Vitakka,vicāra

Initial application, sustained application

Theme: Thinking, mindfulness and dhyana

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1.1 CONTEXT AND MEANING. The word jhāna (Skt. dhyāna) can mean either “meditation,” or, more commonly, “mental absorption,” in the sense of the mind being fully itself, untouched and undistracted by any physical sensation, so that it is profoundly calm, clear, and blissful. A problem with understanding the first dhyana is that the first two of its component mental factors, called vitakka,vicāra, have been differently interpreted by both scholars and meditators. [4]

For our purposes, we shall broadly define vitakka,vicāra as follows:

- **vitakka** thought, applied thought; [meditation] (initial) application of mind to object (a mental factor);
- **vicāra** examination, sustained thought, pondering; [meditation] sustained application of the mind to the object (a mental factor).

Vitakka is etymologically related to takka, “thought,” and by extension, “logic, reasoning.” As such, several scholars conclude that conceptual thought continues in the first dhyana. Some suttas appear to support such a view, since they refer to the second dhyana as the “cessation of wholesome intentions” (kusala,cetanā), and as “noble silence” (ariya tuññā, bhāva). [5]

1.2 THE FIRST DHYANA AND THE PHYSICAL SENSES. According to the Raha,gata Sutta (S 36.6) and the Ānanda Sutta (S 36.15), when we are in the first dhyana, we are no longer able to speak. This would not be the case if the first dhyana were merely a state of calm reflection. In fact, from the Mahā,-parinibbāna Sutta (D 16), we know that hearing, too, does not arise in a dhyana.

Pukkusa, a follower of Āḷāra Kālāma’s, relates to the Buddha how, once, his (Pukkusa’s) 500 carts do not trouble the meditating Āḷāra Kālāma at all. The Buddha replies that while he is meditating at Atumā, there is a great thunderstorm that kills two brothers and four oxen, attracting a large crowd thereafter, but the Buddha is totally unaware of all this while he is meditating.

The Kathā,vatthu, too, refutes the view that it is possible to hear any sound during dhyana (Kvu 572).
The Vinaya records a very interesting incident where some monks accused Moggallāna of making a false claim, because he says that while in the “imperturbable concentration” (here, the 4th dhyana) that he hears the sounds of elephants. That the monks have raised such an objection reflects the idea of the impossibility of hearing any sound during dhyana is generally known by the monks. The Buddha, however, exonerates Moggallāna by explaining that it is possible to hear a sound in such a state if the attainment is not wholly pure (aparisuddha) (V 3:109). The Commentary explains Moggallāna has not fully overcome the obstruction to dhyana. His attainment is unstable and thus the hearing occurs while he is in between dhyanas. (VA 2:513 f)

In short, neither speech nor sound arises in dhyana. In fact, all the physical sensing are in suspended animation, as it were. For this reason, Brahhamavamo says,

while in any jhāna it is impossible to experience the body (eg physical pain), hear a sound from outside or produce any thought, not even “good” thoughts. There is just a clear singleness of perception, an experience of non-dualistic bliss which continues unchanging for a very long time. (1999: 44)

1.3 The spiritual nature of the first dhyanas. The first dhyana is an “unworldly” experience. The Lokaṭyāvika Brahmaṇa Sutta (A 9.38) speaks of a monk’s having attained the first dhyana as having realized the end of the “world,” which the Sutta identifies with the five senses. Here again, the Sutta famously refers to how dhyana transcends all physical sensations. [1.2]

The Poṭṭhapaṇḍa Sutta (D 9) describes a dhyanic experience as being a distinctly “subtle but real” perception (sukhuma, sacca, saññā), an expression which indicates a highly refined perception that differs from the way the ordinary world is perceived. Here “subtle” (sukhuma) refers to a purely mental experience, but it is not something constructed by the mind, but a direct feeling of things as they really are.  

Māra, by arousing sensual pleasures, works through the five senses to preoccupy the mind. Since dhyana shuts down the physical senses, Māra is “blind-folded” from us, so that we are beyond his range. Without Māra’s distraction or interference, it is easier for us to direct our energies to attaining various superknowledges, include the direct knowledge of arhathood. As such, the dhyanas are said in the Sandaka Sutta (M 76) to be a “superb distinction” (ulāra, visesa) [13]

1.4 We must mentally prepare ourselves for dhyana. We need to ask ourselves, says the German scholar monk, Analayo, if we are unfamiliar with dhyanas,

Whether the first absorption is a deep state of concentration, achieved only after a prolonged period of practice and seclusion, or a stage of relaxed happy reflection within easy reach of anyone and without much need for meditative proficiency. (2003:76)

The latter notion is clearly rebutted by dhyana passages and teachings found in the early texts and their commentaries. Such sources tell us of various preparations, such as living a morally virtuous life

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that is unuttered, keeping the mind from bodily distractions, and cultivating various intricate mental skills to inspire the mind into a singularity of calm, clarity and pure bliss.

