How Was Liberating Insight Related to the Development of the Four Jhānas in Early Buddhism? A New Perspective through an Interdisciplinary Approach

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The precise nature and status of the meditative states known as the four *jhāna*-s in early Buddhist soteriology is one of the most controversial subjects of early Buddhist studies. Amongst the most unclear issues connected with *jhāna* meditation is its relation to liberating insight. There appear to be fundamental discrepancies related to this issue in the *Suttapiṭaka* itself and in the later Buddhist meditative texts. These discrepancies appear to be sometimes difficult or even impossible to reconcile. In this paper I attempt to present a model of liberating insight as an intrinsic quality of the *jhāna* meditative state through an interdisciplinary approach relying on textual studies as well as on the new developments in the field of rapidly developing cognitive sciences. In the first part of the paper I analyze various concepts of liberating insight present in the *Suttapiṭaka* and the way they are connected to the development of the four *jhāna*-s. Then I point out some fundamental difficulties connected with the traditional Buddhist model of insight understood as a meditative method on its own, distinct from a *jhāna* meditative state. Later I attempt to propose an explanation of how and why the original concept of liberating insight as an intrinsic quality of *jhāna* states underwent a radical evolution, which has unfortunately led to both textual discrepancies and serious problems on a practical and psychological level. In order to provide a plausible model of liberating insight as an intrinsic aspect of a *jhāna* state, I will also refer to some important new developments from the field of cognitive sciences,

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> which provide a new way of explaining how human cognition works. In order to show that my model is possible on a practical level, I will also point out some meditative developments from the later history of Buddhism, where insight was seen in a way somewhat similar to what I am proposing.

The precise nature and status of *jhāna* meditation in early Buddhist soteriology remains one of the most controversial subjects of early Buddhist studies. Amongst the most unclear issues connected with *jhāna* meditation is its relation to liberating insight. The English word "insight" itself is most often used in modern times as a direct translation of the Pāli term *vipassanā* (cf. Bodhi, 2000: 330, 397), and occurs very frequently in meditative literature. In the *Suttapiṭaka* itself, however, it does not occur very frequently (cf. Rhys Davids & Stede, 2007: 627). It becomes much more prominent in Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*, which describes the vehicle of pure insight (*vipassanāyāna* – Vism XVIII.15), various insight knowledges (*vipassanāñāṇāni* – Vism XX.104-XXI.61), and the ten imperfections of insight (*dasa vipassanupakkilesā* – Vism XX.105). We find the term "liberating insight" in the work of many modern scholars who discuss early Buddhist meditation. Its meaning seems to be far wider than that of *vipassanā,* however. It features prominently in Lambert Schmithausen's influential paper *On Some Aspects of Descriptions or Theories of "Liberating Insight" and "Enlightenment" in Early Buddhism* (e.g. Schmithausen, 1981: 199, 204). As Schmithausen has remarked, he was not concerned with all the aspects of liberating insight, but mainly with the issue of its content (Schmithausen, 1981: 199). He focuses in particular on the insight with regard to the four noble truths, which is rendered in the *Suttapiṭaka* by such terms as:

> *abbhaññāsiṃ,* in the autobiographical version, but *jānāti* in the versions describing the Path of the Liberation of the Disciple. Afterwards, however, both versions refer to this comprehension by means of "*jānato ... passato"* (Schmithausen, 1981: 204).

The term "liberating insight" has also been frequently used by Johannes Bronkhorst in his seminal work *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India* (e.g. 1986: 96, 97, 102, 104). Bronkhorst (1986: 101) points out that the Buddhist texts often speak about "insight" (s. *prajnā/paññā*) as something immediately preceding liberation and that liberating insight takes place in the fourth *jhāna* (Bronkhorst, 1986: 97). He suggests that originally these passages

merely made a short reference to *paññā* (Bronkhorst, 1986: 102). Elsewhere (Bronkhorst, 1986: 114) he mentions three insights (*ñāṇa*-s). Therefore, we may conclude that when Bronkhorst uses the term "liberating insight" he does so with reference to the Pāli terms *paññā* or *ñāṇa.*

Tilmann Vetter is yet another scholar who refers to the concept of "liberating insight" in his book, *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism.* He makes an interesting distinction between *paññā,* which he labels as "discriminating insight" and *aññā,* which he considers the "right insight" or "liberating insight" (Vetter, 1988: 30, 32).

Alexander Wynne's *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation* is a more recent work dealing with the issue of "liberating insight" (e.g. Wynne, 2007: 120-121, 123-124). He has pointed out that it is possible to find a notion of non-intellectual liberating insight in the *Posālamāṇacapucchā* of the *Pārāyanavagga* (Sn 1112-15), which describes a meditator who sees (*vipassati*) after having grasped (*abhiññāya*) and thus becomes liberated[1] (cf. Wynne, 2007: 105). Later he (2007: 120) speaks of a more intellectual form of liberating insight (*paññā*). Wynne is probably the first scholar who has come up with a definition of what may be considered liberating insight:

> Instead of attaining a complete cessation of thought, some sort of mental activity must take place: a liberating cognition based on the practice of mindful awareness (Wynne, 2007: 105).

As we have seen, the term 'liberating insight' is used by modern scholars with reference to several Pāli terms (e.g. *paññā*, *aññā, ñāṇadassana*,[2] *abhiññā,*

[1] Sn 1115: ākiñcaññasambhavaṃ ñatvā, nandī saṃyojanaṃ iti. Evam etaṃ abhiññāya, tato tattha vipassati.

[2] It is noteworthy, that *ñāṇa-dassana* is a Jain term and in Jainism it functions as a dvandva compound with the meaning of the two achievements clearly differentiated. I am grateful to Richard Gombrich for pointing this out to me. This is probably an example of the Buddha's tendency to use terms which were already in circulation during his times but to provide them with a new meaning. It is also worth noticing that the term *paññā* appears in the *Suttapiṭaka* in connection with the pre-Buddhist teachers Āḷāra Kālāma and Rāma (e.g. MN 26/I 164-165), where it appears as a part of a fivefold set together with *saddhā, viriya, sati and samādhi*. This set of course also appears throughout the *Suttapiṭaka* as an element of the Buddha's own teaching and is known as the five *indriya*-s (e.g. SN 48.1/V 193). But does that mean that the term *paññā* was already in usage among the pre-Buddhist sects, perhaps even in the meaning of "liberating insight"? I believe that we cannot make such a conclusion, as we have no access to Āḷāra Kālāma's and Rāma's own formulations of their teachings.

vipassanā). It appears that it is not the presence of any term in itself, but the context in which it appears, that decides whether it refers to liberating insight or not.

Therefore, in this paper, when I refer to "liberating insight", I understand it as a cognitive act leading to seeing things as they really are and resulting in a transformation of a human being and feeling certain of one's own liberation. This tentative definition is general enough to leave room for some new interesting possibilities of understanding liberating insight.

There appear to exist fundamental discrepancies related to the issue of liberating insight in the *Suttapiṭaka* itself and in the later Buddhist meditative texts. These discrepancies appear to be sometimes difficult or even impossible to reconcile.

As Schmithausen has noted:

> There are already in the Sūtra Piṭaka various, even conflicting views or theories of Liberating Insight (and Enlightenment) (Schmithausen, 1981: 240).

