historical-critical approach, the present paper offers a study of descriptions of the second absorption as reflected in the early Buddhist discourses.

Keywords : Absorption, early Buddhism, Meditation, Tranquillity

1. Introduction

Based on the historical-critical approach, the present paper offers a study of descriptions of the second absorption as reflected in the early Buddhist discourses found in the Pāli *Nikāyas* and their parallels, which for the most part are preserved in the Chinese *Āgamas*.¹ The questions explored are how far such descriptions envisage if, while being in the second absorption, insight into impermanence can be practiced, if sound can be heard, and if the bodily dimension of experience is still perceived.

2. The Second Absorption

In general, descriptions of the attainment of the four absorptions in the Pāli *Nikāyas* and the Chinese *Āgamas* are fairly similar.² For example, the description of the second absorption in the *Uddesavibhāṅga-sutta* closely corresponds to its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, a collection that with considerable probability stems from a Sarvāstivāda

* I am indebted to Shaila Catherine, bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā, and Synchen Shi for commenting on a draft version of this article.

¹ Needless to say, such descriptions could be descriptive or prescriptive. Thus my discussion is only concerned with ascertaining the implications of the indications given in the early discourses, whatever may have been the sources that informed these indications.

² For a comparative survey of absorption descriptions cf. Meisig 1990.

transmission lineage.³ The description in the *Uddesavibhaṅga-sutta* reads as follows:

With the calming of application (*vitakka*) and its sustaining (*vicāra*), with internal stillness and mental unification, one dwells having accomplished the second absorption, which is without application and without its sustaining, and with joy (*pīti*) and happiness born of concentration.⁴

Here is the corresponding passage from its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel:

Having calmed [directed] awareness and [sustained] contemplation, [with] internal stillness and mental unification, one dwells having attained and accomplished the second absorption, which is without [directed] awareness and without [sustained] contemplation, and with joy and happiness born of concentration.⁵

In these descriptions “internal stillness” renders the expression *ajjhataṃ sampasādanaṃ* and its Chinese counterpart 內靜. The term *pasāda* here conveys as a central aspect of the second absorption a condition of inner stillness. Due to leaving behind *vitakka/vitarka* and *vicāra*, the mind immersed in the second absorption has reached an

³ The general consensus by scholars on the school affiliation of the *Madhyama-āgama* has been called into question by Chung and Fukita 2011: 13–34, Chung 2015 and 2016; for critical replies cf. Anālayo 2012: 516–521 and Dhammadinnā and Anālayo 2016.

⁴ MN 138 at MN III 226,16 to 226,19.

⁵ MĀ 164 at T I 695a26 to 695a28.

inner stillness that no longer needs the support of these two mental factors.

The choice of translation terminology like “awareness” (覺) and “contemplation” (觀) in the above *Madhyama-āgama* passage for the two factors of the first absorption to be overcome supports an understanding of the corresponding terms *vitakka/vitarka* and *vicāra* as having a different function in the present context than mere ordinary thinking and pondering.⁶ Instead, they appear to refer to a directing of the mind towards a theme or object of meditation and the sustaining of the mind in this condition. With the second absorption, however, even such directing and sustaining is no longer required.

Another qualification of the second absorption indicates that at this juncture of practice the mind has reached a noble type of silence.⁷ Since upon attaining the first absorption speech has already ceased,⁸ the reference to silence here is clearly not meant in a literal sense. Instead, the idea of noble silence would reflect the function of *vitarka* and *vicāra* as verbal formations.⁹ These mental factors are required for being able to speak. In the context of the first absorption, however, the same two mental factors are employed in a way that does not involve breaking into speech, but only a directing of the mind and sustaining it

⁶ Anālayo 2013; cf. also Cousins 1992: 139, who relates *vitarka* to “the activity of bringing different objects into firm focus before the mind’s eye – be those objects thoughts or mental pictures.” Shankman 2008: 40 points out that *vitarka* and *vicāra* as qualities of the first absorption “should never be understood as thinking or musing in the ordinary sense.” The position that these two factors of absorption involve the presence of conceptual thought, however, has been taken by Griffiths 1983: 60, Stuart-Fox 1989: 82, Bucknell 1993: 397, and Brasington 2015: 98.

⁷ SN 21.1 at SN II 273,15 and its parallel SĀ 501 at T II 132a20.

⁸ SN 36.11 at SN IV 217,5 and its parallel SĀ 474 at T II 121b2.

⁹ SĀ 568 at T II 150a24 and its parallel SN 41.6 at SN IV 293,15.

there. When even these rather subtle manifestations of *vitarka* and *vicāra* cease, the mind has become totally silent within.

Notably, the *Uddesavibhaṅga-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel agree in pointing out the danger in becoming attached to the experience of the second absorption.¹⁰ This happens when a practitioner develops attachment to the sublime pleasure experienced when being in the second absorption.¹¹ The warning sounded in this way reflects a recurrent caution expressed in the early discourses in regard to absorption experience. Although these are often presented as crucial for progress on the path to full awakening, at the same time the possibility of getting stuck in them is also a recurrent theme.

A discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* and its *Samyukta-āgama* parallel illustrate the potential drawback of deep concentration practices with the example of taking hold of gum with one's hand, whereupon the gum sticks to the hands.¹² Of a similarly sticky nature can be attachment to the pleasures of deep concentration, preventing the practitioner from progressing towards the cessation of all attachment that early Buddhist thought considers the supreme goal of practice.

The same warning recurs in a discourse in the *Majjhima-nikāya* and its *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel, which describe different accomplishments that fall short of being the final goal, such as material gains, fame, moral conduct, or becoming accomplished in concentration. To mistake deep concentration for the final goal is according to these

¹⁰ MN 138 at MN III 226,22 points out that due to attachment to the pleasure experienced the mind gets stuck internally, MĀ 164 at T I 695a28 indicates that due to such attachment the mind will not become internally settled; cf. in more detail Anālayo 2011: 788 note 152.

¹¹ For a translation and discussion of the simile illustrating the blissful condition of a mind that is immersed in the second absorption cf. Anālayo 2014b: 35f.

¹² AN 4.178 at AN II 165,23 and its parallel SĀ 492 at T II 128b5.

discourses comparable to someone in search of heartwood who takes the inner bark or the roots of a tree, believing to have found heartwood.¹³

These indications make it clear that the attainment of absorption, with all the undeniable substantial benefits it offers for progress towards awakening, should from an early Buddhist perspective be made the object of insightful contemplation in order to avoid getting stuck due to attachment.

3. The Second Absorption and Insight

How to cultivate insight in relation to the second absorption can be seen in the *Mahāmālunkya-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel. The two discourses take their respective presentations through the four absorptions and the three immaterial attainments, each time indicating what one should do in case the insight contemplation in regard to one of these attainments should not have been successful in bringing about the destruction of the influxes.¹⁴ The *Mahāmālunkya-sutta* describes the case of the second absorption in the following manner:

With the calming of application (*vitakka*) and its sustaining (*vicāra*), with internal stillness and mental unification, one dwells having accomplished the second absorption, which is without application and without its sustaining, and with joy and happiness born of concentration.

¹³ MN 29 at MN I 194,25 and its parallel EĀ 43.4 at T II 759b26.

¹⁴ Cf. in more detail Anālayo 2011: 357f.

Whatever there is therein — [be it] pertaining to form, pertaining to feeling, pertaining to perception, pertaining to formations, pertaining to consciousness — one contemplates those states as impermanent, *dukkha*, a disease, a tumour, a dart, a calamity, an affliction, alien, disintegrating, empty, and not self; and one turns the mind away from those states.

Having turned the mind away from those states, one inclines the mind towards the deathless element: ‘This is peaceful, this is sublime, namely the calming of all constructions (*sankhāra*), the letting go of all supports (*upadhi*), the extinguishing of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nirvāṇa.’ Being established on that, one attains the destruction of the influxes.¹⁵

Here is the relevant passage from the *Madhyama-āgama* version:

Having calmed [directed] awareness and [sustained] contemplation, with internal stillness and mental unification, one dwells having attained and accomplished the second absorption, which is without [directed] awareness and without [sustained] contemplation, and with joy and happiness born of concentration.

In dependence on this attainment, one contemplates the rise and fall of feelings. Having contemplated the rise and fall of feelings in dependence on this attainment and become established in it, one will certainly attain the destruction of the influxes (*āsava*).¹⁶

In this way, the *Madhyama-āgama* version turns in particular to the impermanent nature of feelings. The *Majjhima-nikāya* discourse instead takes up all of the five and moreover encourages cultivating a

¹⁵ MN 64 at MN I 436,10 to 436,16.

¹⁶ MĀ 205 at T I 779c22 to 779c25.

variety of insight perspectives. In addition to impermanence, these also bring in the other two characteristics of *dukkha* and not self in several ways. Another noteworthy difference is that the *Mahāmālunkya-sutta* directly encourages inclining the mind towards Nirvāṇa.

The main point that emerges in common from the two versions is the need to contemplate the impermanent nature of absorption attainment. This raises the question in what way the impermanent nature of an absorption experience should be cultivated so as to safeguard against the potential drawbacks of deep concentration attainments. The above descriptions could in principle be read in two ways: Either one undertakes such contemplation while still being in the attainment, or else one does so retrospectively, after having emerged from it.

