

The Pleasant Way: The *Dhyāna*-s, Insight and the Path according to the *Abhidharmakośa*

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Introduction

In the past decade or so, Western Theravāda Buddhists have become increasingly interested in the practice of the *jhāna*-s, but the curious practitioner is immediately confronted with conflicting descriptions of these states, methods for cultivating them and views as to their soteriological utility.¹ Theravāda meditation teachers disagree as to:

1. Whether there is awareness of bodily sensations or sounds in some or any of the *jhāna*-s.
2. Whether the feelings produced in the *jhāna*-s are best characterized as mental or physical.
3. Whether there is any discursive thought in the first or other *jhāna*-s.
4. Whether there is any intentionality² or only non-dual experience in *jhāna*.
5. Whether there is any volition in *jhāna*.
6. Methods of entry into and of refining *jhāna*.
7. Whether movement from one *jhāna* to another is intentional or simply the result of deepening concentration.
8. Whether it is recommended or even possible to practice *vipassanā* while inside a *jhāna*.
9. Whether the object of the *jhāna* is a single (and therefore, conceptual) object or changing phenomena (and therefore, might include *dhamma*-s).
10. Whether *jhāna* is required, recommended or even antithetical with respect to the goal of liberation.

Although there is no reason why all Theravāda Buddhists should agree on these issues, it is important that individual teachers or schools of practice decide where they stand. Having a clearly defined notion of the particular states to be cultivated, of the methods that will bring about these states and what to do with these states should they arise are of the utmost importance when it comes to the nuts and bolts of the teaching and practice of meditation.

This paper examines the presentation of the *dhyāna*-s in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (AKBh) in light of the aforementioned disagreements, paying particular attention to the views of Vasubandhu and his contemporaries on the cognitive and affective qualities of these states, their relationship to *vipāśyanā* and soteriological utility. The Abhidharma, and the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma, in particular, is commonly seen as a purely scholastic enterprise trading in abstract theory or obscure points of doctrine that are of little

¹ For an overview and analysis of the different approaches of contemporary *jhāna* teachers in the West, see Leigh Brasington's "Interpretations of the Jhanas" at <http://www.leighb.com/jhanas.htm> (retrieved October 9, 2011). Also see the interviews with contemporary teachers in Richard Shankman, *The Experience of Samādhi: An In-depth Exploration of Buddhist Meditation*. Boston: Shambhala, 2008.

² "Intentional" in the phenomenological sense of awareness of an object/content.

consequence to the practical concerns of Buddhist meditators, but most of the disputes that define the modern *jhāna* debate find analogues in the AKBh. Given that modern Theravāda meditation teachers and the Sarvāstivāda Ābhidarmikas both attempt to make sense of canonical statements regarding the *jhāna-s/dhyāna-s*, this should not be too surprising, but it does offer a novel opportunity for us to reflect upon how moderns and pre-moderns talk about the *jhāna-s/dhyāna-s* and to frame the issues that define the modern debate in a broader historical context. Additionally, by looking at the AKBh account of *dhyāna* in light of the modern debate, we might also gain some insight into the obscure dynamic between practice and theory in the AKBh and other Sarvāstivāda accounts of the role of meditation upon the path. Needless to say, I will not be able to examine all of these issues in depth here, but aim to provide enough analysis as to recommend specific topics for further inquiry.

Methodological Note

As I will demonstrate below, Vasubandhu's presentation of the path exhibits a pronounced degree of scholastic elaboration typical of late Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma path theory, but his interpretation of the nature and function of the *dhyāna-s* is largely based on the presentations of *dhyāna* found in sūtra. The result is a conception of *dhyāna* that has more in common with a combined *samatha-vipassanā* style of meditation suggested by several Pāli suttas and typical of the modern Thai forest tradition than with the more absorptive *jhāna-s* and discrete style of *samatha* and *vipassanā* practice presented in the *Visuddhimagga* and other Theravāda commentarial literature. While I think it is fair to say that the *Visuddhimagga* represents an evolution in meditation theory over what we find in the suttas, it is not my intention to argue whether or not the *Visuddhimagga* or AKBh is consistent with a properly "canonical" style of practice. In fact, I think it rather problematic to assume univocality on the part of the Nikāyas or Āgamas with respect to meditation practices. I merely aim to illustrate that the AKBh and *Visuddhimagga* represent two fairly distinct options amongst a broad range of views concerning the *jhāna-s/dhyāna-s* available in fifth century South Asian Buddhism and to examine how these views might relate to modern debates regarding the *jhāna-s*.

The fact that there are, and perhaps always have been, significant disagreements concerning the nature, practice and use of the *jhāna-s* might be taken to suggest that the terms, "first *jhāna*," etc. do not refer to discrete experiences and so it is a mistake to suppose that modern Buddhists and pre-modern Buddhists could be talking about the same phenomena. This is what Robert Sharf argues in "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience."³ Sharf cites canonical discrepancies regarding the description of the first *jhāna* as well as the fact that contemporary practitioners disagree about the proper identification of this and other meditative states as well as about the proper designation of techniques like *vipassanā* and *samatha* as evidence against the view that the meaning of these terms derives from their putative phenomenal referents.⁴ He does not deny that persons who undergo rigorous meditation training might "experience *something* that they are wont to call *sotāpatti*, *jhāna*, or *satori*,"⁵ but says:

³ Robert H. Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," *Numen*, Vol. 42. No. 3 (Oct., 1995), pp. 228-283.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 260.

⁵ *Ibid.*

My point is that such private episodes do not constitute the reference points for the elaborate discourse on meditative states found in Buddhist sources. In other words, terms such as *samatha*, *vipassanā*, *sotāpatti*, and *satori* are not rendered sensible by virtue of the fact that they refer to clearly delimited “experiences” shared by Buddhist practitioners. Rather the meaning of such terminology must be sought in the polemical and ideological context in which Buddhist meditation is carried out.⁶

I agree with Sharf’s general thesis that we ought to avoid the uncritical assumption that meditative experience necessarily plays a central role in the production of the various artifacts of Buddhist thought and culture, including discourse purportedly about meditation. I also endorse Sharf’s critique of the practice of using the category of experience to protect religion from objective or empirical scrutiny. But I do not agree that lack of consensus regarding descriptions of meditative states like the *jhāna*-s or the fact that Buddhist meditation terminology is used in a variety of polemical and ideological contexts entails that this terminology does not refer to specific kinds of experiences. I believe it is reasonable to suppose that the meaning of terms like *jhāna* is constituted *both* in reference to particular kinds of experiences available to those who endeavor to cultivate them and by the various discursive contexts in which these terms are deployed.⁷

Unlike some of the purportedly ineffable experiences at the center of the protective strategy Sharf targets, the *jhāna*-s/*dhyāna*-s are subject to extensive description. The AKBh and other Sarvāstivādin texts aim to provide formal, objective descriptions of the psychological and physiological factors that define these states. The Theravādin Abhidhamma and *Visuddhimagga* also provide this kind of description (or prescription),⁸ but also draw on figurative descriptions of the sort found in the suttas, which appear intended to convey something of the “feel” of these experiences. By contrast, modern Western teachers tend toward more subjective descriptions based on their own experiences, which they often try to correlate with the formal and poetic descriptions found in classical Buddhist literature.⁹ The assumption that all parties involved might be talking about similar kinds of experiences carries some interpretive risk, but I don’t think Sharf has demonstrated that this cannot be the case with respect to the *jhāna*-s or other reasonably effable meditative states.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ I am largely in agreement with Florin Deleanu’s comments regarding the “intertextuality” of meditation manuals and treatises. See Florin Deleanu, “A Preliminary Study on Meditation and The Beginnings of Mahāyāna Buddhism,” *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism* III (2000), pp. 79-80.

⁸ I agree with Sharf that what appears as description often functions as prescription. This is a problem for those who want to claim that meditative experiences give some privileged access to the truth, but does not pose a problem for the more modest claim that some of the meditative states described in pre-modern Buddhist texts have a defined range of phenomenal referents. Moreover, it stands to reason that a prescription that functioned to produce a certain kind of experience in the past might, given commonalities in human psychology and physiology, produce a similar kind of experience today. Finally, we should also note that in comparison to the suttas or the *Visuddhimagga*, the AKBh and similar Sarvāstivāda compendia take a decidedly more theoretical and less prescriptive tone.

