

**CESSATION
EXPERIENCES
— & —
THE NOTION OF
AWAKENING**

*An Investigation into its
Theory and Practice*

AGGACITTA BHIKKHU

Published for free distribution by
Theravada Buddhist Council of Malaysia

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First printing, November 2023: 1,000 copies

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English edited by *Visuddhācāra Bhikkhu* (Sections 1 & 2) and
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Layout by *TerraCreative*

Illustration by *Pontian Cent Art Studio* and *freepik.com*

Photo of Aggacitta Bhikkhu at waterfall in Dusun Tekali, Hulu Langat,
taken by *Rāhula Bhikkhu (Mexico)* and edited by *Sumana Cheong*

Printed by *BS Print (M) Sdn. Bhd.*

Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia
Aggacitta Bhikkhu, 1954-

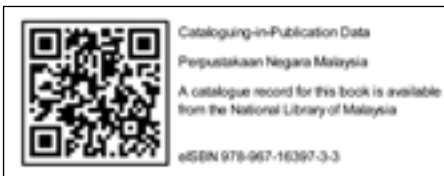
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

CESSATION EXPERIENCES AND THE NOTION OF AWAKENING: AN
INVESTIGATION INTO ITS THEORY AND PRACTICE/
Aggacitta Bhikkhu.

ISBN: Paperback 978-967-16397-2-6
eBook 978-967-16397-3-3

1. Meditation--Buddhism. 2. Spiritual life--Buddhism. 3. Buddhism.

I. Title. 294.3444



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INTRODUCTION

Preamble

In 1994 while I was staying in Shwe Taungong Paṇḍitārāma, Yangon, I wrote an article in answer to a question posed by a Malaysian nun, Sister Vivekanandī, who was then meditating there. It was later published in 1995 as a booklet by Buddhist Wisdom Centre, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, entitled *Cessation Experiences and the Notion of Enlightenment: Tentative Findings of a Preliminary Research*.

That article was mostly based on the theory and practice of the Mahasi tradition, with just a few cursory examples from the suttas without any proper referencing. As the title shows, it is an inquiry about cessation experiences and their relationship to enlightenment (or awakening, as I now prefer to call it).

The title also implies that a sequel will follow, which is long overdue. Finally, after completing a workshop tour on “Entering the Stream and Beyond” in the first half of 2023, I felt ready to fulfil this desideratum, so this is the result.

Structure

This compilation is arranged chronologically into three sections comprising my previous writings related to this subject. It has been some 28 years since the publication of my first work, and it is to be expected that my views have changed with deeper experience and wider learning. For this reason, I thought it would be interesting for the reader to track the changes, although I think my cautious attitude in seeking the truth remains unchanged.

Section 1 comprises a slightly edited version of my original booklet on cessation experiences published in 1995. As mentioned in the Preface, it is based on the theory and practice of the Mahasi tradition which derived much of its theoretical framework from the *Visuddhimagga* (*The Path of Purification*) which, in turn, is very Abhidhammic in its approach. This section includes a short article that was excerpted and published separately in *Vipassanā Tribune* cautioning judgement on the external behaviour of practitioners who might well be highly attained but have not been able to correct unseemly character traits brought forward from past lives.

Section 2 consists of an article that I wrote for *Vipassanā Tribune* in 1995. It was written in a narrative

format based on my conversation with a senior forest monk with much experience in the various meditative methods of Myanmar. It is also based on my readings of related literature in Burmese.

Section 3, which is the last in this compendium, is the actual sequel to my first booklet on cessation experiences with abundant sutta references, cited according to the online DPR (Digital Pāḷi Reader) for the Pāḷi sources and to the respective books from Wisdom Publications (WP) and Buddhist Publication Society for the English translations. Note that sometimes the numbering of the corresponding suttas in DPR and the WP books may be different.

Buddhist Terms

I made some changes to my English translations of certain Pāḷi terms and retained some in the older works. This apparent inconsistency needs an explanation.

Throughout this compilation, I consistently use ‘awakening’ instead of the more popular ‘enlightenment’ because the former is closer to the Pāḷi term *sambodhi*, a noun derived from the root *budha*, which conveys the meanings of waking up, realisation, knowing, blossoming, opening up. In fact

the commentaries explain *sambodhi* as “waking up from the continuous slumber of the defilements, knowing the four noble truths, gnosis, opening up.”

I retained ‘concentration’ for *samādhi* in my earlier works but used ‘composure’ in Section 3 because those earlier works were based on the commentarial idea that *jhāna* is a meditative absorption attainable only by a very focused and concentrated attention on the object of meditation. However, many years ago I realised that such an idea conflicted with the suttas (pointed out in Section 3) and have since consistently used ‘composure’ for *samādhi* in my later talks and writings.

The commentarial usage of the term *Ariya* (Noble One) as someone who has attained any of the four levels of awakening was retained in my earlier writings which were mostly based on commentarial ideas anyway. However, in Section 3 I avoided such terms and preferred to use *sekhas* (trainees) and *asekhas* (non-trainees, the adept) instead.

Pāḷi compound words are hyphenated in Sections 1-2 but not in Section 3 because I adopted a more scholastic approach for the latter, targeting the more learned practitioner who would be familiar with long Pāḷi terms.

English Translations

For convenience, I have mostly used the English translations of the Pāli texts from Wisdom Publications and the abbreviation of the respective book and page numbers are given whenever used. In some places where I prefer an alternative rendering, I have provided my own and given an explanation in the footnote. For the English translation of the *Visuddhimagga*, I used the page numbers in the *The Path of Purification* from Buddhist Publication Society. Unattributed translations are my own.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my special gratitude to a few individuals who had been particularly supportive: Sister Vivekanandī of Penang catalysed the writing of Section 1 (originally entitled “Cessation Experiences and the Notion of Enlightenment: Tentative Findings of a Preliminary Research”) by asking, at an opportune time (in 1994), searching questions on cessation experiences and supramundane attainments; Venerable Visuddhācāra of Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre read through the draft

and pointed out a few apparently inconsistent statements; and Venerable Sujīvo of Santisukhārāma, Kota Tinggi, not only gave some valuable suggestions but also volunteered to get it published in 1995 as well.

The subtitle “Tentative Findings of a Preliminary Research” was used because I intended, at some later date, to elaborate on the subject by including case accounts, references from scriptural and other authoritative sources, and conclusions drawn from an impartial, objective and critical perspective.

For this current compilation of my writings on the subject of cessation experiences, my gratitude goes to Teh Cheah Lee and Eric Chan for transcribing the contents from the hardcopies of the original writings published in 1995; Ayyā Dhammadinnā for reminding me of the long-overdue sequel; CS Tan for vetting the drafts and his useful suggestions; Sumana Cheong for providing the page references for the English translations and Ghaṭikāra Loo for double-checking them; Āyasmā Ariyadhammika for sharing his observation about ‘fruition attainments’ reported by meditators nowadays; Āyasmā Ṭhitavijjo for vetting Section 3 and the Appendix and pointing

out an inaccurate statement; my long-time editor Looi Sow Fei for polishing the English of my new writings for this book; CS Tan, Koay Saw Kean Boon and Kong Peoy Leng for their meticulous proofreading and finally to Joan Wong and Beng Chee of TerraCreative and illustrator Cent for their talents and hard work to produce this beautiful book.

Aggacitta Bhikkhu
October 2023

SECTION 1

CESSATION EXPERIENCES AND THE NOTION OF AWAKENING

*Tentative Findings of a
Preliminary Research*

*To the sincere, humble and earnest yogi
who will rest content
not with mere cessation experiences
but only with the utter cessation
of defilements.*

INTRODUCTION

Yogis¹ who meditate in order to eradicate defilements and thus put an end to saṃsāric suffering are prone to encounter cessation experiences during the course of their practice. This makes them wonder whether they have attained awakening or not, since meditation teachers refer to the experience of nibbāna as a cessation of mental and material phenomena.

With the view of helping honest, humble, eager yogis clear their doubts, or at least save themselves from the hazard of overestimating their own practice, I propose to discuss different types of cessation experiences and successive stages of awakening, including different types of negative mental states (defilements, etc.) eradicated at each respective stage.

1 In Myanmar 'yogi' means a meditator, not a hathayoga practitioner or a 'Hindu' yogi.

WHAT IS A CESSATION EXPERIENCE?

“probably means that an apparent loss of consciousness had occurred during meditation for a split second ...”

When a yogi reports that he has had a cessation experience, he probably means that an apparent loss of consciousness had occurred during meditation for a split second, a few moments, a few minutes or even a few hours depending on circumstances.

This apparent loss of consciousness could have occurred gradually as one's strength of awareness slackens, or abruptly when mindfulness is crystal clear.

In the former case one wakes up feeling rather drowsy, but in the latter case rather refreshed and alert. On 'regaining' consciousness one's sitting posture could still be as upright and stiff as ever in both cases, although in the former case it is likely to be stooped and limp. It is the latter case that we are interested in here for there is no doubt that the former is a case of unmindful drowsiness.

At this point, I would like to pose an interesting question: The Abhidhamma says that as long as one is alive, mind and matter are arising and passing away all the time; and if there is mind, there must be consciousness and the object which it is conscious of—so can anyone (yogi or non-yogi) really be unconscious?

The answer to the question is: Yes, anāgāmis and arahants who have mastered the eight mundane attainments² can suspend the occurrence of mental phenomena and mind-born material phenomena³ for as long as seven days. This state is called *nirodha-samāpatti* (cessation attainment) in the commentaries; in this section I would like to call it Real Cessation Experience (RCE).

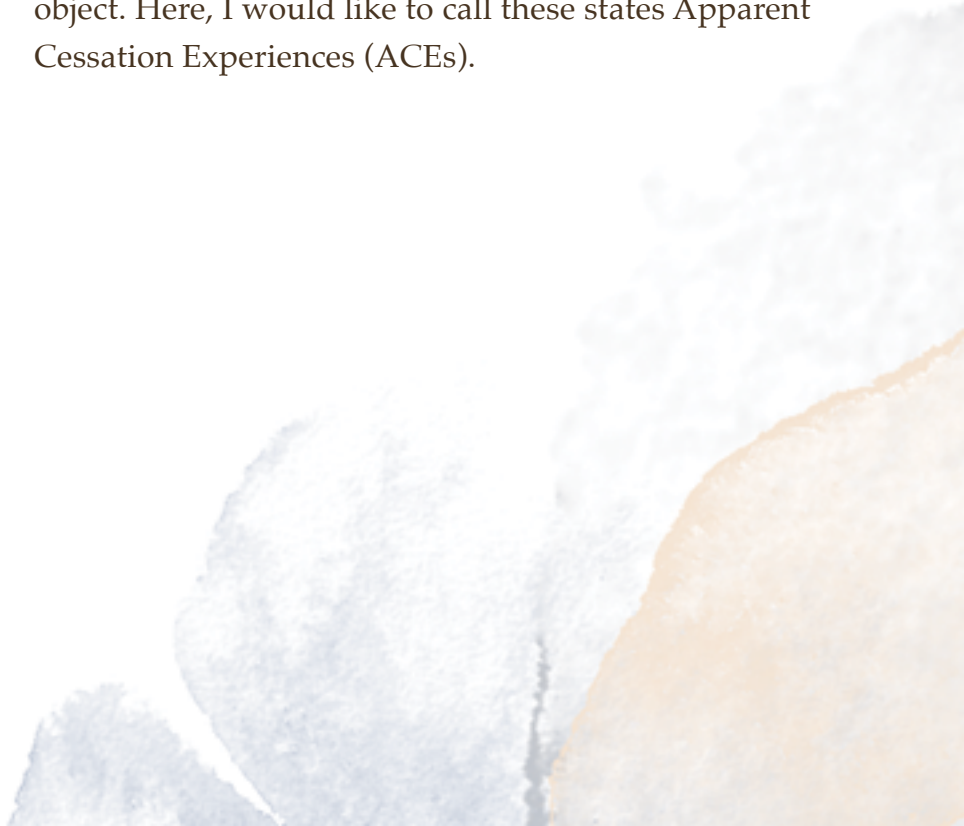
Please note that anāgāmis and arahants who practise **only** vipassanā, without doing samatha and mastering the eight mundane attainments, can never have such RCEs, not to mention pure vipassanā yogis who are neither anāgāmis nor arahants.

2 The eight mundane attainments are the four rūpa jhānas and the four arūpa jhānas which can only be attained by the practice of samatha meditation, i.e. kasiṇa.

3 Only mind-born matter is suspended; matter produced by temperature, kamma and nutriment continues to arise and pass away incessantly.

If such is the case, then another interesting question crops up: But nowadays, pure samatha yogis as well as pure vipassanā yogis report having cessation experiences, don't they? What then are they referring to?

As I mentioned earlier, they are probably referring to an **apparent** loss of consciousness during meditation because they could not be aware that they **were being** conscious then, although in some cases they could recall, after 'waking up' from that state, that they had been conscious of a particular object. Here, I would like to call these states Apparent Cessation Experiences (ACEs).



TYPES OF CESSATION EXPERIENCE

“It is of utmost importance not to be deluded by it into thinking that it is jhāna, phala-samāpatti or nirodha-samāpatti because if one thinks so, one will frequently get into bhavaṅga and thus will never be able to make further progress.”

Before proceeding to explain why yogis are unable to be conscious of being conscious during an ACE, let me first list the different types of cessation experiences, and tabulate some of their corresponding features:

1. BACE (S) Bhavaṅga Apparent Cessation
Experience of samatha yogis.
2. BACE (V) ... Bhavaṅga Apparent Cessation
Experience of vipassanā yogis.
3. JACE Jhāna Apparent Cessation Experience
of samatha yogis.
4. MACE Magga Apparent Cessation
Experience of Ariyan vipassanā
yogis.
5. PACE Phala Apparent Cessation Experience
of Ariyas.
6. RCE Real Cessation Experience (*nirodha-
samāpatti*) of anāgāmis and arahants
who have mastered the eight
mundane attainments.

Comparative Features of Cessation Experiences

TYPE OF CESSATION EXPERIENCE	STATE OF MIND			DURATION AND FREQUENCY
	BEFORE	DURING	AFTER	
BACE (S)	Mindfulness watching the meditation object, e.g. kasina image is clear but not very strong.	Apparent loss of consciousness, i.e. one is not aware that the mind is conscious of a particular object.	Cannot recall that one had been conscious of a particular object although mindfulness may be fresh and alert.	A few moments, minutes or even hours. Can occur innumerable times in a single life.
BACE (V)	Mindfulness watching objects at any of the six sense doors can be fuzzy and weak, or clear and alert.	same	same	same
JACE	Mindfulness watching the meditation object, e.g. reflex image of kasina is intense, crystal clear and appears to converge or dive into it.	same	Can recall vividly that one had been totally absorbed in watching the meditation object, e.g. reflex image of kasina.	From a split-second to seven days non-stop. Can occur innumerable times in a single life.

