

The Origins of Insight Meditation

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It is easy to get the impression from reading the literature that the principal form of meditation current today in Theravāda Buddhism is a particular type of insight meditation (*vipassanā*)—one which is keenly recommended by adherents. Meditation practice of this kind has in relatively recent years spread from Burma to other Southern Buddhist countries and even outside the traditional environment of this form of Buddhism. Today centres and teachers for the practice of insight meditation are to be found in England, Germany, India, U.S.A., and many other countries. Almost all of these derive ultimately from Burma, although they are not all of the same branch of Burmese meditation. This method is advocated with great, if not excessive, enthusiasm—perhaps a single quotation (from the well-known German monk Ñāṇaponika Mahāthera) will suffice:¹

“This ancient Way of Mindfulness is as practicable today as it was 2,500 years ago. It is as applicable in the lands of the West as in the East; in the midst of life’s turmoil as well as in the peace of the monk’s cell.

Right Mindfulness is, in fact, the indispensable basis of Right Living and Right Thinking—everywhere, at any time, for everyone.”

In this article I look first at the present-day practice of this type of meditation and its competitors, then touch briefly on the historical roots of these schools in recent centuries so far as they are known, afterwards turning to the specific features of this kind of *bhāvanā* and to the literary sources of this approach, as they are given in the Theravādin commentarial literature of the first millennium A.D. Looking then to the sources of the commentaries themselves, I find the principal origin of this type of material in a later canonical work, the *Paṭisambhidā-magga* and seek to situate its historical context in the period of the formation of the Vibhajjavādin and Sarvāstivādin schools. Finally I look briefly at the earlier origins of the wisdom tradition in Buddhism and comment on the

¹ Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, third ed., London, 1962 [1953].

work of those scholars who consider it to be a later development, posterior to the time of the Buddha himself.

Schools of meditation practice today

Leaving aside forms of Buddhist meditation which have their roots in Northern or Eastern Buddhism, almost all commercially published accounts of meditation by Buddhist (and non-Buddhist) practitioners are derived from some branch of Burmese insight meditation, and usually from one of two branches of that.² Most other writing is either based on that or on the fifth-century *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa or on a mixture of the two.³ Even Kornfield's *Living Buddhist*

² Some examples are: M. Byles, *Journey into Burmese Silence*, London, 1962; J.E. Coleman, *The Quiet Mind*, New York, 1971; V.R. (Sobhana Dhammasudhi) Dhiravamsa, *The Real Way to Awakening*, London, 1969; V.R. (Vichitr Tissadatto) Dhiravamsa, *Insight Meditation*, London, 2508; V.R. Dhiravamsa, *The Dynamic Way of Meditation, The Release and Cure of Pain and Suffering through Vipassanā Meditative Techniques*, Wellingborough, Northants, 1982; V.R. Dhiravamsa, *The Way of Non-attachment*, Wellingborough, Northants, 1975; V.R. Dhiravamsa, *The Middle Path of Life, Being Talks on the Practice of Insight Meditation*, London, 1974; V.R. Dhiravamsa, *A New Approach to Buddhism*, London, 1972; J. Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight: A Simple and Direct Guide to Buddhist Meditation*, 2nd? ed., New York, 1983 [1976]; J. Goldstein & J. Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom, The Path of Insight Meditation*, Boston & London, 1987; Henepola Gunaratana, Mahāthera, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, reprinted ed., Taipei, 1991; J. Hamilton-Merritt, *A Meditator's Diary, A Western Woman's Unique Experiences in Thailand Monasteries*, 1979 [1976]; A. & J. James, *A Meditation Retreat*, Box, Wiltshire, 1986; A. & J. James, *Modern Buddhism*, Box, Wiltshire, 1987; A. James, *The Unfolding of Wisdom, The Buddha's Path to Enlightenment*, Bradford on Avon, 1993; Chua Jantrupon, *Vipassanā Bhāvanā (Theory, Practice and Result)*, 2nd ed., tr. by F. Tullius, Chonburi, 1988; W.L. King, *A Thousand Lives Away*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965; Mahāsi, Sayadaw, *Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā*, Bangkok, 1975; Achan Sobin S. Namto, *Moment to Moment Mindfulness, A Pictorial Manual for Meditators*, Fawnskin, California, 1989; Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness, A Manual on Meditation*, rev. ed., tr. by Mobi Ho, Boston, 1987; Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart: From Mindfulness to Insight Contemplation*, Berkeley, Calif., c. 1988; E.H. Shattock, *An Experiment in Mindfulness*, London, 1970 [1958]; D.K. Swearer, *Secrets of the Lotus, An Introduction to Buddhist Meditation—Contemporary Classical Interpretations of the Zen and Theravāda Traditions*, New York & London, 1971; J. Walters, *Mind Unshaken*, London, 1961. Other accounts include: G.D. Bond, "The Insight Meditation Movement in Contemporary Theravada Buddhism," *JISRC*, 2.4, 1987, 23–76; R. Gombrich, "From Monastery to Meditation Centre: Lay Meditation in Modern Sri Lanka," in *Buddhist Studies—Ancient and Modern*, eds., P. Denwood and T. Piatigorsky, 20–34, London, 1983; J. Maquet, "Expressive Space and Theravada Values: A Meditation Monastery in Sri Lanka," *Ethos*, 3.1, 1975, 1–23; J. Maquet, "Meditation in Contemporary Sri Lanka: Idea and Practice," *JTP*, 7.2, 1975, 182–96.

³ To mention some of the more influential—largely based on the *Visuddhimagga* are: Edward Conze, *Buddhist Meditation*, London, 1956; Paravahera Vajirañāṇa, Mahāthera, *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice, A General Exposition According to the Pāli Canon of the Theravāda School*, Colombo, 1962; partly based on experience of insight meditation and partly on the *Visuddhimagga* are: G.D. Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka, Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation and Response*, Columbia, S.C., 1988; W.L. King, *Theravāda Meditation: The Buddhist Transformation of Yoga*, University Park & London, 1980; Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, third ed., London, 1962 [1953]. The principal exceptions (among larger works) to this rule are: Bhikkhu Khantipalo, *Calm and Insight, A Buddhist Manual for Meditators*, London, 1981; Phra Mahā Singhathon Narāsabho, *Buddhism, A Guide to a Happy Life*, Bangkok, 1971. Hammalawa Saddhātissa, *The Buddha's Way*, London & New York, 1971/1972 is also rather more wide-ranging than most in its sources.

*Masters*⁴ is heavily and misleadingly biased towards the insight meditation tradition in its selection, although this book does give some coverage of Thai approaches and its final chapter provides a good overview. Of course there is a considerable body of pamphlet literature, distributed by individual monasteries and meditation centres. This is much more varied, but many such works are difficult to obtain except by personal visits.

Before pursuing the history of this tradition it is perhaps useful to look briefly at the other kinds of meditation current at the present time. In Sri Lanka today, there are a number of forest centres which do not practise exclusively insight meditation, although there are certainly influences there from Burma. Most of these probably come from an earlier stage in the development of the Burmese insight tradition. In particular some of these centres teach *kaṣiṇabhāvanā* i.e. meditation on colours and the qualities of the four elements.⁵ It is possible, however, that this tradition is a relatively recent development, partly based upon the texts. Widespread among individual monks are two practices: the development of loving-kindness (to oneself and usually to all sentient beings) and mindfulness of in-and-out breathing.⁶ The first of these is strictly a form of *samatha* or calm meditation, although it is not unusual for it to be practised in conjunction with insight meditation or as a balancing adjunct to other methods. Equally it may be (and often is) adopted as the main form of meditation. As to the second, many different techniques for working with the breath are in fact current, but breathing mindfulness differs crucially from the other methods in that it can be used to develop insight or calm or both together. All these kinds of practice, as found in the island today, seem to be partly individual creations from the literature and partly something transmitted through the network of individual connections within the Buddhist *saṅgha*. It is of course impossible to assess how old the meditative traditions of that network may be, but it certainly includes ideas and practices coming from both Burma and Indo-China.

⁴ J. Kornfield, *Living Buddhist Masters*, Santa Cruz, 1977.

⁵ I have twice stayed for a few weeks at one such centre (Kalugala). Others are described in M.B. Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka: An Anthropological and Historical Study*, Delhi, 1983.

⁶ This statement is based upon personal observation.