⁹ Sharf points out that we do not find these kinds of subjective descriptions in classical Buddhist sources and takes this as evidence that pre-modern Buddhists were not particularly interested in the experience of the states that figure in their formal theories of the path. (See Robert H. Sharf, “The Rhetoric of Experience and the Study of Religion,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7, No. 11–12, 2000, p. 272 and “Buddhist Modernism,” pp. 238-239.) I suggest that the fact we don’t find first person subjective descriptions in classical Buddhist texts might have more to do with literary and cultural convention than with whether or not the authors of these texts (or other members of their communities) cultivated the states these texts describe.

Like others who have investigated the various ways that modern meditation teachers describe the *jhāna*-s as well as classical textual presentations, I think it is reasonable to attribute these differences to the fact that different attentional methods and duration or depth of concentration produce different kinds of phenomenal experiences. It should also be noted that there is something of a consensus forming amongst American meditation teachers that the principle *jhāna*-s are discrete states¹⁰ of consciousness whose phenomenal attributes vary depending on these factors.¹¹ I do not intend to argue that all differences in description in classical sources are the result of different phenomenal experiences. My point is merely that disagreement as to which psychological and physiological factors qualify a state as *jhāna* or as the “right sort” of *jhāna* does not imply that there are no phenomenal referents for “first *jhāna*,” etc., only that there are a variety of candidates for reference and different views as to which of these is most deserving of the name.

Although I believe it is reasonable to suppose that pre-modern Buddhist discourses purportedly about meditation might, on occasion, actually be about meditation or that when Ābhidharmikas discuss the various mental factors present in a particular meditative state they might, among other things, be referring to the salient phenomenal properties of a particular kind of experience, I also think it is important to keep in mind that discourse about meditation and mental states can be informed by a variety of interests and serve multiple functions. Thus, while I take seriously the possibility that Vasubandhu and his co-religionists might have been concerned about the same kinds of psychological and physiological phenomena that modern meditators encounter or seek to cultivate, I have endeavored to be attentive to the places where theoretical coherence or scriptural orthodoxy appear the primary concern.

Sutta-Jhāna and Vipassanā-Jhāna

One of the more fundamental disagreements among modern practitioners is whether one can (or should) practice insight (*vipassanā*) while inside a *jhāna* or whether one must emerge from the *jhāna* in order to do so. It has been suggested that part of the reason for this disagreement is the result of differences between the way the *jhāna*-s are presented in the suttas and the *Visuddhimagga*.¹² In the *Visuddhimagga*, the *jhāna*-s are presented as states of such deep absorption in the meditation object that one must emerge from these states even in order to ascertain their phenomenal qualities. Modern practitioners who cultivate this style of *jhāna*¹³ describe these states as involving an extremely bright and pristine awareness so exclusively focused on the object that any sense of being a subject drops away.¹⁴ In other words, these

¹⁰ In other words, the first *jhāna* can be experienced in a number of ways, but these different experiences have enough in common with each other to be considered the same basic state.

¹¹ See Shankman’s interviews with Kornfield, Thanissaro, Salzberg, Feldman and Brasington in *Samādhi*. For an interesting account of various depths at which the *jhāna*-s might be accessed and how this relates to their intentional qualities based on personal experimentation, see Leigh Brasington’s “Jhanas at the Forest Refuge.” Retrieved October 9, 2011 from http://www.leighb.com/jhana_fr.htm.

¹² See Shankman 2008 and Bhikkhu Gunaratana, “Should We Come Out of Jhāna to Practice Vipassanā?” Retrieved June 28, 2011 from <http://www.buddhanet.net/budsas/ebud/ebidx.htm>.

¹³ It should be noted that not everyone who cultivates this style of *jhāna* (sometimes called “hard” *jhāna*) takes the *Visuddhimagga* to be authoritative. A prime example is Ajahn Brahmavamsa (Brahm) who trained in the Thai forest tradition with Ajahn Chah. See Ajahn Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond: A Meditator’s Handbook*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006.

¹⁴ Stephen Snyder and Tina Rasmussen, *Practicing the Jhānas: Traditional Concentration Meditation as Presented by the Venerable Pa Auk Sayadaw*, Boston: Shambhala, 2009, pp. 28-29.

jhāna-s have a strongly non-dual or non-intentional flavor.¹⁵ There is no sensory awareness and virtually no discursive thought or volition.¹⁶ *Vipassanā* cannot be practiced in this kind of *jhāna* because the single-pointed focus does not allow for any awareness of transitory mental factors or physical sensations and the depth of the absorption does not allow for sufficient “intentional space”¹⁷ between awareness and its object.¹⁸ By contrast, the suttas often describe a kind of *vipassanā* style practice occurring inside a *jhāna*. One of the clearest examples is in the *Anupada* sutta of the *Majjhima Nikāya* where Sāriputta is said to know¹⁹ individual mental factors as they arise and pass away in the four principle *jhāna*-s as well as the first three formless attainments.²⁰ After examining the differences between these two styles of *jhāna* in his book on the subject, Richard Shankman concludes:

Jhāna in the suttas is a state of heightened mindfulness and awareness of an ever-changing stream of experiences, in which the mind is unmoving. Jhāna in the *Visuddhimagga* is a state of fixed concentration, where there is no experience of changing phenomena whatsoever, because the objects of the mind are unmoving.²¹

Although I am wary of Shankman’s suggestion that the suttas consistently describe one kind of *jhāna* practice, I believe he correctly identifies an important difference between the styles of *jhāna* described in suttas like the *Anupada* and the *Visuddhimagga*: the fact that the former has changing phenomena for its object and the latter, a single, unchanging (and therefore, conceptual) object. In *Visuddhimagga*-style *jhāna* practice as taught by Pa Auk Sayadaw, for example, the practitioner does not pay attention to variation or change in the object with which he begins his meditation. For example, if the object is the breath at the nostrils, the practitioner uses sensation of the breath to stay focused on the breath, but does not emphasize or examine the different sensations in the area. As concentration deepens, an internal, “counterpart sign” (*paṭibhāga nimitta*), which typically manifests as a kind of inner²² light, arises in awareness. This is the object (now merged with or having replaced the breath) with which one enters *jhāna*. Although *vipassanā*, which necessarily involves awareness of changing phenomena, cannot be practiced inside this kind of absorption, the absorption is said to produce an extremely powerful

¹⁵ I hesitate to call these states completely non-dual or non-intentional since there seems to be some disagreement over whether it is the phenomenal qualities of the awareness or the awareness itself that are the proper object of the absorption. Moreover, in the first *jhāna* there are *vitakka* and *vicāra*, which are defined intentionally. I will say more about *vitakka* and *vicāra* below.

¹⁶ It is a bit problematic to say that there is absolutely no discursiveness or volition in the first *jhāna* because of *vitakka* and *vicāra*.

¹⁷ By “intentional space” I mean a sufficient degree of intentionality or separation between subject and object for clear apprehension of an object. As suggested above, there may be a kind of low level intentional awareness of the phenomenal qualities of these states that is still not sufficient for insight.

¹⁸ According to the *Visuddhimagga*, *vipassanā* is possible in a supramundane (*lokuttara*) *jhāna*. Supramundane *jhāna*-s are the *vipassanā* states in which the four paths and four fruits are realized. They are said to have the phenomenal properties and intensity of the mundane *jhāna*-s, but take *nibbāna* instead of conditioned things as their object.

¹⁹ M 111, PTS ed. iii.25. The dhammas are continuously examined (*anupada-vavatthita*), which causes him to know (*pajānāti*), “So indeed these dhammas, not having been, come into being; having been, they vanish.”

²⁰ He must emerge from the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception (*nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*) and the cessation of perception and feeling (*saññāvedayitanirodha*) in order to observe (*samanupassati*) the *dhamma*-s that were present in these states.

²¹ Shankman 2008, p. 102.

²² It is understood to be an object of mental rather than visual consciousness.

and clear awareness that can be directed towards the task of insight with great effect “on the way out” of the *jhāna* (or the formless attainments).