<p>MACE</p>	<p>Mindfulness watching one of the three signs in an object at one of the six sense doors is balanced and crystal clear. The noting of objects suddenly speeds up at an alarming rate.</p>	<p>same</p>	<p>Can recall vividly that one had, after the noting mind had stopped, been conscious of an object which is not mind or matter, but is subtle, clear, peaceful and incomparable.</p>	<p>A split second only. Can occur for a maximum of only four times throughout saṁsāra.</p>
<p>PACE</p>	<p>Mindfulness watching one of the three signs in an object at one of the six sense doors is balanced, sharp and crystal clear. There is no sudden acceleration of noting.</p>	<p>same</p>	<p>Should be able to recall that one had been conscious of an object that is not nāma-rūpa, but is subtle, clear, peaceful and incomparable.</p>	<p>From a split second to seven days non-stop. Can occur innumerable times in a single lifetime.</p>
<p>RCE (Nirodha-samapatti)</p>	<p>Watching consciousness of third arūpa jhāna, then apparent loss of consciousness as fourth arūpa jhāna occurs for a split second, i.e. JACE occurs.</p>	<p>Absolutely no consciousness at all.</p>	<p>PACE occurs for a split second followed by BACE. Emerging from that the mind is inclined, bent towards nibbāna, the cessation of mind and matter.</p>	<p>From a split second to seven days non-stop. Can occur innumerable times in a lifetime.</p>

Bhavaṅga Apparent Cessation Experience (BACE)

Bhavaṅga is a Pāḷi word often translated as ‘life continuum’. *Bhava* means ‘life’ and *aṅga* means ‘factor’. *Bhavaṅga* is the factor of life that provides continuity to a sentient being’s stream of consciousness. For human beings it is a type of resultant consciousness produced by wholesome (good) kamma done in a past existence. It has, as its object, one of the following:

1. The intention or volition (*cetanā*) involved when a good deed was done in a past existence, e.g. the thought or intention of offering robes to the Saṅgha.
2. The image or vision of the good deed done, e.g. the vision of oneself offering robes to the Saṅgha.
3. The image or vision of one’s present existence, e.g. the vision of one’s mother, or place of birth.

Now, this type of wholesome resultant consciousness when it occurs:

- for the first time in one’s present existence is called rebirth consciousness (*paṭisandhi-citta*),

- during waking hours,⁴ meditation, or deep sleep, is called life-continuum consciousness or sub-consciousness (*bhavaṅga-citta*), and
- for the last time in one's present existence is called death consciousness (*cuti-citta*).

Whatever it is called—whether rebirth consciousness, *bhavaṅga*, or death consciousness—it has the same object, i.e. it is conscious of one of the three objects mentioned above every time it occurs.

When one is having a deep, dreamless sleep, *bhavaṅga* consciousness is arising and passing away continuously. Yet when one awakes, feeling refreshed and satisfied (perhaps even saying to oneself, “Wow, what a nice and peaceful sleep I just had!”), one is totally unable to recall what one had been conscious of. There were no dreams, and one had been sound asleep—totally ‘unconscious!’

4 According to the Abhidhamma, consciousness at the six sense doors occurs in a fixed linear series (i.e. one after another in a definite order) and one series is ‘connected’ to another by the occurrence of *bhavaṅga* consciousness. In other words, between the acts of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking, *bhavaṅga* consciousness occurs, although the ordinary person is unable to notice it.

Why is that so? There are three plausible reasons for this:

1. Bhavaṅga consciousness is a mundane resultant consciousness, and so the mental factors (especially *saññā*—the power of registering an object in the mind so that it can be recalled from memory) that arise together with it are weak.
2. The object of bhavaṅga consciousness is a past one first perceived just before death in one's immediate past life.
3. The mind that awakes from a prolonged bhavaṅga state is weak, or has not been sufficiently trained to recollect what had occurred during that state.

That vipassanā mindfulness cannot be aware of bhavaṅga consciousness and its object is evident among pure vipassanā yogis. Even those who maintain sharp continuous mindfulness throughout their waking hours can bear testimony that although their mindfulness can be so precise as to be aware of the last rising or falling movement of the abdomen just before falling sound asleep at night, and the first rising or falling as soon as they awake in the morning, it cannot recall that the mind had been conscious of an object during sound sleep.

However, it seems that samatha yogis who have mastered the eight mundane attainments and are engaged in developing the psychic power of recollecting past lives can perceive their own rebirth consciousness and its object.

This difference between the pure vipassanā yogi and the samatha yogi shows that if the mind is properly trained, it can still be aware of a resultant consciousness in spite of the first two reasons stated above.

The Visuddhimagga (a meditation manual)⁵, in discussing the process of attaining jhāna for a yogi meditating on the earth kasiṇa⁶, states that in the domain of *upacāra-samādhi* (access or threshold concentration) the mind is not strong or well balanced enough to keep focusing on the reflex image of the kasiṇa for a long time, although it has succeeded in inhibiting the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*);

5 The Visuddhimagga (Pāḷi), aka The Path of Purification, is a treatise on Buddhist doctrine written by Buddhaghosa in approximately the 5th Century in Sri Lanka. <https://www.encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Visuddhimagga>

6 A kasiṇa is a disc-like device for the yogi to focus on as his meditation object.

so it sinks into bhavaṅga every now and then.⁷

This behaviour is in contrast to fixed concentration (*appanā-samādhi*), which can occur uninterruptedly (i.e. without sinking into bhavaṅga) for the whole day and night.

Pure vipassanā yogis do not concentrate on just one particular object all the time like samatha yogis; so they cannot attain access (*upacāra*) or fixed (*appanā*) concentration in the strict sense of the words. But they are mindful of objects occurring at the six sense doors, and if their mindfulness is strong and continuous enough, they can attain momentary concentration (*khaṇika-samādhi*) which is equivalent to *upacāra-samādhi* in the sense of having the power to inhibit the five hindrances. Therefore, as in the domain of *upacāra-samādhi*, the mind in the domain of *khaṇika samādhi* too is liable to sink into bhavaṅga in a noticeable manner.

7 To students of Abhidhamma this may not be so strange because, as already mentioned (see [Footnote 4](#)), bhavaṅga consciousness spaces or connects the linear series of consciousness appearing at the six sense doors. But this statement is significant because it shows that in the domain of *upacāra-samādhi*, the mind can drop into the bhavaṅga state for exceptionally long periods of time in a noticeable manner.

Mahasi Sayadaw, in his book ဝိပဿနာရှုနည်းကျမ်း (Manual of Vipassanā Meditation), observed that there can be an apparent loss of consciousness when the following mental states are predominant:

- rapture, intense interest (*pīti*)
- calmness and peace (*passaddhi*)
- excessive concentration (*adhika-samādhi*)
- equanimity, balanced state (*upekkhā*)
- restlessness (*uddhacca*)
- path and fruition experience (*magga-phala-vīthi*).

What happens when bhavaṅga consciousness occurs one after another uninterruptedly for an extended period of time? It is conscious of one particular object (as mentioned on [page 22](#)) only, but the yogi is unable to recall the consciousness and its object when he awakes from the state (for reasons mentioned on [page 24](#)); so he thinks he has temporarily lost consciousness. But his idea of unconsciousness is more apparent than real.

Furthermore, this drop into bhavaṅga can take place very abruptly even when mindfulness is sharp and clear, watching the arising and passing away of mental and material phenomena at the six sense doors.

On emerging from bhavaṅga he is unable to recollect the bhavaṅga consciousness and its object, but he can vividly remember noting *nāma* and *rūpa* at the six sense doors just before it happened. He may also feel refreshed and alert as he has emerged from a very peaceful and restful state, and his mindfulness continues to be as sharp as before, or even better.

Under such circumstances, it can be said that this yogi has indeed experienced cessation of the noting mind and the normal objects of noting (i.e. *nāma* and *rūpa* at the six sense doors), BUT consciousness has not ceased as in *nirodha-samāpatti* (cessation attainment), and *nibbāna* has not been realised yet because bhavaṅga consciousness has been occurring uninterruptedly with a particular object of the past life.

The duration of such BACEs can last from a few moments to many hours depending on circumstances such as strength of mind, practice and attachment. Yogis who think that it is a good thing to have such a BACE tend to encounter it frequently and for long periods of time; some even train their minds to develop skill in entering this state for prolonged hours, thinking that it is the *phala-samāpatti* (fruition

attainment) of awakened ones. Admittedly, being in a state of apparent unconsciousness of this nature is better than sitting unmindfully thinking of this and that; but this cannot be called '*bhāvanā*' (which means cultivating, developing or ennobling the mind) because bhavaṅga is a resultant consciousness produced by past kamma. Therefore, if one goes into this state frequently, one is just taking a rest from doing good or bad kamma.

Every yogi who has achieved some degree of concentration, whether khaṇika or upacāra-samādhi, is bound to encounter such BACEs. It is of utmost importance not to be deluded by it into thinking that it is jhāna, phala-samāpatti or nirodha-samāpatti because if one thinks so, one will frequently get into bhavaṅga and thus will never be able to make further progress in one's meditation, whether vipassanā or samatha. In other words, the yogi should not incline his mind towards this state—he should not think that it is a good thing to get BACE—instead he should make a **firm resolution** not to fall into this state, but to continue practice ardently in order to realise the Dhamma which he has not realised yet.

Jhāna Apparent Cessation Experience (JACE)

The samatha yogi trying to concentrate on one particular object, e.g. kasiṇa, is aware that he is being conscious of it at the start, and even when he has achieved upacāra-samādhi, because the consciousness (*citta*) during that meditative state does not occur uninterruptedly for more than seven moments at a time, i.e. one linear series lasts for only seven units of consciousness⁸ at the most, before sinking into bhavaṅga for a few moments.⁹ On emerging from bhavaṅga, the mind either continues to watch the kasiṇa image or reflects that it has been watching it. Even though the mind in the domain of upacāra-samādhi is strong enough to inhibit the five hindrances, nevertheless it still belongs to the sensual sphere (*kāmāvacara*); and it can go back and forth

8 The Abhidhamma says that at the snap of the fingers, millions of units of consciousness have arisen and passed away. Yet the vipassanā yogi who has trained his mind proficiently enough is able to perceive the arising and passing away of consciousness.

9 The duration of bhavaṅga consciousness between each linear series is unpredictable. Here for the sake of convenience, the normally unnoticeable bhavaṅga spacing is mentioned. However, it should be remembered, as mentioned at [page 28](#), that a BACE can last for many hours. See also [Footnotes 4](#) and [7](#).

watching the reflex image, and reflecting on itself watching the reflex image. The speed of the mind is so fast that this activity may not normally be noticed, but nevertheless the yogi is aware that he is conscious of the meditation object.

When *upacāra-samādhi* reaches its apex and flicks into *appanā-samādhi* (fixed or absorption concentration), the mind behaves in an unusual manner that becomes immediately noticeable to the yogi. Instead of just watching the reflex image, it suddenly dives or converges into it; and at that moment there is no duality: no knower and the known, no mind and object. It appears as if the mind has stopped or ceased. This becomes even more prominent when *appanā-samādhi* occurs uninterruptedly for a few hours, because, unlike the mind in the domain of *upacāra-samādhi* where it can watch the meditation object for a while and then reflect on the fact that it is watching it, the mind in *appanā-samādhi* is totally absorbed in one single object without any break in between—for a linear series of this state can last for hours without being spaced by a single *bhavaṅga* at all. According to the commentaries, an adept yogi can sit absorbed in JACE for as long as seven days without any interruption at all.

Upon emerging from JACE, however, even if it had occurred for the very first time (lasting for a split second only), the yogi can vividly recall that the mind had 'plunged' into and was totally absorbed in watching a very clear reflex image of the *kaṣiṇa*. If he has trained the mind well enough, he can even review the *jhānic* factors which had occurred in the consciousness during JACE.

Now this is in stark contrast to the state of mind emerging from BACE, where the yogi is totally at a loss as to what had happened before awakening. The plausible reasons for this inability have been discussed in the previous section (see [page 24](#)). Here I shall explain why the yogi emerging from JACE is capable of recollecting the past consciousness, its mental (*jhānic*) factors and its object.

This yogi has invested much time and effort in developing his mind to the level of *appanā-samādhi*; which means that he has transcended the sensual sphere (*kāmaṇḍava*) consciousness to produce a mind (charged with the power of *samādhi*) belonging to the fine material sphere (*rūpāṇḍava*). This background serves as a very strong foundation and influence

that is responsible for conditioning the occurrence of a sharp, concentrated and powerful series of consciousness—in spite of the fact that it belongs to the sensual sphere—capable of reviewing what had happened during JACE upon emerging from it. Furthermore, the mental factors (including *saññā*—the faculty of registering an object of consciousness so that it can be recalled from memory) present in the *appanā* consciousness, as well as its object (e.g. reflex image of *kasiṇa*), have been deliberately developed to an enormous extent. These factors contribute to the ease and clarity of the act of reviewing.

For more details on the practical/experiential aspects of *upacāra*- and *appanā-samādhi*, I would like to recommend you to listen to the excellent talk: “Access and Fixed Concentration in Tranquillity Meditation” given by Venerable Sujivo Liew in 1993. JACE can only be attained by *samatha* yogis concentrating on one single object of meditation. It is definitely beyond the reach of pure *vipassanā* yogis. *Samatha* yogis with little learning may be deluded into thinking that their JACE is a *nibbānic* experience.

Magga Apparent Cessation Experience (MACE)

The Visuddhimagga maintains that the path (*magga*) and fruition (*phala*) are consecutive mind-moments that happen upon the attainment of awakening. The following explanation tries to link practice with theory based on this model.

Whether or not the yogi has first established himself in samatha meditation, i.e. developed upacāra- or appanā-samādhi, his practice of vipassanā meditation makes use of *khaṇika-samādhi* (momentary concentration) to observe mental and material phenomena (*nāma* and *rūpa*) occurring at the six sense doors. As he gains proficiency in doing this, he goes through the various stages of purification¹⁰ by attaining progressively deeper levels of vipassanā insights until he is able to observe all phenomena arising and passing away with equanimity and balance. At this stage of vipassanā insight called *saṅkhārupekkhā-ñāṇa*, whatever objects arise—whether

10 The “Nyanzin” discourse is about the unfolding of the different levels of purity and insight. Since an English version called *The Progress of Insight* by Mahasi Sayadaw is already available, I shall not go into details on the subject here.

good or bad, painful or pleasurable, loathsome or desirable—can be observed impartially as bare *nāma-rūpa* arising and passing away, and exhibiting the three characteristics of existence. Usually, the yogi can then sit for many hours without changing posture or shifting any part of his body because it is light, supple and free from painful sensations, and his mind remains calm, balanced and alert in spite of long hours of sitting without getting up.

It is during this state that, if circumstances are conducive,¹¹ his noting of objects suddenly speeds up at a very alarming rate, and is abruptly cut off for a split second before a thought arises as to what had happened.

To give a simile—it is as if one is walking calmly and steadily on a smooth, even path when suddenly, without any warning at all, one falls over a five feet terrace and lands on even ground again wondering what on earth had happened! Just so, the yogi reflects

11 Conducive circumstances are maturity of *pāramis* and spiritual faculties (faith, insight, effort, concentration and mindfulness) and the seven suitabilities, viz. a) dwelling, b) alms resort or the place where one's food is obtained, c) proper Dhamma discussion, d) teacher, e) climate, f) food and g) posture for meditation.

on what had happened, and can vividly recall the sequence of events that led to this MACE:

1. There was an alarming speed up of noting.
2. The noting mind was cut off.
3. The mind was then conscious, for a split second, of an object that was not *nāma* or *rūpa* but very subtle, yet clear, peaceful, incomparable and unconditioned.
4. When the noting mind came back it resumed observing phenomena at a rather slower pace and grosser level, i.e. the noting mind as well as the noted objects were not as fine or subtle as they had been before the apparent loss of consciousness.