These alternative interpretations involve an implicit position on the nature of absorption. In the case of the second absorption, what does a state of mental “unification”, *ekodibhāva*, imply? Elsewhere in the Pāli discourses the qualification *ekodibhāva* refer to a deeply concentrated condition of the mind, capable of developing direct knowledge (*abhiññā*) or supernormal abilities (*iddhi*).¹⁷

¹⁷ Most occurrences of the qualification *ekodibhāva* in the four Pāli *Nikāyas* seem to be concerned with the second absorption. Two cases that offer further information are AN 3.100 at AN I 254,33, which relates a mental condition that is *ekodibhāvādhigato* to the ability to realize direct knowledge, and AN 6.70 at AN III 426,8, which describes a *samādhi* that is similarly specified as *ekodibhāvādhigato* as enabling the attainment of *iddhis*. Thus *ekodibhāva* seems to have a more restricted range of meaning than *cittekaggatā*, which in MN 43 at MN I 294,31 and MN 111 at MN III 25,15, as well as in MĀ 210 at T I 788c20 and D 4094 *ju* 8a2 or Q 5595 *tu* 8b8 (parallels to MN 44), qualifies a level of concentration already reached with the first absorption.

This differs from the usage of the similar term *ekaggatā*, which for want of a better alternative I would also render as “unification”. Later texts like the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* explicitly consider *ekaggatā* to be one of the seven mental factors present in every mental state (*sabbacittasādhāraṇa*).¹⁸ In contrast, the comparable definition of “name”, *nāma*, in the discourses, which does not mention *ekaggatā*.¹⁹ So by the time of Abhidharma analysis some degree of mental unification was held to be a general characteristic of the mind.²⁰

This is not what *ekodibhāva* stands for in the early discourses. Here mental unification does not refer just to a momentary focus on an object present in the mind, but rather to a condition of the mind that is unified for a stretch of time. If this should indeed imply a mental condition of being “absorbed”, it would be difficult at the same time to contemplate rising and passing away. Contemplation of changing phenomena would not seem possible if inner stillness and mental unification are to be understood as implying a mental condition that is indeed continuously unified on a single object.

The relationship between absorption attainment and contemplation of impermanence can be further explored with the help of the *Anupada-sutta*, which describes Sāriputta cultivating insight in relation to a range of concentration attainments, from the first absorption

¹⁸ Abhidh-s 2.2; Bodhi 1993: 80 explains that this intends “the unification of the mind on its object.”

¹⁹ MN 9 at MN I 53,11 defines *nāma* as covering feeling, perception, volition, contact, and attention (for similar listings in other traditions cf. Anālayo 2011: 70 note 220). The *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* list of universal factors adds to these five the two factors of the life faculty and *ekaggatā*.

²⁰ Cf. Dhs 9,8.

all the way up to the attainment of cessation.²¹ This discourse has regularly been quoted in support of the ability to contemplate the impermanent nature of the mental constituents of an absorption while being in the actual attainment.²²

The reason why the *Anupada-sutta* takes such a prominent role in relation to the topic of insight and absorption could be related to the

²¹ MN 111 at MN III 25,9 introduces the whole exposition with the Buddha indicating that during the period of a fortnight Sāriputta practiced *vipassanā* in this way.

²² Examples are, e.g., Crangle 1994: 238, who supports his assessment that “wisdom is applied from within *jhāna*” by referring in his note 150 to the insight passage in the *Anupada-sutta* as discussed by Schmithausen 1981: 231 note 117, whose position to my mind reads considerably more cautious in this respect than Crangle seems to think. In an article dedicated to the question if one needs to emerge from absorption in order to cultivate insight, Gunaratana 2007: 47 repeatedly refers to the *Anupada-sutta*, explaining that according to this discourse “Sāriputta knew the arising, presence and passing away of all mental states from the first *Jhāna* up through the base of nothingness.” He adds, 2007: 60, that “Sāriputta knew them when they were present, when they arose and when they disappeared. He was fully mindful of it when any mental state was present. He was completely aware while he was going through these *Jhānic* states.” Gunaratana 2007: 67f concludes that “Ven. Sāriputta not only saw the mental factors of each *Jhāna* in turn, he did it without leaving the *Jhānic* state.” Similarly, Shankman 2008: 85 comments that, according to this discourse, it seems that “Sāriputta was able to recognize, investigate, and develop insight into each of the *jhānas* and the first three *āruppas* while still in the particular meditative state.” He then concludes, 2008: 101f, that from the early discourses to the commentarial tradition “the understanding of *jhāna* evolved from being a state of undistracted awareness and profound insight into the nature of changing phenomena to states of extreme tranquillity in which the mind is utterly engrossed in the mental qualities of the *jhāna* itself.” Thus, according to his assessment, “*jhāna* in the suttas is a state of heightened mindfulness and awareness of an ever-changing stream of experiences.”

formulation the discourse uses when describing Sāriputta's cultivation of insight in relation to the attainment of neither-perception-nor-non-perception and in relation to the attainment of cessation. Here the discourse speaks of having emerged from the attainment and of contemplating those factors that are past, have ceased, and changed.²³ Since these specifications are not used in relation to the four absorptions and the three lower immaterial spheres, this can easily give the impression that these are not concerned with factors that are past and have ceased, but rather with factors that are present.