In the second part of his book, Shankman interviews several contemporary teachers regarding their understanding and use of the *jhāna*-s. Most of those interviewed agree that there is a range of *jhāna*-like states available to the practitioner depending on depth of concentration or method of entry, but vary as to what qualities they attribute to the *jhāna*-s proper, particularly with respect to the degree to which the five sensory consciousnesses are engaged. With the exception of Ajaan Thanissaro and Bhante Gunaratana, the interviewees seem to agree that it is not really feasible to do *vipassanā* in *jhāna* or, at least, not in the second *jhāna* and above.²³ Thanissaro, who trained in the Thai forest tradition,²⁴ explains that while one can become absorbed in a *jhāna* to the point where *vipassanā* is impossible, one can pull back a bit from a *jhāna* that is not totally secluded from the five senses in order to contemplate the experience of the *jhāna* in terms of the four noble truths.²⁵ In his interview with Shankman and in a separate essay, Bhante Gunaratana²⁶ strongly advocates practicing *vipassanā* within *jhāna*: “If you want to come out of Jhāna to practice Vipassanā, then you should not waste your valuable time to attain it at all.”²⁷ The reason, according to Gunaratana, is that the “purity, concentration, light, and mindfulness” of the *jhāna* fade as the hindrances²⁸ rush back upon exiting the *jhāna*. He concedes that there may be a kind of state wherein the mind is utterly absorbed in the object to the point where *vipassanā* is impossible, but suggests that this is the (undesirable) result of cultivating *jhāna* without sufficient mindfulness (*sati*).²⁹

Although Thanissaro and Gunaratana agree that it is possible to do *vipassanā* within *jhāna* and that there is bodily awareness in *jhāna*,³⁰ they rely on different methods of entry. Thanissaro mentions that *jhāna* can be cultivated using the four foundations of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) and specifically describes directing attention towards the pleasant sensation that result from increased concentration³¹ to deepen *jhāna*.³² Focusing on these sensations (*pīti* and/or *sukha*)³³ in order to enter and deepen (the first three) *jhāna*-s is a common modern practice,³⁴ which takes its cue and/or derives authority from one of the standard canonical formulations of the *jhāna*-s found in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*:

²³ This has to do with the absence of *vitakka* and *vicāra*. I will say more about this below.

²⁴ A tradition renowned for a mixed *samatha-vipassanā* style of practice and a suspicion of the commentarial tradition.

²⁵ Shankman, p. 122.

²⁶ Bhante Gunaratana is a Sri Lankan monk who has taught in the United States since the late 1960's.

²⁷ Bhikkhu Gunaratana, “Should We Come Out of Jhāna to Practice Vipassanā?” Retrieved June 28, 2011 from <http://www.buddhanet.net/budsas/ebud/ebidx.htm>. This is notably different from what Gunaratana says in *The Path of Serenity and Insight* (a book based on his 1980 dissertation), where he relies heavily on the *Visuddhimagga* presentation of the *jhāna*-s. See Henepola Gunaratana, *The Path of Serenity and Insight*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985.

²⁸ Sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt. These are sources of distraction that are naturally suppressed as concentration (*samādhi*) increases.

²⁹ Gunaratana, “Should We Come Out of Jhāna to Practice Vipassanā?” p. 3.

³⁰ Note that without bodily awareness, it would be impossible to practice the first foundation of mindfulness as described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta*.

³¹ Specifically, from the suppression of the hindrances:

³² Shankman, p. 119.

³³ There is a considerable amount of disagreement over whether one or the other of these is physical or mental and whether both are feelings (*vedanā*) or whether one might be a member of the *saṅkāra-khandha/samskāra-skandha*. I will discuss these issues below.

³⁴ This is the method taught by Ayya Khema and Leigh Brasington, for example.

...a monk enters and dwells in the first *jhāna*. He steeps, drenches, fills and suffuses his body with *pīti* and *sukha* born of seclusion, so that there is no part of his entire body that is not suffused with *pīti* and *sukha*. Just as a skillful bath-attendant or his apprentice might strew bathing powder in a copper basin, sprinkle it again and again with water, and knead it together so that the mass of bathing soap would be pervaded, suffused, and saturated with moisture inside and out yet would not ooze moisture, so a monk steeps, drenches, fills and suffuses his body with *pīti* and *sukha* born of seclusion, so that there is no part of his entire body that is not suffused with this *pīti* and *sukha* born of seclusion.”³⁵

The sutta provides similarly evocative metaphors with respect to the phenomenal qualities of the other three *jhāna*-s. As will be discussed below, classical commentators and modern practitioners alike to disagree as to whether this formula refers to a kind of bodily awareness that is simply more subtle than we usually experience, something that is felt by the mind or “mental body” (*nāma-kāya*) or something that is produced by the mind but felt with the body. Although Gunaratana says that there is bodily awareness in the kind of *jhāna* he recommends, he describes a method of entry similar to the *Visuddhimagga* light *nimitta* method described above. This suggests that while method of entry might determine the depth of absorption available,³⁶ it does not determine whether a *jhāna* can be used for *vipassanā*. Based on the views of modern practitioners, it appears that the light *nimitta* can produce an absorption that is too deep for *vipassanā* or just deep enough. The same may be true for *jhāna* developed on the basis of a sensation *nimitta*. In sum, the central difference between what we might call a *Visuddhimagga*-style *jhāna* and sutta-style *jhāna* seems to be: 1) the degree to which the mind is absorbed in the object (whether there is enough “intentional space” to observe mental or physical phenomena), 2) whether the mind is fixed on one, unchanging object or aware of changing phenomena and, finally, 3) whether *vipassanā* is practiced subsequent to or within a *jhāna*.

Overview of *Dhyāna* in the AKBh

Vasubandhu and most of his Sarvāstivāda counterparts agree with the *Visuddhimagga* view that attaining *dhyāna* is not strictly necessary for liberation.³⁷ They consider *anāgāmya*, the “not quite there” state before the first *dhyāna*, roughly equivalent to the *Visuddhimagga* notion “access” or “neighborhood” concentration (*upacāra-samādhi*), sufficient. Despite this, the *dhyāna*-s are recommended and play a central role in the conceptual structure of the path. The AKBh presents the *dhyāna*-s as both an effective means with which to attenuate and *abandon* defilements and ideal basis for gaining insight into the four noble truths.

According to Sarvāstivāda path theory, liberation is not simply a function of gaining insight into the true nature of things, but of abandoning the defilements, *viz.*, unhealthy affective and cognitive orientations towards conditioned phenomena. Indeed, the complexity of their path

³⁵ Sāmaññaphala sutta, D i.74.

³⁶ There seems to be something of a consensus that the light *nimitta* method allows for a depth of absorption not available through the sensation method.

³⁷ There seems to be some disagreement about this. While the orthodox Kashmiri Vaibhāṣika position is that *dhyāna* is not necessary, Ghōṣaka (a representative of the western Vaibāṣikas) defines the *nirvedha-bhāgīya*-s (the mundane phases of insight leading to the supramundane path) in such a way that suggests *dhyāna* is necessary. See points 11-15 in Ghōṣaka-s presentation of the first *nirvedha-bhāgīya* in Robert E. Buswell, Jr. “The ‘Aids to Penetration’ (*Nirvedhabhāgīya*) According to the Vaibhāṣika School,” p. 602.

theory derives in large part from their understanding of the multiple ways in which the defilements are abandoned on the mundane and supramundane paths, through the paths of seeing (*darśana-mārga*) as well as cultivation (*bhāvanā-mārga*).³⁸ The Sarvāstivādins regarded the cultivation of the *dhyāna*-s (as well as the immaterial attainments) as an effective means of abandoning certain classes of defilements,³⁹ because attaining each state requires an affective detachment (*vairāgya*) from the phenomenal qualities of the lower states, starting with detachment from the gross sensual pleasure of the desire realm in order to enter the first *dhyāna* and culminating in detachment from third formless attainment in order to attain Bhavāgra (the “summit of [worldly] existence,” the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception).⁴⁰ This does not require deep insight into the four characteristics of phenomena or the other four noble truths;⁴¹ it just requires that the lower state be apprehended as undesirable or gross in relation to the higher state.⁴²

Although one does not need to cultivate *dhyāna* in order to gain direct comprehension (*abhiśmaya*) of the four noble truths or to abandon the defilements associated with the form and formless realms,⁴³ the AKBh defines *dhyāna* in terms of its ability to cause practitioners to know (*prajānanti*) things as they really are (*yathābhūta*).⁴⁴ The *dhyāna*-s are thus recommended as the ideal basis for cultivating the path as well as states that make for a pleasant abiding in the here and now (*dr̥ṣṭadharmasukhavihāra*).⁴⁵ Vasubandhu explains that, “The path in the four *dhyāna*-s is a pleasant (*sukha*) route (*pratipad*), because it is effortless (*ayaṭna*) owing to the *dhyāna* factors and their balance of calm (*śamatha*) and insight (*vipaśyanā*).”⁴⁶ By contrast,

The path in the other *bhūmi*-s, namely, *anāgāmya*, *dhyānāntara* and the *ārūpya*-s, is a difficult (*duḥkha*) route, because it requires effort owing to the lack of the accompanying *dhyāna* factors and deficiency in either *śamatha* or *vipaśyanā*. There is a deficit of *śamatha* in *anāgāmya* and *dhyānāntara* and a deficit of *vipaśyanā* in the *ārūpya*-s.⁴⁷

³⁸ See Cox, “Attainment Through Abandonment” and Jew Chong Liew, “The Sarvāstivāda doctrine of the path of spiritual progress: a study based primarily on the *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāśāstra*, the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* and their Chinese and Sanskrit Commentaries,” PhD dissertation, The University of Hong Kong, 2010.