We can indeed find many different concepts of liberating insight, and in many but not all of them it is closely connected to the development of the four *jhāna*-s.

The scheme of liberation in which liberating insight takes place in the fourth *jhāna* and is achieved by directing the mind towards the destruction of the effluents (*āsava*) has already been given much attention by scholars. It consists of insight into the four noble truths, and later the same fourfold model is applied to the *āsava*-s. To recapitulate: the consensus is that this complicated scheme cannot be accepted as representing the original account of enlightenment (Schmithausen, 1981: 205). The knowledge of the four noble truths, which probably in itself is pretty authentic, appears to have no place in this context. Schmithausen (1981: 208) has noted the psychological implausibility of insight into the four noble truths bringing an end to desire. Bronkhorst has on the other hand stated that the four noble truths are useful knowledge for someone who is about to enter upon the path leading to liberation, but are long overdue for someone at the end of the road:

> We observed that knowledge of the four Noble Truths must come at the beginning of the path leading to 'the cessation of suffering.' […] They constitute what an aspirant must know before he can actually go the path and be liberated (Bronkhorst, 1986: 99).

Bronkhorst's view harmonizes very well with the position that right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*), defined as the knowledge of the four noble truths, occupies in the scheme of the noble eightfold path. Right view is defined as the knowledge of the four noble truths in the *Vibhaṅga Sutta* (SN 45.8/V 8) contained in the *Magga Saṃyutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*. This *sutta* explicitly states that right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*) is the knowledge (*ñāṇa*) of suffering, of the origin of suffering, of the cessation of suffering and of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.[3] This is probably the most "classical" definition of right view.

I believe that there are good reasons to suppose that, at least at some point, the noble eightfold path may have represented a set of factors which had to be realized in a gradual way. The order in which these factors appear in the noble eightfold path would therefore correspond to the order in which they should be developed. The development of the first factors, such as *sammādiṭṭhi,* would be a necessary condition for the development of the factors that follow it in the set.

Support for such an interpretation may be found in some of the *sutta*s contained in the *Dasaka Nipāta* of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. Several *sutta*s (from AN 10.103/V 211 to AN 10.112/V 222) mention a set of ten factors, in which the elements of the noble eightfold path are followed by *sammāñāṇa* (right knowledge) and *sammāvimutti* (right release). The *Vijjā Sutta* (AN 10.105/V 214) appears to be particularly interesting in our case. It states that for one of right view (*sammādiṭṭhikassa*) there arises right intention (*sammāsaṅkappo*).[4] A relation of a similar kind is mentioned for each of the following factors, and the acquisition of the preceding factor appears to be a necessary (and almost in fact a sufficient) condition for the arising of the next factor. On the other hand, in the earlier part of the *sutta* we read that for one of wrong view (*micchādiṭṭhi-kassa*) there is also wrong intention (*micchāsaṅkappo*).[5] The presence of wrong intention causes in turn the arising of the other factors of the set in their "wrong version". If we are to take the message of this *sutta* seriously, it would imply that one simply cannot properly develop any of the later factors without having first developed right view. On the other hand, the acquisition of right view must be seen as a necessary condition for the further development of the factors that follow it in the set. If we accept the definition of right view contained in the

[3] SN 45.8/V 8: Katamā ca, bhikkhave, sammādiṭṭhi? Yaṃ kho, bhikkhave, dukkhe ñāṇaṃ, dukkhasamudaye ñāṇaṃ, dukkhanirodhe ñāṇaṃ, dukkhanirodhagāminiyā paṭipadāya ñāṇaṃ— ayaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, sammādiṭṭhi.

[4] AN 10.105/V 214: sammādiṭṭhikassa sammāsaṅkappo pahoti.

[5] AN 10.105/V 214: micchādiṭṭhikassa micchāsaṅkappo pahoti.

Vibhaṅga Sutta, then it lends support to Bronkhorst's statements that knowledge of the four noble truths must come at the beginning of the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

Schmithausen has pointed out a very important thing: that there is a difference between liberating insight and the awareness of liberation. The latter may be understood as feeling certain of being liberated from suffering and having reached a stage from which one does not fall back. The formulas describing this certitude of liberation seem to bear the marks of authenticity due to their simplicity.

There are probably two most noteworthy formulas of that type in the *Suttapiṭaka*. One of them is used both in an account of "gradual training" (e.g. DN 2/I 47) and in some accounts of the Buddha's own awakening (e.g. MN 85/ II 94). It has the following form:

> When liberated (*vimuttasmiṃ*), there arose a knowledge (*ñāṇaṃ ahosi*): "is liberated" (*vimuttamiti*). I directly knew (*abbhaññāsiṃ*): "birth is exhausted (*khīṇā jāti*), holy life has been lived (*vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ*), what ought to be done is done (*kataṃ karaṇīyaṃ*), there is nothing more for this state (*nāparaṃ itthattāya*)."[6]

The second may be found in the account of the Buddha's own awakening in the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (MN 26/I 160):

> There arose (*udapādi*) for me knowledge (*ñāṇa*) and vision (*dassana*)—unshakable is my release (*akuppā me vimutti*), this is the last birth (*ayam antimā jāti*), there is now no more further becoming (*natthi dāni punabbhavo*).[7]

Alexander Wynne has pointed out that this formula of awakening is unique, in that it contains a pericope that is used throughout the Canon only in connection with the Buddha's own awakening (Wynne, 2007: 20). Therefore Schmithausen (1981: 207) has noted that the final knowledge or awareness of being liberated seems to have been regarded as an essential element from the very beginning. In these formulas we find terms of interest such as *ñāṇa, dassana,* and an aorist of *abhijānāti*.

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[6] MN 85/II 094: vimuttasmiṃ vimuttam iti ñāṇaṃ ahosi. 'khīṇā jāti, vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ, kataṃ karaṇīyaṃ, nāparaṃ itthattāyā' ti abbhaññāsiṃ.

[7] MN 26/I 167: ñāṇañca pana me dassanaṃ udapādi — 'akuppā me vimutti, ayam antimā jāti, natthi dāni punabbhavo'ti.

While these formulas express the certitude of liberation and fulfilment, they say nothing at all about the content of liberating truth that was supposedly discovered. They seem to express the immediate results of awakening. Apparently, we cannot infer anything from these formulas about the nature of the cognitive act (i.e. liberating insight) which has resulted in feeling certain of one's own liberation. The fourfold scheme of insight into the *āsava-s* has been rightly identified as a result of later modifications by Schmithausen (1981: 205), Bronkhorst (1986: 98) and Wynne (2007: 124). This leaves the four *jhāna*-s, the destruction of the *āsava*-s (but not the fourfold scheme) and the certitude of liberation as relatively authentic elements.

