The Pleasant Way: The \textit{Dhyāna}-s, Insight and the Path according to the \textit{Abhidharmakośa}

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\textbf{Introduction}  

In the past decade or so, Western Theravāda Buddhists have become increasingly interested in the practice of the \textit{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.\footnote{For an overview and analysis of the different approaches of contemporary \textit{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, \textit{The Experience of Samādi: An In-depth Exploration of Buddhist Meditation}. Boston: Shambhala, 2008.} Theravāda meditation teachers disagree as to:

1. Whether there is awareness of bodily sensations or sounds in some or any of the \textit{jhāna}-s.  
2. Whether the feelings produced in the \textit{jhāna}-s are best characterized as mental or physical.  
3. Whether there is any discursive thought in the first or other \textit{jhāna}-s.  
4. Whether there is any intentionality\footnote{“Intentional” in the phenomenological sense of awareness of an object/content.} or only non-dual experience in \textit{jhāna}.  
5. Whether there is any volition in \textit{jhāna}.  
6. Methods of entry into and of refining \textit{jhāna}.  
7. Whether movement from one \textit{jhāna} to another is intentional or simply the result of deepening concentration.  
8. Whether it is recommended or even possible to practice \textit{vipassanā} while inside a \textit{jhāna}.  
9. Whether the object of the \textit{jhāna} is a single (and therefore, conceptual) object or changing phenomena (and therefore, might include \textit{dhamma}-s).  
10. Whether \textit{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 \textit{dhyāna}-s in Vasubandhu’s \textit{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 \textit{vipaśyanā} 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
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 Āhidarmikas 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 taking about the same phenomena. This is what Robert Sharf argues in “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience.” 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. He does not deny that persons who undergo rigorous meditation training might “experience something that they are wont to call sotāpatti, jhāna, or satori,” but says:

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 Sarvāstivāda 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.

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6 Ibid.
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 states\(^\text{10}\) of consciousness whose phenomenal attributes vary depending on these factors.\(^\text{11}\) 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 Abhidharmikas 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*.\(^\text{12}\) 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*\(^\text{13}\) 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.\(^\text{14}\) In other words, these

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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](http://www.leighb.com/jhana_fr.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 Brahmavamso (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.
Jhānas have a strongly non-dual or non-intentional flavor. There is no sensory awareness and virtually no discursive thought or volition. 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” between awareness and its object. 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 know individual mental factors as they arise and pass away in the four principle jhānas as well as the first three formless attainments.

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.

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 inner 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

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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-rvavathita), 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 (nevasaṅgānaṁsaṅgāyatana) and the cessation of perception and feeling (saṅhāredayatanorhā) in order to observe (samanupassati) the dhamma-s that were present in these states.
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. 27 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 Gunaratana 26 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 hindrances 28 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 concentration 31 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:

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22 This has to do with the absence of vitakka and vicāra. I will say more about this below.
23 A tradition renowned for a mixed samatha-vipassanā style of practice and a suspicion of the commentarial tradition.
24 Shankman, p. 122.
25 Bhante Gunaratana is a Sri Lankan monk who has taught in the United States since the late 1960’s.
27 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.
28 Gunaratana, “Should We Come Out of Jhāna to Practice Vipassanā?” p. 3.
29 Note that without bodily awareness, it would be impossible to practice the first foundation of mindfulness as described in the Satipaṭṭhāna sutta.
30 Specifically, from the suppression of the hindrances:
31 Shankman, p. 119.
32 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 sankāra-khandha/samskāra-khandha. I will discuss these issues below.
33 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 steepes, 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."

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, 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. 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

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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, Ghoṣaka (a representative of the western Vaibhāṣikas) 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 Ghoṣaka-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). 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, 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). This does not require deep insight into the four characteristics of phenomena or the other four noble truths; it just requires that the lower state be apprehended as undesirable or gross in relation to the higher state.

Although one does not need to cultivate dhyāna in order to gain direct comprehension (abhisamaya) of the four noble truths or to abandon the defilements associated with the form and formless realms, the AKBh defines dhyāna in terms of its ability to cause practitioners to know (prajānanti) things as they really are (yathābhūta). 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 (dṛṣṭadharmasukhāvihāra). Vasubandhu explains that, “The path in the four dhyāna-s is a pleasant (sukha) route (pratipad), because it is effortless (ayatna) owing to the dhyāna factors and their balance of calm (śamatha) and insight (vipaśyāna).” 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 vipaśyānā. There is a deficit of śamatha in anāgāmya and dhyānāntara and a deficit of vipaśyānā in the ārūpya-s.