³⁹ Namely, desire, hostility, pride and ignorance. These involve a mistaken apprehension of or unhealthy orientation towards an existent (*vastuka*) object (like material form) in contrast to the defilements abandoned through the path of seeing (*darśana-mārga*, i.e., direct insight into the four noble truths), which involve a mistaken view with respect to a non-existent (*avastuka*) object (i.e., the self). AKBh vi.58b; Śāstrī p. 780.

⁴⁰ AKBh vi.48-49. One can only detach from the fourth immaterial attainment or Bhavāgra on the supramundane path of cultivation. AKBh vi.45cd.

⁴¹ The four characteristics (*anitya*, *duḥkha*, *śūnya*, *anātman*) comprise the four aspects of the first noble truth. On the sixteen aspects of the four noble truths, see below.

⁴² AKBh vi.49a-d; Śāstrī p. 766. The higher state is seen as as “peaceful, excellent, as a way out” (*śāntita praṇītata, niḥsaraṇta*). The lower is seen as coarse (*audārika*), laden with suffering (*duḥkila*) and as thick wall (*sthūlabhittika*) [preventing a way out].

⁴³ It is also possible to develop the required detachment from the form and formless realms without first-hand experience of them via *dhyāna*. The “direct” or “higher comprehension” (*abhiśmaya*) of path of seeing involves both direct and indirect comprehension of the four noble truths with respect to all three spheres of existence.

⁴⁴ AKBh viii.1d; Śāstrī p. 870.

⁴⁵ AKBh viii.1d; Śāstrī p. 879.

⁴⁶ Caturdhyāneṣu mārgaḥ sukhā pratipad aṅgaparigrahaṇaśamathavipaśyanāśamataḥbyāmayatnavāhitvāt. AKBh vi.66a; Śāstrī p. 794.

⁴⁷ AKBh vi.66cd; Śāstrī p. 794. It is rather mysterious why there should be a deficit of *śamatha* in *dhyānāntara*, but not in the first *dhyāna*. AKBh viii.22d-23a (Śāstrī p. 904) explains that *dhyānāntara* takes effort to pass through it, so cannot be associated with a pleasant mental sensation (*saumanasya*) and is a difficult path. (Cf. Gunaratana 1985, pp. 101-102.) I suspect that this

The *dhyāna* factors are the mental and physical qualities that predominate in and therefore define the *dhyāna*-s. We have already mentioned two of them, *prīti* and *sukha*, and will have more to say about these and the others below, but before discussing the factors in greater detail, there are a couple of things to note with respect to these passages.

First, in the rhetoric of modern “dry insight” movements,⁴⁸ the path which does not involve the cultivation of *jhāna* is a faster, more efficient route to liberation, even if a bit rough or bumpy without the stability and comfort of the *jhāna*-s.⁴⁹ By contrast, the AKBh does not correlate speed with method. Vasubandhu says that the relative⁵⁰ speed with which the path is traversed depends on the strength of the faculties, in particular, wisdom (*prajñā*). The person with sharp faculties (*tīkṣṇendriya*) will traverse the path faster than the person with weak faculties (*mṛdvindriya*), but for either the path will be pleasant or difficult based depending on whether or not he cultivates *dhyāna*.⁵¹

Second, one might be tempted to think that the notion of a pleasant versus unpleasant or difficult path is predicated on the assumption of something like the so-called “*dukkha ñāṇa*-s,” the sixth through tenth stages in the progress of insight in the *Visuddhimagga* system. During these stages, the practitioner may experience fear and other unpleasant psychological (and physiological) phenomena as he comes to grips with the existential impact of insight into the dissolution of phenomena (*bhaṅga*). Given the modern tendency to view the *dhyāna*-s as desirable but dispensable “shock absorbers” for this impact, it is natural to suppose that this is what Vasubandhu has in mind when he distinguishes the pleasant path in the *dhyāna*-s from the unpleasant path without them, but there does not appear to be anything like the *dukkha-ñāṇa*-s in Sarvāstivāda path theory and the AKBh says very little about the psychological (or physiological) difficulties that might ensue from insight. Vasubandhu simply refers to the *duḥkha* of the “difficult” path(s) as the mental or physical discomfort associated with *effort* (*vatna*) and the absence of the *dhyāna* factors.

Finally, it should be noted that aside from any view regarding the intrinsic qualities of the *dhyāna*-s, part of the reason why the AKBh recommends the *dhyāna*-s is the understanding that the Buddha himself⁵² realized the four noble truths and saw the destruction of the taints (*āsrava*), *viz.*, became liberated, in the fourth *dhyāna*.⁵³ In fact, the entire conceptual structure of the

view might simply be the result of unease about the fact that this fifth *dhyāna* (which has *vicāra*, but not *vitarka*) is not explicitly mentioned in the *sūtra*-s. In “Jhāna and Buddhist Scholasticism,” *JIAS* 12.2, 1989, 79-110, Martin Stuart-Fox notes that some of the references to this kind of *jhāna* found in the Nikāya-s (which serve as the basis for the Abhidhamma inclusion of a fifth *jhāna*) are missing from the Chinese Āgamas.

⁴⁸ Here I have in mind the modern Burmese *vipassanā* movements that grew and spread worldwide owing to the efforts of Mahasi Sayadaw and U Ba Khin.

⁴⁹ The *jhāna*-s are seen as either as a desirable but dispensable “shock absorber” for the profound psychological impact of insight or an useless detour into a kind of non-Buddhist quiescence.

⁵⁰ In contrast to some modern Theravāda movements- especially the Mahasi Sayadaw and U Ba Khin/Goenka movements, the Sarvāstivādins saw the path as taking a minimum of three lifetimes and in most cases, far, far longer.

⁵¹ AKBh vi.66d; Śāstrī p. 795.

⁵² Here we might also note that Gunaratana cites the *Cūlahatthipadopama* sutta recounting the Buddha’s enlightenment on the basis of the fourth *jhāna* as “conclusive evidence” that the Buddha practiced *vipassana* while in *jhāna*. Gunaratana, “Should We Come Out of Jhana to Practice Vipassana,” p. 15. The sutta (M 27, PTS ed. i.175) does not mention coming out of *jhāna* to realize the three knowledges or the four noble truths.

⁵³ “[Buddhas and *pratyekabuddhas*] abide in the fourth *dhyāna* and without rising from that very spot, and due to their intense, immovable *samādhi*, undertake the aids to penetration until they are awakened.” AKBh vi.24ab; Śāstrī, pp. 722-723.

Sarvāstivāda path, both the role the *dhyāna*-s play in abandoning the defilements⁵⁴ and the way the mundane and supramundane paths are structured around the contemplation of the four noble truths, seems to be abstracted from this scriptural account of the Buddha's awakening.⁵⁵

Śamatha, Vipāśyanā and Dhyāna in the Progress of the Path

The Sarvāstivāda path is divided into five major stages and *dhyāna* plays an important role in all but the first of these stages.⁵⁶ The first stage of the path (the “aids to merit” or *puṇya-bhāgīya*) involves ethical discipline, learning and purification and, like in the *Visuddhimagga* is regarded as an essential foundation for undertaking mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*). The second stage of the path (the “path of preparation” or *prayoga-mārga*) involves two phases: 1) the cultivation of *śamatha* and the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness (*smṛtyupasthāna*) and 2) four stages of increasingly subtle contemplation of sixteen aspects of the four noble truths.⁵⁷ These stages, the *nirvedha-bhāgīya*-s (“aids to penetration”) are included under the rubric of the fourth foundation of mindfulness, mindfulness of dharmas. The last of these four stages (*laukikāgradharma* or “highest worldly dharma”) serves as the immediate condition for the supramundane path, which is also divided into two stages: the path of seeing (*darśana-mārga*), which involves a higher comprehension (*abhisamaya*) of the four noble truths over the course of fifteen moments⁵⁸ and the path of cultivation (*bhāvanā-mārga*), in which the three noble persons who are not yet arhats (stream-enterer, once-returner, non-returner) abandon remaining defilements by means of continued contemplation of the four noble truths.