In many of the *sutta*s, we find a different concept of liberating insight connected with the practice of the four *jhāna*-s. In these *sutta*s, the imperfections connected with the jhānic states become themselves the object of insight. For example, the *Jhāna Sutta* (AN 9.36/IV 422) of the *Aṅguttara Nikaya* suggests that while absorbed in any of the four *jhāna*-s, or the four *arūpa*-s (formless states) and *saññāvedayitanirodha* (cessation of perception and feeling) one regards (*samanupassati*) whatever element there is connected to any of the five *khandha*-s as impermanent (*aniccato*), painful (*dukkhato*), void (*suññato*), non-self (*anattato*), among other labels (*rogato gaṇḍato sallato aghato ābādhato parato palokato*) conveying the painful, dissatisfying nature of existence. As a result, he keeps his mind back from those phenomena (*dhammehi cittaṃ paṭivāreti*)[8] and "focuses" (*upasaṃharati*) on the deathless property (*amata dhātu*) in the following way:

> 'this is peaceful (*santaṃ*) this is excellent (*paṇītaṃ*), namely calming of all that is constructed/made up (*sabbasaṅkhārasamatho*), giving up of all clinging (*sabbūpadhipaṭinissaggo*), destruction of craving (*taṇhākkhayo*), dispassion (*virāgo*), cessation

[8] PTS version has *paṭivāpeti*, but it seems impossible to provide a plausible etymology of this term. I am indebted to Richard Gombrich for pointing this out to me. He has also suggested emending to *paṭivāreti*, which fits much better in this context. Interestingly, the Thai edition has *patiṭṭhāpeti* and the Cambodian one has *paṭipādeti*. This may perhaps suggest that some corruption of the original text occurred during the transmission so that there was uncertainty concerning the verb used in this fragment.

(*nirodho*) and *Nibbāna*.[9]

This in turn, will result either in the destruction of the *āsava*-s, or in becoming an *opapātika* (spontaneously reborn being) and achieving final release in that state. A similar concept is proposed in the *Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta* (MN 52/I 349) of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, although slightly different terms are being used. After the attainment of any of the four *jhāna*-s, the meditator discriminates/reflects (*paṭisañcikkhati*) that the attained *jhāna* is made up/constructed (*abhisankhata*), and intended/planned (*abhisañcetayita*). Then he understands (*pajānāti*) that such a state is impermanent and subject to cessation (*nirodhadhamma*).[10] The result of such insight is the same as in the aforementioned *Jhāna Sutta*. The same form of insight is then applied to any of the nine successive states culminating in *saññāvedayitanirodha,* and to the development of loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), equanimity (*upekhā*) and sympathetic joy (*muditā*) as well.

These two *sutta*s differ from the ones analyzed above in that they describe a different content of liberating insight and a different mechanism by which liberation occurs. Vision of *jhāna* as a dissatisfying, conditioned state is the content of liberating knowledge. This results in disenchantment and in turn in the destruction of the effluents.

It is easy to see that this concept of insight is based on a new vision of the four *jhāna*-s, now no longer considered the central teaching of the Buddha. The fourth *jhāna* is no longer seen as a special, purified state – in these *sutta*s it is just a stage between the third *jhāna* and the attainment of the base of infinite space (*ākāsānañcāyatana*). The concept of *opapātika* present in these *sutta*s also seems to represent a later stage of development which harmonizes well with the new vision of the *jhāna*-s. Apparently at this point final and irreversible liberation no longer seemed so certain, possibly due to the growing confusion about the nature of authentic Buddhist practice. The introduction of the concept of *opapātika* could shift the final liberation to a future existence, and thus provide meaning and hope to the life of a person who has failed to reach the ultimate goal of Buddhism here and now.

[9] AN 9:36/IV 423: so yad eva tattha hoti rūpagataṃ vedanāgataṃ saññāgataṃ saṅkhāragataṃ viññāṇagataṃ, te dhamme aniccato dukkhato rogato gaṇḍato sallato aghato ābādhato parato palokato suññato anattato samanupassati. so tehi dhammehi cittaṃ paṭivāpeti. so tehi dhammehi cittaṃ paṭivāpetvā amatāya dhātuyā cittaṃ upasaṃharati — ‘etaṃ santaṃ etaṃ paṇītaṃ yadidaṃ sabbasaṅkhārasamatho sabbūpadhipaṭinissaggo taṇhākkhayo virāgo nirodho nibbānan’ti.

[10] MN 52/I 350: ‘idampi paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ abhisaṅkhataṃ abhisañcetayitaṃ. yaṃ kho pana kiñci abhisaṅkhataṃ abhisañcetayitaṃ tad aniccaṃ nirodhadhamman’ti pajānāti.

Moreover, the method of insight described here seems to be implausible from a psychological point of view. The fact has been expressed by some Buddhist scholars, such as Henepola Gunaratana in *A Critical Analysis of the Jhānas in Theravāda Buddhist Meditation*:

> Insight cannot be practiced while absorbed in *jhāna*, since insight meditation requires investigation and observation, which are impossible when the mind is immersed in one-pointed absorption (Gunaratana 1985:151).

But if this is indeed the case, wouldn't it make liberating insight taking place in the fourth *jhāna* and leading to the destruction of the *āsava*-s equally implausible? One might ask then, why should we single out insight into the imperfections of the *jhāna*-s as a later development? There are a couple of issues to be considered here. If we analyze the passages in the form in which they have survived into modern times, then indeed fourfold insight into the four noble truths and the *āsava*-s taking place in the fourth *jhāna* is psychologically implausible. This is in fact yet another argument supporting the relative lateness of the passage in its present form, in addition to those of Schmithausen (1981, 207-208) or Bronkhorst (1986: 98). However, those scholars have also suggested that the present form of the account is probably a result of modification of a more original, authentic account. Bronkhorst has stated:

> Let us see what remains that can be considered authentic Buddhist meditation in view of the conclusions of the present chapter. The Four Dhyānas and the subsequent destruction of the intoxicants survive the present analysis easily (Bronkhorst, 1986: 88).

Schmithausen has commented that his issue:

> is not with the antiquity of the notion of *āsravas* as such […] Therefore it seems preferable to consider the whole "*āsrava*-layer" as genuine (Schmithausen, 1981: 206).

The second issue deserving consideration is that insight requiring investigation and observation, as mentioned by Gunaratana, may not be the only type of insight. Such a possibility has already been hinted at by Bronkhorst (1986: 104), who has stated that liberating insight acknowledged by the earliest Buddhist tradition remained unspecified, or even that it was in fact unspecifiable

(Bronkhorst, 1986: 102). Alexander Wynne has commented that the simpler, non-intellectual versions of liberating insight are likely to be earliest, though the content of liberating insight in the earliest teaching is unclear (Wynne, 2007: 124). The occurrence of such a type of insight in the fourth *jhāna* may therefore not be psychologically implausible at all. The insight mentioned in the *Jhāna Sutta* and in the *Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta* is however of the traditional type, so the issue of psychological implausibility still remains.

It seems valuable to compare such canonical concepts with the real life experience of modern meditators. That is because the later concepts present in the *sutta*s may often be a result of doctrinal evolution and polemics, and do not necessarily reflect authentic practices and experiences. Although we cannot be sure that the experiences of modern meditators have any connection with the ancient texts, it is nevertheless worthwhile considering whether they might offer a sort of a view from the inside. Such a view might help to explain some general features of Buddhist meditation, and so clarify the problems and puzzles which abound in the canonical sources. Ajahn Brahm, a modern meditation master, writes about *jhāna* in his *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond: A Meditator's Handbook*:

> From the moment of entering a *jhāna*, one will have no control. One will be unable to give orders as one normally does. One cannot even decide when to come out.[11] […] Thus in *jhāna* not only is there no sense of time but also no comprehension of what is going on (Brahm, 2006: 153).
>
> No decision making process is available. […] consciousness is nondual, making comprehension inaccessible […] (Brahm, 2006:155).

