



# EVAM ME SUTTAṀ This is how I heard it

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## Week four: Concentration & discernment

### Introduction

This week we will look at concentration (*samādhi*) and discernment (*paññā*; *vipassanā*), and the relationships between them. Concentration is central to Buddhist practice, for *samādhi* in a broad sense is what we generally call “meditation.” Here we will look at what the Buddha means by “concentration” and the connection between concentration and the discernment that leads to *nibbāna*. And here, when we speak of concentration, we mean right concentration (*sammā samādhi*), the eighth factor of the noble eight-fold path.

### Right concentration

§150. Now what, monks, is five-factored noble right concentration? [*First jhāna*] There is the case where a monk – quite withdrawn from sensuality [*kāma*], withdrawn from unskillful qualities [*akusala dhammā*] – enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture [*pīti*] & pleasure [*sukha*] born from withdrawal [*viveka*], accompanied by directed thought & evaluation [*vitakka-vicāra*]. He permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born from withdrawal. There is nothing of his entire body unpermeated by rapture & pleasure born from withdrawal. ...

[*Second jhāna*] Furthermore, with the stilling of directed thought & evaluation, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of composure [*samādhija*], unification of awareness [*cetaso ekodibhāvaṃ*] free from directed thought & evaluation – internal assurance [*ajjhata sampasādana*]. He permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born from composure. There is nothing of his entire body unpermeated by rapture & pleasure born from composure. ...

[*Third jhāna*] And furthermore, with the fading of rapture, he remains in equanimity [*upekkhā*], mindful & alert [*sati-sampajāna*], and physically sensitive to pleasure. He enters & remains in the third jhāna, of which the Nobles Ones declare, “Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasurable abiding.” He permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the pleasure divested of rapture, so that there is nothing of his entire body unpermeated with pleasure divested of rapture. ...

[*Fourth jhāna*] And furthermore, with the abandoning of pleasure & stress – as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress – he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness [*upekkhā-sati-pārisuddhi*], neither-pleasure-nor-

pain. He sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness, so that there is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness.<sup>1</sup>

When we speak about “concentration” in broad terms, we are dealing with three fundamental technical terms: *samatha*; *samādhi*; and *jhāna*. Let us first try to clarify these terms.

*Samatha* can be translated as “tranquillity” or “serenity.” It is derived from the Sanskrit root *śam*, which means “calm;” “tranquil;” “serene.” *Samatha* has a broader range of meanings than *samādhi*, and is often linked with *vipassanā*, or “insight,” in the compound *samatha-vipassanā*. It denotes the calm aspect of meditation practice as compared to the insight aspect. Successful practice requires the cultivation of both *samatha* (serenity; tranquillity) and *vipassanā* (insight; discernment), so we could see them not as separate and distinct practices as such, but different aspects of a single path to awakening.

§165. These four types of individuals are to be found existing in the world. Which four?

There is the case of the individual who has attained internal tranquillity of awareness [*ajjhataṃ cetosamatha*], but not insight into phenomena [*dhammas*] through heightened discernment [*adhi-paññā dhamma-vipassanā*]. There is ... the individual who has attained insight into phenomena through heightened discernment, but not internal tranquillity of awareness. There is ... the individual who has attained neither internal tranquillity of awareness nor insight into phenomena through heightened discernment. And there is ... the individual who has attained both internal tranquillity of awareness & insight into phenomena through heightened discernment.

The individual who has attained internal tranquillity of awareness [*ajjhataṃ cetosamatha*], but not insight into phenomena through heightened discernment, should approach the individual who has attained insight into phenomena through heightened discernment ... and ask him: “How should fabrications [*saṅkhāras*] be regarded? How should they be investigated? How should they be seen with insight [*vipassitabba*]?” ...

As for the individual who has attained insight into phenomena through heightened discernment, but not internal tranquillity of awareness, he should approach an individual who has attained internal tranquillity of awareness and ask him: “How should the mind be steadied? How should it be made to settle down? How should it be unified? How should it be concentrated?” ...<sup>2</sup>

*Samādhi* is derived from the prefix *saṃ*, “with; together;” the prefix *ā*, “towards;” and the root *dhā* “put; place.” From *saṃ* + *ā* + *dhā* we get “to bring together;” “to collect;” “to unify.” *Samādhi* is sometimes defined in the Canon as *cittass’ ekaggatā*, “unification of mind,” or “mental one-pointedness.” It is usually translated as “concentration.” Buddhaghosa, in the fifth century Visuddhimagga, a text that

<sup>1</sup> Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff). *The wings to awakening: An anthology from the Pali canon*. Barre, Massachusetts: Dhamma Dana, 1996: 234-5.