Now the presentation in the *Anupada-sutta*, a discourse without a known parallel in the discourse collections of other traditions, is not without problems. The description of the mental factor analysis in the *Anupada-sutta* shows signs of later expansion in line with the evolving Abhidharma thought.²⁴ Nevertheless, in what follows I will take a closer look at the *Anupada-sutta* as it is to see if the discourse, in the way it has come down in the Theravāda tradition, does indicate that insight into impermanence is to be practiced while the practitioner is immersed in an absorption. Here is the description of the attainment of the second absorption and of its insightful contemplation by Sāriputta:

With the calming of application (*vitakka*) and its sustaining (*vicāra*), with internal stillness and mental unification, he dwelled having accomplished the second absorption, which is without application and without its sustaining, and with joy and happiness

²³ MN 111 at MN III 28,17+28: *dharmā atūā niruddhā vipariṇatā*.

²⁴ The expansion appears to involve the following part of the list of mental factors: “contact, feeling, perception, volition, mind, desire, determination, energy, mindfulness, equipoise, attention”; for a more detailed discussion cf. Anālayo 2014a: 100–110.

born of concentration.

The states that are in the second absorption, these states were determined by him one by one: internal stillness, joy, happiness, mental unification, contact, feeling, perception, volition, mind,²⁵ desire, determination, energy, mindfulness, equipoise, attention. Known these states arose, known they remained, known they disappeared.

He understood thus: ‘Indeed, in this way these states, which have not been, come into being; having been, they disappear.’ Not being in favour of or against these states, he dwelled being independent, without being bound to them, being freed from them, being released from them, with a mind that is without confines. He understood: ‘There is an escape beyond this.’²⁶

According to the above description of Sāriputta’s practice in the *Anupada-sutta*, “known these states arose, known they remained, known they disappeared”, *viditā uppajjanti, viditā upaṭṭhahanti, viditā abbattham gacchanti*. This provides a significant indication for a proper appreciation of the discourse, which clearly depicts a mode of contemplation where Sāriputta is aware of these states arising and, after they have remained for a while, he is also aware when they disappear. To do this while being in an absorption is impossible, because the very presence of these states is required for there to be an

²⁵ The Siamese edition (S^c) instead speaks of “consciousness”.

²⁶ MN 111 at MN III 25,26 to 26,11.

absorption in the first place and for it to continue being a state of absorption.²⁷

The formulation used in the discourse makes it clear that the passage does not intend to refer to the momentary change of mental factors. The *Anupada-sutta* clearly specifies that Sāriputta observes the arising of these mental factors who “have not been, come into being”, *ahutvā sambhonti*, and he contemplates their disappearance when “having been, they disappear”, *hutvā paṭiventī*.²⁸ Needless to say, the notion of momentariness prevalent in the commentaries, according to which phenomena pass away right on the spot every moment, is a late development in Buddhist thought.²⁹ It thus can safely be set aside as not standing at the background of the description in the above discourse.

So when these states have not yet come into being or disappear, a practitioner inevitably is not yet or no longer in the absorption, simply because the absorption lasts only as long as all of the mental factors that characterize it are fully present. Therefore to observe the arising of these mental factors and their disappearance could only happen before absorption is attained or after the attainment has come to an end.

The fact that in the case of the attainments of neither-perception-nor-non-perception and of cessation the *Anupada-sutta* speaks of emerging from the respective attainments and contemplating mental

²⁷ As already pointed out by Vetter 1988: 69, “it is certainly not possible to observe, as is stated in the text, the disappearance of these qualities in any of these states [i.e. the absorptions], because they are constituted by these qualities.”

²⁸ The PTS edition (E⁶) uses *paṭivedenti* instead of *paṭiventī*.

²⁹ According to von Rospatt 1995: 15–28, the doctrine of momentariness manifests fully only after the closure of the canonical Abhidharma collections.

factors that are past, have ceased, and changed, would then be related to the particular nature of these two attainments. Here either perception has been subdued to the extent that it is no longer possible to cognize or else the mind has come to cease.³⁰ Therefore there is no continuity of perceptual awareness from before the time one entered these attainments to emergence in the way this would be possible with the absorptions and the other immaterial attainments. In the case of attaining neither-perception-nor-non-perception or cessation, practitioners could only know that at some time in the past they entered and that by now they have emerged.

The same is not the case for the four absorptions and the lower three immaterial attainments, where practitioners can and in fact should indeed be aware of the condition of the mind during actual attainment. But such awareness would be concerned with a stable condition of the mind, a stability of continuously knowing the meditation object. The coming into being of that mental condition and its disappearance, in contrast, can only be contemplated when one is not yet or no longer in the actual attainment.