Some yogis experience an alarming speed-up of the noting process without the noting mind being cut off. Some experience the mind going 'unconscious' for a split second without noticing anything special before and after the event. Others just go 'unconscious' for many minutes or a few hours. These are not MACEs. To think that they are is very regrettable because it is a delusion that will undermine one's personal practice, good behaviour and state of mind, not to mention the danger of misleading other people if one were to teach meditation.

A yogi who has really achieved MACE as described above for the first time is considered a stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*),¹² a Noble One who has attained the first stage of awakening. After that experience, PACE will occur frequently when the yogi is meditating. The yogi's meditation teacher will then instruct the yogi to train his mind to enter PACE at will and to maintain its duration for successively longer periods. This is called "practising to gain skill in fruition attainment (*phala-samāpatti*)". When the meditation teacher is satisfied with the skill of the yogi in getting PACE, he may ask him to make a resolution to "relinquish the highest Dhamma he has

12 Some yogis encounter the MACE as described above but they are not impeccable in the five precepts and do not exhibit other qualities of a Noble One (Ariya) as mentioned in the Pāli scriptures (see section on "[The Notion of Awakening](#)"). So what can we make out of that? Frankly, I would like to humbly confess that I do not know, and that I am still in the process of making research into this matter. But my attitude, at this moment, is to view possibilities of the first and second MACE as ambiguous because one can deceive oneself into thinking that one is awakened; and so it is better to strive on until the third MACE (*anāgāmi-magga*) because at that stage, sensual desire and aversion (unpleasant states of mind and heart, e.g. anger, sadness, disappointment, impatience, frustration, etc.) are supposed to be uprooted, and on that point, one cannot possibly deceive oneself (See also [page 48](#)).

attained, and to strive for the Dhamma he has not yet attained.”¹³

Meanwhile, the yogi notices that his practice has undergone significant changes: When he first started meditating, it was difficult to concentrate the mind to see *nāma* and *rūpa* arising and passing away. Then after the MACE,¹⁴ as soon as the mind was concentrated, all forms and concepts disappeared, and every object observed was reduced to *nāma* and *rūpa*. Sometimes small minute particles arising and passing away at fantastic speed could be noticed. When he was practising to gain skill in getting PACE, he would get into *saṅkhārupekkhā-ñāṇa* not long after he had concentrated the mind.

13 This is a tacit way of saying, “I relinquish going into *phala-samāpatti* and wish to strive for the higher path.” Mahasi Sayadaw was very cautious of criticism from others and repeatedly warned his meditation teachers never to directly declare any yogi’s attainment, *supramundane* or otherwise. Moreover, he was also acutely aware of the harm that could be done to an aspiring yogi should the meditation teacher inaccurately or mistakenly make a wrong declaration. For this reason, his meditation teachers were expressly told to reserve their judgements of their yogis’ attainments and instead send them to listen to his recording of the “*Nyanzin*” discourse about the unfolding of the different levels of purity and insight. While listening, the qualified yogis can decide for themselves where they are at or what they have attained.

14 Not immediately after, but after resuming normal practice.

But now that he has made this new resolution (to relinquish the highest Dhamma, etc.) he does not get to saṅkhārupekkhā immediately, even when his mind has become concentrated. To his surprise, he finds that he has to go through the various stages of insight starting from *udayabbaya-ñāṇa* (insight into the rise and fall of phenomena), and deal with many painful sensations and experiences again, this time worse than before (when first practising for MACE). With much effort and time,¹⁵ he finally arrives¹⁶ at saṅkhārupekkhā again. Then, if circumstances are favourable,¹⁷ he encounters for the second time MACE as described above. If the experience is genuine, the yogi is now a sakadāgāmi.

This whole process of practising for PACE and higher MACE is repeated¹⁸ until the highest goal, arahantship is attained. There can only be one MACE for each of the four stages of awakening, not

15 I am making a general statement here for it differs according to individual effort, pāramis, etc.

16 After getting to saṅkhārupekkhā-ñāṇa he may still get PACE in spite of his resolution to relinquish it. This is because he has not fully cut off longing for or delight in it. When this happens, he must firmly resolve to relinquish it again and again.

17 See [Footnote 11](#).

18 Repeated twice—once for anāgāmi MACE and once again for Arahatta MACE.

more. This means that throughout a sentient being's saṃsāric existence, genuine MACEs can occur for a maximum of four times only. PACE, however, can occur for indefinite times and duration (up to seven days at a stretch) for the corresponding Ariya.

Phala Apparent Cessation Experience (PACE)

In the Visuddhimagga this experience is called fruition attainment (*phala-samāpatti*). It can only be encountered after a yogi has had a genuine MACE as described above. Its occurrence can be deliberate (due to an *adhiṭṭhāna*—resolution—made for it to happen), or involuntary, where it just happens by itself without the yogi's intention. Usually, after the yogi has had a genuine MACE, it occurs frequently as little sudden gaps in the process of noting, i.e. sudden, abrupt stoppings of the noting mind which may also appear to be sudden short moments of apparent unconsciousness. The state of mind before its occurrence is sharp, alert, balanced mindfulness of all nāmas and rūpas arising and falling away at any of the six sense doors because the yogi is in saṅkhārupekkhā-ñāṇa at that time.

There is no sudden acceleration of the rate of noting (as in MACE) but just a gap in the noting process. After the gap has occurred the yogi may, or may not, review what had happened. Most yogis do not, and they just go on noting objects as usual. Those who do reflect should be able to recall that after the noting mind had stopped, they were conscious of an object that was not *nāma* or *rūpa*, but was subtle, yet clear, peaceful, incomparable and unconditioned. Then the mind came out of the state and resumed noting objects as usual.

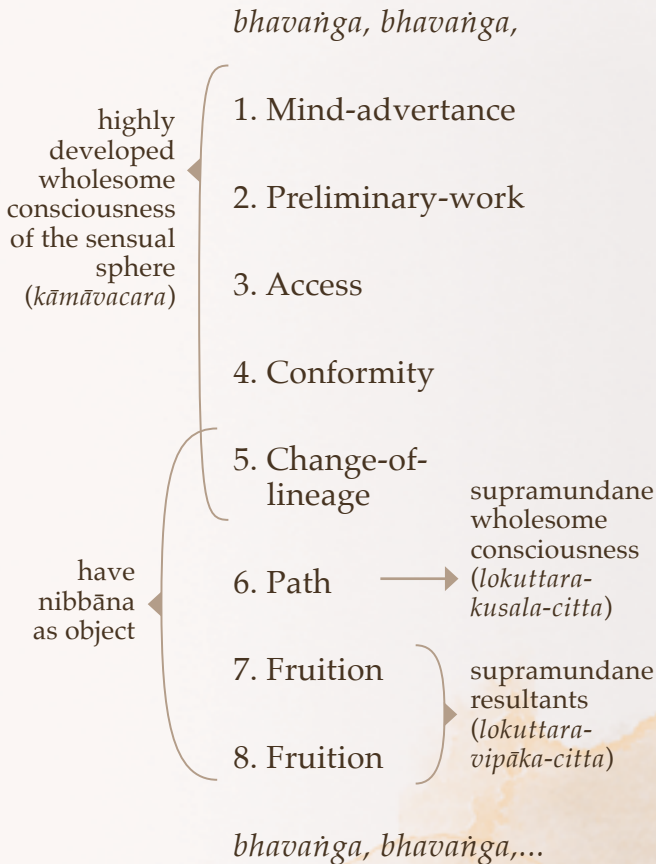
When the meditation teacher notices, by listening to the yogi's report, that he is getting PACEs after a genuine MACE, he may instruct him to make a series of resolutions as mentioned in the previous section (pages 37, 38). The duration and frequency of PACE are indefinite as mentioned at the end of the last section (page 40).

The majority of consciousness during a MACE¹⁹ are highly developed wholesome *cittas* while all (with the exception of the first mind-advertance resultant *citta*²⁰) of that during a PACE are resultants,

19 See infographic on next page.

20 And the three or four successive units of conforming consciousness belonging to the sensual sphere. These do not take *nibbāna* as object but observe *nāma* and *rūpa*.

Abhidhamma Analysis of the MACE



though supramundane, produced by the path consciousness (*magga-citta*) of the previous MACE. As such, *phala-citta*, (together with its mental factors, especially *saññā*, the faculty of registering its object so that it can be recalled to memory) is not as powerful as *magga-citta*. This may be a plausible reason why reflection on a PACE after its occurrence may not be as clear as that on a MACE.²¹

MACE and PACE described here are according to the view of meditation teachers of the Mahasi tradition. Abhidhammic explanations of some of their features are mine. I am well aware that there are serious discrepancies in the notion of attainment described above because some yogis who are supposed to be ‘awakened’ do not seem to exhibit the behaviour expected of a Noble One as mentioned in the Pāli scriptures. For that reason, I am continuing further research into this matter by more personal practice, study, and interviews with other yogis and meditation teachers of the Mahasi and other traditions as well (see also [footnote 9](#)).

21 Yogis who get genuine PACEs can tell the difference between that and BACE, but yogis who just get BACEs do not know what a real PACE is like; so they cannot tell the difference. Not only that, but they even think that their BACE is PACE, and they suffer as a result of that delusion.

Real Cessation Experience (RCE)

As mentioned at the beginning of this work, RCE is called cessation attainment (*nirodha-samāpatti*) in the commentaries, and to qualify for it the yogi must first be an anāgāmi or arahant. This means that on three separate occasions, genuine MACEs must have occurred for a yogi to attain anāgāmihood, and on four separate occasions,²² in the case of arahantship.

In addition to that, the yogi must have also mastered the eight mundane attainments, i.e. getting and maintaining the duration of JACE at will for each of the four rūpa jhānas and four arūpa jhānas.

After that, he has got to practise getting into the first rūpa jhāna, emerging from it, and observing the mental factors accompanying the consciousness that had occurred during JACE in terms of anicca, dukkha and anatta. Then he goes into the next higher jhāna, emerges from it, and repeats the vipassanā observation. This process is repeated for each successive jhāna (first rūpa jhāna to fourth rūpa jhāna, first arūpa jhāna to second arūpa jhāna).

22 During the Buddha's time when people had extraordinary pāramis, it was possible to get four MACEs in one sitting and thus become an arahant. Nowadays, one has to work very hard to get just one MACE, not to mention three or four!

After entering into the third arūpa jhāna and emerging from it, he must do four preliminary duties:

1. Resolve that his personal belongings not in direct contact with his body during RCE may not be destroyed by fire, etc. or be stolen.
2. Resolve that he would automatically get up from RCE should the Saṅgha expect him to turn up for some community affair.
3. Resolve that he would automatically get up from RCE should the Master (Buddha) expect him to come for some discourse, instruction, etc.
4. Determine to see that his life span does not end before the expiry of the RCE duration he is expecting to maintain.²³

After doing this fourfold preliminary duty, he enters into the fourth arūpa jhāna for a split second, and it is then that his mind, together with all mental factors and matter produced by the mind, really ceases. This actual stopping of consciousness can

23 Only a brief description is given here so that the reader can have a rough idea of what it takes to practise for RCE (nirodha-samāpatti).

last for a maximum duration of seven days non-stop, depending on circumstances (see [Footnote 11](#)).

By now, it should be abundantly clear that RCE (*nirodha-samapatti*) is definitely out of the province of pure-vipassanā yogis who do not do samatha, or even samatha-vipassanā yogis who have yet to attain genuine MACE and JACE.

For a comparative summary of the corresponding features of the different types of CEs, see chart on [page 20, 21](#).



THE NOTION OF AWAKENING

*“For what is the point of
being awakened
if the defilements are not
uprooted?”*

In Theravāda Buddhism, the notion of awakening is directly connected to the eradication of defilements,²⁴ and subsequently to liberation from the suffering of saṃsāric existence.

Let me elaborate: Ignorance makes beings blind to the true nature of existence (which is really nothing more than nāma and rūpa exhibiting the three characteristics of anicca, dukkha and anatta), and deludes them into thinking that there can be real, lasting happiness or comfort in the world. Due to defilements rooted in ignorance, beings pursue this ephemeral and illusive happiness, and in the process

24 In the Pāli scriptures, negative, unwholesome states of mind are classified and called by various names, viz. fetters, clinging, pollution, floods, tendencies, etc. Here, to make things simple, I shall just use the general term “defilement” to refer to any of such negative, unwholesome states.

generate good and bad kamma, which is the cause for perpetuating saṃsāric existence.

Vipassanā meditation helps to peel off layer after layer of ignorance so that the yogi can gain personal insight into the true nature of reality. When this happens, he is no longer deluded into thinking that there can be any sort of lasting happiness in phenomena which arise and pass away all the time without stop. As such, defilements such as greed, hatred and delusion do not arise in the course of his practice of continuous mindfulness, particularly at the deeper levels of purification and insight. Nevertheless, this inhibition or suspension of defilements is only temporary; for if he stops practising, or is negligent in being mindful, they will crop up again, sometimes even more intensified than before.

When the yogi has a genuine MACE for the very first time, however, certain defilements are uprooted for good, and there is a striking change in his character because he has become a stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*): a Noble One who has attained the first stage of awakening.

As he continues further practice to attain higher stages of awakening (see [pages 38-40](#)),

he will eradicate successively finer defilements corresponding to the respective stages until he becomes an arahant—when there will be no more defilements left to be uprooted—although certain character traits (see [pages 57-59](#)) may still manifest because of inattentiveness.

Below, I shall list the types of defilements eradicated at the corresponding stage of awakening, as well as general virtues common to all Ariyas, so that the honest, sincere yogi can check for himself whether or not he has really become a Noble One according to the standards set down by the Pāli scriptures—for what is the point of being awakened if the defilements are not uprooted? I think that would only defeat the very purpose of vipassanā meditation.

In fact, the uprooting of defilements is instrumental in shortening saṃsāric suffering because, as I mentioned at the beginning of this subsection, defilements are the motivating force behind kamma, and kamma is the energy that perpetuates saṃsāric existence. Thus, having eradicated certain defilements corresponding to the respective stages of awakening,

- the sotāpanna has a maximum of only seven more lives to live in the sensual realm
- the sakadāgāmi has only one more life in the sensual realm
- the anāgāmi, without coming back to the sensual realm, will be reborn in the brahma world
- the arahant will live until the end of his present existence before being totally liberated from saṃsāric suffering.

Moreover, the uprooting of defilements is also responsible for reducing and eventually eliminating mental stress and suffering in the minds of Ariyas. As long as one has the five aggregates to take care of, no one, not even the Buddha, can escape from physical suffering like bodily discomfort, pain, illness, old age and death. Unawakened worldlings, especially non-meditators, have to struggle with multiple suffering—physical and mental—but Noble Ones, because they have eradicated certain defilements, can reduce and, in the case of anāgāmis and arahants, absolutely eliminate mental stress and tension even in the face of bodily pain and suffering.

So if you think that you have had a couple of genuine MACEs or PACEs you might be interested

in checking to see whether the relevant defilements have really been eradicated or not.

The list given below does not claim to be totally exhaustive, and I am quite sure I shall have to add more as I continue further research; but for the time being I think it is quite comprehensive as most of it is extracted from the Visuddhimagga.

Defilements Eradicated by the Sotāpatti-magga

(First MACE)

1. Wrong view that there is an unchanging, everlasting entity called soul, self, etc. in the five aggregates.
2. Doubts regarding the authenticity of:
 - a. the Buddha—the Perfectly Self-awakened One who discovered the way of practice to eradicate the defilements and thus be liberated from saṃsāric suffering,
 - b. the Dhamma—the way of practice taught by the Buddha, Path (MACE), Fruition (PACE) and nibbāna, and
 - c. the Saṅgha—the community of Noble Ones who followed the teachings of the Buddha and attained the various stages of awakening.