Some interpreters have been inclined to associate the path of seeing with *vipāśyanā* and the path of cultivation with *samādhi* or *dhyāna*,⁵⁹ but the *dhyāna*-s (which are particular instances of *samādhi*)⁶⁰ play an important role in nearly every phase of the path, not only in the abandoning of defilements on the mundane and supramundane paths of cultivation, but also in the insight work of the paths of preparation and seeing.⁶¹ According to the AKBh, the *nirvedha-bhāgīya*-s and the path of seeing require the attainment of *anāgamya*, *dhyānātara* or the four principle *dhyāna*-s, but when the *nirvedha-bhāgīya* occur in the *dhyāna*-s, the practitioner is assured to reach the path of seeing in this very life, owing to an intense world-weariness

⁵⁴ The fact that the Buddha was an ordinary being when he sat down and an arhat when he arose also sets the precedent for the Sarvāstivāda theory of skipping attainments via the mundane path. In brief, by abandoning defilements through the cultivation of the *dhyāna*-s and formless attainments on the mundane path, the ascetic may enter the path of seeing as a candidate for the fruition status of a *sakridāgamin* or *anāgamin*.

⁵⁵ Buswell makes a provocative comparison between what he calls the Vaibhāṣika's “retrospective approach to soteriology” working backwards from the point of the Buddha's awakening and the *Visuddhimagga*'s “proleptic” approach starting from the point of defilement. See Buswell, p. 608.

⁵⁶ See the chart below.

⁵⁷ 1) anitya, dukkha, śūnya, anātman, 2) hetu samudaya, prabhava, pratyaya, 3) nirodha, śānta, praṇīta, niḥsaraṇa, 4) mārga, nyāya, pratipatti, nairyāṇika.

⁵⁸ The sixteenth moment is the fruition that marks entry into the supramundane path of cultivation. For each truth there are two phases of comprehension, one pertaining to the sensual realm and the other to the two higher realms. Within each phase there is a moment of receptiveness to knowledge during which defilements are cut off and the a moment of knowledge which prevents the defilements from re-arising.

⁵⁹ See Cox, “Attainment Through Abandonment,” pp. 65-66 for a similar critique of this tendency.

⁶⁰ See below.

⁶¹ I don't mean to suggest that the process of abandoning defilements does not involve insight, merely that the method of abandonment described above does not emphasize insight to the same extent as the *nirvedha-bhāgīya*-s or *darśana-mārga*. As indicated above, there are classes of defilements abandoned by *darśana*, *bhāvanā* and both.

(*saṃvega*).⁶² In other words, the affective detachment produced through the cultivation of the *dhyāna*-s is regarded a powerful means by which to sharpen the faculty of *prajñā* and thereby speed the progress of insight. This thoroughly integrated conception of the relationship between the cognitive and affective dimensions of the path (and of human psychology more generally) defies the interpreter's wish to find a clear distinction between *darśana*, *vipaśyanā*, *prajñā* and *jñāna* on the one hand and *bhāvanā*, *samādhi* and *śamatha* on the other.⁶³

Although the AKBh does not make a principled distinction between *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*, and both are present to a greater or lesser extent in the meditative states (*samāpatti*) in which the path is traversed, it does present *śamatha* as the foundation for *vipaśyanā*.⁶⁴ Compared to the forty *samatha* objects mentioned in the *Visuddhimagga*, the AKBh only discusses two: meditation on the loathsome (*aśubha-bhāvanā*)⁶⁵ and mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasmṛti*).⁶⁶ As in the *Visuddhimagga*, these are recommended according to personality: meditation on the loathsome for those with excessive lust (*adhirāga*) and mindfulness of breathing for those with excessive discursive thought (*adhivitaraka*).⁶⁷ These meditations can be used to cultivate *dhyāna* and *anāgāmya*, respectively⁶⁸ and the AKBh variously describes them as entrances (*avatāra*) to cultivation (*bhāvanā*),⁶⁹ the means by which there is the gaining of *samādhi*⁷⁰ and accomplished (*niṣpanna*) with the aim of attaining *vipaśyanā*. *Vipaśyanā* itself is defined as the four foundations of mindfulness.⁷¹ Yaśomitra explains that the defilements (*kleśa*) cannot be abandoned except by wisdom (*prajñā*) resulting from the perfection of *samādhi*.⁷²

Yaśomitra further explains that scripture testifies to the fact that there is one vehicle, namely, the four foundations of mindfulness.⁷³ Note that the practices of mindfulness of breathing and the meditation on the loathsome are included among the meditations concerning

⁶² AKBh vi.22b; Śāstrī p. 721.

⁶³ Again, this does not mean that these terms do not have phenomenal referents, just that these referents do not fit the interpreter's categorical scheme.

⁶⁴ AKBh. vi.13d; Śāstrī p. 708.

⁶⁵ According to the *Mahāvibhāṣā* (MVŚ), this is the the primary meditation for entering the noble path and so is discussed at some length there. See Bhikkhu KL Dhammajoti, *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma*, Hong Kong: Centre of Buddhist Studies, 2009, 15.3.1.1.

⁶⁶ AKBh vi.9ab; Śāstrī p. 703. Other Sarvāstivāda texts include analysis of the four elements. See Bart Dessein, *Samyuktābhīdharmaḥḍaya: Heart of Scholasticism with Miscellaneous Addition*, Vol. I (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), pp. 312-314. Also see vol. II, p. 259, fn. 56. It should also be noted that although the AKBh discusses mindfulness of the breath as a method for perfecting *śamatha* in preparation for *vipaśyana*,⁶⁶ Bhikkhu Dhammajoti notes that the Sarvāstivādins had a whole range of views regarding whether each of the six elements of the practice (counting, following, etc.) was *vipaśyanā* or *śamatha* or both. The MVŚ concludes that all six elements can come under the rubric of either *vipaśyanā* or *śamatha*. See Dhammajoti 15.3.1.1.

⁶⁷ AKBh vi.9a-d; Śāstrī p. 703.

⁶⁸ The AKBh explains that mindfulness of breathing cannot be practiced in the *dhyāna*-s because it is accompanied by a neutral feeling, which conflicts with the feeling ascribed to the first three *dhyāna*-s, but there seems to be some debate over this issue and Vasubandhu does not take a clear side.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ AKBh. vi.13d; Śāstrī p. 708.

⁷¹ AKBh vi.14a; Śāstrī p. 708.

⁷² Śāstrī p. 709. According to the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, defilements can be abandoned through the applications of mindfulness (*smṛtyupasthāna*), but only when based on concentration (not when practiced on the basis of hearing or reflection). See Collett Cox, "Attainment through Abandonment: The Sarvāstivādin Path of Removing Defilements," in Buswell and Gimello, ed. *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and It's Transformations in Buddhist Thought*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992, p. 84.

⁷³ Śāstrī p. 709. Tib. 164a6-7.

mindfulness of the body in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.⁷⁴ As mentioned above, the AKBh regards the contemplation of the four noble truths in the *nirvedha-bhāgīya*-s and path of seeing as part of the fourth foundation of mindfulness. Thus, it appears that *samādhi* (ideally *dhyāna*, but barring that, *anāgāmya*) is cultivated via mindfulness of the body and then serves as the basis for the other foundations, culminating in the mindfulness of dharmas in the *nirvedha-bhāgīya*-s and path of supramundane path.⁷⁵

Instead of constituting two separate paths or two discrete phases of practice, *śamatha* and *vipāśyanā* simply indicate a predominance of *samādhi* or *prajñā* or styles of practice suited to persons of different dispositions. Thus, the *Mahāvibhāṣā* describes two kinds of practitioner: the *śamatha-carita* who enjoys solitude and quiet and the *vipāśyanā-carita* who enjoys study, especially of the Abhidharma.⁷⁶ There is much more to be said about *vipāśyanā*, *śamatha* and *dhyāna* in relation to the AKBh's presentation of the paths of preparation and seeing, especially with regard to the nature of the objects on these paths,⁷⁷ but this overview should suffice to illustrate the multiple ways in which *dhyāna* relates to *vipāśyanā* according to the AKBh.