In other words, the concept of insight into the imperfections of the *jhāna*-s which is supposed to be practised while being at the same time absorbed in the very state of *jhāna* might not only be a later development, but might also be implausible on a psychological level. The *Samaṇamaṇḍikā Sutta* (MN 78/

[11] It is interesting to notice that the problem of emerging from a meditative state devoid of thought has already been touched upon in the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* (MN 44/I 299). The *sutta* deals with the emergence from the attainment of cessation of perception and feeling (*saññāvedayita-nirodhasamāpattiyā vuṭṭhānaṃ*). This text rejects the notion of any decision making process on part of the meditator, but bases the moment of emergence on the previous development of the mind.

II 22) states that the unskilful intentions (*akusalā saṅkappā*) cease without remainder (*aparisesā nirujjhanti*) in the first *jhāna* and the same happens to the good ones (*kusalā saṅkappā*) in the second *jhāna.*[12] It is not even possible to think about starting a different practice while one is absorbed in *jhāna*. If one were indeed to start such a practice, it would mean in fact that one was no longer in the state of *jhāna*.

The development of this new concept of insight is undoubtedly a result of the doctrinal evolution of the concept of the *jhāna*-s themselves. From some point they were no longer seen as an exclusively Buddhist form of meditation, and the fourth *jhāna* had lost its elevated status. But still there must have remained a belief that liberating insight must be connected with the state of *jhāna*, and in an attempt to somehow harmonize this old belief with the new vision of the jhānic states, the imperfections of the *jhāna*-s became an object of insight.

In the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa seems to have realized that such a concept is psychologically implausible. In the method of the vehicle of serenity (*samathayāna*), one has to emerge from *jhāna* and then make this state, now a thing of the past, the object of one's insight (Vism XVIII.3). Somehow the strength of concentration and the freedom from the hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) is supposed to be carried over to the state immediately following the *jhāna*. An even bigger problem is connected with the notion of practising insight with regard to a state that is not in the present, but only in the memory of the meditator, for this seems to represent a departure from the Buddhist postulate that insight should be concerned with things as they are (*yathābhūtaṃ*) in their directly known form.

Several *sutta*s speak about insight without any mention of the four *jhāna-s* at all. In these texts, the meditator reaches liberation as a result of seeing the various elements constituting his body/mind complex as impermanent (*aniccaṃ*), and therefore stressful (*dukkhaṃ*) and as a result non-self (*anattā*). That which is non-self should be seen (*daṭṭhabbaṃ*) by right understanding (*sammappaññāya*) just as it is (*yathābhūtaṃ*), thus: This is not mine (*n'etaṃ mama*), this I am not (*n'eso 'ham asmi*), this is not my self (*na m'eso attā*). This leads to weariness/

[12] MN 78/II 28: […]paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati; etth' ete akusalā saṅkappā aparisesā nirujjhanti.[…] dutiyaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati; etth' ete kusalā saṅkappā aparisesā nirujjhanti.

disenchantment (*nibbidā*), dispassion (*virāga*) and liberation (*vimutti*).[13] Several different Buddhist theoretical schemes of body/mind complex may be used in this context, such as those of the four or six elements (*dhātu – e.g.* the *Dhātuvibhaṅga Sutta* MN 140/III 237), sense bases (*āyatana* – e.g. the *Mahāsaḷ-āyatanika Sutta* MN 149/III 287), *khandha*-s (*Khandha Saṃyutta* - SN 22/III 1), or simply feelings (*vedanā – Vedanā Saṃyutta* SN 36/IV204).

On a practical level, many of these accounts do not seem to serve well either as instructions for practice or as verbalizations of the immediate experience representing the supposed content of the liberating insight. How is one supposed to directly know and see such elements as "eye" (*cakkhuṃ*) or "eye-consciousness" (*cakkhuviññāṇaṃ*) (SN 35.25/IV 16)? If we are to take Buddhist schemes of cognitive processes seriously, these elements would represent "subjective/ internal (*ajjhatta*) conditions (*paccaya*)" necessary for the arising of experience, but not the experience itself. It also seems that according to this mode of analysis we are not in fact aware of visual forms (*rūpa*) in themselves, as they are the "objective/external (*bahiddhā*) conditions" of our experience. It would seem that the elements which can be directly experienced start with anything that is felt (*vedayitaṃ*) as pleasant (*sukhaṃ*), unpleasant (*dukkhaṃ*) or neither unpleasant nor pleasant (*adukkhamasukhaṃ*) and which arises based on the contact of all the above mentioned subjective and objective conditions (*cakkhusamphassapaccayā uppajjati*).[14] The same can be said about the basic elements (*dhātu*), which either appear as a set consisting of four elements (*catudhātu - paṭhavī, āpo, tejo, vāyo* – SN 14.30/II 169) or six (the above-mentioned four plus *ākāsa* and *viññāna* - SN 18.19/II 248). We do not directly experience the qualities of fire, water, air or earth. We experience feelings resulting from the operations of our senses. To conceive our body and the processes that happen there as the four or six *dhātu*-s requires a good deal of deliberate, conceptual work. For example, as part of the contemplation of the earth element, one should actively think and imagine that spleen is a particular compound of the body, and being devoid of thought and rigid it must be considered *paṭhavī* (Vism XI.64). It may normally not be directly experienced, probably apart from the cases of medical conditions. Real-life vipassanā meditator Sunlun Shin Vinaya seems to be well aware of that practical problem:

[13] SN 35.1/IV 1: cakkhuṃ, bhikkhave, aniccaṃ. Yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ; yaṃ dukkhaṃ tad anattā. Yad anattā taṃ 'n' etaṃ mama, n' eso 'ham asmi, na m' eso attā'ti evam etaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya daṭṭhabbaṃ.

[14] SN 35.25/IV 16: yam p' idaṃ cakkhusamphassapaccayā uppajjati vedayitaṃ sukhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkhamasukhaṃ.

> They have to be approached through indirection, through the repetition by word of mouth of the essential characteristics and a forcing of understanding of their natures. This understanding normally takes place first in the realm of concepts.[…] If it were true that it is necessary to handle the processes with the gloves of concepts and thoughts, that processes can never be got at directly, then there can be no path to freedom and no liberating knowledge (Kornfield, 1996: 90, 92).

> Do not reflect that this is rupa and this nama. Do not consider that this is anicca, this dukkha and this anatta. All thinking, reflection and consideration are conceptual. They are not vipassana (Kornfield, 1996: 104-105).

Of course this statement does not constitute a conclusive argument in itself, but is nonetheless worth taking into consideration. There is also a second very serious psychological problem connected with insight meditation which is deliberately practised through the active applying of categories and active analysis. While it attempts to provide a clear view of the mind-body complex as it really is here and now, it fails to become aware that the very mental activity of performing insight -- understood as: "deliberate analysis", "applying categories", "maintaining active consciousness" -- is in itself an important mental process which constitutes an essential part of our very being/selfhood in the moment. Therefore these "mental" acts should probably themselves become the object of insight in order for it to be complete and all-embracing. That is because such mental states of performing active discursive insight would in fact be made up (*abhisankhata*), and intended/planned (*abhisañcetayita*), as the *Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta* suggests about the jhānic states. But this would create a sort of "vicious circle" of insight, and thus render the practice ineffective and in fact impossible.

