How to Enter the First *Jhāna*

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1. How can one enter the first *jhāna* (concentrated state)?

Sakyamuni Buddha advocated the development of the meditation states known as *jhānas*. As is well known, he attained nirvana after deep meditation. This suggests that *jhāna* played an important role in attaining nirvana.

The questions I shall deal with in this paper are whether the Nikāya texts teach how to enter into the first meditative state of *jhāna* and whether the way to enter into it as taught by the texts _ if they do _ was widespread in the Indian religion of the day or specifically designed for Buddhist practitioners.

2. Detachment

The brief description of the way to enter into the first meditative state is given as follows.

Being thus detached from sense-desires (*kāma*), detached from unwholesome states (*akusala-dhamma*), he (practitioner) enters and stays in the first *jhāna*.” [DN I, 73. For quotations from DN, I use the PTS edition.]

This statement is seen to be made wherever the first state of *jhāna* is referred to in the Nikāyas. We thus see that the two kinds of detachment, the one from sense-desires and the other from unwholesome states, are necessary for entering into the first meditative state. Then how can one detach oneself from them?

3. *Pañca-bala* (fivefold force)

It is said that one can detach oneself from sense-desires and unwholesome states by the fivefold force (*pañca-bala*): *saddhā*, *virīya*, *sati*, *samādhi* and *paññā*.

3-1. *saddhā* ([faith] and subtle *paññā* [wisdom])

Having heard the [Buddha's] dhamma, he (practitioner) gains faith (*saddhā*) in the Tathāgata (Buddha). [DN I, 62]

The faith in the Buddha, and, the understanding of dhamma by subtle wisdom (*paññā*) are known to be essential for the attainment of nirvana. Thus entering into the first meditative state constitutes the path to nirvana from the beginning.

3-2. *virīya* (exertion)

Having gone forth, he dwells protected by the restraint of the rules, ... seeing danger in the slightest faults, observing the commitments he has taken on physical and verbal deeds, devoted to the wholesome and purified life, perfected in morality. [DN I, 63]

Exertion (*virīya*) concerning the rules protects practitioners from committing a fault in performing physical and verbal acts, so that their lives become purified.

3-3a. *sati* 1 (mindfulness; guard of six sense faculties)

Practitioners have to avoid committing a fault not only in performing physical and verbal acts but also in performing mental acts. Merely to live upon the rules does not protect practitioners from committing a fault. They also have to guard their sense faculties of vision, audition, smell, taste, touch and thinking. The six kinds of sense faculties are guarded in one and the same manner. With respect to the sense faculty of vision, for example, it is said:

The bhikkhu, on seeing a visible object with the eye, does not grasp at its major signs (*nimitta*) or secondary characteristics (*anuvyanjana*). Because greed and sorrow, evil unwholesome states, would overwhelm him if he dwelt leaving this eye-faculty unguarded, so he practises guarding it. [DN I, 70]

What *sati* is and how a practitioner practises it are explained by a modern practitioner as follows:

Mindfulness is nonjudgmental observation. ... One simply takes a balanced interest in things exactly as they are in their natural states. One does not decide and does not judge. One just observes. ... The meditator observes experiences very much like a scientist observing an object under a microscope without any preconceived notions, only to see the object exactly as it is.¹⁾

Being always mindful (*sati*), which means sensing anything as it is without judgment, is characteristic of Buddhist meditational practice. Such a meditational method is called *vipassanā-bhāvanā* (insight meditation).

3-3b. *sati* 2 (and *sampajāna* [clear awareness])

The bhikkhu acts with clear awareness (*sampajāna-kāri*) in ... walking, standing, sitting, lying down, in waking, in speaking and in keeping silent. ... In this way, the bhikkhu is accomplished in mindfulness and clear awareness (*sati-sampajāññena samannāgato*). [DN I, 70]

Mindfulness (*sati*) is always followed by clear awareness (*sampajāna*). Whenever one is mindful in sensing an object-moment, one can sense it as it is and moreover be fully aware of that very act of sensing.