Overview of *Dhyāna* Factors

The fact that the AKBh is clearly of the view that one can and should practice *vipāśyanā* while in *dhyāna* does not tell us very much about what Vasubandhu or his co-religionists thought these states were like. For that, we will need to examine their views regarding the *dhyāna* factors. As in the Theravāda Abhidhamma, the Vaibhāṣika call the mental and physical qualities that predominate in *dhyāna* and define a mental state (*citta*) as *dhyāna*, factors (*aṅga*).⁷⁸ It stands to reason that the enumeration of these factors ought to have something to do with phenomenal description, but as mentioned above, we shouldn't assume that this is the case in all Buddhist discourse. Modern meditators tend to treat the factors as descriptions of phenomenal properties that can help identify whether a particular experience is access concentration, first *jhāna*, second *jhāna*, etc., and also as descriptions of potential objects for absorption or investigation. While I don't think there is any reason to rule out the possibility that this is also how Vasubandhu and his co-religionists understood the *dhyāna* factors, it is clear that there are a variety of other concerns also at work in their debates about these factors. While Vasubandhu and his Vaibhāṣika interlocutors generally agree about the structure and progression of the path and about the role *dhyāna* plays in this, they disagree about the ontological foundations of defilement and abandonment, and thus, about the very nature of the transformation effected by the path. With respect to the *dhyāna* factors, Vasubandhu's own views are typically informed by an interest in ontological parsimony and/or a preference for a simpler scriptural explanation, but

⁷⁴ This is also the case with the analysis of the four elements, which are included in the *mokṣabhāgīya* in the *Samyuktābhidharmahrdaya*.

⁷⁵ Vasubandhu does not spell out too many of the details of this, but it is my hope that a more thorough study of the commentaries on the AKBh will reveal a fuller account of what these practices might have been understood to entail.

⁷⁶ See Dhammajoti 15.3.1.1.

⁷⁷ There is some ambivalence and debate about whether the objects of the paths of preparation and seeing are the intrinsic characteristics (*svalakṣaṇa* or *svabhāva*) of phenomena or their common characteristics (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) and how insight into one relates to insight into the other. While both are objects of the four foundations of mindfulness (see AKBhVI.14cd), the *Mahāvibhāṣā* explains that in the path of seeing there is direct comprehension (*abhisamaya*) of the specific or intrinsic characteristics of phenomena through the direct realization of the common characteristics that are the 16 aspects of the four noble truths. See Dhammajoti 15.4.

⁷⁸ AKBh vi.71c and following also discusses which of the 37 aids to enlightenment exist in each *dhyāna*.

he shares with the Vaibhāṣika a commitment to analyzing the *dhyāna*-s in a manner that is consistent with the basic principles of Abhidharma psychological theory.

Both Vasubandhu and the Vaibhāṣika take as authoritative the *sūtra* formula that outlines the four factors that predominate in the first *dhyāna* and fall away in the higher *dhyāna*-s (the elimination formula)⁷⁹ as well as another formula that emphasizes the positive qualities that develop and predominate in each successive *dhyāna* (development formula).⁸⁰

Elimination formula:

1st *dhyāna*: vitarka, vicāra, prīti, sukha

2nd *dhyāna*: prīti, sukha

3rd *dhyāna*: sukha

4th *dhyāna*: [upekṣā]

Development formula:

1st *dhyāna*: vitarka, vicāra, prīti, sukha, cittaikāgratā.

2nd *dhyāna*: adhyātmasamprasāda, prīti, sukha, cittaikāgratā

3rd *dhyāna*: [saṃskāra-]upekṣā, smṛti, samprajñāna, sukha, samādhi

4th *dhyāna*: aduḥkhāsukhā-vedanā, upekṣā-pariśuddhi, smṛti-pariśuddhi, samādhi

In the following sections, I examine Vasubandhu and his co-religionist's interpretations of these factors, focusing on issues that relate to the modern *jhāna* debate.

Single-pointedness (*Ekāgratā*)

The Vaibhāṣika define the attainment (*samāpatti*) of *dhyāna* as the single-pointed focus (*ekāgrya*) of a pure (*śubha*) or wholesome (*kuśala*) mind.⁸¹ Vasubandhu agrees with this definition, but objects to Vaibhāṣika view that *samādhi* is a discrete mental factor responsible for making a mind single-pointed. According to Vasubandhu, *samādhi* is just a concept referring to a series of minds that are single-pointed. This series constitutes *dhyāna* depending on the presence and strength of the wholesome mental factors, in particular, the *dhyāna* factors. Both parties agree, however, that the relevant sense of single-pointedness (*ekāgratā*) is having a single (*ālambana*).

Based on their definitions of *samādhi*, it would seem that the Vaibhāṣika and Vasubandhu assume that the single-pointedness of *dhyāna*, whatever its ontological underpinnings, is consistent with the notion that *dhyāna* involves a balance of *śamatha* and *vipāśyana*. In the modern *jhāna* debate, however, Shankman and Gunaratana distinguish the *vipassanā*-style *jhāna* found in the suttas from the *Visuddhimagga*-style of *jhāna* on the basis of different interpretations of the term *ekaggatā*.⁸² Shankman proposes different translations of *ekaggatā* to capture the relevant distinction: “unification of mind” for sutta-*jhāna* versus “one-

⁷⁹ AKBh viii.2ab.

⁸⁰ AKBh viii.7-8; Śāstri p. 888. This formula is similar to that found in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, but adds *cittaikāgratā* to the first, *samādhi* to the third and *smṛtipariśuddhi* and *samādhi* to the fourth.

⁸¹ AKBh viii.1d.

⁸² This factor is not mentioned in any of the standard formulas for the first *jhāna*, but is implied in the formula for the second *jhāna* by the phrase *cetaso ekodibhāvam* and is explicitly mentioned in some suttas (e.g., *Mahāvedalla* MN 1:294, *Anupada*) and is picked up in the *Vibhaṅga*.

pointedness” for *Visuddhimagga-jhāna*.⁸³ Gunaratana explains that the mind in *jhāna* is unified in the sense that all the wholesome factors work in harmony, but that there is not “one-pointedness of the meditation object.”⁸⁴ Although *jhāna* is attained via focus on a single object, according to Gunaratana, namely, the light *nimitta*, the object of *vipassanā* within *jhāna* is the subtle changes that take place in the body and mind.⁸⁵ Although Shankman and Gunaratana’s explanation of *ekaggatā* seems to make sense of one of the important distinctions between the kind of *jhāna* that is described in suttas like the *Anupada* and the *Visuddhimagga* style of *jhāna*, it is hard to reconcile with what we find in the AKBh. It seems that there are two possibilities here: either the AKBh only means “object” (*ālambana*) in a rather loose sense, something like a single frame of reference, such as the breath or body, in which one might observe change, or that Vasubandhu has something other than the direct observation of changing or momentary phenomena in mind when he refers to *vipaśyanā*.⁸⁶ Unfortunately, deciding which might be the case is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Vitarka and Vicāra

One of the more vexing issues in the modern *jhāna* debate has to do with the phenomenal referents of the *dhyāna* factors of *vitakka* and *vicāra*. How these terms are interpreted concerns the discursive, intentional and volitional qualities of the first *jhāna*, but it also concerns what distinguishes the *jhāna*-s as a special class of conscious states from ordinary states. Early Ābhidharmikas and later commentators like Vasubandhu and Buddhaghosa also struggled with the interpretation of these factors.⁸⁷ The problem is that in the Nikāyas and Āgamas *vitakka* and *vicāra* are explicitly defined in terms of speech, which might be taken to suggest that the first *jhāna* is not so very different from ordinary discursive consciousness. In the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta*, for example, the Bhikkhuni, Dhammadinnā identifies *vitakka* and *vicāra* as the conditions for speech (*vacīsamkhāra*).⁸⁸ Vasubandhu gives the same definition in the AKBh, explaining that the difference between the two has to do with their degree of subtlety.⁸⁹ The Nikāyas and Āgamas also commonly define *vitarka* and *vicāra* in terms of intention (*saṃkalpa*). This tracks with how Vasubandhu uses the term *vitarka* in some parts of the AKBh and his explanation of the two terms in the *Pañcaskandha*:

Vitarka is mental discourse (*manojalpa*) that searches about (*paryeṣaka*), a particular kind of volition (*cetanā*) and discrimination (*prajñā*) that is the grossness of mind. *Vicāra* is mental discourse that examines (*pratyaवेक्षका*), a particular kind of volition and discrimination that is the subtleness of mind.⁹⁰

⁸³ Shankman, p. 4.

⁸⁴ Gunaratana, “Should We Come Out of Jhana,” pp. 6-7; 15.

