

Dhyana-factors, 4 or 5?

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Leigh Brasington is a well known American Buddhist teacher, who describes himself as “being authorized to teach jhānas by (the late) Ayya Khemā.” Brasington, like a growing number of careful students of early Buddhism, including myself, are deeply interested in the teaching and practice as taught by the Buddha. We would like to discover “what the Buddha actually taught (and practised),” not what is “late,” or the Abhidhamma, or the Commentaries. And we may also exclude Buddhaghosa’s opinions with the blessings of the Mahāvihāra tradition, the dominant Sinhala scholastic tradition—and perhaps even modern writers!

If “late” is suspect or wrong, then, the later the more suspect or wrong. Indeed, **we** are the “latest” in terms of Buddhist tradition--we must be the most wrong! We must then declare that all else except **us** are wrong! This sadly is how late writings usually work.

Valuable views

As a keen student of early Buddhism myself, I try to keep up with the views of contemporary Buddhists, including scholars, who are also Buddhist practitioners (that is, those who are not merely unbiasedly earning a living off Buddhism). Let me naively state my observation that British scholars of early Buddhism tend to see it “as it is” along with the Abhidhamma and the Commentaries. Rupert Gethin (author of *The Buddhist Path to Awakening, A Study of the Bodhi-Pakkhiya Dhamma*, 1992), for example, has deep respect for both. American Buddhists, on the other hand, it seems, are likely to be more selective, and clearly vocal about what they disagree with. This is merely a biased observation, not a learned opinion.

My point is that we are talking about **living Buddhism**, which is characterized by interesting (sometimes not so interesting) takes on Buddhism, or rather what we think it should be. Writings by such scholars, teachers and practitioners (especially the last) are especially valuable and instrumental in helping us with a better understanding of what the Buddha taught, the “early Buddhism” of the historical Buddha. I have used such a wordy definition partly because a young local Mahayana zealot publicly declared that “Mahayana is earlier than early Buddhism”; yet, they look up more to the omnipresent and “eternal” Amitabha Buddha.

Vitakka-vicāra

Before I digress further, let me say that this reflection is a response after reading Brasington’s “Five factors for the First Jhana – Not!” (2012), a carefully documented research with all the proper sutta references. I find no strong reasons to disagree with most of what he has written except for his view on *vitakka-vicāra*. I disagree with him partly also because he has taken such a strong stand on it—that *vitakka* “only” means “thinking” and *vicāra* means “examining.”

I have written a long paper on “The Buddha discovered dhyana” (SD 33.1b) where I made the assertion that all **thinking and knowing** (as we normally know it) cease. (This is partly in

response to a well known Sinhala jhana scholar who surprisingly wrote that thinking does occur in dhyana!). Anyway, I have just completed translating and annotating **the (Navaka) Ānanda Sutta** (A 9.37) where Ānanda makes the interesting statement that the sense-faculties and their respective objects are present during dhyana, “yet one does not experience that base.” Simply, we can take this to mean that all sensing as we know it stops in dhyana, yet “one is actually percipient” in dhyana. This refers to subtle form of knowing, on which I have noted further in SD 55.18.

Having said that, I would agree with Brasington that *vitakka, vicāra* can be translated as “thinking and examining.” This is what actually happens in our “daily” lives. However, in practical meditation, we usually start by focusing and directing our **thinking** to “applying” it to the meditation object; and we keep doing this whenever that mind moves away: this is called “sustained application.” These are clearly awkward translations but in meditation practice, we will notice that this is what we actually do, at least, at the start.

4 or 5 dhyana-factors?

If we only look for actual terms that denote “factor” (*aṅga*) we are likely to notice the **nouns** to be only 4 in number. Brasington quotes this well known sutta stock passage, thus:

Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu vivicc'eva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi, sa-VITAKKAM sa-VICARAM vivekajam-PĪTI-SUKHAM paṭhamam jhānam upasampajja viharati.

Brasington’s 4 dhyana-factors are highlighted in BLOCK CAPS. However, the operative words here are actually VIVICCA and VIVEKA. Simply put, these 2 terms mean “secluded” (Brasington’s term). *Vivicca* refers to overcoming the sensual as a hindrance, but this is a synecdoche (shorthand) for the 5 hindrances (sensual desire, ill will, restless and worry, sloth and torpor, and doubt).

The later teachers, following early Buddhism thought (I think) that it is important to highlight the fact that overcoming the **5 hindrances** lead to the 1st dhyana (and so forth). In fact, I feel that if the texts (early and late) have maintained there are **only 4 dhyana-factors** (which is right, of course), we, as meditators and meditation teachers today, would suggest or innovate and say that it is easier to explain and understand the 1st dhyana by way of the 5 dhyana-factors. This is a teaching aid. My point is: choose your dhyana-factors: 4 or 5? **Yes!** And go on with your meditation beyond words.

When meditation is read as an essay or thesis, it is like reading a musical score. We may argue about the phrasing and arrangements. True music lovers do not really care about words when it comes to instrumental music. The bottom line is to play the piece, feel the music, listen to it, enjoy it fully. We are free to criticize the playing, the acoustics, etc, but when we do play the piece ourselves, there is a certain kind of fulfilment, freedom and peace that are sweeter than all that we can speak of the unspeakable.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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