This in turn shows that the *Anupada-sutta*'s description does not depict insight into impermanence being practiced while a practitioner is immersed in the second absorption.³¹ Instead, the presentation in

³⁰ In these two cases, MN 111 at MN III 28,16+27 in fact no longer lists any mental factors, unlike the cases of the four absorptions and the lower three immaterial attainments, where the discourse each time lists the mental factors of which Sāriputta was aware.

³¹ This does not imply that from the viewpoint of the early discourses the second absorption has no insight potential, quite to the contrary. But as far as this particular textual corpus is concerned, the cultivation of insight while being in the actual attainment could only take place with a stable object, not by contemplating changing phenomena. In addition, the very experience of profound joy and happiness while immersed in the second absorption would also have considerable potential to reduce the attraction

this discourse supports a reading according to which contemplation of the impermanent nature of the mental constituents of the second absorption takes place before or else on emerging from its attainment, by way of retrospection and comparison of the stable mental condition while being in the attainment with the present mental state and with what happened before entering absorption.³²

4. The Second Absorption and Sound

The foregoing suggests that the qualification of the second absorption as being a condition of mental unification (*cetaso ekodibhāva*) should be taken literally, in the sense that from the viewpoint of the early discourses the mind of a practitioner who has fully entered its attainment will indeed be continuously unified in deep concentration. It is in this sense that the condition of the second absorption would qualify as a noble type of silence, a silence where not only thoughts, but also the mental activity responsible for formulating thoughts has become still. The reference to a noble type of silence brings up the related question of whether one who has entered the second absorption

of sensuality and thus to make a substantial contribution to the path to liberation. A particularly powerful support for this path could be the cultivation of the *brahmavihāras*; for a discussion of their relation to insight cf. Anālayo 2015a and 2015b.

³² Ajahn Brahm 2006: 178 concludes that “one cannot gain deep insight while experiencing jhāna. This is because the jhāna states are too still for the mental activity of contemplation to occur ... after emerging from a jhāna ... it is then that deep insight is possible.”

will be able to hear sound,³³ a question that has raised discussions already during the period of Buddhist exegetical activity.³⁴

The possibility to be clearly aware while in a deep state of absorption, yet be impervious to any sound, finds exemplification in an episode reported in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and its parallels. In the episode in question the Buddha describes a former occasion when he had been in deep meditation while a terrible storm was raging. The parallels agree that the Buddha explicitly specified that he was fully awake, yet he did not hear anything.³⁵

A story recorded in a range of *Vinayas* at first sight appears to provide a different perspective, as here Mahāmoggallāna claims to have heard the sound of elephants while being in a deep level of concentration corresponding to the fourth absorption or the immaterial attainments.³⁶ Other monks thereupon think that he has committed a

³³ In what follows my discussion of the possibility of “hearing sound” intends the mental processing of externally created sound waves in such a way that these are understood for what they are. The question at stake is thus whether a mind immersed in the second absorption can at the same time recognize, for example, the sound of a bell being rung for being the sound of a bell.

³⁴ See the paper by Dessein in this volume.

³⁵ DN 16 at DN II 132,12, Waldschmidt 1951: 276,8 (§28.36), DĀ 2 at T I 19b2, T 5 at T I 168b18, T 6 at T I 184a1, and T 7 at T I 198a29.

³⁶ According to Ṭhānissaro 2012: 227: “as for the assertion that a person in jhāna cannot hear sounds, this point is clearly disproven by an incident in the ... discussion of Parājika 4 in the Vinaya. There, Ven. Moggallāna states that he can hear sounds when entering the formless attainments. A group of monks object to his statement, convinced that he is making a false claim ... so they report his statement to the Buddha. The Buddha's reply: Moggallāna's experience of those attainments was not pure; however, that impurity was not enough to make the statement false. He actually was experiencing the formless attainments.”

breach of the *pārājika* rule regarding the making of false claims to have reached a higher attainment, referred to as *uttarimanussadhamma*.³⁷ When the matter is brought before the Buddha, however, he exonerates Mahāmoggallāna.

In agreement with the Theravāda version, the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* reports the Buddha explaining that Mahāmoggallāna's attainment had been "impure".³⁸ According to the Theravāda commentarial tradition, the expression "impure" here means that he had not properly purified his mind from the obstructions to concentration. Being seated in the fourth absorption, he heard sound when having momentarily lost the absorption and then thought he had heard them while being in the attainment.³⁹

The commentarial explanation receives support from other *Vinayas* that cover the same event. The Mahāsāṅghika *Vinaya* reports the Buddha explaining that Mahāmoggallāna did not properly understand the characteristics of emerging and entering (absorption). It was when he had emerged from the concentration that the hearing occurred; he did not hear while being in the concentration attainment.⁴⁰ According to the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, the Buddha clarified that Mahāmoggallāna had quickly emerged and then quickly re-entered (the absorption). Even though he had emerged from the concentration, he thought to have remained in the concentration.⁴¹ The

³⁷ On the term *uttarimanussadhamma* cf. Anālayo 2008.