⁸⁵ Gunaratana, p. 6-7.

⁸⁶ See note 77 on the objects of the *prayoga*- and *darśana-mārga*.

⁸⁷ For an excellent summary of the various early interpretations of these terms, in the Pāli literature, in particular, see Lance Cousins, “Vitakka/Vitarka and Vicāra: Stages of *samādhi* in Buddhism and Yoga,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 35 (1992): 137-157. Also see Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, Kandy: BPS, 2010, pp. 75-78.

⁸⁸ M i.299 (MN 44).

⁸⁹ AKBh, ii.33a. *vitarkya vicārya vācaṃ bhāṣate nāvitarkeyāvicārya*.

⁹⁰ Tib.14b. Yaśomitra quotes the *Pañcaskandha* directly in the commentary on AKBh i.33 Śāstrī p. 72: *vitarka katamaḥ/ pratyaवेक्षको manojalpaścetanāprajñāviśeṣaḥ /yā cittasyaudārikatā / vicāra katamaḥ/ manojalpaścetanāprajñāviśeṣaḥ/ yā cittasya sūkṣmatā*. This is the same definition as found in the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*.

Here Vasubandhu defines *vitarka* and *vicāra* as kind of discursive activity that is both conative and cognitive⁹¹ and further specifies that while the discursive activity of *vitarka* involves zeroing in on an object, the discursive activity of *vicāra* involves subsequent examination of that object. Whereas the Theravāda Ābhidhamma redefines *vitakka* and *vicāra* when they serve as *jhāna* factors so that they are longer directly connected to discursive activity, Vasubandhu makes no such adjustment in the AKBh (or *Pañcaskandha*). Shortly after defining *vitarka* and *vicāra* as the conditions for speech, he refers to their role as *dhyāna* factors and argues (contra the Vaibhāṣika position) that because *vitarka* and *vicāra* merely refer to a relatively gross and subtle form of discursive or pre-verbal⁹² activity, they cannot be present in the same mind. The upshot of this is that, according to Vasubandhu, they are alternately rather than simultaneously present in *dhyāna*.⁹³ The notion that even as *dhyāna* factors, *vitarka* and *vicāra* refer to discursive or pre-verbal activity finds support in canonical references to the second *jhāna* as “noble silence” (*ariyo tunhībhāvo*)⁹⁴ or as involving the cessation of even wholesome intentions (*saṅkappa*).⁹⁵ However, the discursive activity that is contrasted with silence and intention need not be taken to imply full-blown conceptual activity in the form of an internal monologue. Following the *Pañcaskandha* definition, it might only refer to the conative impulse to seek out and observe an object as well as the ability to individuate an object (or its qualities), *viz.*, to see an object (or its qualities) as distinct from other things. While this would seem to depend on some implicit form of conceptualization, it need not entail any explicit labeling. In other words, it might seem *as if* there is no conceptual mediation.

Amongst modern practitioners, there is some debate as to how *vitakka* and *vicāra* might relate to the task of *vipassanā*. Insofar as *vipassanā* is typically described as a process of directing attention to and examining the characteristics of individual phenomena, it stands to reason that *vipassanā* might require precisely the kind of volitional and discursive activity described above. This seems to be something like what Thanissaro has in mind when he describes pulling back from the *jhāna* to engage in “thought” and “evaluation” (his translations for *vitakka* and *vicāra*) or the first *jhāna* (which has these factors) “piggy-backing” on the other *jhāna*-s.⁹⁶ Thanissaro describes this kind of analysis “an *almost* preverbal level of surveillance.”⁹⁷ By contrast, Gunaratana maintains that there is no discursive activity in a *vipassanā jhāna* (presumably, including the first *jhāna*):

Mindfulness is mindful of not letting words, concepts, ideas, logic, philosophy and psychology disturb the smooth running of *samādhi*. It does not get swept away with their verbal specifications. Attention simply keeps paying attention to whatever is happening

⁹¹ There is a tradition of reading the compound *manojaḷpaścetanāprajñāviśeṣaḥ* implying a disjunction, but I don’t think we can attribute this to Vasubandhu. See Karin Meyers, “Freedom and Self-Control: Free Will in South Asian Buddhism,” PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 2010, pp. 209-215.

⁹² Here we must read “pre-verbal” in the sense of anticipating verbal activity. Perhaps “pro-verbal” is better.

⁹³ The notion that *vicāra* is just a subtler form of the discursive or pre-verbal activity of *vitarka* is part of the logic of the fifth *dhyāna* or *dhyānāntara* found in both the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma.

⁹⁴ S ii.273.

⁹⁵ M ii.28.

⁹⁶ Shankman, p. 122.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 128. The emphasis is mine.

without verbalizing, conceptualizing and it makes sure that this is non-conceptual awareness. Mindfulness at the highest level does not use concepts.⁹⁸

It's hard to tell if these views are really so different from each other or just the result of different emphases. Whereas Thanissaro aims to explain the difference between a deeply absorptive *jhāna* and one with enough intentional space to engage in *vipassanā*, Gunaratana is trying to emphasize the difference between ordinary discursive activity or low level mindfulness and deeply concentrated *vipassanā*. Based on what little he says in the AKBh, it seems that Vasubandhu might agree with Thanissaro that *vitarka* and *vicāra* involve an almost preverbal level of surveillance, but he would not say that *vipaśyanā* requires this. After all, the ideal state in which to practice *vipaśyanā* is the fourth *dhyāna*, which is far removed from the activity of *vitarka* or *vicāra*. Looking at the development formula of the *dhyāna* factors, it is evident that it is the mindfulness (*smṛti*) and clear comprehension (*samprajñāna*) of the third *dhyāna* and the purified mindfulness (*smṛti-pariśuddhi*) of the fourth *dhyāna* that support *vipaśyanā*. One might argue that even purified mindfulness might require some implicit form conceptualization, but it is not clear whether the Vasubandhu of the AKBh would agree.⁹⁹

In order to avoid attributing discursiveness to *jhāna*, *vitakka* and *vicāra* get redefined in the Theravāda Abhidhamma, as the application of the mind (*cetaso abhiniropana*) to the object.¹⁰⁰ The *Visuddhimagga* explains that while *vitakka* continually strikes at the object, *vicāra* is sustained engagement with the object.¹⁰¹ The relationship between the two is then illustrated by a series of metaphors that seem to suggest two slightly different conceptions of the relationship between *vitakka* and *vicāra*. They are explained, on the one hand, in terms of the striking and sustained ringing of a bell or a bee seeking and then buzzing around a flower, and on the other, as the one hand that holds a dish while the other wipes it. These metaphors are rather different in that the former suggest a temporal progression from one mental activity to another and the latter, simultaneous activities. The latter gives some notion of how *vitakka* and *vicāra* might be distinctive factors in the same moment of consciousness, but the former two seem more like what Vasubandhu has in mind in the *Pañcaskandha*.

In the modern *jhāna* debate, advocates of deeply absorbed *jhāna*-s tend to argue that all the *jhāna*-s including the first do not involve any discursiveness or volition whatsoever and so tend to favor something along the lines of the *Visuddhimagga* definition of *vitakka* and *vicāra* as mental application. Others claim that the *jhāna*-s, especially the first but even the higher *jhāna*-s might involve some low-level discursiveness “in the background,” but that this does not interfere with concentration. Naturally, they are inclined to interpret *vitakka* and *vicāra* as implying a subtle discursiveness, a kind of discursiveness that may play a useful role in initially taking up and engaging with the object, but is no longer necessary once the mind is firmly engaged. Opinions differ as to whether such a low level discursiveness is conducive to *vipassanā*. Some interpreters simply regard this kind of discursiveness as a potential distraction or minor imperfection in concentration, but Thanissaro seems to take it to be an asset to *vipassanā*. I have

⁹⁸ Gunaratana, “Should We Come Out of Jhana to Practice Vipassana?” p. 14.

⁹⁹ At AKBh ii.24 (Pradhan p. 54) mindfulness is simply defined as non-forgetting (*sampramoṣa*) of the object.