3. Clinging to the belief that by merely following certain practices which do not include the Noble Eightfold Path (i.e. vipassanā meditation), one can uproot defilements and thus reach nibbāna, total liberation from saṃsāric suffering.
 4. Sensual desire
 5. Aversion
 6. Other defilements
- } that will cause rebirth
in the lower realms
7. Defilements causing the five precepts to be broken. (This means that an Ariya does not have to 'observe' the five precepts because they are automatically established in him. The intention to break any of them does not arise at all, not to mention the act of breaking it.)
 8. Envy or jealousy (of others more fortunate than oneself).
 9. *Macchhariya* (stinginess, possessiveness and competitiveness combined)—it is the displeasure at and unwillingness to give away to or share with others one's possessions (dwelling, benefactors, gain, knowledge) or virtue (fame).
 10. Favouritism—the making of unjust decisions or judgements due to prejudice, anger, delusion or fear. [For monks this is mostly concerned with a) the distribution of requisites donated to the Saṅgha, and b) the

interpretation of the doctrine and discipline (*Dhammavinaya*).]

11. Intentionally committing a vinaya offence, e.g. accepting money and using it to buy things, eating after noon, eating food that has not been offered, etc. (This is for bhikkhus and bhikkhunī nuns only.)

Virtues of a Sotāpanna

*[The Seven Great Reflections—discoursed by the Buddha himself]*²⁵

If a sotāpanna takes a temporary break from worldly responsibilities and retreats to a secluded place for meditation, he may, on reflection, arrive at the following realisations:

1. He is not overcome by obsessive defilements that will prevent him from seeing things (nāma and rūpa) as they really are (i.e. their arising and falling away without stop).
2. His mind becomes concentrated and cooled of the defilements soon after he starts meditating. (This is in contrast to the situation when he first started to practise before getting his first genuine MACE, where it was rather difficult to keep the mind from wandering off to

25 In Kosambiya Sutta (MN 48). Here, this is my English paraphrase of Mahāsi Sayadaw's explanation in Myanmar.

other objects and make it concentrate on the (primary) object of meditation.)

3. There cannot be any yogi outside of the Buddha Sāsana who is awakened as he is (because outside the Buddha Sāsana there is no practice comprising the Noble Eightfold Path, no vipassanā meditation).
4. Though he may commit a misdeed, he is incapable of concealing his fault from others, i.e. pretending to be innocent. (For monks, this means that if he should find out that he had unintentionally committed a vinaya offence, he would immediately and openly confess it to a fellow monk and resolve to be extra careful in future so that he would not make the same mistake again.)
5. Though he may be willing to help fellow renunciants with their chores, his mind is sharply inclined towards the practice of sīla, samādhi and (vipassanā) paññā.
6. If someone is giving a talk on Dhamma or Vinaya in a language he understands, he is deeply interested, pays full attention, and listens carefully.
7. He comprehends the meaning and theme (or sequence) of the talk, and experiences rapture because of that.

Note:

Although these seven virtues were specifically attributed to a sotāpanna by the Buddha himself, it must be remembered that they should be even more intensified and well-established in the hearts of those Noble Ones who have attained higher stages of awakening, viz. sakadāgāmi, anāgāmi and arahant.

Defilements Eradicated by the Sakadāgāmi-magga

(*Second MACE*)

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sensual desire 2. Aversion 3. Other defilements | } | <p>that will cause more than one rebirth in the sensual realms</p> |
|--|---|--|

Defilements Eradicated by the Anāgāmi-magga

(*Third MACE*)

1. Sensual desire (i.e. desire for objects and experiences associated with the five sense doors).
2. Aversion (i.e. displeasure in the mind including anger, fear, sadness, disappointment,

depression, frustration, sorrow, anguish, mental pain, heart-break).

3. Malicious talk meant to separate friendship and cause disunity.
4. Coarse or vulgar speech meant to hurt another.
5. Remorse (for wrong doing done and good deed not done).

Defilements Eradicated by the Arahatta-magga

(Fourth MACE)

1. Desire for rebirth in the rūpa brahma world.
2. Desire for rebirth in the arūpa brahma world.
3. Conceit or pride (superiority complex, inferiority complex, equality complex and all egocentric thoughts).
4. Restlessness.
5. Ignorance (about the true nature of reality, especially the dukkha and anatta aspect).
6. Sloth and torpor (but an arahant can also be sleepy due to environmental (or climatic), bodily and medical conditions).
7. Lack of moral shame.
8. Lack of moral dread.

9. Frivolous gossip (talk which does not conduce to worldly benefit, jhāna, magga, phala, nibbāna).
10. Wrong effort.
11. Wrong mindfulness.
12. Wrong concentration.
13. Wrong liberation.
14. Wrong knowledge (meditative).
15. Covetousness.

ASSESSMENTS

Character Traits

Character traits are little habits or idiosyncrasies peculiar to each person, something that makes us differentiate between one individual and another, in spite of the fact that every being is made up of the same nāma and rūpa. Only the Sammāsambuddha can uproot character traits but not other arahant disciples, not even Pacceka Buddhas. Thus, although the Great Disciples of the Buddha had become arahants they retained their respective character traits. For example:

- Venerable Sāriputta had a very unmonkish habit of jumping over puddles of muddy water because he had been a monkey for many many lifetimes in the past.
- Venerable Piliṇḍavaccha had the rude habit of calling out “Hey Outcast (*vasala*)!” to monks and laymen alike because for the last five hundred existences he had been a snobbish brahmin.
- Venerable Belaṭṭhasīsa, the preceptor of Venerable Ānanda, destroyed the stupa of a late bhikkhunī at the cemetery where he was staying because every evening other bhikkhunis (belonging to the Gang of Six) would come and lament over her death, thus disturbing his peace of mind.
- Venerable Kassapa was a very stern monk and he scolded Venerable Ānanda after the Buddha’s demise because many of Venerable Ānanda’s disciples had disrobed.

To a critical external observer, the speech and actions of the Noble Ones mentioned above would seem to be offensive and censurable and would, indeed, cast doubt over the authenticity of their attainments. The fact, however, is that they were

arahants whose behaviour was not motivated by defilements, though admittedly influenced by character traits. It seems, therefore, that defilements and character traits, although appearing similar in their expressions, are actually different from each other.

How do we draw the line between one and the other? On the one hand, an outspoken observer judges and criticises a Noble One by his outward conduct at the risk of committing *ariyūpavāda-kamma* (an act of insulting a Noble One) which obstructs his own spiritual progress and rebirth in a happy realm. On the other hand, a yogi who overestimates his own practice may justify all his misdeeds by attributing them to the influence of character traits rather than admit that the relevant defilements have not really been eradicated; and he does so at the risk of terminal self-deception. Obviously, the line is rather fuzzy, especially in the case of the yogi who thinks he has had one or two MACEs.

Perhaps by exercising more caution and discretion in judging others by their outward behaviour, and being humble and honest with ourselves and our own practice, we may be able to fare well in this matter.

Whether or not others are really awakened is not OUR problem but theirs. OUR problem is whether we are really awakened or not. Accordingly, we have to look inwards—not outwards—by checking to see whether or not the relevant defilements which are supposed to have been uprooted still arise, and by persevering in meditation until the highest goal is reached.

In other words, each of us has to draw our own fine line between the potency of defilements yet to be uprooted and the influence of character traits by using the Straight Edge of Self Honesty and the Sharp Pencil of One-pointed Mindfulness.

The Disadvantages of Overestimating One's Practice

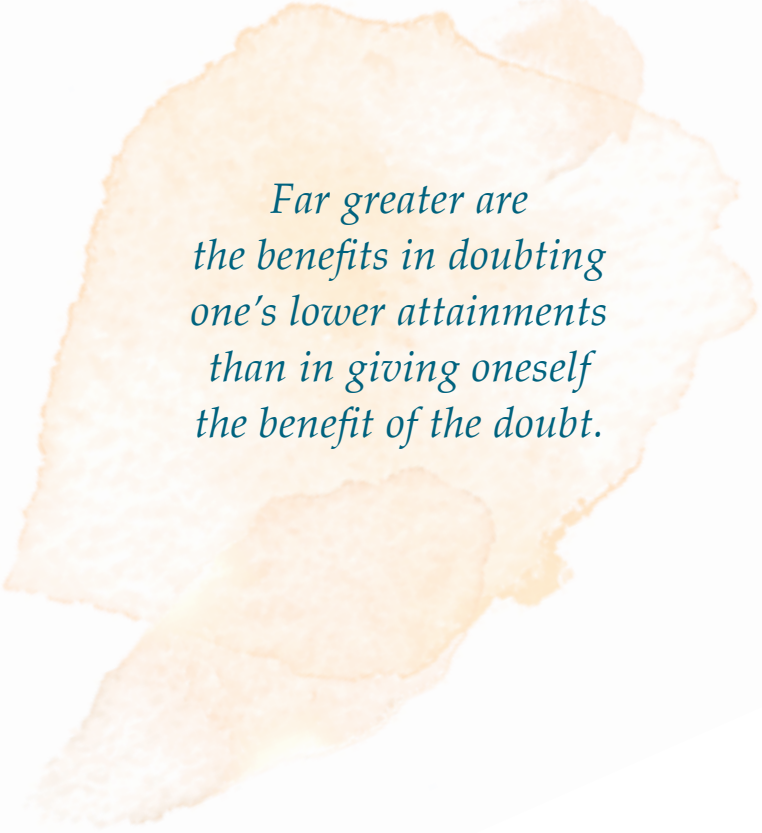
1. One may not really be awakened.
2. One stops practice to do missionary work.
3. One misleads others into walking the wrong path.
4. One becomes proud, haughty and overconfident.
5. One is liable to reject the authority of the Pāli scriptures because one's defilements have not really been eradicated.

6. One may suffer from terminal self-deception and thus miss the chance of really becoming awakened.
7. One cannot attain higher stages of awakening.
8. One does not obey the words of the Master who said: “Do not rest content with lesser attainments, but strive on till you reach the highest goal.”

The Benefits of Doubting One’s Attainment

1. One may in fact be awakened.
2. One keeps on practising.
3. One does not mislead others.
4. One remains humble and patient.
5. One accepts the authority of the Pāli scriptures and keeps on checking to see whether the defilements have really been uprooted or not.
6. If one has not gotten the real MACE yet, one may get it with continued practice.
7. One may attain higher stages of awakening.
8. One is a true disciple of the Buddha because the Master said, again and again, that one must not rest content (with the lower stages of awakening) until one reaches the highest goal, i.e. arahantship.

Last Words of Advice



*Far greater are
the benefits in doubting
one's lower attainments
than in giving oneself
the benefit of the doubt.*

SECTION 2

TALES OF CESSATION

UTissa sat for hours in a state of blankness. His posture was firm and his mind fresh and alert when he emerged from his sitting.

He had had a sudden cessation experience and wanted to have it again. The first experience occurred while he was watching his mind in a meditative exercise that began with mindfulness of rapid breathing.

Ever since the first experience, he had been instructed to practise and use resolutions in his sittings. He made resolutions to go in quickly to the

state of blankness, ‘the peaceful void’; then to go in frequently. After he was quite adept at that, he resolved to go in and stay in ‘the peaceful void’ for increasingly longer periods of time.

But he was not always successful in staying awake during his sitting. Sometimes he would doze off and wake up feeling very sleepy though his posture was still firm. Sometimes he would nod often.

How could it be otherwise? Isn’t everything anatta—not subject to the control of the self? Even resolutions, which are mental formations (*sankhāras*) that depend not only on strength of mind but also on other favorable conditions, e.g. food, climate and health to give the desired result, are anatta.

His dozing and nodding were defilements to his sitting. At the same time, he had had numerous cessation experiences—willfully going into and coming out of that ‘peaceful void’. Because of the repeated cessation experiences which he attained rather easily, he had no doubt at all that the Gates to the Woeful Realms (*Apāya*) were closed for him. What puzzled him, however, was why his defilements had not been totally eradicated: “How come I’m still not an Arahant?”

Inspiration from the Past

“The trouble with yogis nowadays,” declared U Datta, interrupting U Tissa’s reverie, “is that they only talk of how much they want to be awakened. But they don’t really try. Look, how much time and effort do they actually put into serious meditation?”

“You can say that again,” U Tissa replied. “If only we can be spurred by a sense of urgency...”

“Remember the five bhikkhus when Kassapa Buddha’s Sāsana was declining?”

“Sure. They said, ‘This is the Age of Decadence. What do we have to do with those shameless bhikkhus who don’t respect the Vinaya? Let’s climb up a hill and sacrifice our lives to meditation.’ When they got to the peak of the hill they threw away the ladder and were forced to devote their last days to meditation and nothing else.”

“Talking of the Age of Decadence...,” U Datta sighed. “Look at what’s happening today. Even meditation monks and Sayadaws who are supposed to be pure in their *sīla*, handle money and break many Vinaya rules, not to mention the vast majority of non-practising monks everywhere. We *are* at the Age of Decadence too.”



U Datta sounded rather emotional as he touched on this sensitive issue. They were monks who had been utterly disgusted with the prevalent moral decadence of the Saṅgha and had taken to the forest, aspiring to lead a life more in accordance with the Dhamma-Vinaya.

“Yes,” U Tissa agreed. “You’re right again. We *are* at the Age of Decadence.” He paused and thought deeply for a few moments. Then his face tensed up as he said firmly and gravely, “We ought to follow their example.”

Other members of the forest Saṅgha protested and tried to talk them around, “Look, this is *not* the Age of Decadence. *Pariyatti Sāsana* here in Myanmar is flourishing like it never has. We even have five *Tipiṭakadharas*, monks who can recite the Tipiṭaka by heart. There are still monks who have deep respect for the Vinaya and try to conduct themselves accordingly. You don’t have to resort to such drastic measures. You can go on an intensive retreat and vow not to talk unnecessarily.”

“Nothing less than the fear of death can stimulate urgent, wholehearted effort,” retorted U Tissa. U Datta nodded in agreement. Their hearts were intent on striving for attainment in this very life. Do or die it didn’t matter—as long as they died trying.

Do or Die

U Tissa and U Datta left the forest monastery in search of a suitable place to do-or-die-meditate. A few hundred miles later they arrived at a seaside monastery and explained their plans to the resident monk: The Sayadaw was to make arrangements for a boat to take the two of them to a small uninhabited island offshore and leave them stranded so that they would be forced to meditate until they died of thirst, hunger and exposure.

“Sayadaw Phayar, we hope you can help us. We are striving toward a noble goal.”

“Okay, I sympathise with you. But I have some important business to do in town right now. So can you please stay here and look after my monastery for a few days? I’ll make the necessary arrangements as soon as I get back.”

The two earnest monks were compelled to wait for the Sayadaw’s return before they could embark on their heroic enterprise. During the interval, however, U Datta thought things over and backed out.

“Well, if you dare not do it, stay here then. I’m going,” U Tissa remarked bluntly as he got up to leave.

“But the Sayadaw’s not back yet, so where are you going?”

“Up to the top of that hill over there,” U Tissa replied, pointing to a hill near the monastery.

U Datta was obliged to stay back in the monastery until the resident monk returned. His plan was to wait four or five days at the seaside before going up the hill to see how his friend was faring.

The Crazy Monkey Saves the Crazy Monk

Now the Sayadaw kept a pet monkey. On the third day after U Tissa’s departure it started to go berserk for no apparent reason. U Datta was at a complete loss as to what to do.