39 Namely, desire, hostility, pride and ignorance. These involve a mistaken apprehension of or unhealthy orientation towards an existent (vastu) 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 (avastu) object (i.e., the self). AKBh vi.56b; Śāstra 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; Śāstra p. 766. The higher state is seen as “peaceful, excellent, as a way out” (sāntita praṇītata, niṣsaranta). The lower is seen as coarse (audārīka), laden with suffering (dukkhā) and as thick wall (śhilābhattīka) [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” (abhisamaya) 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; Śāstra p. 870.
45 AKBh viii.1d; Śāstra p. 879.
46 Caturdhāṃkasūtra mārgaḥ suṅkha praṭipad anāgāparigrahaḥ samathavipaśyānasamatābhāyāmayatvāhitvāt. AKBh vi.66a; Śāstra p. 794.
47 AKBh vi.66cd; Śāstra 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 (Śāstra 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, 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. By contrast, the AKBh does not correlate speed with method. Vasubandhu says that the relative speed with which the path is traversed depends on the strength of the faculties, in particular, wisdom (prajñā). The person with sharp faculties (tiṣṇendriya) will traverse the path faster than the person with weak faculties (mrddvindriya), but for either the path will be pleasant or difficult based depending on whether or not he cultivates dhyāna.

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 ṇāna-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-ṇāṇa-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 dukkha of the “difficult” path(s) as the mental or physical discomfort associated with effort (yatna) 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 himself realized the four noble truths and saw the destruction of the taints (āṣrava), viz., became liberated, in the fourth dhyāna. In fact, the entire conceptual structure of the

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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 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.
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 defilements 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.

Śamatha, Vipaśyanā 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. The first stage of the path (the “aids to merit” or punyabhāgīya) 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. These stages, the nirvedha-bhāgīya-s (“aids to penetration”) are included under the rubric of the fourth foundation of mindfulness, mindfulness of dharms. The last of these four stages (laukiāgradharmā 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 moments 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 vipaśyanā and the path of cultivation with samādhi or dhyāna, but the dhyāna-s (which are particular instances of samādhi) 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. According to the AKBh, the nirvedha-bhāgīya-s and the path of seeing require the attainment of anāgamyas, 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 the path of seeing as a candidate for the fruition status of a sakrīdāgamin 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) anītya, duhkha, śūnya, anātman, 2) hetu samudaya, prabhava, pratyaya, 3) nirodha, śanta, prāṇīta, niḥṣarana, 4) mārga, nyāya, pratipatti, nairṛtyāni. 

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.


60 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.
(samvega). 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.

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. Compared to the forty samatha objects mentioned in the Visuddhimagga, the AKBh only discusses two: meditation on the loathsome (aśubha-bhāvanā) and mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasampriti). 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 (adhitarka). These meditations can be used to cultivate dhyāna and anāgāmya, respectively, and the AKBh variously describes them as entrances (avatāra) to cultivation (bhāvanā), the means by which there is the gaining of samādhi and accomplished (nippanna) with the aim of attaining vipaśyanā. Vipaśyanā itself is defined as the four foundations of mindfulness. Yasomitra explains that the defilements (kleśa) cannot be abandoned except by wisdom (prajñā) resulting from the perfection of samādhi.

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

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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, Samyuktābhidharmahādaya: 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 vipaśyanā, 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 dhammas 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 vipaśyanā 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 vipaśyanā-carita who enjoys study, especially of the Abhidharma.\(^{76}\) There is much more to be said about vipaśyanā, 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 vipaśyanā according to the AKBh.

**Overview of Dhyāna Factors**

The fact that the AKBh is clearly of the view that one can and should practice vipaśyanā 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 (āṅga).\(^{78}\) 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

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\(^{74}\) This is also the case with the analysis of the four elements, which are included in the mokṣabhbāgīya in the *Saṃyuktābhidharmadhāraya*.

\(^{75}\) 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 (sva-lakṣaṇa 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 (abhisaṃaya) 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)\(^\text{79}\) as well as another formula that emphasizes the positive qualities that develop and predominate in each successive dhyāna (development formula).\(^\text{80}\)

Elimination formula:
1\(^{\text{st}}\) dhyāna: vitarka, vicāra, prīti, sukha
2\(^{\text{nd}}\) dhyāna: prīti, sukha
3\(^{\text{rd}}\) dhyāna: sukha
4\(^{\text{th}}\) dhyāna: [upekṣā]