Most of the textual sources lay out the training for dhyana as if it were easily attained, but we have at least one instance where the Buddha details his own difficulties in striving to attain the first dhyana. The Upakkilesa Sutta (M 128) clearly shows that even the Buddha, despite his childhood experience of the first dhyana, faced great difficulty when he attempted to attain it during his ascetic years. 15

The Upakkilesa Sutta records how, only after having overcome a series of 11 mental impurities, the ascetic Bodhisattva was able to attain the first dhyana. He had to overcome doubt, inattention, sloth and torpor, fear, excitement, inaction, excessive effort, weak effort, longing, perception of diversity, and excessive gazing at forms. Only with their complete removal was he able to attain dhyana. 16 Similarly, the Tapussa Sutta (A 9.41) reports how the Bodhisattva struggles with sensual desires in order to cultivate dhyana. 17

2. Vitakka, vicāra as dhyana-factors

2.1 A "THOUGHTLESS" PROCESS. What we have seen thus far clearly shows that the first dhyana is a state of deep mental focus that is well beyond mere reflection and conceptualizing. We can as such safely surmise that, as dhyana-factors (jhanāṅga), 18 initial application (vitakka) and sustained application (vicāra) are not thinking processes at all.

In normal thinking and speech, vitakka refers to when initial thought directs the attention to what us to be thought or said, while vicāra keeps the coherence of a sequence of thoughts or words. In such cases, vitakka is usually translated as "initial thought" or simply "thinking," while vicāra is rendered as "sustained thought" or "pondering." In the first dhyana, however, such a process is merely a "thoughtless" intentional directing the attention towards the object of concentration and keeping it there. As such, it is best to translate vitakka in meditation context as "initial application," and vicāra as "sustained application."

2.2 VITAKKA AS INTENTION. The Mahā Cattāriśaka Sutta (M 117) lists vitakka under its synonyms for supramundane right thought, and one of these synonyms is "application of mind" (cetaso abhiniropana). 19 We should therefore translate vitakka in the dhyana context as "initial application." 20

This translation and sense can be applied to the various sutta passages quoted above, where at first sight seem to suggest that conceptual thought continues into the first dhyana, since they speak of the "cessation of wholesome intentions" on attaining the second dhyana, the "noble silence." Although, in the dhyana context, initial application is different from discursive thought, it is still here an intention, but a very subtle mental activity.

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15 Analayo insightfully comments: "Possibly his ability to enter the first jhana so easily at this particular moment during his early youth was related to samatha practice undertaken in a previous life, an ability lost during his adolescence and later sensual indulgence as a young man, so that he had to develop it anew." (2003: 76 n42). See The Buddha discovers dhyana = SD 33.1b (4.4.1).
16 M 128.16-32/3:157-162 = SD 5.18. On how the 11 mental impurities are prob a precursor of the 5 hindrances, see SD 5.18 Intro (3).
17 A 9.41.4/4:439 f = SD 64.16.
18 On the def of the dhyana-factors, see Dhyana = SD 8.4(6).
19 "Thinking, thought, intention, mental focus, mental fixity, directing of the mind, verbal formation" (takko vitakko sankappo appanā vyappanā cetaso abhiniropanā vaci,sankhāro): M 117.14/3:73 =SD 6.10. Here the factor of intention (sakappa) is identified with initial application (vitakka), that is instrumental in bringing about dhyana by fixing and directing the mind upon its object. For vicāra as "verbal formation" (vacī,sankhāra), see Cūja Vedal-la S (M 44.15/1:301). "Application of mind" (cetaso abhiniropanā) also occurs at Vbh 257 & Vism 142 in a def of vitakka.

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Only in the second dhyana is attained does such a mental activity fully ceases, and concentration becomes completely stable. This is affirmed by the joy and zest of the second dhyana being qualified as being “born of samadhi” (samādhi,jā) and the expression, “oneness of the mind” (cetasā ekodi, bhava). The mind here has attained total stillness, that is, the noble silence, bereft of even the subtle wholesome intentions. All this shows that dhyana is no ordinary reflection, but arises only after some effort of meditation skill.

3 Dhyana, four or five?

3.1 A DHYANA WITHOUT VITAKKA. A problem with understanding the first dhyana is that the first two of its component mental factors, called vitakka, vicāra, have been differently interpreted by both scholars and meditators. The suttas characterize the 1st dhyana as “with initial application and sustained application” (sa,vitakka sa,vicāra).21 However, several discourses also mention a dhyana without vitakka but with vicāra.22 As a result of this, the Abhidhamma speaks of a fivefold dhyana system.