In Burma many schools of insight meditation are current, but in addition to that there is a great deal of concentration-orientated meditation.⁷ Most of the latter seems to be associated either with esotericism of some kind or with the development of psychic powers and is often especially linked to developing mental contact with some kind of non-human being.⁸ This kind of thing is found in Thailand, but what is also found there is a tradition (or rather a number of traditions) which seek to develop concentration to a high level as the basis for the subsequent achievement of insight and the higher levels of the Buddhist path. I shall contrast this approach as calm meditation, although it should be noted that there are Burmese insight schools which place more emphasis on concentration than others, while there are Thai schools which introduce the insight aspect at a somewhat earlier stage than others. (I shall exclude from consideration here Thai schools of insight meditation as these seem to have been introduced from Burma either in the post-war period or earlier in the twentieth century.)

Among the Thai schools the most well-known to European practitioners is certainly the *samādhi* tradition of North-East Thailand. This approach, also referred to as the Forest Tradition, is particularly, but not exclusively, current in the Thammayut *nikāya*. It often involves the attempt to develop some degree of *samādhi* but does bring in some insight at an early stage. It can also be characterized by its use of meditation on the thirty-two parts of the body and by use of the *mantra* *Buddho* together with mindfulness of breathing. This tradition is both conservative and reformist but not usually modernist or ultimatist.⁹ It can

⁷ G. Houtman writes: “Today at least two dozen distinct nationally renowned insight methodologies operate many hundreds of centres, in which many thousands of independent teachers teach, and to which hundreds of thousands of independent practitioners commit themselves for temporary retreats.” (Draft Introduction to Gustaaf Houtman, *Contemplating Insight*, forthcoming, page 5). No doubt there are more which operate only in small groups or even on a one-to-one basis with a single teacher.

⁸ G. Houtman, “Traditions of Buddhist Practice in Burma,” Ph.D., SOAS, University of London, 1990.

⁹ It should be noted, however, that it has its roots in the Thammayut reform of King Mongkut (king 1851–1868, but ordained as a monk from 1824), a reform which was certainly actively modernist in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. For the reform of King Mongkut and the Forest Tradition, see: F. Bizot, *Le Bouddhisme des Thaïs*, Bangkok, 1993, chapter 3; S.J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer, A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background*, Cambridge, 1976; S.J. Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets, A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism and Millennial Buddhism*, Cambridge, 1984, chapters 6 and 9–11; J.L. Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State, An Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand*, Singapore, 1993. Many pamphlets for free distribution from this tradition circulate. See Kornfield, *op. cit.*, chapters 9 (and 4). English versions of some are available via anonymous FTP from the node sunsite.unc.edu in the sub-directory /pub/academic/religious studies/Buddhism/DEFA/ Theravada.

be contrasted with the highly modernist approach of the followers of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu with their distinct tendency towards ultimatism.¹⁰ A more traditionalist approach is that of Wat Paknam involving concentration on various centres in the body, particularly one just above the navel, and the *mantra sammā arahaṃ*.¹¹ An offshoot of this is the Dhammakāya movement with the same kind of meditation practice, but with a strongly modernizing tendency.¹² Here however the modernization lies rather in presentation than in ideas; so it is perhaps better characterized as revivalist. It is sometimes referred to as fundamentalist, but this is rather misleading.

The last two of these must have their roots in the kind of Southern Buddhist esotericism so ably described in the writings of François Bizot.¹³ In fact Bizot

¹⁰ By ‘ultimatism’ I mean the perennial tendency within most forms of Buddhism to emphasize the highest levels of wisdom or enlightenment and discard more elementary levels. For a full bibliography on Buddhādāsa, see: Louis Gabaude, *Une herméneutique bouddhique contemporaine de Thaïlande: Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu*, Paris, 1988; cf. also Peter A. Jackson, *Buddhadasa: a Buddhist Thinker for the Modern World*, Bangkok, 1988 and Buddhādāsa, Bhikkhu, *Toward the Truth*, Philadelphia, Pa., 1971.

¹¹ A visitor’s account from 1954 in Richard Randall, *Life as a Siamese Monk*, Bradford on Avon, 1990. Some English pamphlets: T. Magness, *Sammā Samādhi, Being an Exposition of the Method of Samatha-vipassanā as Discovered and Attained by All Buddhas*, Bangkok, c. 1960; T. Magness, *Sammā Samādhi (Part Two), Being an Exposition of Attainments Derived From Samatha-vipassanā*, Bangkok, c. 1961; T. Magness, *The Life and Teachings of the Ven. Chao Khun Mongkol-thepmuni*, Bangkok, c. 1970?; Phra Wai Cattālayo, *Brightness of Dhamma*, Bangkok, 1986; The Venerable Pra (sic) Bhavana-kosolthera, (Veera Ganuttamo), *Basic Meditation Practice by Vijja Dhammakaya Approach*, Bangkok, 1984.

¹² Ven. Mettānando, Bhikkhu, “The Dhammakāya Movement—An Aspect from Within,” in *IABS Tenth International Conference in Paris*, edited by Ananda W.P. Guruge, 35–36, 1991 (a much shortened version of the conference paper). Various English language pamphlets are available from Wat Dhammakāya.

¹³ F. Bizot, *Le Figuier à Cinq Branches, Recherche sur le bouddhisme khmer*, Paris, 1976; F. Bizot, “La Grotte de la Naissance. Recherches sur le bouddhisme khmer, II,” *BEFEO*, LXVII, 1980, 221–273; F. Bizot, *Le Don de Soi-même, Recherches sur le bouddhisme khmer III*, Paris, 1981; F. Bizot, “Notes sur les yantra bouddhiques d’Indochine,” in *Tantric and Taoist Studies in honour of R.A. Stein*, ed., M. Strickmann, Vol. I, 155–191, Brussels, 1981; F. Bizot, *Les traditions de la pabbajjā en Asie du Sud-Est, Recherches sur le bouddhisme khmer, IV*, Göttingen, 1988; F. Bizot, *Rāmaker, L’Amour symbolique de Rām et Setā, Recherches sur le bouddhisme Khmer, V*, Paris, 1989; F. Bizot, “La consécration des statues et le culte des morts,” in *Recherches nouvelles sur le Cambodge*, ed., F Bizot, Paris, 1994, 101–39; F. Bizot, *Le bouddhisme des Thaïs*, Bangkok, 1993; F. Bizot and O. von Hinüber, *La guirlande de Joyaux*, Paris, 1994 and see also: O. de Bernon and F. Bizot, *Le Rāmaker du vieux Chak*, Paris, 1995; Catherine Becchetti, *Le mystère dans les lettres*, Bangkok, 1991; C. Becchetti, “Une ancienne tradition de manuscrits au Cambodge,” in *Recherches nouvelles sur le Cambodge*, ed., F Bizot, Paris, 1994, 47–62.

has described a number of types of meditation practice of a loosely tantric kind which he has met with in Cambodia (and Northern Thailand?). Some at least of these traditions have clearly survived the period of Communist rule.¹⁴ It seems that they have had some currency at a popular level through most of mainland South-East Asia, but tend to be disliked in the higher levels of the hierarchy and by some of the western-educated upper classes.¹⁵

Historical roots

There has been some discussion among scholars as to exactly how old the meditation tradition is. In fact we should distinguish carefully here what we mean by meditation and who exactly we are referring to. First of all it is necessary to distinguish between monks and lay people. It is often claimed that meditation among lay people in Ceylon is a relatively new phenomenon of the post-war period. Certainly a middle class movement, attending meditation centres catering for the laity is indeed a recent development. Relatively few village people seem to take up meditation before they reach a more advanced age. It may however be a mistake to assume that this is merely formalistic or ineffective.

In South-East Asia lay practice in youth is again claimed to be a recent phenomenon, although certainly considerably older than in Ceylon. I have doubts about this, however, as the strong tradition of spending a period in the *saṅgha* must have led to a certain number of individuals continuing to meditate after disrobing. Of course, there is no doubt that the majority of meditators would have been monks before relatively recent times. In any case lay meditation seems to have been a normative part of the various forms of esotericism.

For monks, it is clear that there has always been some tradition of meditation, at least in South-East Asia. In Ceylon it is usually held that relatively few monks meditate. This seems to me to be a slight overstatement of the case. Nevertheless for Ceylon the impression one has is that the meditation tradition was largely moribund at some point in the past and has been in part reintroduced from elsewhere. The same claim that few monks meditate is also made for Burma and Thailand. Here I find it flatly unbelievable. My own experience is that meditation is widely practised and well-known, although certainly not universal. The claim is based upon anthropological data which I find partially suspect. Sometimes one feels that it is a bit like sending a questionnaire to vicars asking

¹⁴ F. Bizot, *Le Chemin de Laṅkā*, Paris, 1992, 72.