As shown above, exertion, mindfulness and clear awareness are to be pursued by practitioners. With these factors, their concentration is increased and they are contented (*santutṭha*) with the life characterized by no possession. It is said that practitioners with these factors are prepared to practise *samatha-bhāvanā* (meditation by concentration) which had already been widespread in the Indian religion before the Buddha.

3-4. *samādhi* (concentration)

[The bhikkhu] sits down cross-legged, holding his body erect, and concentrates on keeping mindfulness established in front of him. [DN I, 71]

To keep concentration on one single object with no interruption is necessary for entering into the first meditative state. Concentration is successfully supported by the Buddhist practice of mindfulness.

3-5. *paññā* (wisdom [by removal of the five obstacles])

A practitioner, keeping concentration, successfully removes all the five obstacles (*nīvaraṇa*); worldly desires (*abhijjhā*), hatred (*vyāpāda*), sloth-and-torpor (*thīna-middha*), worry-and-flurry (*uddhacca-kukkucca*) and doubt (*vicikicchā*), which hinder the wisdom (*paññā*) from appearing.²⁾

Of the five obstacles, doubt consists of being uncertain as to what dhammas are

wholesome.

Abandoning doubt, he dwells with doubt left behind, without uncertainty as to what dhammas are wholesome, his mind is purified of doubt. [DN I, 71]

The doubt in question is one of the three fetters (*sakkāyaditṭhi*, *vicikicchā*, *sīlabbata-parāmāsa*) that are to be removed at the first stage of nirvana (*sotāpatti-phala*). That a practitioner removes doubt in the development of concentration means that he attains part of wisdom of nirvana there.

4. The first *jhāna* (concentrated state)

When they have removed the five obstacles and attained part of wisdom, practitioners know that they have finally entered into the first meditative state of *jhāna*.

When he (bhikkhu) knows that these five obstacles have left him, gladness (*pāmuḍḍa*) arises in him, from gladness comes delight (*pīti*) , from the delight in his mind his body becomes light (*kāyo passambhati*), with a light body he feels joy (*sukha*), and with joy his mind is concentrated (*cittaṃ samādhīyati*). [DN I, 73]

This statement is directly followed by the above-mentioned brief description.

Being thus detached from sense-desires (*kāma*), detached from unwholesome states (*akusala-dhamma*), he enters and stays in the first *jhāna*, which is with thinking (*savitakka*) and pondering (*savicāra*), born of detachment, filled with delight (*pīti*) and joy (*sukha*). [DN I, 73]

The first meditative state of *jhāna* resulting from the detachment from sense-desires and unwholesome states is that which is filled with delight and joy.

5. Conclusion

The way to enter into the first meditative state of *jhāna* was taught in the Nikāyas. One cannot say that it was commonly accepted in the Indian religion of the day. Rather, one has to say that it was specifically designed within the framework of the Buddhist path to nirvana relying on the fivefold force.

First of all, a practitioner heard the Buddha's dhamma and gained faith in the Buddha. It is to be noted that at the first stage of the path to nirvana the same is required.

The practitioner also exerts himself to protect himself from committing a fault in

performing physical and verbal acts. In addition, he has to be mindful because mindfulness prevents greed or sorrow from occurring.

A practitioner has to remove the five obstacles which hinder wisdom from appearing by means of keeping concentration. Concentration brings about part of wisdom, and the practitioner naturally enters into the first meditative state of *jhāna*.

To conclude: the Buddha, reforming the meditational methods which had been widespread in the Indian religion of the day, included it into his practice system within the framework of the path to nirvana.

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- 1) Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Boston: Wisdom Publishing, 2002), p.139.
 - 2) “*So ime panca nīvaraṇe pahāya cetaso upakkilese pannāya dubbalīkaṇe.*”[MN 1, 181, PTS edition]

〈Key words〉 *jhāna, sati, vipassanā, samādhi, nīvaraṇa*

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