³⁸ Vin III 109,12: *aparissuddho* and T 1428 at T XXII 985a3: 不清淨; in what follows my study has benefited from the discussion of this event by Synchen 2010.

³⁹ Sp II 514,1: *samādhiparipanthike dhamme na suṭṭhu parisodhetvā ... catutthajjhānaṃ appetvā nisinno, jhānaṅgehi uṭṭhāya nāgānaṃ saddaṃ sutvā, antosamāpattiyā assosin ti evaṃ saññī ahoṣi.*

⁴⁰ T 1425 at T XXII 466a6: 不善知出入相, 出定聞, 非入定聞.

⁴¹ T 1442 at T XXIII 680b8: 速出, 速入, 雖是出定, 謂在定中.

Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya* has such an indication already as part of its actual report of what happened. According to this report, he well took hold of the characteristic of entering concentration, but not of the characteristic of emerging from it. He actually had emerged from the concentration when hearing the sound of elephants. Having heard it, he had then quickly entered the concentration again.⁴²

The circumstance that the other monks thought Mahāmoggallāna had made a false claim to attainment shows that for them it was self-evident that one cannot hear sound and at the same time be in deep absorption. Thus the Mahāmoggallāna incident in the different *Vinayas* does not imply that, from the perspective of these texts, one can hear sound when being actually immersed in the fourth absorption or one of the immaterial attainments. It does imply, however, that they envisaged the possibility of mistaking a condition for being absorption, even when this condition actually falls short of being the full attainment, properly speaking.

The inability to hear sound appears to apply also to lower levels of absorption, according to a discourse in the *Anguttara-nikāya* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel. The narration that precedes the actual exposition in these discourses revolves around some senior disciples who considered noise to be an obstacle to entering deep concentration. The Buddha confirms that this is indeed the case and then elaborates by presenting a series of obstacles in terms of their being “thorns”.⁴³ The part relevant for the present topic reads as follows:

⁴² T 1435 at T XXIII 440c22: 善取入定相, 不善取出定相, 從三昧起, 聞薩卑尼池岸上大象聲, 聞已, 還疾入三昧, a description the Buddha repeats when explaining to the monks what had happened at T XXIII 441a4.

⁴³ The thorns listed in the two versions before coming to the four absorptions differ. MĀ 84 at T I 561a4 lists breaches of morality as a thorn to maintaining morality; bodily adornments as a thorn to guarding the senses;

Sound is a thorn for one entering the first absorption; [directed] awareness and [sustained] contemplation is a thorn for one entering the second absorption; joy is a thorn for one entering the third absorption.⁴⁴

The presentation in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* agrees closely:

Sound is a thorn to the first absorption; application (*vitakka*) and its sustaining (*vicāra*) is a thorn to the second absorption; joy is a thorn to the third absorption.⁴⁵

Given that for attaining the second absorption one needs to overcome *vitakka* and *vicāra*, and for attaining the third absorption it is necessary to leave behind joy, it seems that from the perspective of

the appearance of beauty as a thorn to cultivating the [notion] of the absence of beauty; anger as a thorn to cultivating loving kindness; the drinking of liquor as a thorn to abstaining from liquor; looking at the female form as a thorn to leading the celibate life (for a heterosexual male, of course). AN 10.72 at AN V 134,23 lists delight in socializing as a thorn to seclusion; pursuing the appearance of beauty as a thorn to cultivating the [notion] of the absence of beauty; going to see shows as a thorn to guarding the senses; keeping company with females as a thorn to leading the celibate life. After the four absorptions, MĀ 84 continues with the four immaterial attainments and the attainment of cessation, and then concludes with lust, hatred, and delusions as thorns that an arahant has left behind. AN 10.72 does not cover the immaterial attainments, but only mentions cessation and the set of thorns an arahant has overcome: lust, hatred, and delusion. These differences give the impression as if an original exposition predominantly concerned with the thorns to absorption practice, this being the topic broached in the introductory narration, has been subsequently expanded by way of addition of other thorns.

⁴⁴ MĀ 84 at T I 561a7 to 561a9.

⁴⁵ AN 10.72 at AN V 134,26 to 135,2.

these texts proper attainment of the first absorption requires leaving behind the thorn of hearing sound.⁴⁶ A statement confirming the incompatibility of the first absorption with the hearing of sound can be found in the Chinese *Dīrgha-āgama*,⁴⁷ a collection probably transmitted by Dharmaguptaka reciters:⁴⁸

When one enters the first absorption, the thorn of sounds ceases.