¹⁵ On this tradition, see L.S. Cousins, "Esoteric Southern Buddhism," in title to be announced, ed., Susan Hamilton, 1996.

them if they are mystics—probably even those with a considerable spiritual experience and commitment would be likely to answer ‘no’. In fact a much more sophisticated sociological analysis than is usually undertaken seems required, taking into account such things as regional differences, what is meant by meditation and the overall pattern of the different stages of a monk’s life.

Above all, it is essential to attempt to ask questions in terms which are actually meaningful to the meditation tradition. This is where what we actually mean by ‘meditation’ becomes crucial. In general English usage of the word ‘meditation’ seems to refer to methods or techniques of repetitive exercise for developing some kind of mental state or understanding. This is very far from covering the full range of meaning of Buddhist *bhāvanā*. Indeed this term refers very precisely to the bringing into being of the *bodhipakkhiyadhammas* in general or the eightfold path in particular. In other words, such monastic activities as studying or teaching the *dhamma* as well as chanting *suttas* or repetition of *gāthā* may equally be forms of *bhāvanā*. This is certainly the position of the *aṭṭhakathā* and was probably that of traditional Theravāda Buddhism. Many *samatha* meditators today would still have some such understanding. In this view of the matter, *bhāvanā* is very widely practised indeed, both by virtually all monks and by most of the more committed laity.

While such a view of ‘meditation’ is indeed still widely held, it is precisely not the position which is frequent in some schools of insight meditation. For them, such activities as chanting and repetition of traditional formulæ are either not meditation at all or only an inferior form of meditation and that only when they are in a very orthodox form. Note then that for such monks or lay followers there is relatively little meditation in present-day Buddhism—by definition.

Such a position can be a product of reformism, the frequently recurring tendency in the history of Theravāda Buddhism to seek to restore Buddhism in general and the *saṅgha* in particular to an idealized state conceived of as their original and proper condition. Reformist movements have in fact recurred fairly frequently throughout the last thousand years of Southern Buddhist history, if not longer. However, there is little evidence to suggest that in the past this was associated with insight meditation. In some cases at least, it was much more concerned with monastic practice and traditional scholarship. On the whole it seems that it is not possible, at present, to trace the lineage of the present-day insight meditation tradition beyond the nineteenth century (in Burma).

Ironically, the only form of meditation whose lineage appears to be provably older than this is the esoteric tradition. One branch of this tradition was certainly introduced into Ceylon by monks sent by the King of Siam in the eighteenth century. The practice of this method appears to have died out on the island in the course of the nineteenth century, but, as mentioned above, it is still extant in

Cambodia. It must in the past have been more widespread and is in any case clearly affiliated to some methods still surviving in Thailand. Indeed it is likely that there must have been an ongoing tradition of practice of a number of methods of *samatha* meditation.

In contrast the practice of insight meditation as a separate method is probably a revival based at least in part upon the texts. (Of course, it must always have existed as an adjunct to *samatha* meditation and as a practice for advanced *samatha* meditators.) We can in fact be more precise than that. Its primary source is the commentarial writings of Buddhaghosa, particularly the *Visuddhimagga*. Undoubtedly, some of the monks who have been influential teachers of *vipassanā* in Burma were very learned in *abhidhamma*, but, as we shall see, this is not the main basis for their presentation of insight meditation. (I do not mean to suggest that they did not draw on their knowledge of canonical Buddhism. Indeed, they certainly did. The point is that their presentation is structured on the *Visuddhimagga* model.)

Characteristic features of insight meditation

In order to delineate the main features of insight meditation today, I shall take as my paradigm the school of Mahāsi Sayadaw. This is perhaps the most influential single school at the present time and, more importantly, is probably one of the more extreme in its advocacy of insight and distrust of concentration.¹⁶ (This is particularly the case in conversation with adherents of this approach; in some of his writings the Mahāsi himself seems to take a more moderate position.) The most distinctive element in the practice of this school is undoubtedly its technique of watching the rise and fall of the abdomen, but I shall pass over this as it seems to be an innovation of the Mahāsi himself.

The method of practice of this school is highly intensive, involving the maintenance of mindfulness and clear comprehension over long periods of time, ideally with very little sleep—eighteen to twenty hours of continuous meditation is normative. Usually sitting meditation and walking practice are alternated. The walking practice involves the systematic breaking down into named stages of the process of movement. Initially, each of these stages is noted mentally and at the same time all external distractions or internal wanderings of the mind are similarly noted. It is in fact recommended that the walking practice (and any other necessary activities) should be carried out as slowly as possible.¹⁷ This slowing down is sometimes criticized by devotees of other schools of insight¹⁸

¹⁶ Outside Burma (but not within) the tradition of U Ba Khin is very nearly as influential, but this school is much more moderate in its approach.

¹⁷ Mahāsi, Sayadaw, *Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā*, Bangkok, 1975, 22: “It is therefore instructed that slow motion exercises be carried out at all times.”

¹⁸ e.g. by the disciples of the well-known Thai female teacher, Acharn Naeb.

and does not in fact seem to be clearly authorized in the texts, although the differentiation of movement into stages is found.

As with most other schools of insight meditation the stages of the path are mapped out in accordance with the seven purifications and the various kinds of insight knowledge. On the whole the *Visuddhimagga* account is followed fairly closely with a few variations (usually justified by reference to other texts). I shall not give a detailed account of this, as I have outlined Buddhaghosa's description elsewhere.¹⁹ The most important features for present purposes are set out in Table One. The third and fourth columns set out (in ascending order) the seven purifications (*visuddhi*) which form the structure of the *Visuddhimagga*. The first two columns give the corresponding insight knowledges which occur in each stage of purification.

The point at which controversy has sometimes arisen in relation to Mahāsi Sayadaw's approach lies in relation to the second purification: *cittavisuddhi*, always understood as equivalent to concentration (*samādhi*). For the Mahāsi, all that is required to practise insight meditation is the weakest of the three degrees of concentration, i.e. *khaṇikasamādhi* or momentary concentration. Of course, if this means that this degree of concentration is all that is required to *start* meditation, then it is not controversial and in fact applies to any kind of meditation. However, Mahāsi Sayadaw seems to mean more than this. Again, it is often stated that the various insight knowledges are experienced in momentary concentration. This seems to follow from the fact that they do not have a *paṭibhāganimitta* or non-sensory mental object, as the two higher kinds of concentration do. By elimination therefore they must be developed with momentary concentration.

There are two problems with this. The first is historical. Buddhaghosa uses the term *khaṇikasamādhi* only rather rarely. The list of the three kinds of concentration (momentary, access and absorption) occurs in a passage which explains how the five kinds of *pīti* (energization/joy), when they are conceived and mature, bring about the tranquillization of mind and body. When that matures, it brings about bodily and mental happiness. When that in turn matures,

¹⁹ L.S. Cousins, "The Stages of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification: the Interior Castle of St. Teresa of Avila and the Path of Purification of Buddhaghosa," in *The Yogi and the Mystic—Studies in Indian and Comparative Mysticism*, ed., K. Werner, London, 1989, 103–120.

