

Dhyanas for dummies [Part 1 of 2]

Deep meditation for shallow people

Source: Anupada Sutta (M 111), SD 56.4 (3.2.1)

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3.3.1.1 THE 1ST DHYANA [§§3-4]. The teaching section—which is practically most of the Sutta—starts with the 4 form dhyanas (*rūpa jhāna*), each of which is defined in the traditional manner, that is, in terms of **their dhyana-factors** (*jhān’āṅga*) [§§3, 5, 7, 9]. Those of the 1st dhyana are: “initial application (*vitakka*), sustained application (*vicāra*), zest (*pīti*) and joy (*sukha*)” [§3], without any mention of one-pointedness of mind (*citt’ek’aggatā*), but which is mentioned at §4.1 (we will return to this point later).

Briefly, here are the commentarial glosses on these **dhyana-factors**.

(2) By **vitakka** is meant that the meditator knows by examining (the state) through the characteristic of mental application (*olokento abhiniropana, lakkhaṇo*) (that is, directing the mind to the mental object or keeping it focused). It should be recalled that since all the mental fetters [3.3.3] have been overcome, sense-based knowing has been suspended. Hence, this apparently active aspect of dhyana refers to a purely mind-based process.

(3) **Vicāra** is the characteristic of pondering over that (*tathā anumajjana, lakkhaṇo*), which is taken in a purely mental (suprasensual) sense. This is a mental effort to sustain that attention so that the mind remains focused. Even without the full presence of one pointedness of mind, this guided focus is still able to generate zest (*pīti*).

(4) **Pīti** or zest is the characteristic of suffusing (*pharaṇa, lakkhaṇa*), meaning that since we are clearly aware of *only* mental states, this *nowness* simply floods our mind, actively rapturing us, flooding us with an overpowering joy. The “**suffusing**” here means that this is purely a mental experience of boundless and total unity with, as it were, all things. In mundane terms, we may compare this to that consuming “rush” a speed-driver feels when he is zooming at superspeed. It may even be said to be a purely mental (non-sexual) ecstasy, free of the body.*

[*This idea is famously depicted by Bernini (1598-1680) in his sculpture of “Ecstasy of Saint Teresa,” depicting a woman in religious ecstasy contemplating on her religious communion with Christ. We also have the Tibetan *yab-yum* (“father-mother”) depiction of the ecstatic union between wisdom and compassion. Such symbolism clearly has its limits which should be clearly respected, so that we do not fall prey to the notion that the finger *is* the moon. See SD 38.4 (3.2.3.2); SD 53.18 (2.2.3.3).]

(5) **Sukha** or “joy” is the characteristic of being pleased (*sāta, lakkhaṇam*), that is, a supra-sensual pleasure, a purely mental ease.¹ It’s like being fully satiated with our favourite food and we are just quietly sitting in total contentment. In the 1st dhyana, this calm pleasure contrasts with the exuberant pervasive zest. This is like a child safely experiencing a merry-

¹ See Vbh §567/257,22-27.

go-round revolving at full speed, which gives him a deep sense of inner joy suffused by the movement.

(6) **Citt'ek'aggatā** (the oneness of mind), the characteristic of being undistracted (*avikkhepa*), of being undistracted (*avikkhepa, lakkhaṇā*), of being inwardly calm [§4.1] (MA 4:87,20-25). Its presence is hinted at by the phrase “born of solitude” (*viveka, ja*), that is, it arises from the mind’s freedom from the body (“sensual objects,” a synecdoche for the mental fetters) and from the negative aspects of the mind (“unwholesome states”): hence, it is said to be “quite secluded from sensual objects (*vivicc’eva kāmehi*), secluded from unwholesome states (*vivicca akusalehi*)” [§3].

(7) In other words, the oneness of mind is present but unnoticed on account of the activity of zest. Hence, the Sutta describes that, in the 1st dhyana, **these states** are present: initial application, sustained application, zest, joy and one-pointedness of mind [§4.1b]. The joyfully focused mind (free of all sensual distractions) keeps directing itself to the blissful peace of that dhyana. At this stage, there is still a bit of subtle “separation” between subject and object, as it were: the mind subtly works to keep itself *with* it—self, so to speak. But that’s all it does undistractedly.

3.3.2.1 THE 2ND DHYANA [§§5-6]. At this stage, it is beneficial to remind ourselves that the Buddha’s teaching is historically and spiritually characterized by **renunciation** (*nekkhamma*), of letting go, of the less that liberates—this is the spirit of the teaching as “an opening (*okāsa*) in the confined” (*sambadh’okāsa*).² The mind, as it were, renounces itself: it does not see itself as being “separate” from its object—the idea of subject and object, is transcended: this is the ceasing of all initial application and sustained application (*vitakka, vicāra*). We now see the theme of the dhyanic mind transcending or “renouncing” itself: we ascend the dhyanas by the lessening of **the dhyana-factors** (*jhān’āṅga*) of the preceding dhyana.

(2) **The 2nd dhyana**, in its “dhyana” passage, says that it is attained “with the stilling of initial application and sustained application” (*vitakka, vicārānaṃ vūpasamā*) [§5]. In renouncing, letting go, of directing and sustaining our mind—our attention needs no more guidance: it is fixed on its object—so that we fully embrace the zest and joy born of samadhi that is, the 2nd dhyana. [§Table 3(1)]

(3) The Anupada Sutta adds a valuable note for us here, on how zest and joy (*pīti, sukha*) becomes even more refined. It says that the 2nd dhyana “**has serene faith in oneself and single-mindedness**” (*ajjhataṃ sampasādanaṃ cetaso ekodi, bhāvaṃ*) [§5]. The meditator has truly become an island unto himself (*atta, dīpa*), dwelling “with the Dharma as an island ... as refuge, with no other refuge,” as declared by the Buddha. Psychologically, this is the fulfilment of our individuation process, of becoming a true individual, who is morally virtuous, with wise faith in the Buddha Dharma, a truly free individual, free from the crowd.

(4) The phrase—***ajjhataṃ sampasādanaṃ cetaso ekodi, bhāvaṃ***—is found in the definition of the 2nd dhyana throughout the Pali canon. Clearly, these twin qualities—serene faith and single-mindedness—reflect a sublimation, a refinement, of the heart and head, feeling and

² See **Sambādh’okāsa S** (A 6.26,2), SD 15.6; SD 56.19 (1.1.2).

thinking, in dhyana. In fact, we see here that the zest (*pīti*) is now more refined, becoming “**serene faith in oneself**,” a calmer sense of “self-confidence,” while joy (*sukha*), too, is more refined, becoming “single-mindedness.”

(5) In other words, the meditator is imbued with subtler forms zest and joy as a profounder inner peace that suffuses him, that is, by way of serene faith in oneself and single-mindedness. Hence, the Sutta describes that, in the 2nd dhyana, **these states** are present: serene faith in oneself, zest, joy and mental oneness. [§6.1b]

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