<sup>2</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 251.

defines Theravāda orthodoxy, says *samādhi* is “the centering of consciousness and consciousness-concomitants evenly and rightly on a single object.”<sup>3</sup>

*Sammā samādhi* (“right concentration”) is one of the factors of the noble eightfold path, and when the Buddha asks, “What is *sammā samādhi*?”, he usually answers in terms of the four *jhānas*, as in our text above. But is this really a definition? Normally we would think of a definition of, say, *a*, to take the form of “*a is b*.” But here we don’t so much have the Buddha saying what *samādhi is*, but what it *does*, how it *functions*. So it may be that asking for the “definition” of right concentration is asking the wrong question. The right question is, what does right concentration *do*? How does it *behave*?

What makes right concentration “right” is the abandoning of unskillful qualities, such as the hindrances, and the development of skillful qualities, such as the *jhāna* factors. Hence the definition of first *jhāna* includes seclusion from “sensuality and unskillful mental qualities,” and the cultivation of five core mental qualities: directed thought, or initial application (*vitakka*), evaluation, or sustained application (*vicāra*), rapture (*pīti*), pleasure (*sukha*), and unification of awareness, or unification of mind (*cetaso ekodibhāvaṃ*, or *cittass’ ekaggatā*). So *jhāna* is a way of mapping the meditating mind as it develops *samādhi*, or concentration, and becomes absorbed with a single object. Ṭhānissaro describes it as a “mutual pervasion of awareness and object in a state of expansion.”<sup>4</sup>

## Pleasure & the body

Ṭhānissaro’s approach to concentration brings out the importance of the body and its relationship to pleasure. The body is the field of both concentration and discernment. The unification of awareness implies the unification of the body that contains awareness. So in keeping the breath in mind, “one should be sensitive to the entire body while breathing in and out. This accounts for the term ‘*mahāggata*’ – enlarged or expanded – used to describe the mind in the state of *jhāna*.”<sup>5</sup>

The Canon speaks of “form” and “formless” *jhāna*, and the use of the term “form” again brings out the centrality of the body.

In one sense, “form” denotes the body, and form *jhāna* is a state of mental absorption in the form of one’s own physical body, as sensed from within. *Jhāna* focused on this type of form comes in four levels, identical with the four levels mentioned in the definition of the faculty of concentration [§72] and of right concentration under the noble eightfold path [§102]<sup>6</sup>.

In *jhāna* practice the meditator “permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body” with awareness, and the rapture and bliss that accompany awareness. This comes about through our relationship with breath in *ānāpāṇasati*, “keeping the breath in mind.” Body and breath are two themes that keep coming up in Ṭhānissaro’s presentation of practice. *Ānāpāṇasati* is an *embodied* practice, and our

<sup>3</sup> Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa. *The path of purification (Visuddhimagga)*. Translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1975: 85.

<sup>4</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 224.

<sup>5</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 224.

<sup>6</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 224.

relationship to body is central. “Breath” gives entry into body, and in particular, into the *whole* body, because “breath” is not confined to the conventional concept of it; breath is *vayo dhātu*, “air element” or “wind property,” which extends throughout and beyond the body. It *moves* through body, and so provides a link with rapture (*pīti*), which is also associated with movement. Further, wind property is one of the “four great things” (*mahābhūta*), and where one of these is found, all are found. So sensitivity to any aspect of body experience gives entry into breath, and entry into breath gives entry into any other aspect of body experience.