“I’m not staying here with this crazy monkey, that’s for sure. Might as well climb up the hill now to see how U Tissa’s doing,” he thought.

When U Datta got to the top of the hill he stared aghast at the sight that made him exclaim:

“Oh my Lord Buddha! U Tissa, what have you done?”

U Tissa was sprawling limply on the ground smeared with fresh blood spurting from two clean

cuts at the throat and wrist respectively. A bloody razor was lying by his side. U Datta ran down the hill to get help immediately. U Tissa was rushed to the nearest hospital and, to cut a long story short, he lived to tell his tale in a soft rasp:

“After I had slashed my own throat and wrist, I lapsed into a strange realm of consciousness. A very frightening, black hellish vision appeared before me. I tried to get rid of it by various meditation techniques but it just wouldn’t go away.”



Was He Really Awakened?

Hman Taung Forest Sayadaw²⁶ who related the story to me concluded with the following comments:

“I tell you, Ashin Phayar, if he had died at that moment he would have gone straight to hell for sure. One may ask, ‘If he had been meditating, how come such a hellish vision appeared in his near death encounter?’ My hunch is that he couldn’t stand the pangs of thirst and hunger. His meditation wasn’t strong enough to overcome the pain. He was probably inspired by the example of Ven. Godhika²⁷ and as a last desperate resort he took to the razor.

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- 26 Hman Taung Forest Sayadaw U Candobhāsa took to the forest life immediately after he had passed his Dhammācariya (Dhamma-teachership) examinations in one of the most distinguished monastic colleges in Myanmar. He is a practising bhikkhu accomplished in various methods of meditation including the Mahasi, Kanni and Thanlin methods.
- 27 Ven. Godhika was a bhikkhu during the Buddha’s time. He was suffering from a severe illness that prevented him from going into his usual *jhānas* (meditative states of concentration). Thinking that he had already ‘done what had to be done,’ i.e. attained arahantship, and therefore it was futile to endure such suffering, he slashed his own throat, only to realise that he was still a *puthujjana* (unawakened worldling). Quickly he established mindfulness on the objects appearing in his field of awareness and attained to arahantship just before he died.

That action was motivated by impatience, aversion, frustration—in short, by unwholesome mental states rooted in anger (*dosamūla-akusala-citta*). It is common knowledge that if anger predominates just before death, rebirth will take place in hell. The hellish vision that appeared before him and refused to go away would have been the sign of his rebirth destination (*gati-nimitta*).

“Another question to ask is: ‘If he were already awakened because he had had so many cessation experiences, would it be possible for him to be reborn in hell?’ The very fact that the hellish vision appeared during his near death encounter proves that his so-called peaceful void was not the real thing. I feel he just dropped into *bhavaṅga* (life continuum or subconsciousness). He fell sound asleep. That’s all. Just because he could program his mind to go into that blank state and prolong its duration at will, led him to believe that he was awakened. And yet he was fully aware that his defilements had not been eradicated. No wonder he was puzzled.”

The above story actually took place in Myanmar in the early 1990’s. However, the names of the two monks involved have been changed to prevent embarrassment.

At the Mahasi Meditation Teachers' Conference

Going back a little further in time, we arrive at the famous Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha (MTY), Rangoon, Burma in the early 1970's. There, at the end of each year, thousands of meditation teachers and representative yogis from all the Mahasi branches throughout the country convene to pay homage to the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw and receive his advice and exhortations. During one of these festive occasions the Ven. Sayadawgyi suddenly decided to hold a meditation teachers' conference. One very interesting topic of discussion in that conference was brought up by a young meditation teacher (who later became one of the senior Nāyaka Sayadaws at MTY Yangon), Pyan Kapye Sayadaw U Jaṭila:

“Venerable Chairman and fellow meditation teachers, may I humbly ask for your help in solving this problem that has been puzzling me for some time. After a yogi has had his first cessation experience and subsequent repetitions of it, we instruct him to make use of resolutions to will it to occur again quickly, frequently and for increasingly longer periods of time. When we observe that he is

already quite skilled in this task, we then instruct him to relinquish the highest dhamma that he has attained. Now if, after making this resolution the yogi should have another cessation experience, then it means he has attained to the second stage, has he not? After that we again instruct him to repeat the resolutions (to gain skill in going in and coming out of the cessation experience and prolonging its duration) and eventually to relinquish the highest dhamma that he has attained. Then he undergoes another cessation experience. That means he's attained to the third stage, hasn't he? But when I closely observe his behaviour, he doesn't seem to exhibit the qualities expected of one who has attained to the third stage. He seems to me rather more typical of someone who is at stage two. Now, what is this? Venerable Sirs, I open this topic for discussion. Please let me hear your views."

(Silence for some time.)

"Ven. Chairman, I think this topic is rather too profound for us to comment on. I propose that we refer the matter to the Venerable Sayadawgyi himself..."

Mahasi Sayadaw's Answer

The Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw Phayargyi was not present in that conference but duly gave a written reply which is summarised below:

“When a yogi is instructed to ‘relinquish the highest dhamma that he has attained’, it means that he is asked to resolve not to go into fruition attainment (*phala-samāpatti*) of the Path that he has already attained. Since a meditation teacher can not decide with absolute certainty whether a yogi has really attained to Path and Fruition or not, it would be inappropriate for him to phrase the resolution in a direct way, e.g. ‘I relinquish the stream-enterer’s fruition attainment (*sotāpatti-phala-samāpatti*)’.

“One should bear in mind that a yogi can still go into *phala-samāpatti* again even after having made a resolution to relinquish it because he may still harbour a subtle inclination for it. Therefore a subsequent cessation experience after relinquishment need not necessarily imply attainment of the next highest path.

“Another important point to note is that there are some cessation experiences wherein it appears as though there is a cessation of mental and material

phenomena and which the yogi can practise to attain again at will, i.e. quickly, frequently and for desired periods of time, and during which his posture may remain firm. However, if the relevant defilements have not been eradicated as a consequence of such cessation experiences, then one can only conclude that they are not genuinely *nibbānic* in nature.”

Ledi Sayadaw’s Precautionary Advice

Let us now take another stride back in time to pre-war colonial Burma. The legendary Venerable Ledi Sayadaw was receiving a group of visitors comprising Ye Lair Sayadaw U Ādicca from Meikthila, U Kavi (later renowned as Sun Lun Sayadaw), a yogi U Vicāra, and U Bha San, the chief clerk of Sun Lun Mill. At that time U Bha San addressed the Venerable Ledi Sayadaw:

“Sayadaw Phayar, I practised *kaṣiṇa* meditation according to Thitkhya Taung U Tiloka’s²⁸ book *Paṇḍitavedanīya* and I got the *uggaha-nimitta* (learning sign) and *paṭibhāga-nimitta* (reflex sign) quite well. *Appanā-jhāna-samādhi* (absorption meditative concentration) occurred. Then when I switched to

28 See inset next page.

vipassanā according to the method of meditation on feelings (*vedanā-kammaṭṭhāna*) mentioned in your *Anattadīpanī* (*Manual on Non-self*), I saw in my mind's eye the body arising and passing away very quickly just like sesame seeds sizzling in a hot frying pan. After that I advanced according to the progress of insight and fully comprehended the impermanent nature of mind and matter ..." U Bha San went on to give a complete account of his meditation experience until the attainment of Path and Fruition impulses (*magga-phala-javana*).

U Tiloka was one of Ledi Sayadaw's more prominent disciples. At Ledi Monastery in Upper Burma he was a brilliant scholar and an enthusiastic yogi. He taught Pāḷi Grammar and literature in the day and practised meditation at night. One dark night Ledi Sayadaw chanced to notice that U Tiloka's room was glowing with light.

With the intention of relieving him of his academic duties so that he could devote his time to meditation, Sayadaw called him the next day and said, "U Tiloka, it is no longer befitting for you to stay with us." Unfortunately U Tiloka

misconstrued his teacher's good intentions and thought that he was jealous of him. His parting words to his teacher were: "I'll come back when I can fly in the air, Sir."

He left the monastery, travelled hundreds of miles southwards to Mon State and stayed on a hill called Thitkhya Taung (Thitkhya is a Burmese word derived from the Pāḷi: *sekkha* = trainee or non-arahant ariya; Taung is the Burmese for hill) so called because the hill was a yogis' haunt and was reputed to have many ariyas staying there.

One day a couple of laymen came to see him on an errand. U Tiloka was sitting in his thatched bamboo hut deeply absorbed in meditation. The laymen waited for some time but U Tiloka was totally oblivious of their presence. Then one of them whispered to the other, "I've heard it said that when a yogi is absorbed in *jhāna*, his posture is unshakable. Let's put him to the test. Let's remove the floorboards."

Slowly and gently, they removed one piece of floorboard after another. In the end, U Tiloka was sitting in mid-air as imperturbable as ever! The laymen were in awe. They begged for forgiveness and put the floorboards back again.

Later U Tiloka had some nagging doubts about his bhikkhuhood and so he left the Saṅgha to become a hermit. After that he sank into obscurity.

“Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu,” Ledi Sayadaw congratulated, then continued, “Uh ... Next time my disciples must never tell anyone that they’ve got Path or Fruition. People have been telling me that all along the banks of the Irrawaddy, in towns like Prome, Shwe Taung, Nyaung Ton, etc., there are lots of ‘sotāpannas’, ‘sakadāgāmis’ and ‘anāgāmis’. I have also received piles of letters asking for confirmation. Never declare that so-and-so is a sotāpanna ... or an arahant. The powerful nature of latent defilements is extremely subtle and therefore it is very difficult to know whether or not they have been uprooted by the Path.

“A yogi who has pāramī, makes whole hearted effort and gains insights into the true nature of mind and matter may, at times experience cool peace as though there is a cessation of mind and matter. At that time transgressive (*vītikāma*) and obsessive (*pariyuṭṭhāna*) defilements are not manifest in a gross manner but remain dormant in the yogi’s mind. At that time the meditation teacher may think that to be really Path and Fruition and thus make an incorrect declaration.

“The meditation teacher must compare the experience to what is written in the texts and if he thinks that there is agreement then he must say ‘sādhu’ three times and urge the yogi to continue practising further by balancing the five powers of faith, wisdom, effort, concentration and mindfulness.



“To give a simile: A lush bodhi tree with many branches, leaves and buds evokes pleasurable aesthetic feelings in everyone who looks at it. If someone should break off some of its branches, it would become weak and not able to flourish again

immediately. In the same way, the yogi is like the bodhi tree flourishing with the buds of Path and Fruition. The person who mistakenly declares what is not really Path and Fruition to be Path and Fruition is like the one who mutilates the bodhi tree.

“The yogi, thinking that he’s already a sotāpanna, is liable to become complacent and take a rest. Like Visākhā and Anāthapiṇḍika, he is prone as a ‘sotāpanna’ to indulge in sense pleasures when the latent sensual desire becomes grossly manifest. Although he may actually have the potential to attain Path and Fruition in this very life, his yearning to practise further is likely to be curtailed because of his teacher’s premature and presumptuous declaration. So the yogi suffers loss and his teacher is guilty of having plucked the buds of Path and Fruition. Both are at the losing end.

“Even after having deeply considered and decided that one is a genuine ariya, one ought to wait for at least seven years to check if the latent defilements surface and whether or not the threefold kamma of physical, verbal and mental behaviour becomes gross. Do be extremely careful.”

SECTION 3

CESSATION EXPERIENCES IN THE PROCESS OF AWAKENING

*An Enquiry Based
on the Vinaya Piṭaka
and Early Suttas*

INTRODUCTION

Cessation experiences are dealt with in detail in the previous two sections. The first section attempts to link practice with theory according to the Mahasi tradition which is heavily based on the Abhidhammic concepts found in the *Visuddhimagga*. The second section delves deeper into the hazards of misinterpreting cessation experiences and overestimating one's attainment with anecdotal evidence and the wisdom of two iconic Theravādin elders of Myanmar. In this third section, I attempt to go back to the roots, scrutinising what the suttas actually say about cessation experiences in the process of attaining the various levels of awakening. Unfortunately, not much information about the process of becoming a *sakadāgāmi* or *anāgāmi* can be gleaned from the suttas, so my scrutiny is limited to stream-entry and arahantship in particular, and *sekhas* and *asekhas* in general.

DEFINITION OF CESSATION EXPERIENCE

In the previous sections, ‘cessation’ is an English rendering of a-nyein-daht (အငြိမ်းစာတ်), a term commonly used in the various vipassanā traditions across Myanmar. It refers to nibbāna, the element in which all constructions (*saṅkhāras*) have ceased. This fits in with two items (1 & 5) in a list of epithets below for nibbāna frequently found in the suttas:

‘This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is,

- (1) the stilling of all activities
(*sabbasaṅkhārasamatha*),
- (2) the relinquishing of all acquisitions,
- (3) the destruction of craving,
- (4) dispassion,
- (5) cessation (*nirodha*), nibbāna.’²⁹



29 E.g. Samādhi Sutta (AN 10.6, NDB page 1343)

This ‘element of cessation’ as an epithet of nibbāna is not the same as the cessation of perception and feeling (*saññāvedayitanirodha*) during which there is a temporary suspension of consciousness because consciousness is inextricably conjoined with the feeling and perception which have ceased. This is stated in Mahāvedalla Sutta (MN 43, MLDB page 389):

“Feeling, perception, and consciousness, friend—these states are conjoined, not disjoined, and it is impossible to separate each of these states from the others in order to describe the difference between them. For what one feels, that one perceives; and what one perceives, that one cognizes....”

An authentic cessation experience therefore is the meditator’s realisation of nibbāna, i.e. mind consciousness (*manoviññāṇa*) is conscious of nibbāna. Note that this contrasts with the cessation of perception and feeling during which consciousness (*manoviññāṇa*) synchronously ceases.

THE REALISATION OF NIBBĀNA

In the early suttas, the realisation of nibbāna is broadly differentiated into two: that of the trainee (*sekha*)³⁰ and non-trainee (*asekha*) respectively. The most obvious passage that shows this distinction is in Kosambi Sutta (SN 12.68, CDB page 611), in Venerable Nārada's acknowledgement:

“Friend, though I have clearly seen as it really is with correct wisdom, ‘Nibbāna is the cessation of existence (*bhavanirodha*),’ I am not an arahant, one whose taints are destroyed. Suppose, friend, there was a well along a desert road, but it had neither a rope nor a bucket. Then a man would come along, oppressed and afflicted by the heat, tired, parched, and thirsty. He would look down into the well and the knowledge would occur to him, ‘There is water,’ but he would not be able

30 For the sake of brevity and convenience, I use the term *sekha* in this section to refer to the stream-enterer, once-returner and non-returner as a group of awakened ones, although in other contexts in the suttas, *sekha* may also include other sincere practitioners who are not yet awakened; and *asekha* to the arahant.

to make bodily contact (*kāyena phusitvā*) with it. So too, friend, though I have clearly seen as it really is with correct wisdom, ‘Nibbāna is the cessation of existence,’ I am not an arahant, one whose taints are destroyed.”



In this simile of the well water, we can deduce that Venerable Nārada was a sekha who could clearly see with correct wisdom that nibbāna is the cessation of existence or becoming (*bhava*), but could not ‘make bodily contact (*kāyena phusitvā*)’ with it because only an aseka or arahant can do so. Later we shall see that in the suttas this phrase *kāyena phusitvā* is a Pāli idiom that means ‘having personally experienced’ in a specific way.