A passage in the *Posadhavastu* of the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* also speaks of the thorn of sounds. Here this comes as part of a description of meditating monks who were unable to develop unification of the mind because of the thorn of sounds.⁴⁹ This further supports the

⁴⁶ Ajahn Brahm 2006: 273 note 9 concludes that “sound can disturb the first *jhāna*, but when one actually perceives the sound one is no longer in the *jhāna*.” Brasington 2015: 111f argues, however, that the reference to sound being a thorn for the first absorption, “far from confirming that you don’t hear in the first *jhāna*, it simply confirms the obvious that trying to meditate in a noisy environment is unlikely to lead to concentration deep enough to enter or sustain the first *jhāna*.” This argument seems to me to lack coherence. If the passage implies that sound is a thorn and thus an obstacle for entering or sustaining the first absorption, which indeed it does, it follows that one who is in the first absorption cannot at the same time be paying attention to hearing sound, precisely because that is an obstacle for entering or sustaining the first absorption. In sum, as already stated by Kuan 2012: 50, the statement in the discourse “implies that sound is not heard by one who attains the first *jhāna*.”

⁴⁷ DĀ 11 at T I 59a7, a statement made similarly in DĀ 10 at T I 56c29.

⁴⁸ Cf., e.g., Demiéville 1951: 252f, Brough 1962/2001: 50, Lü 1963: 242, Bareau 1966, Waldschmidt 1980: 136, Mayeda 1985: 97, Enomoto 1986: 25, Hirakawa 1987: 513, Schmithausen 1987: 318, Oberlies 2003: 44, Salomon 2007: 354 note 14, and Willemen 2008: 60.

⁴⁹ Hu-von Hinüber 1994: 264,3 (§6.4): *dhyāyinām kaṇṭakaśabdena cit-taikāgryam na labhante*; with the Tibetan counterpart in *ibid.* note 2: *bsam*

impression that suggests itself from the above-surveyed early discourses in the way these have been preserved by the Dharmaguptaka, Sarvāstivāda, and Theravāda reciter traditions. Judging from their presentation, with the actual attainment of the second absorption one would definitely no longer hear sound.

In practical terms this in turn would imply that one who hears sound would not at that very same time be fully immersed in the second absorption of the type described in the early discourses. This could be either because of having temporarily risen from the absorption, or else because of having mistaken a level of concentration bordering on absorption to be already the full attainment itself.⁵⁰

5. The Second Absorption and the Body

Another question in regard to the second absorption is how far one would still be aware of the body while being in the attainment. The discourses indicate that this would not be the case with the attainment of the immaterial spheres, whereby all relationship to forms, be these experienced physically or perceived mentally, has

gtan dag gi tsher ma ni sgra yin pas, sems rtse gcig pa nyid kyang mi thob pa'i skabs te.

⁵⁰ Catherine 2008: 156 explains that at times one may have an experience wherein “the jhanic factors are strongly established but ... it is not full absorption. To understand the quality of this phase, imagine yourself standing on the threshold of your house. You are looking inside through the open front door, but you have not yet stepped inside. You are looking inward, but you can still feel the outside temperature. This phase marks a natural transition; I would not call it jhana until a deeper immersion has occurred. When conditions for absorption do occur, the experience is like entering the house and closing the door behind.”

been left behind. This much is implicit in the standard reference describing the attainment of the first immaterial sphere of infinite space, which requires leaving behind all perceptions of form and all experience of resistance.⁵¹

From the standard description of the four absorptions, however, it is not clear how far this applies to these as well.⁵² Now the description of the third absorption speaks of experiencing happiness *kāyena*, literally “with the body”.⁵³ Yet, this does not amount to an indication that in the third absorption the body is experienced, since the instrumental *kāyena* can act as an idiomatic expression that is best rendered as “with one’s whole being”.⁵⁴ The same expression occurs in relation to the immaterial attainments and to realizing the ultimate truth,⁵⁵ which a practitioner could of course not be experiencing “with the body”, but only with “the whole being”.

Whereas the standard description of the third absorption does not provide a definite indication that one who has attained absorption will still be able to be aware of the bodily dimension of experience, such an indication can be found in the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel. Both explicitly included the bodily di-

⁵¹ Cf., e.g., MN 64 at MN I 436,18 and its parallel MĀ 205 at T I 780a7.

⁵² According to SĀ 559 at T II 146c6, already with the first absorption sensory objects will no longer be experienced. The parallel AN 9.37 at AN IV 427,13, however, makes such a statement only for the immaterial attainments.

⁵³ Cf., e.g., MN 138 at MN III 226,24: *sukhañ ca kāyena paṭisaṃvedeti*, which has its counterpart in the expression 身覺樂 in the parallel MĀ 164 at T I 695b1.

⁵⁴ Cf., e.g., Schmithausen 1981: 214 and 249 ad. note 50, Radich 2007: 263, Harvey 2009: 180 note 10, and Anālayo 2011: 379f note 203.