<i>avasiṭṭhakilesa-paccavekkhaṇa</i>	recollection of remaining defilements		
<i>pahīnakilesa-paccavekkhaṇa</i>	recollection of defilements abandoned		
<i>sotāpatti, etc.</i>	stream-entry, etc.	<i>ñāṇadassana-visuddhi</i>	purification by knowing and seeing
<i>gotrabhu</i>	lineage		
<i>anuloma</i>	inflow		purification by knowing and seeing the path
<i>saṅkhārupekkhā</i>	equipoise as to constructions		
<i>paṭisaṅkhānupassanā</i>	deep analysis	<i>paṭipadāñāṇa-dassanavisuddhi</i>	
<i>muñcitukamyatā</i>	desire to be free		
<i>nibbidānupassanā</i>	distaste	(<i>balavavipassanā</i>)	(strong insight)
<i>ādīnavānupassanā</i>	wretchedness		
<i>bhayatupaṭṭhāna</i>	establishing the sense of danger		
<i>bhaṅgānupassanā</i>	breaking up		
<i>udayabbayadassana</i>	seeing rise and dissolution	<i>maggāmaggañāṇa-dassanavisuddhi</i>	purification by knowing and seeing true and false ways
<i>kalāpasammasana</i>	laying hold in groups	(<i>taruṇa-vipassanā</i>)	(young insight)
<i>paccayapariggaha =</i> <i>(cullasotāpanna)</i>	comprehending conditions (lesser stream-enterer)	<i>kaṅkhāvitarāṇa-visuddhi</i>	purification by crossing through doubt
<i>nāmarūpavavatthāna</i> <i>(saṅkhārapariccheda)</i>	determining name and form (defining constructions)	<i>diṭṭhivisuddhi</i>	purification of view
		<i>cittavisuddhi</i>	purification of mind
		<i>sīlavisuddhi</i>	purification of precept

Table One

it brings about the three kinds of concentration.²⁰ It is not entirely clear what Buddhaghosa (as opposed to later interpreters) means by that. The only other passage in which Buddhaghosa refers to momentary concentration is in the *Samyutta Commentary*.²¹ Here *ekodibhūta* is explained as concentrated with momentary concentration, while *ekagga-citta* is understood to refer to access and absorption. The *ṭīkā* understands momentary concentration in this passage as referring to the concentration of the prior stage which brings access *jhāna*. In other words it would seem to be simply the momentary occurrence of access concentration, rather than a different level of concentration as such. Buddhaghosa also uses a somewhat similar term: *khaṇikacitt(ass') ekaggatā*—momentary one-pointedness of mind.²² This is used to explain how someone practising breathing mindfulness emerges from *jhāna* and contemplates the mind associated with *jhāna* as subject to destruction and liable to disappear. As he is doing so, at a moment of insight momentary one-pointedness of mind arises as a result of penetrating the (three) characteristics (of impermanence, etc.). Subsequently he fixes the mind on the object by means of this momentary one-pointedness of mind. This seems to imply that the term momentary concentration would be applied by Buddhaghosa to the earlier stages of insight.

²⁰ Vism, 144. Virtually the same passage is given in the *Abhidhamma Commentary* at Dhs-a, 117. This reference in Dhs-a is likely to be the source of the passage in the *Visuddhimagga* or else both are drawing from an earlier *Abhidhamma* commentary. The Dhs-a adds that only the kinds of *pīti* which produce the first two kinds of concentration apply i.e. in commenting on skilful, sense-sphere consciousness. Upasena and Mahānāma also give this passage (Nidd-a, I, 129; Paṭis-a, I, 183), but it is noteworthy that Dhammapāla does not. Indeed, Dhammapāla uses the term only once in his commentaries (at Th-a, III, 208) and Buddhadatta apparently never uses it. It is possible that there is a difference here between the Indian and the Sinhalese Pali commentators.

²¹ Spk, III, 200. Spk-pt, II (Be, 2521) 469: *Paṭipakkha-dhammehi anabhibhūtātāya eko udetī ti ekodī ti laddha-nāmo samādhi bhūto jāto etesan ti ekodibhūtā. Etttha ca ekodibhūtā ti etena upacāra-jjhānāvahā pubba-bhāgiko samādhi vutto; samāhitā ti etena upacār'-appanā-samādhi. Ekagga-cittā ti etena su-bhāvito vasi-ppatto appanā-samādhi vutto ti vedītabbo.*

²² Vism, 289 = Sp, II, 433; cf. Paṭis-a, II, 503. The *Mahāṭīkā* comments: momentary one-pointedness of mind is concentration which lasts for just a moment (at a time); for that fixes the mind unshakably on the object as if in absorption, through occurring continuously in a single manner without being overcome by opposing qualities (*paṭipakkha*) (Vism-mhṭ, [1928] I, 278). Sometimes, Buddhaghosa does refer to: “factors of awakening in insight, which have various qualities and characteristics and last for one moment only”—Ps, IV, 143; Spk, III, 274 (v.l.). Note that in the same place there is mention of concentration which is “as if attained to absorption”. There are also two passages referring to momentary attainment of fruition attainment (*khaṇikasamāpatti*): Sv, II, 547 (pt: II, 186); Spk, III, 292 f., but this expression is not used elsewhere or by other commentators.

This suggestion gains some support from the use of another term in the earlier commentators. Mahānāma (early sixth century A.D.) in fact distinguishes four kinds of concentration, of which the first two are: momentary concentration and insight concentration (*vipassanāsamādhi*).²³ This latter term is sometimes used by Buddhaghosa,²⁴ but more often, when referring to the higher stages of insight, he uses either a simple reference to insight or such expressions as signless liberation (*animitto vimokkho*) or signless attainment of mind (*animittacetosamāpatti*).²⁵ The higher knowledges are treated at a much later point in the *Visuddhimagga* and are perhaps considered by Buddhaghosa as something *sui generis*.

Let us note here that these rather few passages, in which momentary concentration is referred to, must stand against numerous references to concentration as having just the two kinds: access (*upacāra*) and absorption (*appanā*).²⁶ Access concentration is in fact fairly ancient as a concept, with roots in the canonical literature.²⁷ It is generally characterized in the commentaries in terms of the abandonment of the hindrances and the arising of the abstract or semblance sign (*paṭibhāga-nimitta*). It is possible that momentary concentration is intended to apply to the stage in meditation before this, when an acquired sign (*uggahanimitta*) or eidetic image is the object of the mind (as well as to the parallel stage in insight meditation). However, it is more likely that Buddhaghosa simply means by momentary concentration a stage in which moments of access concentration with a semblance *nimitta* as their object occur in between moments with other objects.

²³ Paṭis-a, I, 125. Paṭis-gp, (c. 1962) 86: Paramatthakkhaṇamattena yutto *samādhi khaṇikasamādhi*, Ekattavasena vā santānena vā abhāvita-*samathass'* ev' etaṃ nāmaṃ; cf. also Paṭis-a, I, 130; 281.

²⁴ Spk, II, 303; III, 90; Mp, II, 362; III, 402; IV, 40. Some of Buddhaghosa's references seem to be related to the defilements of insight (*vipassanūpakkilesa*) and others to strong insight. The expression *vipassanā-samādhi* is also used by Dhammapāla: Ud-a, 191; It-a, I, 175; Th-a, II, 270; III, 118; Thī-a to Thī, 144. It is used twice in Vism-mhṭ.

²⁵ For textual references, see Peter Harvey, "'Signless' Meditations in Pāli Buddhism," *JlABS*, 9.1, 1986, 25–52.

²⁶ e.g. Vism, 85 ff.; 11; 126; Sp, II, 427 ff.; VII, 1317; Sv, I, 217; Ps, I, 108; 113; II, 83; Spk, I, 27; III, 254; 277; Mp, II, 153; III, 345; V, 67; Vibh -a, 75; 261; 269; 284, etc. Other commentators: Abhidh-av, 93 f.; Nidd-a, I, 131; 133; III, 79; Cp-a, 49; 315; It-a, I, 139; 169; 173; II, 13; Ud-a, 32; 190; 268; 407, etc.

²⁷ The concept, if not the term, is shared with the northern *abhidhamma* schools (and the Northern Buddhist traditions derived from them). In particular, note the ninth *samādhicariyā* of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (Paṭis, 99), which is rightly interpreted by Ud-a, 196 and Paṭis-a, 316 as referring to access *samādhi*.

This seems also to be the position of the author of the *Mahāṭīkā* to the *Visuddhimagga*.²⁸ Commenting on Buddhaghosa's use of the term 'preparatory concentration' in his description of the process of developing *deva* hearing (Vism, 408), he makes it clear that momentary concentration is for him a concentration that arises easily after emerging from the preceding (fourth) *jhāna*. He indicates that preparatory concentration has been referred to (by others) as the stage of access to the *deva* hearing element,²⁹ but suggests that this was said with regard to multiple advertings. Obviously he is correct in regard to the consciousness process, since in this case auditory consciousnesses must be interspersed. The implication for our purposes is that momentary concentration is simply access concentration occurring with sensory consciousnesses interspersed rather than, as normally, in a series of successive mind door processes with the semblance *nimitta* and *jhāna* factors as object.

The second problem is practical. In terms of meditation experience it is quite possible that a lower degree of concentration experienced after attaining a higher one is something quite different to the same degree of concentration when a higher level has not been achieved.