Perhaps something else was however meant by the descriptions, such as the above mentioned one from the *Saḷāyatana Saṃyutta*. Perhaps it is simply a very specific way of saying that a meditator directly knows and sees his body (*kāya*) as it really is. Then one of the several theoretical schemes used to analyze the body into several components is applied, like that of *dhātu*-s*, āyatana*-s*, khandha*-s or simply feelings (*vedanā*). This might not necessarily mean, however, that if asked about the content of his experiences, the meditator would reply using these terms; he might even not know them,

and yet meditate correctly. In a similar way we could perhaps say that the meditator directly knows and sees protons, neutrons and electrons constituting his body as impermanent, painful and non-self. Isn't his body constituted by these elements? So if he really knows and sees his body as it really is, then according to this particular mode of speaking, he must directly know them as well. And yet they do not correspond to any elements of his direct experience which could be verbalized for the sake of report. He may in all probability not even know these concepts or even anything that directly corresponds to them. So although the accounts which combine insight with *jhāna* give no indication that they should not be taken rather literally, it could perhaps be argued that these formulas were neither instructions for practice, nor immediate verbalizations of direct experience. However, at some point they came to be seen exactly as such and formed the scriptural basis for the so called "analytic insight", undoubtedly due to the growing confusion about the true nature of Buddhist practice and of insight itself.

So we can see problems with concepts of insight knowledge and insight practice in themselves and with their connection to *jhāna* meditation on both the textual and the practical, psychological level. The psychological implausibility connected with these concepts may be an important hint suggesting that their very presence in the *sutta*s is in fact a result of doctrinal polemics, shifts and evolution and not of real life practice. Alexander Wynne has suggested in *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation* that at some point:

> The scheme of jhānas became a support for different versions of intellectual insight; meditation became the means for an increasingly elaborate set of mental gymnastics (Wynne, 2007: 124).

A strictly philological approach may not take us much further. Professor Johannes Bronkhorst has made a very important suggestion concerning this problem, during a brief e-mail correspondence I once had with him. He has suggested that even when by a purely philological approach we reach the conclusion that certain accounts describe real meditational events, we still have to make sense of them. This is a psychological problem, and we need a psychological theory to provide proper interpretations of these accounts.

Therefore let us now turn for help to modern cognitive science. If the original concept of liberating insight was indeed based on real life experience and thus

on actual human cognitive processes, the results of this dynamically developing discipline may shed some important light on our problem.

Liberating insight is supposed to be a special kind of understanding bringing transformative knowledge. But what is the real cognitive mechanism of insight? Where does it take place? In the stereotypical concept of Buddhist insight we find some implicit preconceptions which seem to be rooted in our ordinary, common sense way of thinking. Let's take for example this definition by Gunaratana:

> Insight meditation requires investigation and observation (Gunaratana, 1985: 151).

Or by Griffiths, from his paper: *Concentration or Insight: The Problematic of Theravāda Buddhist Meditation:*

> Wisdom is a type of […] discursive knowledge and vision. The means used to achieve this kind of conscious awareness is a continuous attempt to internalize the categories of Buddhist metaphysics (Griffiths, 1981: 613).

There is nothing particularly controversial or unique about these definitions, as they represent a fairly stereotypical approach to insight, quite popular in Buddhism. They are based on a common sense, widely accepted notion of "understanding" as a deliberately undertaken mental activity which takes place in a field of consciousness. This understanding results in obtaining declarative knowledge of explicit character – the liberating knowledge which is so problematic in the *sutta*s. This is common sense. However, what modern cognitive science tells us, is that the way in which we think, solve cognitive problems, come up with new ideas and make decisions goes very much against what is considered to be common sense. The widespread, common sense approach to these issues is often labeled as "folk psychology". According to folk psychology, higher level cognitive operations are performed in a controlled, willed way on the basis of consciousness. We have access to our higher cognitive operations, we are aware of them, we actively make them happen through the effort of our will. Although labeled "folk psychology", this approach has in fact been a prevalent trend also throughout the history of sophisticated Western thought, for example in Cartesian philosophy.

We can however see for ourselves the limitations of this model when it comes to explaining how we arrive at some new ideas and yes, insights. These are the well-known "eureka effects", "a-ha moments" – when we suddenly become aware of a new insight, without prior awareness of the process leading to its emergence. This has led people in the past centuries to often attribute them to some kind of divine inspiration. The explanation of this phenomenon and many more of our mental operations became possible with new developments in cognitive science fueled by research in neuroscience and in particular the concepts of: unconscious information processing, implicit learning and tacit knowledge. This unconscious is however, not the well-known Freudian psychoanalytic unconscious - it is the cognitive unconscious, first described by Kihlstrom in 1987. James S. Uleman sums up this concept in his introduction to the collective work entitled *The New Unconscious*:

> In early models, the unconscious referred to pre-attentive perceptual processes and latent memory traces, so that complex higher mental processes depended on awareness for their operation. In later models, complex processing did not require awareness of the information that was transformed, so much more complex unconscious cognitive processing occurs.
>
> He (Kihlstrom) concluded that "conscious awareness…is not necessary for complex psychological functioning" (Uleman, 2005: 5-6).

These new developments often seem to go strongly against the most basic common sense notions. In one of the chapters of the same book, Ap Dijksterhuis, Henk Aarts and Pamela K. Smith write:

> First of all and strictly speaking, conscious thought does not exist. Thought when defined as producing meaningful associative consciousness, happens unconsciously. One may be aware of some elements of the thought process or one may be aware of a product of a thought process, but one is not aware of thought itself (Dijksterhuis, Aarts, Smith, 2005: 81).
>
> Our senses can handle about 11 million bits per second.[…]The processing capacity of consciousness pales in comparison.[…] our consciousness can process 50 bits per second.[…]In other words,

> consciousness can only deal with a very small percentage of all incoming information. All the rest is processed without awareness. Let's be grateful that unconscious mechanisms help out whenever there is a real job to be done, such as thinking (Dijksterhuis, Aarts, Smith 2005: 82).

This information may be of value when we consider the potential mechanism of Buddhist insight. It was supposed to be concerned with the body (*kāya*), as it really is (*yathābhūtaṃ*), connected with the unaltered awareness of the sense-input. If our mental processing indeed works as the aforementioned cognitive scientists would like us to believe, then this shows the limitations of conscious awareness when it comes to interpreting sense data. Although Buddhist thought seems to be actively against the notion of a conscious self, its stereotypical concept of insight seems to rely on preconceptions of "folk psychology" which are criticized by modern cognitive science.

Now I would like to draw attention to some remarks by Professor Ran R. Hassin of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. They are of particular value to us, since they explicitly deal with the mechanism of cognitive insight.