In the Abhidhamma model, another dhyana is added in between the first and second described in the suttas, and vitakka and vicāra are eliminated successively, instead of simultaneously, as in the sutta model. In the sutta tradition, when both vitakka and vicāra are eliminated, the second dhyana arises with the dhyana-factors of pīti, sukha and ekaggatā (that is, zest, happiness and one-pointedness). In the Abhidhamma tradition, the elimination of vitakka alone produces the second dhyana, thus retaining four dhyana-factors (that is, including vicāra) (DhsA 43, 179-182).

3.2 BUDDHAGHOSA’S EXPLANATIONS. The fivefold dhyana model is elaborated by Buddhaghosa in the Attha,sālinī, his Dhamma,saṅgaṇī Commentary, DhsA 43, 179-182. He says that this is an optional model, depending on the particular mental disposition of the disciple. For those who, when reviewing the first dhyana, see vitakka as the first factor to appear gross, while the other four are subtle, the teacher formulates a second dhyana with four factors [3.1], that is, without vitakka, but with vicāra, pīti, sukha and ekaggatā (DhsA 179).

Buddhaghosa supports his explanation with reference to the suttas themselves, quoting the Saṅkhittā Dhamma Sutta (A 8.63), where three kinds of samadhi are listed, namely:

1. samadhi with both vitakka and vicāra;
2. samadhi without vitakka but with only vicāra; and
3. samadhi with neither vitakka nor vicāra. (A 8.63.5/4:300) =SD 46.6

Of these, he says that the second represents Abhidhamma interpretation of the five stages of dhyana.23

The Sukha Vagga (A 2.7) of the Anguttara says that there are two kinds of happiness—the happiness with zest (sa-p, pītika sukha) and the happiness without zest (ni-p, pītika sukha)—of these two, the latter is the foremost.24 Its Commentary notes that sappītika here means “happiness of the first and second dhyana that is attended by zest” (sa-p, pītika ti pathama, dutiya-j,jhāna,-sukhaṁ) and that nippītika refers to the “happiness of the third and fourth dhyana that is bereft of zest” (ni-p, pītika ti tatiya, catuttha-j,jhāna,-sukhaṁ) (AA 2:153).

The Sukha Vagga goes on to say that of two further kinds of happiness—that which is delight-based (sāt'ārammana sukha) and that which is equanimity-based (upekkhārammana sukha)—the foremost is

21 See eg Sāmañña,phala S (D 2.77/1:74); Mahā Saccaka S (M 38.31/1:246); Jhāna Ābhīñña S (S 16.9/2:211 f); Saññimitta Vg (A 2.2.3/1:53).
22 Avitakka, vicāra, matta. Saṅgīti S (D 33.1.10(50)/3:219); Upakkilesa S (M 128.30/3:162); Sa, vitakka Sa, vicāra S (S 43.3/4:360); Asaṅkhata S (S 43.12/4:363); Saṅkhitta Dhamma S (A 8.63.5/4:300); DhsA 33; 54; Vbh 264, 266, 277-279; Pai:VRI 2:91; MA 4:209; DhsA 179; Vism 4.198-202/168-170; Miln 337 calls them “the concentration jewel” (samādhi ratana). Stuart-Fox points out that some of the Pali sources quoted above do not have any Chinese version in the Āgamas (1989: 92).
23 DhsA 179 f; see also MA 4:209.

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the equanimity-based happiness. Its Commentary says that the former is the happiness of the first three dhyanas, while the latter is that of the fourth dhyana (AA 2:153).

3.3 Repetition in the 2nd dhyana definition? The stock definition of the second dhyana runs like this:

> With the stilling of initial application and sustained application, by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, the monk enters and dwells in the second dhyana, free from initial application and sustained application, accompanied by zest and happiness, born of concentration.

(V. 29/1:73, 22.21(viii)/(2)/2:314 f; M 27.20/1:181; 141.31/3:252; Vbh 254)

Notice that the underscored phrases are effectively synonymous. The question now is whether they are repetitive and redundant or not. Buddhaghosa, in his Visuddhi, magga, explains that each of the two phrases executes a different function. The opening phrase, he says, is mentioned for the following reasons:

1. to directly point out that the second dhyana is attained by eliminating the gross factors of the first dhyana;
2. to indicate that the cause of serene faith (samasādana) and oneness of mind (ekodi, bhāva)؛ and
3. to show that the second dhyana is without initial application and sustained application.

(Vism 4:146 f/156)

In short, while the first phrase refers to the condition leading into or producing the second dhyana, the second phrase describes the characteristic condition of the second dhyana itself.