This brings us to the key area of debate. On the authority of the canonical *Rathavinītasutta* (M I 145–151), the seven *visuddhi* are held to be successive stages, referred to as like a relay of chariots. It follows therefore that it is not possible to achieve the insight knowledges of the sixth purification unless the earlier stages have been completed. The particular point of relevance here is the second *visuddhi* which is traditionally defined as either access concentration or full absorption (*appanā*). Indeed Mahāsi Sayadaw himself recognizes in his Pali work *Visuddhi-ñāṇa-kathā*³⁰ that this is the authoritative definition. However, he argues that here the term 'access concentration' is inclusive of momentary concentration, particularly that degree of momentary concentration which can still the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*). "For otherwise purification of mind would be very hard to arouse for someone whose vehicle is just insight (*suddhavipassanāyānika*) (and) who is experiencing insight without having aroused either access concentration or absorption concentration."³¹

In the Mahāsi's understanding then, momentary concentration is itself something which admits of various degrees. So he speaks of the stage of

²⁸ *Khaṇikasamādhī* is mentioned six times in the *Mahāṭīkā* to the *Visuddhimagga* (Mahidol CDROM). Ñāṇamoli translates five of these (see Vism Trsl. Index s.v. momentary concentration), omitting only that to Vism, 144. See note 22 above.

²⁹ *Parikamma-samādhī nāma dibba-sota-dhātuyā upacārāvatthā ti pi vadanti.*

³⁰ Appended to: Mahāsi, Sayadaw, *The Progress of Insight*, Kandy, 1965. See p. 42: *Nanu aṭṭhakathāsu upacāra-appanā-samādhīnaṃ yeva citta-visuddhi-bhāvo vutto ti? Saccaṃ...*

³¹ *ibid.*, (my translation, correcting misprints).

purification of mind being accomplished by momentary concentration which is similar in strength to access. Likewise the highest stage of the sixth purification is explained as being accomplished by momentary concentration which has a strength equivalent to that of full absorption. Since it is difficult to imagine how someone could achieve such a degree of momentary concentration without having at some point experienced (at least briefly) access concentration, this is perhaps not really very different to saying that the higher stages require the prior development of access. What it apparently does differ from is the position of a number of Sinhalese scholar monks.³² They, and others, argue that it is not possible to achieve the stage of the transcendent path (*lokuttaramagga*) without having previously achieved at least the first *jhāna*. Even here, however, if the momentary concentration in strong insight were taken as momentary experiencing of absorption interspersed with insight knowledge, the difference would be rather small in practice.

The canonical texts clearly give considerable importance to *jhāna*. So at first sight it is surprising that there should be a tradition which regards it as unnecessary for some. Even the canonical *abhidhamma* texts make it clear that the transcendent path must be of at least the degree of the first *jhāna*.³³ It is true, however, that they do not in fact specify that *jhāna* is attained beforehand; in principle it could be achieved at the path moment itself. (Equally, they could be assuming that higher *jhānas* have previously been achieved.³⁴) The fact remains that this seems an unexpected development and not really what is envisaged in the *suttas*. How then did such a possibility arise?

The literary sources of the vipassanā tradition

If we take the two main features of the insight tradition as, firstly, the acceptance of routes to enlightenment which bypass the development of *jhāna* and, secondly, the mapping of the sequence of insight knowledges, then the immediate source is no doubt the *Visuddhimagga*. In a former article³⁵ on the distinction between *samathayāna* and *vipassanāyāna*, I have surveyed the main

³² Soma Thera, "Contemplation in the Dhamma," in *The Path of Freedom by the Arahant Upatissa*, eds., N.R.M. Ehara *et al.*, Colombo, 1961, 353–362; Kheminda Thera, *Path, Fruit and Nibbāna*, Colombo, 1965. Note that these monks have connections with other Burmese insight schools.

³³ *e.g.* Dhs, 60; 69 f.

³⁴ From this interpretation, we should understand *e.g.* Dhs as describing the specific occasion on which the path is developed. This may be of the level of any one of the four *jhānas*, but previous experience of all four may be assumed, at least in the case of the *arahant* or never-returner.

³⁵ L.S. Cousins, "Samatha-yāna and Vipassanā-yāna," in *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Hammalava Saddhātissa*, eds., G. Dhammapāla *et al.*, 55–68, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka, 1984.

Eleven Knowledges from the Paṭisambhidāmagga		The eighteen great insights (arranged after Mahānāma)		Ways of the (seven) Purifications		Suttanta	
14. paccavekkhaṇa	reviewing (recollection)	[<i>tadā samudāgate dhamme vipassanā</i>]	[insight into the dhamma arisen then]	<i>avasitṭhakilesa-paccavekkhaṇa</i>	recollection of remaining defilements	<i>khayasmim khaye nāṇa</i>	knowledge of destruction of the destroyed
13. vimutti	freedom	[<i>chinnam-anupassanā</i>]	[contemplation of what has been cut]	<i>pahīnakilesa-paccavekkhaṇa</i>	recollection of defilements abandoned	<i>vimuttasmim vimuttam iti nāṇa</i>	knowledge that what is freed is freed
12. phala	fruit	[<i>payogapaṭipassaddhi</i>]	[the complete stilling of effort]				
11. magga	path	[<i>dubhatovuṭṭhāna-vivaṭṭana</i>]	[turning around that emerges in both way]	<i>sotāpatti, etc. vuṭṭhāna</i>	stream-entry, etc. emergence	<i>dassana or virāga</i>	vision or greedless(ness)
10. gotrabhu	lineage	<i>vivaṭṭanānupassanā</i>	turning around	<i>gotrabhu</i>	lineage		
9. saṅkhārupekkhā	equipoises as to constructions	<i>paṭisaṅkhānupassanā</i>	deep analysis	<i>anuloma saṅkhārupekkhā</i> <i>paṭisaṅkhānupassanā</i> <i>muñcitukamyatā</i>	inflow equipoise as to constructions deep analysis desire to be free	<i>nibbidā</i>	distaste
8. ādinava	wretchedness (disadvantage)	[<i>nibbidā</i>] <i>ādināvānupassanā</i> <i>yathābhūtañāṇadassana</i>	[distaste] wretchedness knowing and seeing things as they are	<i>nibbidānupassanā</i> <i>ādināvānupassanā</i> <i>bhayatupaṭṭhāna</i> <i>(balavāipassanā)</i>	distaste wretchedness establishing the sense of danger (strong insight)	<i>nibbidā</i>	distaste
7. vipassanā	insight	<i>adhipaññādhamma-vipassanā</i> <i>suññatānupassanā</i> <i>appañihitānupassanā</i> <i>animittānupassanā</i> <i>vipariṇāmānupassanā</i> <i>vayānupassanā</i> <i>khayānupassanā</i>	dhamma insight through higher wisdom emptiness without aim signless changing dissolving destruction	<i>bhaṅgānupassanā</i>	breaking up		
6. udayabbayānupassanā	contemplating rise and fall laying hold	<i>paṭinissaggānupassanā</i> <i>nirodhānupassanā</i> <i>virāgānupassanā</i> <i>nibbidānupassanā</i> <i>anattānupassanā</i> <i>dukkhānupassanā</i> <i>aniccānupassanā</i>	Releasing ceasing greedless distaste no-self suffering impermanence	<i>udayabbayadassana</i> <i>(taruṇa-vipassanā)</i> <i>kalāpasammasana</i> <i>=maggāmaggañāṇa-dassanavisuddhi</i>	seeing rise and dissolution (young insight) laying hold in groups = purification by knowing and seeing true and false ways	<i>yathābhutañāṇa-dassana</i>	knowing and seeing things as they are
5. sammasana							
4. dhammaṭṭhiti	dhamma abiding	[<i>yathābhūtañāṇa</i>] <i>sammādasana</i> <i>kaṅkhāvitaranā</i>]	[knowing things as they are] right seeing crossing through doubt]	<i>paccayapariggaha</i> <i>kaṅkhāvitarāṇavisuddhi</i> <i>(cullasotāpaana)</i> <i>nāmarūpavathāna</i> <i>(saṅkhārapariccheda)</i> <i>=ditṭhivissudhi</i>	comprehending conditions = purification by crossing through doubt (lesser stream-enterer)	<i>yathābhutañāṇa-dassana</i>	knowing and seeing things as they are
[<i>phussana</i> <i>ekarasa</i> <i>pariccāga</i> <i>tīraṇa</i> <i>nāta</i>]	[touching single taste renouncing causing to enter into known]	[<i>sacchikiriya</i> <i>bhāvanā</i> <i>pahana</i> <i>pariññā</i> <i>abhiññā</i>]	[witnessing bringing into being abandoning thoroughly knowing deeply knowing]		determining name and form (defining constructions) = purification of view	<i>yathābhutañāṇa-dassana</i>	knowing and seeing things as they are

The underlined terms are also found in the list of knowledges in the Nānakathā of the Paṭisambhidāmagga

Table Two

to awakening. It suffices to say here that the possibility of omitting *jhāna* is reasonably well-established in the *aṭṭhakathā* literature. Its ultimate source appears to lie in a particular interpretation of a passage in the *Paṭisambhidā-magga* (II, 92–103).

