

Mental Absorptions (*jhānā*)

The Pāḷi term *jhāna* is derived from the verb *jhāyati*, which means either to contemplate, to meditate or to burn. Both meanings can be applied here: The mind is firmly established on an object and contemplates it, which has the effect of burning away the hindrances to meditation or concentration. The word absorption can be used as a translation for this state of mind, because the mind is completely absorbed in the object of meditation. It is not aware of any other object at this time. No brain associations take place, so no thoughts occur. Sensory objects are not perceived. Physical sensations are also not perceived. The body is completely motionless. Consciousness rises in the heart and continuously perceives only the chosen object. It does not turn anywhere else, giving the impression that it is completely absorbed in the chosen object.

The four *jhāna* are clearly defined states of consciousness and not the individual judgement of any state of consciousness. In the *suttā*, the description of the first *jhāna* is "*vivicceva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi*", which means that the mind is completely secluded from both sense objects and unwholesome things. There are different spheres in which consciousness can appear. Here it is said that already in the first *jhāna* consciousness no longer appears in the realm of sense objects (*vivicceva kāmehi*). The moments of consciousness (*citta*) and the appearance of these in a process in the *jhāna* are different from ordinary sense consciousness. The consciousness (*citta*) of the *jhānā* is called finematerial consciousness because it is itself very subtle and because it takes subtle, material objects. In DN 22 it is described by the Buddha as *mahaggata* - sublime. If one practices correctly and learns to analyse it after emerging from *jhāna*, one can see it in one's own stream of consciousness and clearly distinguish it from sense sphere consciousness. If one receives proper training as a meditation teacher and practises all sections according to DN 22, one also learns to distinguish the consciousness in *jhāna*, referred to as *mahaggata citta* - sublime consciousness - from sense sphere consciousness in the consciousness of others and can give correct, helpful instructions to students, as it says in DN 22:

"Thus internally contemplating consciousness, he (she) dwells.

Thus externally contemplating consciousness, he (she) dwells.

Thus internally and externally contemplating consciousness, he (she) dwells."

What is *jhāna* and what is not is therefore not based on speculative, individual perceptions. In the *suttā* we only find the distinction between four or five *jhānā*, which are described precisely with their specific factors and which can be achieved in sequence. We do not find a distinction between light and full *jhāna* there.

With the exception of arahat, *jhāna* is composed of consciousness that creates results. So not only the time that the mind spends in *jhāna* is pleasant, but the results of this time are also expected to be pleasant and helpful for spiritual development. The *jhānā* with its finematerial consciousness are very wholesome states that bring corresponding results. One moment of consciousness in a *jhāna* can, if other conditions are present, bring about an entire life span in a happy sphere of life. This connection should be carefully considered when talking about and teaching light *jhāna*, as it does not apply here.

The *jhānā* thus differ in quality from the ordinary consciousness of human beings. They are composed of the consciousness of beings in the higher realms of the gods.

At the time when the mind enters the absorptions, the hindrances are completely suppressed and the *jhāna*factors are fully developed and stable for a long time. According to the Suttanta method (according to the discourses) there are four finematerial *jhānā*, according to the Abhidhamma method there are five finematerial *jhānā*. In a few places, the Buddha also mentions five finematerial *jhānā* in the *suttā*. There are also four immaterial bases (*āyatana*), which can also be called *jhānā*, because the mind is also completely absorbed in the corresponding object.

With increasing concentration, the *jhānā* can be attained one after the other. These absorptions are a composition of the *jhāna*factors and the mental factors that occur together with them. Without the associated mental factors, the *jhāna*factors cannot appear. They are very wholesome states of mind that can be maintained uninterruptedly for a long time. The mind is completely pure and clear (*cittavisuddhi*) during this time. The mind is pure and clear in *jhāna* and also afterwards, if one practices correctly.

The mind is very alert in *jhāna* and also afterwards, if one practices correctly and also maintains the right mindfulness, it is never in an ecstatic, trance-like state.

In addition to mental absorptions (*jhānasamāpatti*), supernormal powers (*abhiññā*) can be attained through *samātha* meditation (*bhāvanā*).

The highest goal of *samātha* meditation are the immaterial bases.

Based on the deep concentration and tranquillity of *samatha* meditation, one can practise insight meditation (*vipassanā bhāvanā*) and thus attain awakening (4 paths - *magga*). One can attain path consciousness based on any of the four finematerial *jhānā* or four immaterial bases by emerging from the corresponding *jhāna* and practising *vipassanā*.

As explained earlier, the word *jhāna* literally means to burn off. This means that these states can occur when the hindrances no longer occur for a longer period of time. When the hindrances cease to occur, happiness arises in the mind. The mind dwells in a harmonious, very quiet contented state.

Beings are often unhappy, dissatisfied, frustrated because they are overwhelmed by the obstacles without realising it. These are not only obstacles to meditation, but also obstacles to lasting happiness.