Sekhas' Realisation

In Tapussa Sutta (AN 6.119, NDB page 989), the Buddha said:

“Bhikkhus, possessing six qualities, the householder Tapussa has reached certainty about the Tathāgata and become a seer of the deathless (*amatadasso*), one who lives having realized the deathless (*amatam sacchikatvā iriyati*). What six? Unwavering confidence (*aveccappasāda*) in the Buddha, ... in the Dhamma, ... in the Saṅgha, noble virtuous behavior, noble knowledge, and noble liberation ...”

We know that the deathless (*amata*) is another epithet or synonym for nibbāna,³¹ and having ‘unwavering confidence’ in the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha are part of the standard qualities of a stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*)³² and above. This shows that Tapussa, and the other householders, including Anāthapiṇḍika, mentioned in the subsequent suttas

31 E.g. in Asaṅkhatasamyutta (SN 43, CDB pages 1372 onwards)

32 E.g. in Paṭhama-giṇṇakāvasatha Sutta (SN 55.8, CDB page 1800)

(AN 6.120-139, NDB pages 989-990) are at least stream-enterers who have seen and realised nibbāna.

In the Vinaya Mahāvagga,³³ there is an account of how Sāriputta and Moggallāna became stream-enterers. The former attained the Dhamma-eye (*dhammacakkhu*) while he was listening to a four-line verse recited by Venerable Assajī, indicating that he had become a stream-enterer. Then as he approached Moggallāna to share his extraordinary experience, the latter was impressed by his sudden change of appearance and demeanour and immediately asked if he had attained the deathless (*amataṃ adhigato*), to which he replied, “Yes, friend, I have attained the deathless.” From this, we can deduce that his attainment of the deathless is equivalent to the realisation of nibbāna by a stream-enterer.



33 Mahākhandhako 14. Sāriputtamoggallānapabbajākathā (Āyasmā Ānandajoti’s English translation is available at <https://bit.ly/2vFsOF1>)

The Dhamma-eye

In most of the accounts found in the Vinaya Piṭaka and early suttas, the arising of the Dhamma-eye indicates the attainment of stream-entry. However, it can also mean—albeit rarely—any of the 4 levels of awakening from stream-entry to arahantship, e.g. in Brahmāyu Sutta (MN 91, MLDB page 753-754):

Just as a clean cloth with all marks removed would take dye evenly, so too, while the brahmin Brahmāyu sat there, the spotless immaculate vision of the Dhamma arose in him: ‘All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation.’

... “Bhikkhus, the brahmin Brahmāyu was wise,

... With the destruction of the five lower fetters, he has reappeared spontaneously [in the Pure Abodes] and will there attain final Nibbāna, without ever returning from that world.”

Besides nibbāna, what else does the Dhamma-eye see? The stock description of what it sees is: ‘Whatever has the nature of origination, all that has the nature of cessation (*yam kiñci samudayadhammam*



sabbam taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ).’ This pithy sentence shows that it sees

- (1) impermanence due to
- (2) causality culminating in a glimpse of
- (3) *nibbāna*, the cessation of all constructions (*sabbasaṅkhārasamatha*).

The second and third aspects are mentioned in detail in Ariyasāvaka Sutta (SN 12.49, CDB pages 585-586):

“Rather, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple has knowledge about this that is independent of others: ‘When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises ...

‘When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases. When there is no ignorance, volitional formations do not come to be. When there are no volitional formations, consciousness does not come to be ...’ [*All the 12 links of the dependent origination are mentioned.*]

“He understands thus: ‘In such a way the world ceases.’

“Bhikkhus, when a noble disciple thus understands as they really are the origin and the passing away of the world, he is then

called a noble disciple who is accomplished in view, accomplished in vision, who has arrived at this true Dhamma, who sees this true Dhamma, who possesses a trainee's knowledge, a trainee's true knowledge, who has entered the stream of the Dhamma, a noble one with penetrative wisdom, one who stands squarely before the door to the Deathless."

The generic formula for causality in this sutta is expressed by: 'When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises ... When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.' This is encapsulated in the stock description of what the Dhamma-eye sees: 'Whatever has the nature of origination, all that has the nature of cessation.'

Bear in mind that seeing causality need not necessarily entail experientially understanding all the 12 links forwards and backwards as detailed above because practically all the accounts of the arising of the Dhamma-eye in the Vinaya and the early suttas do not go into such details.

From the expression 'one who stands squarely before the door to the Deathless' we can assume that the door is open and deduce that he sees the deathless, *nibbāna*.

In *Dutiyasāriputta Sutta* (SN 55.5, CDB pages 1792-1793), a stream-enterer is defined as one who possesses the Noble Eightfold Path. I understand this to mean that all the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path are there only at the moment when the Dhamma-eye arises, otherwise how could he dwell negligently by not making further effort for solitude by day nor for seclusion at night as stated in *Nandiya Sutta* (SN 55.40, CDB page 1827)? When a stream-enterer dwells negligently, it could mean, e.g. that he is probably enjoying pleasures of the senses which is contrary to the Right Thought of renouncing sense pleasures and the Right Effort of abandoning unwholesome states including greed. Also it is implied in *Kosambiya Sutta* (MN 48, MLDB page 422) that if he pursued, developed and cultivated the right view that leads to liberation, then he would obtain serenity and quenching; otherwise not.

Whenever the arising of the Dhamma-eye is mentioned in the *Vinaya Piṭaka* or early suttas, it always occurs momentarily only once while one is intently listening to a Dhamma discourse given by the Buddha or one of his disciples. This suggests that it is a momentary experience that occurs only once in a lifetime, yet with dramatic life-changing consequences.

Stream-entry

The stock passage following the arising of the Dhamma-eye not only describes what it sees but also the permanent life-changing consequences that it brings about.³⁴

He saw the Dhamma, attained the Dhamma,
understood the Dhamma, fathomed the
Dhamma, crossed over doubt, got rid of
bewilderment, attained self-confidence, and
became independent of others in the teaching of
the Teacher.

These consequences are more explicitly stated in specific suttas, e.g.

“He possesses confirmed confidence in the Buddha thus: ‘The Blessed One is ... teacher of devas and humans, the Enlightened One, the Blessed One.’ He possesses confirmed confidence in the Dhamma ... in the Saṅgha ... He possesses the virtues dear to the noble ones, unbroken ... leading to concentration ... He is one finished with hell, finished with the animal realm, finished with the domain of ghosts, finished with the plane of misery, the bad destinations,

34 E.g. in Upāli Sutta (MN 56, MLDB page 477)

the nether world. He is a stream-enterer, no longer bound to the nether world, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as his destination.” (Paṭhamagiñjakāvasatha Sutta (SN 55.8 CDB page 1800)

“When the dust-free, stainless Dhamma-eye arises in the noble disciple, then, together with the arising of vision, the noble disciple abandons three fetters: personal-existence view, doubt, and wrong grasp of behavior and observances.” (Sarada Sutta AN 3.94, NDB page 327)

There is a whole series of suttas, beginning with Pahīna Sutta (AN 6.90 to AN6.95, NDB pages 979-981) listing the attributes of one accomplished in view (*diṭṭhisampanna*), a synonym for a stream-enterer, summarised as follows:

1. He has abandoned the three fetters (mentioned above).
2. He has abandoned the lust, hatred and delusion leading to the plane of misery.
3. He is incapable of dwelling without reverence and deference toward the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha and training. Yet Nandiya Sutta (SN 55.40, CDB page 1827) states that he could also dwell

negligently by not making further effort for solitude by day nor for seclusion at night.

4. He is incapable of undergoing an eighth existence.
5. He is incapable of considering any conditioned phenomenon (*saṅkhāra*) as permanent or pleasurable; and any phenomenon (*dhamma*) as a self.
6. He is incapable of resorting to [the belief] that purity comes about through superstitious and auspicious acts.
7. He is incapable of depriving his mother, his father or an arahant of life.
8. He is incapable of acknowledging another teacher (mentioned above).
9. He is incapable of resorting to [the view that] pleasure and pain are made by oneself; or by another; or by oneself and by another; or not by oneself but have arisen fortuitously; or not by another but have arisen fortuitously; or neither by oneself nor by another but have arisen fortuitously. For what reason? Because the person accomplished in view has clearly seen causation and causally arisen phenomena.

However, in Kosambiya Sutta (MN 48, MLDB page 422), it is stated that when he pursues, develops and cultivates this view, he personally obtains serenity and quenching, which could mean that if he were negligent and did not do so then he would not obtain serenity and quenching because he might be engaged in blaming, complaining, scolding, etc.

These are some of the extraordinary life-changing consequences of that momentary, once-in-a-lifetime occurrence of the Dhamma-eye for a stream-enterer. There is no evidence in the Vinaya Piṭaka, the four Nikāyas or the early suttas of the Khuddaka Nikāya that a stream-enterer can replicate what the Dhamma-eye sees; if he could then he would become a once-returner or above.

Asekhas' Realisation

Sometimes, after listening to a Dhamma discourse by the Buddha, a man could not attain the Dhamma-eye but felt inspired to walk the spiritual path by

becoming a monk. He would approach the Buddha and request for ordination. After becoming a bhikkhu and receiving specific instructions from the Buddha he would then practise and eventually attain arahantship. There is a stock passage found throughout the Pāli canon describing this event.³⁵ Below is my slightly revised translation:

Then that bhikkhu, dwelling alone,
 withdrawn, diligent, ardent, and resolute,
 not too long afterwards, personally realised
 with direct knowledge in this very life, that
 unsurpassed goal of the holy life for the sake
 of which clansmen rightly go forth from the
 household life into homelessness; and having
 attained it, dwelt (in the attainment). He
 directly knew: 'Destroyed is birth, the holy life
 has been lived, what had to be done has been
 done, there is no more for this state of being.'
 And that bhikkhu became one of the arahants.

Notice the syntax describing his attainment of arahantship:

realised (*sacchikatvā*) ... that unsurpassed goal
 of the holy life, i.e. nibbāna, and

35 E.g. in Upādiyamāna Sutta (SN 22.63, CDB pages 906-907)

having attained it, dwelt (in the attainment)
(*upasampajja viharati*)³⁶.

This should be contrasted with the syntax describing how sekhas realise nibbāna in Tapussa Sutta and others (AN 6.119-139, NDB pages 989-990):

become a seer of the deathless (*amatadasso*),
one who lives having realized the deathless
(*amatam sacchikatvā iriyati*)³⁷.

In other words, while sekhas live their lives after having realised and seen nibbāna once, asekkhas can, after having attained nibbāna, dwell in the attainment. This is more explicitly expressed in

36 *Upasampajja viharati* is more often rendered as “entered and dwelt in”. For a detailed analysis of how *upasampajja* should be more accurately translated, see Appendix A “[Translation of Upasampajja](#)”.

37 The Pāli verb *iriyati* (lives) shares the same root as the noun *iriyapatha* (posture). This seems to suggest that after having realised the deathless, he lives his household life by going around in different postures, while *viharati* (dwells) means ‘to remain or engage in’ the attainment after having attained it.

Ratana Sutta (KN 1.6, 5.13)³⁸. Of the seven verses devoted to the Saṅgha, Verse 6 refers to all the four pairs of individuals worthy of gifts, Verses 8-11 refer to the stream-enterer while Verses 7 and 14 to the arahant. This is my translation of Verse 7:

They who're well engaged mentally (and)
 firmly
 In Gotama's sāsana void of cravings
 Have reached the goal, and plunged into the
 Deathless,
 Freely enjoying the peace they have attained.
 This, too, is an exquisite gem in the Saṅgha.
 By this speech of truth may there be well-
 being.

38 The Ratana Sutta can be considered a late addition to the Minor Collections (Khuddaka Nikāya) because a parallel cannot be found in the Sanskrit/Chinese Āgamas. *A Sanskrit version of the same text is found in the Mahāvastu (the Great Story), a large collection of material of the Lokottaravādin Mahāsāṅghika sect. In the Sanskrit version the sutta is embedded in the narrative which gives the background to how the verses came to be recited. In the Pāli texts the narrative (nidāna) is given in the commentary to Khuddakapāṭha, Paramathajotikā (Pt 1). The stories in both versions agree in outline, but differ somewhat in the details. (For a continuation of this excerpt, see Āyasmā Anandajoti's excellent comparative study at <https://bit.ly/1PAcNPE>.)*

Notice that it explicitly states that those who are ‘void of cravings (*nikkāmino*) have reached the goal and plunged into the Deathless, freely enjoying the peace they have attained.’ Among all the four types of awakened ones, who else is void of cravings but the arahant? Note that the non-returner has eradicated sensual cravings but not craving for existence in the fine material and immaterial realms.

The phrase ‘freely enjoying the peace they have attained’ implies that they can repeatedly enjoy the peace of nibbāna, something that the sekhas are unable to do. Is this exclusive ability what is meant by the phrase *kāyena phusitvā*, literally translated as ‘having made bodily contact with’? After all, we saw in Kosambi Sutta (SN 12.68, CDB page 611) that this was the primary difference between a sekha’s glimpse of nibbāna and an asekha’s personal experience of it.

Kāyena Phusitvā

A contextual research into the usage of this phrase brings up two important suttas that clearly show the extent and manner of personal experience it is supposed to represent. Both suttas are part of a series of suttas about the topics of a Q&A session involving

Venerable Udāyī and Venerable Ānanda. Let us start with Kāyasakkhi Sutta (AN 9:43, NDB pages 1320-1321) in which Venerable Udāyī asked:

“In what way has the Blessed One spoken of a body witness?”

“Here, friend, secluded from sensual pleasures ... a bhikkhu having attained the first jhāna dwells in that attainment³⁹ (*upasampajja viharati*) He dwells having contacted that base with the body (*kāyena phusitvā*) in whatever way [it is attained]. To this extent the Blessed One has spoken of a body witness (*kāyasakkhī*) in a provisional sense (*pariyāyena*)...” [This is repeated for each of the remaining three jhānas and of all the four āruppas.]

In order to justify the usage of the term ‘body witness (*kāyasakkhī*)’, the phrase ‘having contacted ... with the body (*kāyena phusitvā*)’ is shown to represent or to be synonymous with ‘having attained ... dwells in that attainment (*upasampajja viharati*)’. This means that like the thirsty man who can only see the water in the well but cannot make bodily contact with it, sekhas can only glimpse nibbāna when the Dhamma-

39 Original translation: a bhikkhu enters and dwells in the first jhāna.

eye arises, but cannot dwell in the attainment of nibbāna like meditators who attain and dwell in the jhānas and āruppas.

While the attainers of the jhānas and āruppas can be called body witnesses (*kāyasakkhī*), they are so called only in a provisional or figurative sense (*pariyāyena*). The sutta ends by declaring that in the non-provisional or ultimate sense (*nippariyāyena*), only an arahant can be called a body witness (*kāyasakkhī*).

At the outset, I stated that a more idiomatic translation for *kāyena phusitvā* would be ‘having personally experienced’. One could argue that having a glimpse of nibbāna is also a personal experience. After all, there is this English saying: ‘Seeing is believing’. However, the usage of *kāyena phusitvā* in this sutta as well as in Ubhatobhāgavimutta Sutta (AN 9.45, NDB pages 1323 onwards) specifies that the extent and manner of ‘having personally experienced’ is actually ‘having attained, he dwells in that attainment’.

PHALASAMĀPATTI OR FRUITION ATTAINMENT

The term *phalasangāpatti* cannot be found anywhere in the Vinaya Piṭaka, the four Nikāyas or the early suttas of the Khuddaka Nikāya. It can only be found in the later texts of the Khuddaka Nikāya⁴⁰ and extensively in Paṭṭhāna, the seventh and last book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka.