> It seems that the processes that yield insights do not require conscious awareness. […]These findings seem to suggest that insights tend to pop up in awareness without prior conscious evidence for their formation. […] In a series of studies we further examined whether insights can occur not only in the absence of conscious awareness of the processes that lead to them, but also in absence of the conscious awareness of the insights themselves (Hassin, 2005: 204).

And indeed the occurrence of such insights was confirmed by the study.

> Implicit insights are unconscious in that (a) they can occur without awareness of the learned rules and (b) they can be manifested in behavior without awareness. In addition, implicit insights are unintentional in that they can occur when people do not intend for them to happen, and in that they can affect behavior without a corresponding intention (Hassin, 2005: 205).

I think it's quite obvious that the notion of implicit insight presented here should be of great interest to us, as it may provide a key to understanding how insight was supposed to operate in the early Buddhist context. We have already seen that it is the issue of the explicit content of liberating knowledge which is so problematic.

Johannes Bronkhorst has stated that:

> Prajñā referred to some unspecified and unspecifiable kind of insight (Bronkhorst, 1986: 102).
>
> We must conclude, that if the earliest Buddhist tradition acknowledged the existence of any liberating insight at all – and it possibly did – this insight remained unspecified (Bronkhorst, 1986: 104).

Likewise, Wynne (2007: 123):

> The content of liberating insight in the earliest teaching is unclear.

It therefore seems that the idea that implicit insights can occur without awareness of the learned rules could indeed make sense in the context of early Buddhism.

Even more important is that they can be manifested in behavior without awareness. Buddhist soteriology is interested in achieving a fundamental change in the human being, reaching to his very core. A change that results in a completely new way of functioning in the world. A crucial element of this new way of functioning is that it doesn't require conscious, sustained effort to be maintained – it happens spontaneously and effortlessly. Now the problem with explicit, conscious learning which results in the attainment of verbal knowledge, which in turn can later be declared, is that it usually doesn't produce permanent changes in our behavior, but on the contrary usually serves as a basis for conscious, deliberate, long-term decision making. If the results of insights can be manifested in behavior without awareness and if they can affect behavior without a corresponding intention, that all fits well with the spontaneous, effortless state of an *arahant*. The fact that insights are unintentional, in that they can occur when people do not intend them to happen, would also solve many interpretative problems, as there would be no need for performing any additional, deliberate, consciously willed insight practice in the state of *jhāna*, where such activities seem difficult to imagine.

Let us now briefly summarize the results of our foray into the field of cognitive science, which to some may appear surprising or perhaps even unwarranted. As we have seen, there are several very important problems with respect to the issue of liberating insight and its connection to the meditative states of the four *jhāna*-s in early Buddhism. Certainly this proved to be a huge interpretative problem for

the later generations of Buddhists, and as some modern scholars have pointed out, they attempted to solve this problem by introducing several concepts of theoretical, deliberately practised insight which result in explicit knowledge, for example, insight into the four noble truths. As we have seen however, applying such concepts has resulted in psychological implausibility and in severe discrepancies on the textual level. Schmithausen has stated that it seems reasonable to expect that liberating insight was a psychologically plausible process (Schmithausen, 1981: 208). Taking into account all that we have learned about this elusive liberating insight of early Buddhism, we should be looking for a psychological mechanism which does not have to be deliberately and consciously practised, so that it could be harmonized with a state such as the fourth *jhāna*, and which possesses unspecified and perhaps unspecifiable content (cf. Bronkhorst, 1986: 102, Wynne, 2007: 124). It need not necessarily produce any explicit knowledge as a direct result, but should still be cognitive in character and able to cause change in a human being. While the theories of "implicit insight" or "cognitive unconscious" are not yet completely developed in detail, and seem to have not been used so far with specific reference to Buddhist meditation, they provide a very promising perspective: a possible hint concerning the nature of the elusive liberating insight of early Buddhism.

Bronkhorst has recently made an interesting comment:

> The relevant claims in the early Buddhist texts (which we will consider in detail below) concern psychological states and processes that are unusual from a commonsensical point of view. They are not, however, in conflict with any established rules of natural science or psychology. […] The claims made in the early Buddhist texts may not agree with the way we think about ourselves and other human beings, but that may merely mean that we have to revise our thoughts about ourselves (Bronkhorst, 2012: 73-74).

If liberating insight was indeed a cognitive mechanism similar to that postulated by the modern cognitive scientists, then it would very much go against common sense or "folk psychology". This would make it easier for us to understand how the later Buddhists could become confused regarding such a supposedly essential element of their doctrine. This fact, coupled with the external influence of an environment which saw knowledge as liberating (cf. Bronkhorst, 1986: 104, Vetter, 1988: XXXII-XXXIII), would then lead to serious reinterpretations of the original doctrine.

But could the four *jhāna*-s in their original form be endowed with at least this kind of implicit insight? Wynne has suggested that the terms contained in the stock description of the *jhāna*-s may be perhaps connected with insight/ awareness, and not with the firm keeping of an object in the mind, as traditional interpretation would like to have it:

> Words expressing the inculcation of awareness e.g. *sati*, *sampajāna*, *upekkhā* are mistranslated or understood as particular factors of the meditative states.[…] They give the misleading impression that the third and fourth jhāna are heightened states of meditative awareness characterized by some sort of indescribable inner calm. But these terms have quite distinct meanings in the early Buddhist texts: they refer to a particular way of perceiving sense objects (Wynne, 2007:123).

This may not be in itself, however, a completely conclusive argument in our case, as the term such as *sati* can be interpreted as pertaining to a perfect way of concentrating on a meditative object, keeping it in mind. Such is in fact the interpretation of Ajahn Brahm:

> One's mindfulness is greatly increased to a level of sharpness that is truly incredible. One is immensely aware. Only mindfulness doesn't move. It is frozen (Brahm, 2006: 153).

The notion of intrinsic insight is not easily reconciled with the vision of the four *jhāna-s* as a yogic type of meditation practised by concentrating on single objects, leading to the shutting of the senses and to the stillness of the mind. Fortunately, however, there is a good deal of argument that point to the contrary.

In the *Indriyabhāvanā Sutta* (MN 152/III 298) we find a critique of meditative practice leading to the shutting down of the senses. The *sutta* suggests as the apex of their development a state described by the same terms as the third *jhāna*:

> If he wishes that (*sace ākaṅkhati*) — "by having avoided (*abhinivajjetvā*) both disagreeable/ objectionable (*paṭikūla*) and agreeable (*appaṭikūla*) let me dwell (*vihareyyaṃ*) equanimous (*upekkhako*) mindful (*sato*) and clearly comprehending

> (*sampajāno*)," he dwells there equanimous, mindful and clearly comprehending.[15]

The terms *upekkhako*, *sato*, and *sampajāno* are exactly the same as the ones used in the description of the third *jhāna*. The stock description of the fourth *jhāna* speaks of giving up (*pahāna*) of pleasure (*sukha*) and pain (*dukkha*), as well as of the earlier settling down (*atthaṅgama*) of *somanassadomanassā* (mental ease and mental pain). This may very well correspond to avoiding the agreeable and the disagreeable as described in the *Indriyabhāvanā Sutta*. This would mean, just as Wynne would like to have it, that at least the third and fourth *jhāna* were originally not meant to be states of sense-inactivity and mental stasis.