The happiness and contentment that arise from concentration are a very good basis for profound insights into the nature of our existence.

Jhāna states of mind are very simple states of mind. This simple mind arises because one focuses on only one object for a long time. For a few hours, one can continuously observe only one simple object and the mind enters into absorption with the object when practising with an object suitable for absorption. It becomes as if absorbed by the object. Ordinary thinking ceases for a long time. This is also a good way to let go of habitual thought patterns. The mind is completely immersed in the object of contemplation. Happiness and joy are a strong support for maintaining this state for a long time.

The body also becomes very relaxed, but without being perceived by the mind, because the mind only perceives the one object. The matter produced in the body by *jhāna* consciousness replaces other matter that may have been caused by unwholesome consciousness in the past. This process of transformation also happens in the brain, which is matter. As a result, thinking also changes when one dwells in *jhāna* consciousness for long periods of time.

In this pleasant, simple way, a powerful, beneficial state of mind can be maintained for a very long time. This wholesome state of mind is not only pleasant in the present, but also brings pleasant results in the future according to the law of cause and effect. For example, a major pleasant consequence of *jhāna* is easier access to *vipassanā* meditation. The experiences of *jhānā* bring a completely different dimension to meditation.

The *jhāna* factors mentioned above are already developed to a high level in the first *jhāna*. However, the factors of happiness and joy are not experienced in the same way as when one gets desired sense objects. It's not like when one gets one's favorite car or one goes on a big trip. The joy is not excessive, it is a quiet joy that can be sustained without interruption. It also leads to stillness and contentment afterwards. There is no one present in the *jhāna* who experiences this joy. It is present to maintain these powerful, wholesome states of mind for a long time. In these states of deep calm, there is no ego. There is no one who judges, demands, rejects. Only mind is present, which continuously takes this one object, which is the previously chosen object. That is why these states are so recovering, because the ego is not present. Such states are not found in any sense experiences.

The happy feeling and joy only fulfill their function, they have no owner. They intensify other mental factors such as perception, mindfulness, lightness, softness and skillfulness. When one is aware of these pleasant states of mind, the *jhāna* is interrupted. When one enjoys them, consciousness with craving arises. Mindfulness is very important at this point. One should understand that these states have arisen due to causes. Then even after emerging from *jhāna*, a wholesome state of mind is maintained as a powerful basis for insight meditation.

The personal experiences of *jhāna* vary. How absorption is experienced depends on the length of the *jhāna* mental processes. The moments of consciousness (*citta*) are different from sense consciousness, which is the ordinary state of consciousness. The *jhāna* moments of consciousness are finematerial and therefore subtler than sense consciousness. But they are kammically more powerful. If the finematerial mental processes of *jhānā* are often interrupted by other consciousness, whether by sense consciousness or by the life continuum (*bhavaṅga*), the experience of absorption is less than if the *jhāna* consciousness lasts for a long time. But kammically, even short periods in *jhāna* are powerful and give their corresponding results. The longer one practices and sits without interruption, the more intense is the absorption experience and the perception of sense objects, be it bodily sensations or sounds, ceases altogether. If one has a lot of distractions in worldly life, the states of absorption in meditation tend to be shorter and therefore not as deep and intense and are not always recognized as such. If one can analyze consciousness, one can distinguish sense consciousness from finematerial consciousness and can subsequently see in which kind of consciousness the mind was dwelling.

In the *suttā*, however, we find descriptions of long-lasting, uninterrupted states of absorption, because otherwise a dwelling "completely secluded from sense pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states of mind" is not possible. Thus it can be concluded that only long-lasting states of absorption purify the mind to such an extent that it is prepared for insight and liberation. The short experiences of finematerial consciousness can thus only be an accumulation of wholesome moments of consciousness in order to produce long-lasting states of absorption due to their kammic potential.

For the attainment of *jhāna*, the conditions must be present in the corresponding stream of consciousness. Other wholesome states of mind are an essential prerequisite. *Jhānā*

are not attainable because one wants to have them and tries with desire to bring about these states. It is not possible to attain these wholesome states with behaviour, as one might attain status or wealth with worldly achievement and competitive behaviour.

Nor can one reach these states because one has heard that they are blissful and then think one can reach them in a week-long retreat. A variety of conditions and patient practice, as well as letting go of attachments and other unwholesome states of mind are prerequisites for attaining them. This sometimes requires fundamental changes in life. The purification of the mind that precedes *jhāna* is continued and strengthened through the experience of *jhāna* and dwelling in it. The purification of the mind through *jhāna* also has the effect that when practiced regularly, the tendency for thoughts to get out of control is greatly reduced. The mind is simply still. The tranquil state after *jhāna* experiences can only be maintained if one endeavors to observe the body and mind in all activities with right mindfulness. The *jhāna* provide an excellent basis for this, namely for Buddhist mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is a prerequisite for *jhāna* and through *jhāna* mindfulness improves.