The Visuddhimagga has one whole section⁴¹ devoted to a detailed explanation and justification (quoting extensively from the Paṭisambhidāmagga⁴² and the Abhidhamma) of fruition attainment, which is supposed to be the ability of the awakened one to experience nibbāna and be totally absorbed in it as will as a jhānic state similar to that at the moment of

40 Niddesa, Milindapañha, and Nettippakaraṇa only mention phalasangāpatti in general, but Paṭisambhidāmagga mentions for each of the awakened ones separately.

41 23. paññābhāvanānisaṃsaniddeso, phalasangāpattikathā. (PP pages 317-319)

42 According to the German tradition of Indology this text was likely composed around the 2nd century CE: Hinüber, Oskar von (2000). *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. ISBN 3-11-016738-7. For more information about this text, see also <https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Patisambhidamagga>.

his respective awakening. In other words a stream-enterer, once-returner, non-returner or arahant can re-experience his respective glimpse of nibbāna and having done so, dwell in that attainment as desired. For example, if a stream-enterer's first glimpse of nibbāna was at the first jhāna level, then his phalasangāhī will also be at that same first jhāna level, and so on.

However, we have already seen in Kosambi Sutta (SN12.68, CDB page 611) that sekhas are unable to do this as it is only the province of asekhas. Even in Ratana Sutta, which can be considered a late addition to the Khuddaka Nikāya, it is stated that only arahants can 'plunge into the Deathless, freely enjoying the peace they have attained.'

Nonetheless, even though the term *phalasangāhī* cannot be found in the Vinaya, the four Nikāyas, or the early suttas of the Khuddaka Nikāya, a similar idea is implied in the above-mentioned Verse 7 of Ratana Sutta and in the stock passage describing a bhikkhu's attainment of arahantship:

he ... personally realised (*sacchikatvā*) ...
 that unsurpassed goal of the holy life, i.e.
 nibbāna, and having attained it, dwelt (in that
 attainment) (*upasampajja viharati*).

There are also a few more references giving credence to this idea. In *Sāriputta Sutta* (AN 10.7, NDB page 1344), when asked by Venerable Ānanda, Venerable Sāriputta replied that it was indeed possible for a bhikkhu to obtain a type of samādhi in which he would not be percipient of the four great elements, or the four objects of the āruppas, or this world or another world, and yet be percipient. When asked how that could be possible, he shared his own attainment of such a samādhi and concluded that though he was not percipient of all those things,

“On that occasion, friend, I was percipient:
“The cessation of existence is nibbāna.””

In *Samādhi Sutta* (AN 10.6, NDB pages 1343-1344), Venerable Ānanda asked the same question of the Buddha and the latter replied that it was possible. When asked how, the Buddha said:

“Here, Ānanda, a bhikkhu is percipient thus:
‘This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, the stilling of all activities, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna.’”

In other words, because the bhikkhu is percipient of nibbāna, he would no longer be percipient of anything else.

This stock passage describing the experience of nibbāna is found elsewhere too, e.g. Saññā Sutta (AN 11.7, NDB pages 1557-1559) and the Samādhi Suttas (AN 11.18-21, NDB pages 1582-1585), but with an additional phrase appended to it:

“of anything seen, heard, sensed, cognized, reached, sought after, and examined by the mind, but he would still be percipient.”

In these passages showing the idea of phala-samāpatti found in NDB, we see that nibbāna is an objective reality that the mind can be conscious of even though it is not conscious of any other worldly objects or the objects of the āruppas.

Phalasangāmi vs Aruppasamāpatti

These references suggest that the idea of fruition attainment found in the suttas is closer to the attainment of the āruppas than that of the jhānas, as asserted by the Visuddhimagga. I arrived at this conclusion after scrutinising two important suttas that clearly show what the āruppas are.

In Mahāvedalla Sutta (MN 43, MLDB page 389), when asked by Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita:

“Friend, what can be known by purified mind-consciousness released from the five faculties?”

Venerable Sāriputta replied:

“Friend, by purified mind-consciousness released from the five faculties the base of infinite space can be known thus: ‘Space is infinite’; the base of infinite consciousness can be known thus: ‘Consciousness is infinite’; and the base of nothingness can be known thus: ‘There is nothing.’”

This shows that when one is dwelling in the āruppas, one has been released from the five senses; in other words, one is totally oblivious of the five senses.

In Ānanda Sutta (AN 9.37, NDB pages 1302) this is reiterated in even greater detail:

Venerable Ānanda: “(1) The eye itself as well as those forms will actually be present, and yet one will not experience that base. (2) The ear itself as well as those sounds will actually be present, and yet one will not experience that base. (3-5) The nose ... The tongue ...

The body itself as well as those tactile objects will actually be present, and yet one will not experience that base.”

Venerable Udāyī: “But, friend, of what is one percipient when one does not experience that base?”

Venerable Ānanda: (6) “Here, friend, with the complete surmounting of perceptions of forms, with the passing away of perceptions of sensory impingement, with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, [perceiving] ‘space is infinite,’ a bhikkhu having attained the base of the infinity of space dwells in that attainment.⁴³

When one is thus percipient one does not experience that base.” [*Repeated for the next 2 āruppas, but not the 4th.*]

Venerable Ānanda concluded by saying that when one has attained the samādhi that is the fruit of final knowledge (*aññāphala*), one too does not experience that base.

“... the concentration that does not lean forward and does not bend back, and that is not reined in and checked by forcefully

43 Original translation: a bhikkhu enters and dwells in the base of the infinity of space.

suppressing [the defilements]—by being liberated, it is steady; by being steady, it is content; by being content, one is not agitated. The Blessed One said this concentration is the fruit of final knowledge.’⁴⁴ When one is thus percipient too, friend, one does not experience that base.”

Note that in (6), there is a stock passage describing the process of attaining the āruppas, namely:

1. one has to go beyond all forms—meaning all the objects of the five senses. This is reiterated by the subsequent clause which explicitly states that one is no longer conscious of the five senses.
2. Even after one is no longer conscious of the five senses, one is still conscious of what is going on in the mind, but one must not pay attention to anything else except the respective āruppa.

44 Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *ayaṃ ... samādhī aññāphalo vutto bhagavatā* as ‘The Blessed One said this concentration has final knowledge as its fruit.’ However this does not make sense in this context which is about what one can be percipient of during absorption. Rendered as ‘the samādhī (that) is the fruit of final knowledge’ tallies with the idea of phalasaṃpatti described in AN 10.6, AN 10.7, and AN 11.17-21 mentioned above.

Jhāna vs Āruppa

It is interesting that the answers to these two questions in two different suttas do not include the jhānas. This means that when one is dwelling in the attainment of any jhāna, one has not gone beyond the objects of the five senses, though the mind is so composed that it would not be distracted by them. It is also interesting that throughout the Pāḷi canon, although detailed descriptions of the experience of jhāna at different levels are frequently mentioned, the objects of its focus are never specified.

In Saṃkhitta Sutta (AN 8.63, NDB pages 1205-1207), the Buddha asked a monk to develop the four brahmavihāras and the four satipaṭṭhānas at different levels of samādhi which includes the mental states reminiscent of the jhāna factors.

“When, bhikkhu, your mind is firm and well settled internally, and arisen bad unwholesome states do not obsess your mind, then you should train yourself thus: ‘I will develop and cultivate the liberation of the mind by loving-kindness ...

“When (1) this concentration [*on liberation of the mind by loving-kindness*] has been developed

and cultivated by you in this way, then you should develop this concentration (2) with thought and examination; you should develop it (3) without thought but with examination only; you should develop it (4) without thought and examination. You should develop it (4) with rapture; you should develop it (5) without rapture; you should develop it (6) accompanied by comfort; and you should develop it (7) accompanied by equanimity. *[Repeated for compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity followed by each of the four satipaṭṭhānas]*

In Poṭṭhapāda Sutta (DN 9, LDB pages 161-162), the Buddha said that when one dwells in the attainment of the jhāna one can even be conscious of some of the jhāna factors, but not when one is in the āruppas:

“Having reached the first jhāna, he remains in it. And whatever sensations of lust that he previously had disappear. At that time there is present a true but subtle perception of delight and happiness, born of detachment, and he becomes one who is conscious of this delight and happiness ...

“Again ... he reaches and remains in the second jhāna ... and he becomes one who is conscious of this delight and happiness ...

“Again ... he reaches and remains in the third jhāna ... and he becomes one who is conscious of this true but subtle sense of equanimity and happiness ...

“Again ... he reaches and remains in the fourth jhāna ... and he becomes one who is conscious of this true but subtle sense of neither happiness nor unhappiness ...

“Again, by passing entirely beyond bodily sensations, by the disappearance of all sense of resistance and by non-attraction to the perception of diversity, seeing that space is infinite, he reaches and remains in the Sphere of Infinite Space. In this way some perceptions arise through training, and some pass away through training”

In Anupada Sutta (MN 111, MLDB pages 900-902), the mental factors in the āruppas (except the one that is exclusive to each respectively) are exactly the same as those in the 4th jhāna (except three that are exclusive to itself).⁴⁵

45 See [Appendix B](#) for a tabulation of the mental factors for all the jhānas and āruppas.

“And the states in the fourth jhāna—(1) the equanimity, (2) the neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, (3) the mental unconcern due to tranquillity, (4) the purity of mindfulness, and the unification of mind; the contact, feeling, perception, volition, and mind; the zeal, decision, energy, mindfulness, equanimity, and attention—these states were defined by him one by one as they occurred ... “And the states in the base of infinite space—(1) the perception of the base of infinite space and the unification of mind; the contact, feeling, perception, volition, and mind; the zeal, decision, energy, mindfulness, equanimity, and attention—these states were defined by him one by one as they occurred ...”

A scrutiny of all these references led me to the following conclusions:

1. The āruppas are true absorptions during which all the five senses are cut off and the mind is only focused on one single mental object.
2. The āruppas are defined by their respective object of focus, not by the synchronously occurring mental states during their attainment because the mental states for each of them are practically the same as those of the fourth jhāna.

3. The jhānas are not absorptions because the objects of all the six senses are still perceptible though the mind is not distracted by them.
4. The jhānas are defined by the jhāna factors, or synchronously occurring mental states during their attainment, not by what they are conscious of, which could be any object of the 6 senses.
5. In order to attain phalasangāmi one's samādhi must be the fruit of final knowledge (*aññāphala*) and at a level equivalent to that necessary for āruppasamāpatti.

Why Sekhas Cannot Attain Phalasangāmi

Collating the above conclusions, we can now understand why sekhas can only get a glimpse of nibbāna but not dwell in it: they have attained the jhāna that can only perceive nibbāna once momentarily, but have not attained the samādhi resulting from final knowledge to dwell in an actual absorption with nibbāna as object, at a level of samādhi equivalent to that which attains the āruppas.

That the sekhas have attained jhāna at the moment of their respective attainments is not only based on the Visuddhimagga's explanation of phalasangāṇī mentioned above, but is also corroborated by the suttas. In Dutiyasāriputta Sutta (SN 55.5, CDB page 1792), the Buddha endorses Venerable Sāriputta's answer that a stream-enterer possesses the Noble Eightfold Path, of which the last factor is right samādhi.

Right samādhi is defined as the four jhānas in four suttas,⁴⁶ and one-placement of mind (*cittassekaggatā*) supported by the remaining seven factors of the Noble Eightfold Path in four other suttas.⁴⁷ Collating both sets gives this definition: right samādhi must be supported by the remaining seven factors of the Noble Eightfold Path whether it is (1) one-placement of mind which must at least be at the first jhāna level, or (2) any of the four jhānas.

46 Vibhaṅga Sutta (SN 45.8, CDB page 1529), Saccavibhaṅga Sutta (MN 141, MLDB page 1101), Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (DN 22, LDB page 349) and Pañcaṅgika Sutta (AN 5.28, NDB pages 647-649).

47 Janavasabha Sutta (DN 18, page 299), Samādhiparikkhāra Sutta (AN 7.45, NDB page 1027), Mahācattārīsaka Sutta (MN 117, MLDB page 934) and Samādhi Sutta (SN 45.28, CDB page 1537).

That this first type of right samādhi can be achieved while listening to a Dhamma talk is supported by Āvaraṇanīvaraṇa Sutta (SN 46.38, CDB page 1592) which states:

“When, bhikkhus, a noble disciple listens to the Dhamma with eager ears, attending to it as a matter of vital concern, directing his whole mind to it, on that occasion the five hindrances are not present in him; on that occasion the seven factors of enlightenment go to fulfilment by development.”

The sixth factor of enlightenment is samādhi, which goes to fulfilment when any of the four jhānas is attained.

What Then Are the ‘Cessation Experiences’ Nowadays?

Since phalasangāhī is not the province of sekhas, and yet some meditators who are obviously not arahants claim to have attained it, what then could such ‘cessation experiences’ be?

There is one type of recollection (*anussati*) called recollection of peace (*upāsamaṇussati*) found only in a list of ten recollections in both AN 1.297 (NDB page 116) and AN 1.482 (NDB page 128). This is

explained in the *Visuddhimagga*⁴⁸ as the recollection of nibbāna by reflecting on its virtues or qualities as stated in several suttas. It can be successfully done only by an awakened one, although others can also benefit by trying to do so. I suppose this means that the sekha who has had a glimpse of nibbāna could recollect that experience though not exactly replicate it, while an unawakened one could only intellectually imagine it by recollecting the descriptions of it found in the suttas. In any case, even if successfully done the level of samādhi could only reach what the *Visuddhimagga* calls 'access concentration' (*upacārasamādhi*), but not the 'absorption concentration' (*appanāsamādhi*) of the jhānas.

This recollection of peace (*upasamānussati*) could be a possible answer to the above question provided all the other qualities of a stream-enterer are also fulfilled. However, the 'cessation experiences' reported by contemporary meditators appear to be absorptions, not just recollections or reflections. So the question still remains: what could they be?

48 *anussatikammaṭṭhānaniddeso, upasamānussatikathā* (PP pages 820-835).

Many knowledgeable and experienced meditation teachers in Myanmar believe that this so-called fruition attainment is dropping into the life-continuum (*bhavaṅga*)⁴⁹. In more conventional language it means ‘spaced out’ or ‘fallen into deep sleep’. The mind can be trained especially when it is well composed, to repeat what it has been programmed to regard as a desirable attainment. In such a case, this is a pseudo-fruition attainment that could mislead one into believing one has attained awakening.

As Mahasi Sayadaw cautioned: “Another important point to note is that there are some cessation experiences wherein it appears as though there is a cessation of mental and material phenomena and which the yogi can practise to attain again at will, i.e. quickly, frequently and for desired periods of time, and during which his posture may remain firm. However, if the relevant defilements have not been eradicated as a consequence of such cessation experiences, then one can only conclude that they are not genuinely nibbānic in nature.”⁵⁰

49 See [page 22](#).

50 See [page 76](#).

In his ဝိပဿနာရှုနည်းကျမ်း (*Manual of Insight*), Mahasi Sayadaw detailed that there could be an apparent loss of consciousness when the following mental states are predominant:

- rapture, intense interest (*pīti*),
- calmness and peace (*passaddhi*),
- excessive concentration (*adhika-samādhī*),
- equanimity, balanced state (*upekkhā*),
- restlessness (*uddhacca*), and
- path and fruition experience (*magga-phala-vīthi*).