The *Mahātaṇhā-saṅkhaya Sutta* (MN 38/I 256) suggests that after the attainment of the fourth *jhāna* the meditator dwells with each of the six senses registering its respective objects, mindfulness of the body established/present (*upaṭṭhitakāyasati*), and with an immeasurable mind (*appamāṇacetaso*). He dwells having abandoned both compliance and opposition (*anurodhavirodhavippahīno*), and whatever feeling (*vedanaṃ*) he feels, he does not delight in it (*nābhinandati*), does not welcome it (*nābhivadati*), and remains not being bound to it (*nājjhosāya tiṭṭhati*).[16] It seems that this *sutta* describes the same state as the *Indriyabhāvanā Sutta*, just using different terms.

There is also a great deal of research by Bronkhorst (1986) showing the original four *jhāna*-s as radically different from the mainstream methods. Vetter suggests that the spontaneous *jhāna* of Early Buddhism became replaced with a more artificial one (Vetter, 1988: XXXVI). I have also attempted to provide some additional evidence and reconstruct this process of reinterpretation of the four jhānic states in my *Reexamining Jhāna: Towards a Critical Reconstruction of Early Buddhist Soteriology* (Polak, 2011).

If that is the case, insight could be indeed an intrinsic quality of the four *jhāna*-s, inherent in their very nature and method form their earliest phases, which

[15] MN 152/III 301: sace ākaṅkhati — 'paṭikūlañca appaṭikūlañca tadūbhayaṃ abhinivajjetvā upekkhako vihareyyaṃ sato sampajāno'ti, upekkhako tattha viharati sato sampajāno.

[16] MN 38/I 270: so cakkhunā rūpaṃ disvā piyarūpe rūpe na sārajjati, appiyarūpe rūpe na byāpajjati, upaṭṭhitakāyasati ca viharati appamāṇacetaso. Tañ ca cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti — yatth' assa te pāpakā akusalā dhammā aparisesā nirujjhanti. so evaṃ anurodhavirodhavippahīno yaṃ kiñci vedanaṃ vedeti, sukhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkhamasukhaṃ vā, so taṃ vedanaṃ nābhinandati nābhivadati nājjhosāya tiṭṭhati.

would increase its momentum with the progress of meditation, until reaching its apex in the state of the fourth *jhāna*. According to the *Kāyagatāsati Sutta* (MN 119/III 88) this apex would come about by having pervaded (*pharitvā*) the body (*kāya*) of the meditator by means of a bright, purified mind (*parisuddhena cetasā pariyodātena*).[17] This activity would be spontaneous, not requiring any deliberately undertaken conscious effort to understand or analyze it. Once the *citta* had been purified, it would spontaneously effectuate insight, provided it had the sense data to work with. Probably no separate conscious and willed activity was needed or even possible in the state of the fourth *jhāna*.

The *Cetanākaraṇīya Sutta* (AN 10.2/V 2) states that for one who is concentrated (*samāhitassa)* no intention ought to be made (*na cetanāya karaṇīyaṃ)*: "I know and see things as they really are" (‘*yathābhūtaṃ jānāmi passāmī’ti*).[18] It is a natural process that one should expect (*dhammatā esā*). Then just as naturally come weariness/disenchantment (*nibbidā*), dispassion (*virāgo*), cessation (*nirodho*) and liberation (*vimutti*).

When I presented the initial version of this paper at the IABS Conference in Vienna in 2014, Alexander Wynne pointed out to me yet another *sutta* which describes the spontaneous character of true insight: the *Sekha Sutta* (MN 53/I 353). It describes the disciple of the noble ones (*ariyasāvako*) who is endowed with virtue (*sīlasampanno hoti*), guards the doors of the sense faculties (*indriyesu guttadvāro hoti*), observes measure in eating food (*bhojane mattaññū hoti*), is devoted to wakefulness (*jāgariyaṃ anuyutto hoti*), attains the four *jhāna*-s at will (*nikāmalābhī*), without difficulty (*akicchalābhī*) and without trouble (*akasiralābhī*). Such a person is compared to a hen (*kukkuṭī*) whose eggs had been properly covered, warmed and incubated. There is no need for any wish to arise (*na evaṃ icchā uppajjeyya*), in order for her chicks to break

[17] MN 119/III 94: catutthaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati. so imam eva kāyaṃ parisuddhena cetasā pariyodātena pharitvā nisinno hoti; nāssa kiñci sabbāvato kāyassa parisuddhena cetasā pariyodātena apphuṭaṃ hoti.

[18] AN 10.2/V 2: samāhitassa, bhikkhave, na cetanāya karaṇīyaṃ — ‘yathābhūtaṃ jānāmi passāmī’ti. dhammatā esā, bhikkhave, yaṃ samāhito yathābhūtaṃ jānāti passati.

through the eggshells and be born safely.[19] Subsequently, having come to the purity of equanimity and mindfulness (*upekkhāsatipārisuddhiṃ āgamma*), as a result of the destruction of the effluents (*āsavānaṃ khayā*) he attains and abides in effluent-free (*anāsavaṃ*) liberation of the mind (*cetovimuttiṃ*) and liberation through understanding (*paññāvimuttiṃ*), which he has realized (*sacchikatvā*) himself (*sayaṃ*) by direct knowledge (*abhiññā*). This is however likened to a chick breaking out (*abhinibbhidā*) from an egg, so no volition or separate "practice" is needed for that.[20] And indeed, while all the preceding elements of the Buddhist path ending with the four *jhāna*-s are described as a matter of conduct (*idam pi 'ssa hoti caraṇasmiṃ*), the release from effluents is a matter of knowledge (*vijjā*). This would mean that it cannot be "performed" – it "happens" to oneself.

Such a type of insight would thus be implicit and unintentional, and not produce any immediate verbal liberating knowledge which could be declared. It would however produce profound changes in the cognition and functioning of an awakened person. Its first manifestation in declarable knowledge would be the certitude of its profound effects – the knowledge of liberation. In this way *jhāna* would prove to be a state with profound cognitive effects, thus justifying its name, as *jhāyati* can be rendered as meaning "thinks". It is however the type of thinking suggested by the modern cognitive sciences that we are dealing with here: occurring outside consciousness, having nothing to do with inner speech (that would be *vitakka*), but nonetheless solving cognitive problems and providing insights.

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[19] MN 53/I 356-357: yato kho, mahānāma, ariyasāvako evaṃ sīlasampanno hoti, evaṃ indriyesu guttadvāro hoti, evaṃ bhojane mattaññū hoti, evaṃ jāgariyaṃ anuyutto hoti, evaṃ sattahi saddhammehi samannāgato hoti, evaṃ catunnaṃ jhānānaṃ ābhicetasikānaṃ diṭṭhadhammasukhavihārānaṃ nikāmalābhī hoti akicchalābhī akasiralābhī, ayaṃ vuccati, mahānāma, ariyasāvako sekho pāṭipado apuccaṇḍatāya samāpanno, bhabbo abhinibbhidāya, bhabbo sambodhāya, bhabbo anuttarassa yogakkhemassa adhigamāya. seyyathāpi, mahānāma, kukkuṭiyā aṇḍāni aṭṭha vā dasa vā dvādasa vā tānāssu kukkuṭiyā sammā adhisayitāni sammā pariseditāni sammā paribhāvitāni, kiñcāpi tassā kukkuṭiyā na evaṃ icchā uppajjeyya — 'aho vat' ime kukkuṭapotakā pādanakhasikhāya vā mukhatuṇḍakena vā aṇḍakosaṃ padāletvā sotthinā abhinibbhijjeyyun 'ti, atha kho bhabbā va te kukkuṭapotakā pādanakhasikhāya vā mukhatuṇḍakena vā aṇḍakosaṃ padāletvā sotthinā abhinibbhijjituṃ.