It is with the second of these features that I am more concerned with here—the insight knowledges. Again, the *locus classicus* is no doubt the *Visuddhimagga*, which describes what later tradition takes to be the sixteen insight knowledges in considerable detail. In the earlier *Vimuttimagga*, which was probably Buddha-ghosa's model, most of these (if not all) are present, but in a very abbreviated form.³⁶ The additional material, as so often in the *Visuddhimagga*, is derived from the *Paṭisambhidā-magga*. This is best set out in tabular form as shown in Table Two. The underlined terms are also found in the list of knowledges in the *Ñānakathā* of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*.

The first two columns of the table list the fourth to the fourteenth kinds of knowledge given in the *mātikā* to the first (and longest) section of the *Paṭisambhidā-magga*, the *Ñānakathā*. Since the first three kinds of knowledge are concerned with learning, precepts and concentration, while the fifteenth and those following turn to the objects of insight knowledge, this can be treated as a distinct list of eleven knowledges. In fact, each knowledge is given a definition and it is sometimes this definition which is used in the later commentarial tradition. Where this is the case I have indicated it by underlining in the fifth column.

Perhaps even more important in the *Paṭisambhidā-magga* than the knowledges of the first section is a list of thirty-seven (or forty-one) experiences of the Buddhist path, a list which recurs on at least thirty different occasions. (There are some variations in application which make the exact count arbitrary.) Part of this list, following the eight '*jhānas*' and preceding the four paths is the sequence known to the commentaries as the eighteen *mahāvīpassanā*. It is given in the third and fourth columns of the table. (The bracketed items also occur in the *Paṭisambhidā-magga*, but elsewhere.)

It is fairly obvious that the commentarial account of the stages of insight is largely built up from the materials provided by the *Paṭisambhidā-magga*.³⁷ This is not to say that the *Visuddhimagga* account would have been completely acceptable or even recognisable to the author of the *Paṭisambhidā-magga* (traditionally Sāriputta, the exemplar of wisdom). Looking at it the other way sophisticated account of the stages of insight—an account which does provide

³⁶ e.g. N.R.M. Ehara *et al.*, *The Path of Freedom by the Arahant Upatissa*, Colombo, 1961, 298–302.

³⁷ There, is of course, also material from the *suttas* and the term *anuloma* from the *Paṭṭhāna*.

the main features of the later model. This is clear enough if we note that it begins with detailed analysis of phenomena, moves on to contemplation of rise and fall, then to breaking up (*bhaṅga*), to the experiencing of some kind of sense of danger and subsequently to the establishment of a settled state of equipoise. After all this, there follows the transitional stage of gaining the lineage, prior to the path knowledge itself.

The historical context of the Paṭisambhidā-magga

A.K. Warder has discussed the date of the *Paṭisambhidā-magga* and concluded that, apart from a few later additions, the main parts of this text were composed in the late third century and the early second century B.C.³⁸ It would be possible to argue for a slightly earlier range of possibilities and in fact Warder's assumption that the work grew over a period of time could be questioned. The work is sufficiently well-integrated that a single authorship is not beyond the bounds of possibility. For present purposes, however, Warder's dating is close enough. It situates the composition of this text in a specific historical context.

That context is of some interest in itself. It is clearly subsequent to the division of the *mahāsaṅgha*, which took place at some point not too long after the Second Communal Recitation, probably as a result of a reformist move to tighten up the discipline of the community. Such movements are common in the history of religious groups which place a high value on spiritual development or moral purity. They were mentioned above in relation to the history of Southern Buddhism over the last thousand years or so. The evolution of mediæval Christian monastic orders also provides many parallel cases, to mention only one example from a wider context. It is probable that the first division of the order did not have doctrinal implications, but it is also likely that distinct schools of thought already began to emerge in this period or soon afterwards, centred around particular teaching lineages and/or specific monastic centres and regions.³⁹

In terms of dating, we can suppose that three major trends had already emerged by the third century B.C. One of these new schools of thought was the little known Pudgalavādin tradition, which seems to have been concerned, partly with a type of dialectical exploration of and/or meditation on the nature of self and partly with investigating the nature of the process of rebirth.⁴⁰ More relevant to the history of insight meditation are the two other schools of thought: the Sarvāstivādins and the Vibhajjavādins, the latter being the ancestors of the

³⁸ Paṭis Trsl., xxix–xxxix.

³⁹ L.S. Cousins, "The 'Five Points' and the Origins of the Buddhist Schools," in *The Buddhist Forum*, ed., T. Skorupski, Vol. II, 27–60, London, 1991.

⁴⁰ See L.S. Cousins, "Person and Self," to appear in a volume to be produced following the 'Buddhism into the Year 2000' conference (Bangkok, 1990), 1995.

Ceylon tradition. When considering the Sarvāstivādins, it is customary to focus on their specific doctrine of dharmas as, in some sense, transcending time. Here, however, I am not so much concerned with that as with the reasons why they were interested in the subject at all.

After all, the subject of dharmas is precisely the subject of the fourth foundation/establishing of mindfulness: *dhamma* contemplation in regard to *dhammas* (*dhammesu dhammānupassanā*). In other words, the concerns of the early *abhidhamma* are closely related to insight meditation. In this sense one might expect these early schools of thought to share a common interest in insight meditation in so far as they are *abhidhamma*-based in their orientation.⁴¹ Probably, in fact, that interest precedes the crystallization of distinct schools of thought. More specifically, one of the key areas of debate which eventually separated the two *abhidhamma* traditions of Sarvāstivāda and Vibhajyavāda is the exact nature of the process by which enlightenment is attained.

This debate focussed precisely upon the realization of the four noble truths at the time of achieving the ‘stages of sanctity’: stream-entry and so on. For the Sarvāstivādins this was a process of gradual realization (*anupūrvābhisamaya*) in which the sixteen aspects of the four truths were separately known in successive moments. The Vibhajyavādins on the other hand taught that the truths were realized simultaneously in a single moment (*ekābhisamaya*). Of course the contrast between ‘sudden’ and ‘gradual’ enlightenment is one with a long subsequent history,⁴² but we should none the less be careful not to exaggerate the difference. Even sixteen moments is quite a brief period in terms of *abhidharma* and it is not clear whether the Sarvāstivādins supposed that the distinction could be observed in experience. Conversely, contemplation of different aspects of the four truths in the stages shortly before realization is quite acceptable to the tradition of the Pali commentaries. Again, it is not clear how far it was thought that this could be distinguished in practice.

The *Paṭisambhidā-magga* is in many ways a text of the *ekābhisamaya* tradition.⁴³ The exact historical relationship between it and the developments in the canonical Sarvāstivādin *abhidharma* is not yet known, but it is certain that

⁴¹ One might also speculate that the Pudgalavādins might have been more orientated towards *samatha* meditation, as the early Sarvāstivādins certainly were towards insight meditation. In that case the Vibhajyavādins would be seeking a compromise (as in other areas). It is certainly noticeable that the *Paṭisambhidā-magga* contains important developments in the area of calm meditation as well as the insight-orientated materials with which I am concerned in this paper.

⁴² David Seyfort Rugg, *Buddha-nature, Mind and the Problem of Gradualism in a Comparative Perspective, On the Transmission and Reception of Buddhism in India and Tibet*, London, 1989, 150–192, discusses the earlier sources.

⁴³ A.K. Warder, “Introduction,” in *The Path of Discrimination*, London, 1982, v–lxiv, espec. xxiii ff.

each cannot be fully understood without the other. One might compare the way in which the availability of previously inaccessible literature of the Buddhist logical tradition has made it possible to understand many aspects of the ancient Nyāya which were otherwise unclear. So it is not surprising that the articulation of the Vibhajyavādin insight tradition which we see already well under way in the *Paṭisambhidā-magga* is paralleled by similar developments in the Sarvāstivāda.