However, he did not—or could not—specifically identify what that apparent loss of consciousness was.

During the workshop for monastics on “Entering the Stream and Beyond” held in SBS in July 2023, Āyasmā Ariyadhammika shared an interesting observation based on his experience in the three major Theravāda Buddhist countries, mostly among the meditation centres and meditative forest monasteries. He said that although the idea of phalasangāhī for sekhas was prevalent in Myanmar, it was practically absent among the

Thais,⁵¹ and ambiguously known among the Sri Lankans. A summary of his conclusion is: The phenomenon of ‘fruition attainment’ may be the result of the conditioning of the mind by the tradition in which the meditator was brought up, the type of Dhamma books he has read, e.g. the *Visuddhimagga*, and what he expects the experience to be like, thus producing a corresponding ‘experience’.

Summary

In the face of the sutta-informed certainty that sekhas cannot attain phalasangāmi and such uncertainty about what ‘cessation experiences’ actually are, it would be unwise and even disastrous to use the yogi’s skill to enter, remain in and emerge from such ‘cessation experiences’ as a yardstick or the gold standard to authenticate stream-entry.

51 He was probably referring to the forest meditative tradition because the idea of phalasangāmi is prevalent among those practising the Mahasi method, originally imported from Myanmar but now sprinkled with Thai characteristics.

AUTHENTICATION OF STREAM-ENTRY

We saw that stream-entry is heralded by the arising of the Dhamma-eye which sees, or experientially understands:

- (1) impermanence
- (2) causality
- (3) nibbāna.

Is this not good enough to authenticate stream-entry? Unfortunately no. This is because it is rather subjective and prone to overestimation by the one who claims to have had it. The criteria given by the Buddha himself in Paṭhama-giṅjakāvasatha Sutta (SN 55.8, CDB page 1800) called the Dhamma-mirror also share this same pitfall: If one

“possesses confirmed confidence (*aveccap(p)asāda*) in the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha and the virtues dear to the noble ones—unbroken, untorn, unblemished, unmottled, freeing, praised by the wise, ungrasped, leading to concentration ... if he wishes, could by himself declare of himself: ‘I am one finished with hell, finished with the animal

realm, finished with the domain of ghosts, finished with the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world. I am a stream-enterer, no longer bound to the nether world, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as my destination.'"

Even if 'confirmed confidence' is more accurately translated as 'experientially verified faith' and explained as the faith that arises because of what the Dhamma-eye sees, the virtues dear to the noble ones are nowhere defined and therefore subject to debate. One could also question how the stream-enterer could be so presumptuous as to declare that he was free from the lower realms and was destined to be fully awakened because this is not within the purview of the Dhamma-eye.

Proposal for a Supplementary Safer Set of Criteria

Although the arising of the Dhamma-eye is all-important for stream-entry, that momentary once-in-a-lifetime experience may not be as significant as its life-changing consequences. Some of these more obvious ones could perhaps provide a supplementary safer set of criteria for authenticating stream-entry.

Two among them stand out: moral standards and a change of mindset.

Moral Standards

Since the virtues dear to the noble ones are nowhere defined, we need to piece the jigsaw puzzle together. The first clue is that he will never fall into the woeful realms. According to Pahīna Sutta (AN 6.90, NDB pages 979-980), he has abandoned lust, hatred and delusion leading to the plane of misery. But the question is: To what extent of lust, hatred and delusion, when manifested, can lead one to the plane of misery? Phrased more generally, what makes a person fall into the woeful realms?

In Sāleyyaka Sutta (MN 41, MLDB pages 380-381), the Buddha said that there are 10 types of unrighteous conduct (more popularly known as *duccarita* or unwholesome conduct) owing to which some beings are reborn in the realms of misery. These are the 3-4-3 connected with bodily action, speech and mental states respectively:

1. Taking life
2. Taking what has not been given
3. Sexual misconduct

4. False speech
5. Divisive speech
6. Harsh speech
7. Unbeneficial speech
8. Covetousness
9. Malicious thoughts
10. Wrong view

Bear in mind that these are not like the precepts in which the stream-enterer has to undertake to refrain from such misconduct. There is no question of having to undertake them because the intention to do any of these will never arise in a stream-enterer. Self-honesty and introspective mindfulness are definitely required to use these supplementary criteria to authenticate one's own perceived attainment of stream-entry.

The above list is just to give a general idea of the moral standard expected of a stream-enterer. You are encouraged to read the sutta itself for details and clarifications on what each item entails.

Change of Mindset

The Dhamma-eye's experiential verification of impermanence due to causality culminating in a glimpse of nibbāna will definitely bring about a

radical change of mindset that will reduce much mind-rooted suffering. Therefore a stream-enterer would not blame himself or others because he clearly understands that everything is a product of causes and conditions, many of which are beyond his control. We saw this above in Catutthābhabbaṭṭhāna Sutta (AN 6.95, NDB page 981):

“He is incapable of resorting to [the view that] pleasure and pain are made by oneself; or by another; or by oneself and by another; or not by oneself but have arisen fortuitously; or not by another but have arisen fortuitously; or neither by oneself nor by another but have arisen fortuitously. For what reason? Because the person accomplished in view has clearly seen causation and causally arisen phenomena.” (Abridged)

However, Kosambiya Sutta (MN 48, MLDB page 422) states that when he pursues, develops and cultivates this view, he personally obtains serenity and quenching, which could mean that if he was negligent and did not do so, then he would not obtain serenity and quenching but would suffer from disappointment, resentment, dissatisfaction, anger, and so forth.

And because the stream-enterer has seen and clearly understood the four noble truths, which includes the first (suffering) and the second (craving, desire, attachment, clinging as the cause of the first), he would tend to reduce desires, etc. and lead a more contented and peaceful life. We suffer not only because we cannot get the objects of the senses we desire, but sometimes even more so because we cling to our views, beliefs and ideologies and get embroiled in all sorts of arguments and conflicts. The stream-enterer would be wiser and avoid all these by reducing as much desire as is possible.

Summary and Conclusion

While the arising of the Dhamma-eye and what it sees is undeniably the pivotal criterion for identifying the attainment of stream-entry, its authentication should be supplemented by the proposed set of criteria based on a rigorous standard of moral conduct and an extraordinary change of mindset. This is because one's experience of what the Dhamma-eye sees is highly subjective and prone to overestimation. Using the supplementary set of

criteria with genuine self-honesty is a safe way to prevent overestimation and the subsequent undermining of one's journey to liberation; and perhaps more importantly, if one is a teacher, to not be guilty of leading others astray and of undermining their spiritual development.

APPENDIX A

TRANSLATION OF UPASAMPAJJA

“Enters and dwells in the first jhāna” is currently a popular translation of the Pāli *paṭham jhānam upasampajja viharati*. A reader who does not understand Pāli will certainly construe that jhāna is a meditative absorption in which one enters into and remains absorbed. This is an inevitable misconception brought about by a misleading translation.

During the Closer to Reality DhammaVinaya Seminar held in Sāsanārakkha Buddhist Sanctuary in November 2006, I had already pointed out this misleading translation to the participants, but since then it must have sunk into oblivion because the contents of the seminar were neither recorded nor published. Now I think is the opportune time to rejuvenate my effort to address this misleading translation.

There is an explanation of the first jhāna and its attainment in the Visuddhimagga⁵² and the commentary to the Vinaya⁵³ as follows:

upasampajjāti upagantvā, pāpunītvāti vuttamī hoti. upasampādayitvā vā, nippādetvāti vuttamī hoti. vibhaṅge pana “upasampajjāti paṭhamassa jhānassa lābho paṭilābho patti sampatti phusanā samphusanā sacchikiriyā upasampadā”ti vuttamī tassāpi evamevattho vedītabbo.

This is translated by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli thus:

Enters upon (*upasampajja*): arrives at; reaches, is what is meant; or else, taking it as “makes enter” (*upasampādayitvā*), then producing, is what is meant. In the Vibhaṅga this is said: “‘Enters upon’: the gaining, the regaining, the reaching, the arrival at, the touching, the realizing of, the entering upon (*upasampadā*) the first jhāna” (Vibh 257), the meaning of which should be regarded in the same way. (PP pages 151-152)

52 Visuddhimaggo, (paṭhamo bhāgo) pathavīkasiṇaniddeso, paṭhamajjhānakathā.

53 Vin-a 1, verañjakaṇḍavaṇṇanā, paṭhamajjhānakathā.

This translation of *upasampajja* as ‘enters upon’ is questionable because *upasampajja* is the absolutive of the verb *upasampajjati* which can be etymologically analysed into *upa + sam + √pad + ya + ti*. In this breakdown, *√pad* is the root while the rest are affixes. A translation of each of these elements gives

upa = close

sam = well, properly

√pad = going; going away

ya + ti = verbal suffixes to make the word a 3rd person singular verb in the present tense

In no way can this be construed as ‘enter’ or ‘enter upon’, because the Pāli verb for ‘to enter’ is *pavisati*. Even though ‘enter upon’ can be considered an English idiom with several meanings, none of them fits in with the etymological analysis or commentarial explanation, as can be seen below:

entering upon. (n.d.)

Literally, to enter some thing or place as something is happening.

To begin or start a course of action.

To gain possession or ownership of something.

To start thinking about something.⁵⁴

54 entering upon. (n.d.) Farlex Dictionary of Idioms. (2015). Retrieved October 1 2023 from <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/entering+upon>.

I propose a more accurate and literal translation of the commentarial passage as follows:

upasampajja means having approached (*upagantvā*), having reached (*pāpunitvā*). Alternatively it means having accomplished (*upasampādayitvā*), having produced (*nippādetvā*). In the Vibhaṅga, it is said: “*upasampajja* means the obtaining (*lābho*), the firm obtaining (*paṭilābho*), the attainment (*patti*), the proper attainment (*sampatti*), the contact (*phusanā*), the proper contact (*samphusanā*), the realisation (*sacchikiriyā*), the completion (*upasampadā*) of the first jhāna”. Its meaning too should be understood in the same way.

Based on the above analysis, a more accurate translation of *upasampajja viharati* in the context of meditation should be “having reached / attained (the meditative state), he dwells / remains (in that attainment).”

For example, in Paṭhamapuññābhisanda Sutta (AN 4:51, NDB page 440), the Buddha talked about the four streams of merit gained by the donor of the four requisites when a monk uses them while in a meditative mode. An extract of the English translation reads:

When a bhikkhu enters and dwells (*upasampajja viharati*) in a measureless concentration of mind while using a robe [that one has given him], one acquires a measureless stream of merit, stream of the wholesome, a nutriment of happiness—heavenly, ripening in happiness, conducive to heaven—that lead to what is wished for, desired, and agreeable, to one’s welfare and happiness.

In my opinion, a more accurate translation is:

When a bhikkhu is using a donor’s robe after having attained a measureless concentration of mind and dwelling in it (*upasampajja viharati*), the donor’s measureless stream of merit, stream of the wholesome, nutriment of happiness—heavenly, ripening in happiness, conducive to heaven—leads to what is wished for, desired, and agreeable, to his welfare and happiness.

Let us now examine other non-meditative contexts in which this term *upasampajja* is used, e.g. in Mahācattārisaka Sutta (MN 117, MLDB page 934), the translation is:

Mindfully one abandons wrong view,
mindfully one enters upon and abides in

(*upasampajja viharati*) right view: this is one's right mindfulness ... Mindfully one abandons wrong thought ... wrong speech ... wrong action ... wrong livelihood, mindfully one enters upon and abides in (*upasampajja viharati*) right livelihood: this is one's right mindfulness ...

A more accurate translation would be:

Mindfully he abandons wrong view;
mindfully, having attained right view, he dwells in that attainment (*upasampajja viharati*) ...

One could attain the right view by listening or reading about it, but can one Remember it, Recollect it, Remind oneself to apply it and finally Retrospect by looking back at one's mind to check that it is still there? Dwelling in that attainment means having the mindfulness (i.e. the above 4Rs) to do all these.

In the case of Kālāma Sutta (AN 3.66, NDB page 286), the translation seems to be more liberal and idiomatic:

“But when you know for yourselves: ‘These things are wholesome; these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; these things, if accepted and undertaken, lead

to welfare and happiness,' then you should live in accordance with them (*atha tumhe, kālāmā, upasampajja vihareyyātha*)."

My preferred translation for the last line is: then, Kālāmas, after having accomplished them, you should live accordingly (*atha tumhe, kālāmā, upasampajja vihareyyātha*).

In summary, *upasampajja viharati* should not be translated as "enters/enters upon and dwells" but more accurately rendered as "having attained/reached/accomplished ..., he dwells/remains/lives in it/accordingly." To be less wordy, it can also be rendered as "attains/reaches/accomplishes ..., and dwells/remains/lives in it/accordingly." Translated in this way, the *jhānas* need not be misconstrued as meditative absorptions.

APPENDIX B

TABULATION OF MENTAL
FACTORS IN ANUPADA
SUTTA (MN 111)

No.	Mental Factors	Jhāna				Āruppa		
		1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	1 st	2 nd	3 rd
1.	Thought (<i>vitakka</i>)	☑						
2.	Examination (<i>vicāra</i>)	☑						
3.	Rapture (<i>pīti</i>)	☑	☑					
4.	Pleasure (<i>sukha</i>)	☑	☑	☑				
5.	Unification of mind (<i>cittakaggatā</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
6.	Contact (<i>phassa</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
7.	Feeling (<i>vedanā</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
8.	Perception (<i>saññā</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
9.	Volition (<i>cetanā</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
10.	Mind (<i>citta</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
11.	Zeal (<i>chanda</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
12.	Decision (<i>adhimokkha</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
13.	Energy (<i>vīriya</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
14.	Mindfulness (<i>sati</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
15.	Equanimity (<i>upekkhā</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
16.	Attention (<i>manasikāra</i>)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑

No.	Mental Factors	Jhāna				Āruppa		
		1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	1 st	2 nd	3 rd
17.	Internal confidence / tranquility (<i>ajjhatta sampasādana</i>)		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					
18.	Mindfulness & clear comprehension (<i>sati-sampajañña</i>)			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
19.	Neutral feeling (<i>upekkhā adukkhamasukhā vedanā</i>)				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
20.	Mental unconcern due to tranquillity (<i>passaddhattā cetaso anābhogo</i>)				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
21.	Purity of mindfulness (<i>satipārisuddhi</i>)				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
22.	Perception of the base of infinite space (<i>ākāsānañcāyatanaññā</i>)				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
23.	Perception of the base of infinite consciousness (<i>viññāṇañcāyatanaññā</i>)					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
24.	Perception of the base of nothingness (<i>ākīñcaññāyatanaññā</i>)						<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

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ABBREVIATIONS

	Pāli Text	Reference according to
AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya	Book number : Sutta number
DN	Dīgha Nikāya	Sutta number
KN	Khuddaka Nikāya	Book number : Sutta number
MN	Majjhima Nikāya	Sutta number
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya	Saṃyutta number : Sutta number
CBD	The Connected Discourses of the Buddha	
DPR	Digital Pali Reader Online	
LDB	The Long Discourses of the Buddha	
MLDB	The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha	
NDB	The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha	
PP	The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)	



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THE DESTRUCTION OF CRAVING
VANQUISHES ALL SUFFERING.





Āyasmā Aggacitta is a Malaysian bhikkhu ordained at the age of 25 by the late Bhaddanta Mahasi Sayadaw U Sobhana in Rangoon in 1979. Bhante Aggacitta, as he is more popularly known, received meditation training in the various traditions of Myanmar.

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