⁵⁵ Cf., e.g., MN 70 at MN I 477,26 (immaterial attainments) and MN I 480,9 (ultimate truth).

mension of the experience of absorption under the heading of “contemplation of the body”. The *Kāyagatāsati-sutta* offers the following description of the experience of the second absorption:

A monk drenches, steep, fills and pervades this body with the joy and happiness of concentration [of the second absorption], so that there is no part of the whole body that is not pervaded by joy and happiness of concentration ... in this way, monks, a monk cultivates mindfulness of the body.⁵⁶

Here is the corresponding passage on the second absorption in the *Madhyama-āgama* version:

Again, a monk cultivates mindfulness of the body: A monk completely drenches and pervades his body with joy and happiness born of concentration [experienced in the second absorption], so that there is no part within his body that is not pervaded by joy and happiness born of concentration.⁵⁷

The above descriptions of the experience of the whole body being pervaded by joy and happiness born of concentration makes it clear that, from the viewpoint of the early discourses, the bodily dimension of experience does not have to be completely left behind in order to be able to enter absorption.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ MN 119 at MN III 93,19 to 93,23.

⁵⁷ MĀ 81 at T I 555b27 to b29.

⁵⁸ As already pointed out by Shankman 2008: 80, “the *Kāyagatāsati* (Mindfulness of the Body) Sutta ... states unambiguously that through attaining *jhāna* one develops mindfulness of the body ... the sutta states explicitly that body awareness is present in *jhāna*.” Shankman 2008: 81 adds that

This conclusion would also correspond to Buddhist cosmology, according to which mastery of the four absorptions leads to rebirth in the fine material realms,⁵⁹ whereas rebirth in the immaterial realms requires mastery of the immaterial spheres.⁶⁰ At the same time this indication regarding realms of rebirth conveys that the experience of the body can have different dimensions, ranging from coarse experiences in the sensual realms to considerably more refined experiences in the fine material realms. This in turn suggests that, in the case of absorption attainment, the way the body is experienced could be considerably more refined than during normal everyday life.

Given that the second absorption is qualified as a condition of mental unification (*ekodibhāva*), this then suggests that with such absorption attainment mind and body become complementary facets of a single and unified experience. Such a unified condition could still have a physical dimension, a refined sense of the presence of the body, even though this would be quite different from the experience of the body in everyday circumstances.

“while some sort of connection with or awareness of the body seems to be indicated in the suttas, the nature of this body awareness is less clear. Perhaps the suttas are referring to a subtler type of body awareness, not accessible through the normal sense apparatus.”

⁵⁹ For a correlation of the four *jhānas* with rebirth in the respective fine material realms cf., e.g., AN 4.123 at AN II 126,16 and MĀ 168 at T I 700c2.

⁶⁰ On rebirth in these three realms being related to involvement with *kāma*, *rūpa*, and *arūpa* respectively cf. AN 3.76 at AN I 223,26, which has a parallel in EĀ² 42 at T II 881c12. Now *rūpa* could in principle just be a visual object. Given that absorption attainment is not invariably based on a visual object (e.g. in the case of the *brahmavihāras*), however, the responsible factor for *jhāna* in general to correspond to the *rūpa-loka* would appear to be that the bodily dimension of experience has not yet been left behind with absorption, which only seems to happen definitely with the attainment of the immaterial spheres.

6. Conclusion

From the foregoing it seems to me that the viewpoint of the early discourses regarding the attainment of the second absorption can be characterised as follows:

- (1) the second absorption is not considered to be a mental condition during which one can contemplate the impermanent nature of its mental constituents,
- (2) the second absorption is not considered to be a mental condition during which one can hear sound,
- (3) the second absorption is not considered to be a mental condition during which awareness of the body must have completely disappeared.

Now the story of Mahāmoggallāna's hearing of sound provides a good example for understanding how different understandings of the nature of absorption could arise. In fact the dividing line between absorption and levels of concentration bordering on absorption is probably not always easily drawn in subjective experience. Just as with hearing sound, it would similarly be quite possible to contemplate the impermanent nature of different factors of the mind while being deeply concentrated, although strictly speaking from the viewpoint of the early discourse this would have to be reckoned a condition of having temporarily risen from full absorption attainment. Drawing a distinction between absorption proper and states bordering on absorption has some practical significance in so far as overestimating

the absorbed condition of the mind could lead to underestimating the potential of going deeper.⁶¹

In relation to the bodily dimension of the mental unification experienced with the second absorption, it would presumably depend on the meditator whether this is consciously experienced or else only the mental side of unification. Depending on the subjective stance that informs experience, opposing views regarding the actual condition of absorption attainment and its relation to bodily experience might be based on the same mental condition, viewed differently.

⁶¹ Catherine 2008: 155 advises that “should you choose to apply the term jhana liberally to states lightly saturated by jhanic factors, please don't presume such states represent the full potential of jhana. The early discourses ... describe very deeply secluded states.”

Abbreviations

Abhidh-s	<i>Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha</i>
AN	<i>Āṅguttara-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)
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Q	Peking edition
S ^e	Siamese edition
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
Sp	<i>Samantapāsādikā</i>
T	Taishō
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>

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