The formulation in that tradition which corresponds to the insight knowledges is the sequence of the set of the four skilful roots connected with penetration (*nirvedhabhāgiya*).⁴⁴ The term itself is not as frequently used in the Pali tradition, although *nibbedhabhāgiya* does occur.⁴⁵ The list of four is well-known:

1. The little flame (*ūṣmāgata* [online editor's note: in the original, the "ū" and "ā" have an additional " ~ " symbol on top] i.e. of understanding;
2. The culmination (*mūrdhan*) i.e. of understanding;

⁴⁴ On the *nirvedhabhāgiya*, see: R.E. Buswell, Jr, "The Path to Perdition: The Wholesome Roots and Their Eradication," in *Paths to Liberation, The Mārga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought*, eds., R.E. Buswell, Jr & Robert M. Gimello, Honolulu, 1992, 107–34; C. Cox, "Attainment through Abandonment: The Sarvāstivādin Path of Removing Defilements," *ibid.*, 63–106, 76 nn.; E. Frauwallner, "Abhidharma-Studien III," *WZKS*, 1971, 69–121, 83; 98–101; H.V. Guenther, *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma*, 2nd ed., Berkeley, 1974, 200; L. Hurvitz, "The Abhidharma on the 'Four Aids to Penetration'", in *Buddhist Thought and Asian Civilization*. (Guenther vol.), ed., L.S. Kawamura, Emeryville, Calif., 1977; E. Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism, From the Origins to the Śaka Era*, Louvain, 1988, 613 f.; Louis de La Vallée Poussin, "Pārāyaṇa cité dans *Jñānaprasthāna*," in *Études d'Orientalisme publiés par le Musée Guimet à la mémoire de Raymonde Linossier*, Paris, 1932, 323–327; Louis de La Vallée Poussin, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, tr. by L. Pruden, Berkeley, 1988–90, Vol. III, 930–43; D. Seyfort Rugg, *op. cit.*, 176; Śānti Bhikṣu Śāstrī, *Jñānaprasthāna-śāstra of Kātyāyanīputra Retranslated into Sanskrit from the Chinese Version of Hiuan Tsang*, Śāntiniketan, 1955; José Van Den Broeck, *La Saveur de L'Immortel* (A-p'i-t'an Kan Lu Wei Lun). *La version chinoise de l'Amṛtarasa de Ghoṣaka* (T. 1553), Louvain-la-neuve, 1977, 15, 70–72, 156–160; C. Willems, *The Essence of Metaphysics*, Brussels, 1975, 68–72, 86 f.

⁴⁵ The canonical passages are: D, III, 277; S, V, 87; A, II, 167; III, 427; Paṭis, I, 27; 35ff.; 48; II, 201f.; Vibh, 330 f. (°in). Closely related terms occur at: D, III, 251; A, III, 410; 417; It, 35; 93, while the term *nibbedhika*- (usually applied to *paññā*) is quite frequent—PṬC lists more than forty occurrences in the Pali Canon. The source of the term *nibbedhabhāgiya* seems to be the *Nibbedha-sutta* where we find the idea of the factors of awakening, when well-developed, penetrating and breaking up the mass of greed which has never previously been penetrated and broken up (and similarly with the masses of hatred and delusion) (S, V, 87). Most commonly, however, especially later, it is found last in the sequence: connected with decline, connected with stability, connected with something special, applied to types of *samādhi*, wisdom, *saññā*, etc. The *Mahāṭīkā* to Vism, 696 explains *nibbedhabhāgiya-samādhi*- as *vipassanā-samādhi*.

3. Acceptance (*kṣānti*) i.e. when it seems good to one;
4. Highest *dharma*.

I have translated the first a little loosely to get the metaphor. The source is probably M, I, 132 where Aritṭha who thinks he has a highly developed understanding is told that he has ‘not a glimmering’ (*na... usmīkato*).⁴⁶ Skilful roots in *abhidharma* are the three of non-greed, non-hate and non-delusion i.e. the seeds in the mind of generosity, loving-kindness and understanding or wisdom respectively. Here the skilful root of non-delusion is intended.⁴⁷

At first sight the set of four may not look very close to the *Paṭisambhidā-magga*’s sixteen great insights (*mahāvīpassanā*) or the list of eleven knowledges which are abstracted in Table Two. In fact, however, the last four and probably the first two of the eleven knowledges need to be omitted for comparison purposes. This leaves just five (i.e. knowledges 5–10 of the *Ñāṇakathā*) to correspond with the set of four. A case could be made for matching more exactly, but that perhaps goes beyond the evidence. Turning to the great insights, obviously sixteen is a much larger number than four! Yet, when the objects of consciousness are considered, and these are the principal concern of the eighteen *mahāvīpassanā*, the similarity is striking. The eighteen are concerned with various degrees of the three universal characteristics of all *dhammas*, while the set of four have as their object the sixteen aspects of the four noble truths. Since one of the three characteristics is precisely suffering (*dukkha*) and the other two can be considered as ways of looking at suffering,⁴⁸ the eighteen are in effect concerned with the first noble truth.

The similarity is even closer, when it is noted that contemplation of the three (or rather four) characteristics is usually said to lead to the set of four.⁴⁹ Moreover, the highest *dharma* and the most advanced degree of acceptance are said to focus specifically on the first noble truth.⁵⁰ In fact some of the Pali

⁴⁶ Note that in some forms of Middle Indic where -k- is voiced (and long vowels not written) *usmīkata* and the ancestral form(s) of *ūsmāgata* [online editor’s note: in the original, the “ū” and “ā” have an additional “~” symbol on top] would be very close, if not identical.

⁴⁷ See *Abhidh-k-bh*, 19, which indicates that the *nirvedhabhāgiya* are *prajñā*, but can be considered as all five aggregates when their accompaniments are taken into account.

⁴⁸ The first truth is often analysed in terms of the three levels of *dukkhadukkha*, *vipariṇāmadukkha* and *saṅkhāradukkha* i.e. literal suffering, suffering as change and suffering as constructed existence (the five aggregates produced by clinging). The second and third of these are clearly related to impermanence and no-self.

⁴⁹ *Abhidh-k*, VI, 16—emptiness is added as the fourth. Note that this too is one of the sixteen great insights.

⁵⁰ *Abhidh-k*, VI, 19. This is already implied in the *Jñānaprasthāna*: Louis de La Vallée Poussin, “Pārāyaṇa cité dans *Jñānaprasthāna*,” in *Études d’Orientalisme publiés par le Musée Guimet à la mémoire de Raymonde Linossier*, Paris, 1932, 325. In fact, since the preceding *nirvedhabhāgiyas* have all four truths as their object and so do the sixteen moments of *abhisamaya* (taken collectively), the difference is a product of the difference between *ekābhisamaya* and *anupūrvābhisamaya*. See *Abhidh-k*, VI, 17.

sources do relate the insight knowledges to all four truths, or at least three of them.⁵¹ An even more striking resemblance, at least in the later versions of the two descriptions of the process leading to enlightenment, is the way in which the culmination of that process is described. The first three *nirvedhabhāgiya* are now each divided into weak, middling and strong degrees. This gives a total of ten stages for the four sets as a whole. This enlargement parallels the enlargement in the later Pali sources quite closely—there are in fact ten knowledges from knowledge of rise and fall up to lineage knowledge. This of course could be quite coincidental. What is hardly likely to be an accident is that the last stage in each case lasts for a single moment only and the preceding stage is also very brief.⁵² So in each system we have eight stages, followed by two stages that transit very rapidly to enlightenment (*bodhi*).

The third of the *nirvedhabhāgiya* is acceptance (*kṣānti*), a term which is also central to the Sarvāstivādin account of the realization of the truths at awakening. The same duality is also present in the *Paṭisambhidā-magga*. On the one hand, acceptance (*khanti*) occurs as one of the knowledges of the Knowledge Discourse. “Acceptance knowledge is understanding as a result of having known (the aggregates, etc. as impermanent, etc.)”⁵³ Later in the Insight Discourse (*Vipassanā-kathā*) (based on A, III, 437; 431–433) the term occurs as *anulomikā khanti* (suitable acceptance).⁵⁴ Here it is in close association with ‘certainty of rightness’ (*samattaniyāma*), a term which is linked with stream-entry.

Insight in the earlier period

If then the period of the development of the *abhidhamma* schools is the time when the elaborated versions of the path of insight begin to take form, the question arises as to the source material for these enlarged versions. In fact, the *Nikāyas* contain a large quantity of such material—too large to examine here.