[20] MN 53/I 357-358: sa kho so, mahānāma, ariyasāvako imaṃ yeva anuttaraṃ upekkhāsatipārisuddhiṃ āgamma āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ diṭṭhe va dhamme sayaṃ abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja viharati, ayam assa tatiyābhinibbhidā hoti kukkuṭacchāpakasseva aṇḍakosamhā.

We have arrived at a view of early Buddhist *jhāna* as a meditative practice endowed with insight, maintaining the sensitivity of the mind and the senses, and yet at the same time leading to altered states of consciousness free from verbal, discursive thought. But is such a form of meditation possible at all? Have we not come through our textual analysis to something nonsensical, an oxymoron? It seems to be commonly accepted that there are two main types of meditation: *samatha*, which leads to altered states of consciousness and to stopping thought by concentrating on a single object, and *vipassanā*, which leads to experiencing the world as it really is, but fails to bring a radically different state of consciousness.

We may show that such a state is indeed possible, by pointing out that somewhat similar forms of meditation can be tracked down in some later Buddhist traditions and also in the teachings of some modern Theravādin masters. One such meditative method is the practice of silent illumination described in the teachings of the Chan master Hongzhi. Modern Chan Master Sheng Yen recapitulates Hongzhi's practice of silent illumination (*mozhao*) in his book entitled *Hoofprint of the Ox:*

> Hongzhi instructs his students to let go and settle quietly into themselves, leaving behind all entangling conditions and supports until they reach a point of perfect and unrestrained quiescence. At the same time this does not imply that mind becomes dark or incognizant. Quite the contrary, it is the distortions of deluded and conditioned thinking that are silenced, not mental clarity or awareness. With this silence, the mind's innate wisdom shines unobstructed, perfectly clear and luminous, without a single speck of dust to impede it. "In this [state of] silent sitting", Hongzhi says: "the mind clearly perceives the details of sensory objects; yet, as though transparent, no constructed image is produced" (Sheng-yen, 2001:142).
>
> To begin with, silence and illumination are inseparable and must be present simultaneously: in the very act of illumining, one relinquishes grasping after thoughts and sensations, and directly takes things in, thereby bringing the mind to perfect silence. […] It is a mistake to think that first one must develop inner calm, and, only then, apply open awareness (Sheng-yen, 2001:147).

Another meditative state which may be of interest to us is the *vipassanā jhāna* described in the following way by the modern Theravādin master, Sayadaw U Pandita:

> Vipassanā jhāna allows the mind to move freely from object to object, staying focused on the characteristics of impermanence, suffering and absence of self, which are common to all objects. Vipassanā jhāna also includes the mind that can stay focused and fixed upon the bliss of nibbāna. Rather than the tranquility and absorption that are the goal of samatha jhāna practitioners, the most important results of vipassanā are insight and wisdom. […] Vipassanā jhāna is the focusing of the mind on paramattha dhammas. Actually they are just the things we can experience directly through the six sense doors without conceptualization (U Pandita, 1992:179).

I am not claiming here that the meditative states of silent illumination and of the *vipassanā jhāna* are identical to early Buddhist *jhāna*. I am only claiming that the very existence of such forms of meditation at least shows the actual possibility of a state which can be simultaneously endowed with both insight and calm, be devoid of verbal thoughts, and yet retain the sensitivity of the body, without being attained by concentrative methods. This fits pretty well with all the textual evidence we have about the four *jhāna*-s. The fact that early Buddhist *jhāna* was seemingly such a paradoxical state must have greatly contributed to its later fundamental misinterpretation. As Bronkhorst (1986:88) has stated:

> Already early in the history of Buddhism there was uncertainty about the details of the practice taught by the Buddha. This uncertainty opened the door to foreign elements which could take the place of original but little understood elements.

The concept of implicit insight, which goes so strongly against common sense, would seem to have been one of these little understood elements. While the later Buddhists knew that insight was important, they could only conceive it as producing a verbal form of knowledge, and different doctrines came to be seen as direct expressions or verbalizations of such knowledge. These doctrines in themselves were not inauthentic, but they

were originally never supposed to be the expressions or direct verbalizations of liberating insight. They probably originated as a result of deliberate, conscious reflection upon the path leading to awakening or upon the new, transformed way of cognizing and interacting with the world. But as such, they could never perform any directly liberating function. Such was probably the case with the doctrine of the four noble truths. But in the early stages of the process, there was still awareness that the liberating insight must be connected with the fourth *jhāna*. The presence of the knowledge of encompassing the minds of others (*cetopariyañāṇa*) and of the knowledge of recollecting past lives (*pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa*) (both of which are inauthentic in this context, as shown by Schmithausen (1981: 222)) after the attainment of the fourth *jhāna* is probably also a result of attempts to provide some accounts of declarative, explicit forms of knowledge which could be vitally connected to liberation. A similar explanation has already been proposed by Bronkhorst (1986: 115).

Subsequent to this, as the focus on contemplative insight intensified, the four *jhāna*-s were reinterpreted, and no longer seen as a unique, exclusively Buddhist practice, but as a concentrative, quasi-yogic meditative method not very different from that of non-Buddhists. The notion of liberating insight could not be easily harmonized with this new vision of *jhāna*. One of the first attempts at providing this harmonization was making the imperfections of the four *jhāna*-s the object of insight practice. In the earlier phase of development the jhānic imperfections were to be contemplated in the very state of *jhāna*, while later a rather complicated concept of the vehicle of serenity was introduced. Probably sensing the psychological difficulties of such a practice, the Buddhists introduced the notion of purely theoretical insight, not connected in any way to the four *jhāna*-s. As I have noted above, various formulas from the *Suttapiṭaka* were then used as a basis for this new concept of insight. And these formulas probably did not originally function as instructions for practice, or immediate verbalizations corresponding to the elements of our direct experience. This doctrinal evolution had resulted in a concept of Buddhist meditation that could successfully function only on a theoretical level. It is therefore no wonder that ultimately some Buddhists dispensed with meditation altogether (cf. Wynne, 2007: 124, Polak, 2011: 174-190).

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AN	*Aṅguttara Nikaya*
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya*
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya*
SN	*Saṃyutta Nikāya*
Sn	*Suttanipāta*
Vism	*Visuddhimagga*

In this paper, the references to the Pāli suttas are to:

(before the slash)The number of the sutta/ (after the slash) the number of the PTS volume and page in case of the suttas from the Dīgha Nikāya.

The number of the sutta/the number of the PTS volume and page in case of the suttas from the Majjhima Nikāya.

The number of the saṃyutta and the number of the sutta/the number of the PTS volume and page in case of the suttas from the Saṃyutta Nikāya.

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