¹⁰⁰ See Cousins 1992; Gunaratana 1985, pp. 49-59. Cousins 1992 (p. 139) offers an interesting explanation of the meaning of *vitakka* in relation to an eidetic rather than discursive paradigm for thought, which helps account for a closer relationship between the sutta emphasis on *vitakka* as thought or thinking and the Abhidhamma emphasis on *vitakka* as application

¹⁰¹ PTS ed. p. 142.

already suggested that Vasubandhu is not likely to agree with this. In fact, Vasubandhu clearly sees *vitarka* or *vicāra* as a potential problem. He defines the second *dhyāna* factor of inner tranquility (*adhyātmamprasāda*), as “the calm flowing (*praśāntavāhita*) of the mental series (*santati*) that results from the absence of the agitation (*kṣobha*) of *vitarka* and *vicāra*.”¹⁰² This calls to mind Ajahn Brahm’s understanding of *vitakka-vicāra* as the “wobble” of the first *jhāna*. As an advocate of a deeply absorbed style of *jhāna*, Brahm does not attribute the instability of the first *jhāna* to discursiveness, but rather to the conative qualities of *vitakka* and *vicāra*, to “involuntary control” in the form of an automatic movement towards (*vitakka*) and holding onto (*vicāra*) the bliss of *pīti* and *sukha*.¹⁰³ Given that Vasubandhu defines *vitarka* and *vicāra* as volitional as well as discursive, he might agree that the first *dhyāna* is disturbed by these volitional aspects of *vitarka* and *vicāra* (as well as their discursiveness), but does not directly connect attachment to *pīti* or *sukha* to the activities *vitarka* and *vicāra*.¹⁰⁴

Prīti and Sukha

Most of the debates between Vasubandhu and his Vaibhāṣika interlocutors over the *dhyāna*-s are about their ontology rather than their phenomenology. The one exception might be their debate over *prīti* and *sukha*. This debate concerns whether *sukha* is a bodily or mental sensation and indirectly, whether the five sensory consciousnesses are active in the *dhyāna*-s. This same debate (although typically with respect to *pīti* rather than *sukha* and auditory consciousness) is one of more decisive debates amongst modern practitioners. After all, a meditative state that is entirely cut off from the senses, such that there is no sound or awareness of the body (or taste or smell or sight),¹⁰⁵ would seem to be a very distinctive state, easy to distinguish from a state in which the sensory consciousnesses were engaged. Moreover, because it is impossible to observe the body with no sensory awareness of it, this would seem to decide whether *vipassanā* in the form of first foundation of mindfulness is possible in *jhāna*. Thus, modern advocates of *vipassanā* styles of *jhāna* typically understand the *jhāna*-s to involve bodily awareness and tend to interpret *pīti* and/or *sukha* as referring to bodily sensations. By contrast, advocates of more absorptive styles of *jhāna* tend to take the absence of bodily awareness and sound as definitional of *jhāna*.

Given that it would seem impossible to practice the first foundation of mindfulness without any bodily awareness, it is somewhat surprising to find that Vasubandhu’s Vaibhāṣika interlocutor insists that the five sensory consciousnesses are cut off in the *dhyāna*-s. His commitment to this position results in a rather elaborate hermeneutic strategy where he interprets *sukha* in the first two *dhyāna*-s as tranquility (*prasrabdhi*) and *prīti* as mental happiness (*saumanasya*).¹⁰⁶ But because there cannot be two feelings (*vedanā*) in the same moment of consciousness according to the Abhidharma, he claims that *sukha* is part of the *saṃskāra*-

¹⁰² AKBh: viii.9c; Śāstrī p. 893. The Vaibhāṣika describe *adhyātmamprasāda* as confidence (*śraddhā*) resulting from the conviction that the meditative state can be left behind.

¹⁰³ Shankman, pp. 172-3.

¹⁰⁴ He would also not attribute this only to *vitarka* and *vicāra*. According to the AKBh, any *dhyāna* which takes its own existence (*bhava*) as an object of enjoyment (*asvādāna*) is defiled (*kliṣṭa*) by thirst (*trṣṇā*). Any of the four *dhyāna*-s (and immaterial attainments) can be defiled, pure (*śubha*, *śraddhaka*) or untainted (*anāsrava*). The one exception is that Bhavāgra cannot be *anāsrava* owing to the weakness of perception there.

¹⁰⁵ No one seems to argue about these senses. It should also be noted that visual awareness wouldn’t be much of an issue since most modern Theravāda *jhāna* practice is with eyes closed.

¹⁰⁶ AKBh viii.9b.

skandha in the first two *dhyāna*-s, but is *vedanā* in the third *dhyāna*, where it refers to the ease (*sukha*) of the mental body (*manaskāya*).¹⁰⁷ Vasubandhu objects to this explanation, arguing that *sukha* is pleasant bodily feeling and *prīti* is happiness (*saumanasya*). He concedes to the principle that there cannot be two feelings in one and the same consciousness by explaining that like *vitarka* and *vicāra*, *prīti* and *sukha* are only present one at time.¹⁰⁸

It would be easy to read Vasubandhu's objection as just an extension of his general preference for a more straightforward, less theoretically elaborate reading of scripture. It is, after all, a little awkward to insist that the meaning of *sukha* should change in the course of the standard formula. But in the discussion that follows, it seems that the debate might concern the phenomenal properties of *dhyāna*. When asked how there can be bodily conscious in a *dhyāna*, the Dārṣṭāntika (who seems to be representing Vasubandhu's position here) maintains that there is a pleasant (*sukha*) sensation, owing to a wind that is produced by a particular *samādhi* and felt by the body.¹⁰⁹ The Vaibhāṣika suggests that this would amount to a deterioration (*bhraṃśa*) in concentration due to distraction by an external object, but the Dārṣṭāntika argues that this is not the case because this pleasant sensation is internal to the body and thus favorable (*anukūla*) to *samādhi*.¹¹⁰ At first blush, this debate does not look unlike the debate between modern practitioners who emphasize a totally absorptive style of *dhyāna* and those who emphasize focusing on pleasant bodily sensation¹¹¹ as a means of entering or deepening absorption and/or as a potential object for investigation. Although it is reasonable to suppose that a difference in styles of practice might play a part in informing this debate, the conversation soon turns to a rather abstract discussion about how to classify the sensation in question according to the soteriology of defilement.

Conclusions

What is perhaps most striking about the AKBh presentation of *dhyāna* in light of the modern debate is the way that it seems to take up some of the central concerns of modern practitioners only to deal with these concerns in a way that defies expectations. Whereas the most vocal parties in the modern debate agree that *vipassanā jhāna*-s have a changing object and involve sensory awareness, both Vasubandhu and the Vaibhāṣika agree that *samādhi* is single-pointed and the Vaibhāṣika insist that there is no bodily awareness in *dhyāna* despite the fact that they consider *dhyāna* the ideal state in which to practice the four foundations of mindfulness. This seems to suggest that:

1. Vasubandhu and his co-religionists had a very different understanding of what practices like the four foundations of mindfulness or *dhyāna* entail
2. that the ways in which their practices correlate with various styles of modern practice will be revealed upon further study, or
3. that they didn't have any conception of what they entail and/or were not particularly interested in the actual cultivation of these states.

¹⁰⁷ This is the explanation according to the *Vibhāṣāśāstra*, *Samyuktābhidharmahrdaya* and *Dharmaskandha*. See Kuan, Tse-Fu, "Clarification on Feelings in Buddhist Dhyāna/Jhāna Meditation" *Journal of Indian Philosophy* (2005) 33: 297.

¹⁰⁸ Śāstrī, p. 892.

¹⁰⁹ Śāstrī, p. 891.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Which they tend to call *pīti* instead of *sukha*.

Whatever the case, I think that it is a fruitful hermeneutic strategy to continue to test expectations based on modern Buddhist practice against the internal logic of the AKBh. Given the systematic structure of the path, we may be able to discover a theoretical coherence of the meditation system there.

A more difficult question, and one that I suspect we will not resolve, is whether Vasubandhu has any real or imagined phenomenal referents in mind when he talks about the states in which the path is traversed. He tells us a great deal about how the *dhyāna*-s fit in the structure of the path, why they are recommended and how they function soteriologically, but tells us very little about what these states are like. Where we might hope to get greater clarification about the phenomenal properties of these states, the debate typically concerns points of ontology, theory or scripture that have little bearing on the basic phenomenal constitution of these states. We might conclude from this that Vasubandhu simply does not have any phenomenal referents in mind when he talks about the *dhyāna*-s or the other meditative states. Another possibility is that Vasubandhu does have distinct phenomenal referents in mind, but just a very different set of concerns about these states. In either case, examining the ways in which apparently phenomenal description enters into and then recedes from the debate should help us come to a better understanding of the intellectual project of the AKBh. In the process, I suspect that we are likely to learn as much or more about our own understanding of the relationship between practice and theory.