Development formula:
1\(^{\text{st}}\) dhyāna: vitarka, vicāra, prīti, sukha, cittaikagrata.
2\(^{\text{nd}}\) dhyāna: adhyātmasamprasaḍa, prīti, sukha, cittaikagrata
3\(^{\text{rd}}\) dhyāna: [saṃskāra]-upekṣā, smṛti, samprajñāna, sukha, samādhi
4\(^{\text{th}}\) 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 (subha) or wholesome (kuśala) mind.\(^\text{81}\) 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 samatha and vipaśyana. 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 ekaggata.\(^\text{82}\) Shankman proposes different translations of ekaggata 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 cittaikagrata 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 cetasa ekodibhāvaṇ 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. 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.” Although jhāna is attained via focus on a single object, according to Gunaratana, namely, the light nīmitta, the object of vipassanā within jhāna is the subtle changes that take place in the body and mind. 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. 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. 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 Cūlavedalla Sutta, for example, the Bhikkhuni, Dhammadinnā identifies vitakka and vicāra as the conditions for speech (vacāsakārahā). Vasubandhu gives the same definition in the AKbh, explaining that the difference between the two has to do with their degree of subtlety. The Nikāyas and Āgamas also commonly define vitakka and vicāra in terms of intention (sāmkalpa). This tracks with how Vasubandhu uses the term vitakka in some parts of the AKbh and his explanation of the two terms in the Pañcaskandha:

Vitakka is mental discourse (manojalpa) that searches about (paryēṣaka), a particular kind of volition (cetanā) and discrimination (prajñā) that is the grossness of mind. Vicāra is mental discourse that examines (pratyaveksaka), a particular kind of volition and discrimination that is the subtleness of mind.

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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 darsana-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 saṃādhī in Buddhism and Yoga,” Indo-Iranian Journal 35 (1992): 137-157. Also see Bhikkhu Anālayo, Satipatthāna: The Direct Path to Realization, Kandy: BPS, 2010, pp. 75-78.
88 M.ii.299 (MN 44).
89 AKbh, ii.33a. vitarkya vicārya vācaṃ bhāṣate nāvītarkyāvīcārya.
90 Tib.14b. Yaśomitra quotes the Pañcaskandha directly in the commentary on AKbh i.33 Śāstrī p. 72: vitarka katamah/ pratyaveksako manojalpaścetanāpraṇāvīṣeṣaḥ yā cittasyaudārikatā / vicāra katamah/ manojalpaścetanāpraṇāvīṣeṣaḥ/ 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 connative and cognitive 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 Abhidhamma 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-verbal 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. 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) or as involving the cessation of even wholesome intentions (saṅkappa). 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. Thanissaro describes this kind of analysis “an almost preverbal level of surveillance.” 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
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.

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. The Visuddhimagga explains that while vitakka continually strikes at the object, vicāra is sustained engagement with the object. 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

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 (*adhyātmasamprāśaṇa*), as “the calm flowing (*praśāntavāhita*) of the mental series (*santatti*) that results from the absence of the agitation (*kṣoṣha*) of *vitarka* and *vicāra*.” 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 meditation that can be left behind.

As an advocate of a deeply absorbed style of meditation, he might agree that 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*. 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*.

**Pīti 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 *pīti* 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), 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 *pīti* as mental happiness (*saumanasaya*). But because there cannot be two feelings (*vedanā*) in the same moment of consciousness according to the Abhidharma, the he claims that *sukha* is part of the *samskāra-***.

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102 AKBh: viii.9c; Sāstṛi p. 893. The Vaibhāṣika describe *adhyātmasamprāśaṇa* as confidence (*sṛaddhā*) 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* an *vicāra*. According the AKBh, any *dhyāna* which takes its own existence (*bhava*) as an object of enjoyment (*avvādāna*) is defiled (*kliṣṭa*) by thirst (*trṣṇā*). Any of the four *dhyāna*-s (and immaterial attainments) can be defiled, pure (*sukha, sṛddhiḥaka*) or untainted (*anāsrava*). The one exception is that Bhāvaṅga 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).\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 Dārśāntika (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.\textsuperscript{109} The Vaibhāṣīka suggests that this would amount to a deterioration (bhramśa) in concentration due to distraction by an external object, but the Dārśāntika argues that this is not the case because this pleasant sensation is internal to the body and thus favorable (anukūla) to samādhi.\textsuperscript{110} At first blush, this debate does not look unlike like the debate between modern practitioners who emphasize a totally absorptive style of dhyāna and those who emphasize focusing on pleasant bodily sensation\textsuperscript{111} 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 Vaibhāṣīka agree that samādhi is single-pointed and the Vaibhāṣīka 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.

\textsuperscript{107} This is the explanation according to the Vibhāṣāstra, Samyuktābhidharmahṛdaya and Dharmaskandha. See Kuan, Tse-Fu, “Clarification on Feelings in Buddhist Dhyāna/Jhāna Meditation” Journal of Indian Philosophy (2005) 33: 297.
\textsuperscript{108} Śāstrī, p. 892.
\textsuperscript{109} Śāstrī, p. 891.
\textsuperscript{110} ibid.
\textsuperscript{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.