⁵¹ Vism, 638; the application of all four truths at the moment of Stream-entry (Vism, 689 ff.) is also relevant. Compare Paṭis-a, III, 542–543: “In the noble truths” was said with reference to the comprehension of the truths separately by means of ordinary (*lokiya*) knowledge of the truths in the prior stage.

⁵² For the Sanskrit system, the third degree of acceptance lasts for one moment only as does the highest (ordinary) *dharma*. This is perhaps already implied in the *Jñānaprasthāna* (cited above). For the Pali system, lineage is a single moment, but two or three *anuloma* moments immediately precede it. See Vism, 673–675; Dhs-a, 231 ff.; Abhidh-av, 125. The sequence from *anuloma* to lineage to path is given in the *Paṭṭhāna*, e.g. at Tikap, 159.

⁵³ Paṭis, I, 106.

⁵⁴ Paṭis-a, II, 236–242. The same expression is at I, 123; cp. also II, 171; 183. At, I, 176 it occurs as a synonym for *satthusāsana*.

In Table Two I gave as an illustration the sequence from *yathābhūtañānadassana* to *nibbidā* to *virāga* to *vimutti*.⁵⁵ Since the first of these may represent the beginnings of insight and the last its result, we can take the two central terms as representing the heart of the process of insight. Indeed they or their verbal forms occur quite frequently in the Canon. There are of course many parallel sequences, in some of which one or more of these terms are omitted.⁵⁶ Overall, however, *nibbidā* (distaste or disenchantment) can be seen as the parallel in insight meditation to *pīti* (joy or energization) in calm meditation. So, in the one case, joy if successfully tranquillized, leads to happiness and success in controlling one's emotional life. In the other, disenchantment with the things with which one identifies or to which one clings leads to a mental clarity and a deepening of knowledge.

The importance of what is later referred to as the insight knowledges is then already clear in the *Nikāyas*. What is less clear is the context in which we are to understand this. Where insight occurs in a sequence, it usually comes after concentration or after emerging from one of the *jhānas*. Often it occurs without such a context, but in dealing with some aspect of what may be called fundamental theory. I mean, such lists as the aggregates, bases, elements, truths, conditioned origination and the like. It is quite impossible to be sure whether in these passages it is intended to operate as an exercise for even a beginner or whether all these passages are addressed to someone who has already developed *jhāna*. I incline to suspect that in most of these cases it is the latter which is envisaged because they can all be viewed as elaborations of the teaching which is particular to the Buddhas (*sāmuikkamsikā desanā*). That teaching is specifically stated to be given when the hearer's mind is in an appropriate state. The terms used to describe his mind recall the standard descriptions of the state which is appropriate to develop the *abhiññās* i.e. after the fourth *jhāna*.

In the Canon the development of insight after the *jhānas* is certainly the normative pattern, where a full process is described at all. I exclude from consideration those cases where the *dharmā* eye, etc. are said to arise at the end of a discourse, apparently spontaneously. There is no indication, or at least not much indication, of the prior background in most such cases and hence no way of telling if it is envisaged that *jhāna* had already been developed.

The kind of modern tradition of insight meditation with which we were concerned at the beginning of this paper often lays stress on insight as the

⁵⁵ e.g. S, II, 30 ff.; III, 189; A, V, 311–317. Various other formulæ give parts of this process.

⁵⁶ See, for example, the discussion of the vivekanissita formula in: R.M.L. Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening, A Study of the Bodhi-Pakkhiyā Dhammā*, Leiden, 1992, 162–168 or the last of the four tetrads of breathing mindfulness.

Buddha's particular achievement. In this view calm (*samatha*) meditation involving the development of the four *jhānas* is something pre-Buddhist, even perhaps Hindu—something which is not necessary for enlightenment. It is interesting to contrast this with the view of some modern scholars that the development of the *jhānas* is the typically Buddhist form of practice or at least that most likely to have been developed by the Buddha himself.

I will return to the views of scholarship shortly, but first it is useful to consider how far the view that only insight is the proper or specifically Buddhist practice is actually justified in the canonical works. It is certainly true that there is some stress in that literature on the fact that the stages of sanctity are not found outside the Buddhist tradition. There is also, as was mentioned above, some emphasis that the teaching of the four noble truths is particular to the Buddhas. Sometimes too we read that the four establishments of mindfulness are a path which is *ekāyana*. This is often explained as 'the only way', but Rupert Gethin's excellent discussion of this term states the situation quite clearly:

“Given that nowhere is the sense ‘one and one only’ clearly and definitely the proper sense, and in most cases definitely not, it seems rather perverse to adopt this sense in the *satipaṭṭhāna* context.”⁵⁷

We should probably think rather of mindfulness as leading to only one destination, i.e. *nibbāna*.

To set against this are many passages where the relationship between *samādhi* and *paññā* or between calm and insight is stressed. The later tradition does accept that there were *arahats* ‘liberated by wisdom’ (*paññāvimutta*) who had not developed all or even any of the four *jhānas*.⁵⁸ However, the actual references to such *arahats* in the earlier texts seem mostly to say that they had not developed the formless attainments or the first five *abhiññā*. The first four *jhānas* are conspicuously not mentioned.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ R.M.L. Gethin, *op. cit.*, 1992, 63.

⁵⁸ e.g. Sv, II, 512.

⁵⁹ See for example M, I, 477; S, II, 121–123; 126–127. D, II, 70 is less clear. At AN, IV, 452f. one who has not attained all eight attainments can only be regarded as ‘liberated by wisdom’ by way of exposition (*pariyāyena*). It is very striking that in this passage the destruction of the *āsavas* is applied to the *nevasaññānāsañña* sphere, but not to the first *jhāna* (and according to C^e 1971 not to the following *jhānas*). C^e 1971 rightly corrects the absence of reference in E^e and N^e to destruction of the *āsavas* in regard to the *nevasaññānāsañña* sphere in the case of the individual who is ‘both ways liberated’. However, in the *Mahāmālunkya-suttanta* (M, I, 435–36) it is explicitly stated that it is possible to reach arahatship or at any rate never-return after entering the first *jhāna*. Even here it would be possible to suppose that only the immediate process of attainment is referred to. In that case the possibility that prior development of the four *jhānas* is assumed could not be ruled out. It may also be a rather later discourse in view of the relatively developed subject matter and some possibly later terminology.

Already in 1927 E.J. Thomas wrote:

“...the *jhānas* are only four stages in a much more extended scheme. It may of course be the case that they once formed the whole of the mystic process.”⁶⁰

Most recently, both Johannes Bronkhorst and Tilman Vetter have for different reasons taken up the view that the *jhānas* are likely to be the original core of Buddhist meditative practice.⁶¹ It is interesting to note the contrast here with the view of many modern interpreters of Buddhism, for whom it is precisely the insight approach which is the innovative creation of Buddhism—the thing the Buddha added to what was known before. Of course, it does not necessarily follow that adding a rung or two to the top of the ladder means you can dispense with the ladder!

Given that we do not know precisely what developments had already occurred before the time of the Buddha and given that developments in teaching must have occurred during the long life-span of the Buddha himself as well as afterwards, it is difficult to say with any certainty what exactly was taught by the Buddha himself. No doubt, like any good teacher, he would have wished his followers to develop his teachings in a creative and fruitful manner. The subsequent history of Buddhism is clear enough proof that this was the case. What we can, however, say is that for most later forms of Buddhism, in India and elsewhere, the typical Buddhist approach is a synthetic one which seeks to combine differing approaches in a higher ideal.⁶²

⁶⁰ Edward J. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha*, London, 1975 [1927], 181 n.

⁶¹ J. Bronkhorst, *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, Stuttgart, 1986; T. Vetter, *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*, Leiden, 1988.

⁶² See: L.S. Cousins, “*Samatha-yāna* and *Vipassanā-yāna*,” in *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Hammalava Saddhātissa*, eds., G. Dhammapāla *et al.*, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka, 1984, 55–68. For the integration of the ethical and the intellectual, see D. Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, London, 1992, and C. Cox, “Attainment through Abandonment: The Sarvāstivādin Path of Removing Defilements,” in R. E. Buswell, Jr & R.M. Gimello, eds., *op. cit.*, for the view that “...the final goal... subsumes knowledge and concentration as equally cooperative means rather than mutually exclusive ends.” (page 66).