4 Other characteristics of vitakka, vicāra

4.1 Vitakka, vicāra and papañca. Outside of dhyana, vitakka and vicāra have closely to do with thinking and pondering, the kind of mentation that tends to implode into a powerful private world in itself. This private world of words, ideas and emotions is known as “mental proliferation” (papañca). Two ancient verses from the Sutta, nipāta hint at the close relationship between vitakka (as thought), papañca (mental proliferation), and mental liberation:

7 Yassa vitakka vidhūpitā
   arijhāttaṁ anuvikappitā aseāṁ
   su bhikkhu jahitā orā,parāṁ
   uragō jinnāṁ iva tacām purāṇām

   Whose thoughts are burnt up,
   utterly cut off within,
   that monk leaves both this shore and the far shore
   as a snake leaves its old worn-out skin. (Sn 7)

8 Yo nāccasāri na paccasāri

   Who ponders not what is ahead nor what is past.

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25 Vitakka, vicāraṁ vipassāṁ arijhāttaṁ sampasadānaṁ cetas ekodi, bhāvaṁ avitakkaṁ avicāraṁ samādi, jāni pū,sukham dutiya jhānaṁ. The 2nd dhyana is known as “the noble silence” (ariya, tu, bhāva) because within it initial application and sustained application (thinking and discussion, vitakka, vicāra) cease, and with their cessation, speech cannot occur (S 2:273); cf S 4:293 where vitakka and vicāra are called verbal formation (vac, savki- ra), the mental factors responsible for speech: see Kolita S (S 21.1/2:273 f) & Dutiya Jhāna S (S 40.2/4:263 f). In Ariya, pariyesan S (M 1:161), the Buddha exhorts the monks when assembled to “either speak on the Dharma or observe the noble silence” (ie either talk Dharma or meditate).

26 Cp this line with Dh 385. See Dh:G(B)202 f.

27 Comy: “yo nāccasāri means ‘who runs not too far ahead’; na paccasāri means ‘nor has he been left behind’” (yo nāccasāri ti yo nādihi, na paccasāri ti na ohiyy). SnA 1:21, 14. Comy explains this as meaning that the monk does not resort to extremes in views or in practice (SnA 1:21). Cf yo nāyasaram ca āryasaram (Uv 32.55), but, notes Norman, “Both may, however, be merely reminiscences of the sentiment seen in oiliyanti eke, eke atidihi (U 72; It 43,14). See Dh:G(B)201-205 & Norman 1974a:175.
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Well cut off the all without remains.

that monk leaves both this shore and the far shore

as a snake leaves its old worn-out skin. (Sn 8)

Sn 7 tells us that one who has “burnt up,” that is, utterly destroyed, all thinking, the source of karma and suffering, is free from rebirth, abandoning suffering as a snake casts off its slough.

Sn 8 is enigmatic and I don’t think anyone has, in recent times, explained it satisfactorily within the early Buddhist context. Technically (see footnote at Sn 8a), we can translate the line yo naccasāri na paccasāri as “Who neither transgresses nor causes others to transgress,” but it is rather strained, as it does not fit the rest of the verse.

The verse probably says that the true saint does not get caught up with the past or the future, and he has also given up the present, that is, the “all” of the sense-faculties. As such, the saint is no more reborn.

4.2 CESSATION OF VITAKKA, VICĀRA. In the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta (M 44), the nun Dhammatīṇī explains to the layman Visākha that vitakka and vicāra are “speech activity” (vacī, saṅkhāra): “For, avuso Visākha, having first applied thought and sustained thought, one then breaks out into speech. Therefore, vitakka, vicāra is called speech activity.”

She adds that a person who has attained the cessation of perception and feeling, speech activity stops first (that is, in the second dhyāna, the state of noble silence). Then body activity stops (in the fourth dhyāna, when the breath process ceases). Finally, mind activity stops (that is, a temporary suspension of all mental activity lasting up to a week, even more).

And when the meditator emerges from the cessation of perception and feeling, mind activity restarts first, followed by body activity, and finally speech activity. Non-returners and arhats (including the Buddha) who weary at the arising and passing away of conditioned existence would, with the proper technique, often dwell in the state of cessation for durations of seven days or more (Vism 604). This state, as it were, is only a step away from nirvana.

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Bibliography
Please see under \textit{Samadhi} = SD 33.1a

Reading
(1) Analayo, \textit{Satip\=ath\=ana: The direct path to realization}, 2003: 75-79.
(2) Brahmavamso, \textit{Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond}, 2006:155-166.
(4) Martin Stuart-Fox, \textquotedblleft Jh\=ana and Buddhist scholasticism\textquotedblright, 1989:79-110.

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