The bodily pleasure of the practice is also central. Why should we practise concentration? The Buddha gives four uses for concentration, of which the first is “a pleasant abiding in the here and now.” [See §149.] This is the simple enjoyment of *jhāna*, important because: (1) Pleasure “enables the mind to stay comfortably in the present moment, helping it to attain the stability it needs for gaining insight.” (2) The sensitivity developed in tuning into the pleasure of *jhāna* allows us to become aware of refined levels of *dukkha*. (3) The pleasures of *jhāna* “exist independently of the five senses,” and so allow the mind to disengage from the five sensory pleasures. “The fact that fully mature mastery of *jhāna* brings about the attainment of non-returning ... where sensual passion is abandoned, shows the necessary role that *jhāna* plays in letting go of this particular defilement.” (4) When the mind is rested and contented through *jhāna*, it can accept painful insights.<sup>7</sup>

Cultivating pleasure is essential to the development of *samatha*, tranquillity or serenity, and Ṭhānissaro presents *ānāpānasati* as the obvious way to cultivate it. As we look at Ṭhānissaro’s presentation of *ānāpānasati*, we will see how important is pleasure for the mastery of right concentration.

### How is right concentration mastered in *Ānāpānasati*?

Attainment of first *jhāna* is always pleasurable, partly because of the sense of freedom from the hindrances that allows entry into it. This freedom creates a sense of pleasure that allows the mind to settle into present experience. [See §154.] Then the cultivation of concentration strengthens the pleasant qualities of rapture and pleasure.

The practice begins simply, by just directing awareness to the breath “in and of itself, in the present, at the same time evaluating it as one begins to discern variations in the length of the breath.” [See §151.] Some teachers recommend that the student adjusts the rhythm of the breath to make it comfortable, as “the first level of *jhāna* must be based on a sense of pleasure.” [See §238.]<sup>8</sup>

§151. [1] Breathing in long, he discerns that he is breathing in long; or breathing out long, he discerns that he is breathing out long. [2] Or breathing in short, he discerns that he is breathing in short; or breathing out short, he discerns that he is breathing out short.

Then comes deliberate “training,” where we train ourselves by making awareness sensitive to the body as a whole, and then focusing on “bodily fabrication” – the

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<sup>7</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 230-1.

<sup>8</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 228.

breath itself – in such a way as to cultivate deeper levels of calm, along with rapture and pleasure.<sup>9</sup>

[3] He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to the entire body, and to breathe out sensitive to the entire body. [4] He trains himself to breathe in calming bodily fabrication, and to breathe out calming bodily fabrication. [5] He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to rapture, and to breathe out sensitive to rapture. [6] He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to pleasure, and to breathe out sensitive to pleasure. [7] He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to mental fabrication, and to breathe out sensitive to mental fabrication. [8] He trains himself to breathe in calming mental fabrication, and to breathe out calming mental fabrication.

As these feelings suffuse the entire body it calms down, and “mental fabrications – feelings and perceptions – become clearly apparent as they occur.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, what becomes central as concentration develops is not so much the body as the mind in relationship to the body. This is part of the shift from the “what” to the “how.” The mind becomes more sensitive, discernment develops, and rather than being focused on the movements of breath, the practitioner becomes focused on the mental qualities (the hindrances, the *jhāna* factors, and the factors of awakening) that define the nature of the meditative experience itself. The meditation object becomes the mind focusing on the meditation object. But again, the pleasure of this enterprise remains paramount.

[9] He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to the mind, and to breathe out sensitive to the mind. [10] He trains himself to breathe in satisfying the mind, and to breathe out satisfying the mind. [11] He trains himself to breathe in steadying the mind, and to breathe out steadying the mind. [12] He trains himself to breathe in releasing the mind, and to breathe out releasing the mind.

Mastery of concentration entails discernment into patterns of cause and effect, as we master the causes for abandoning the hindrances and cultivating the *jhāna* factors. This corresponds to the second level of frames-of-reference practice, “the phenomenon of origination and passing away.”<sup>11</sup> Here is where discernment comes to the fore, as the fact of impermanence and our response to this fact become the focal point of practice.

[13] He trains himself to breathe in focusing on inconstancy, and to breathe out focusing on inconstancy. [14] He trains himself to breathe in focusing on dispassion (*literally, fading*), and to breathe out focusing on dispassion. [15] He trains himself to breathe in focusing on cessation, and to breathe out focusing on cessation. [16] He trains himself to breathe in focusing on relinquishment, and to breathe out focusing on relinquishment. [S.LIV.1]<sup>12</sup>

### Is *jhāna* necessary for awakening?

When we come to the relationship between concentration (*samādhi*) on the one hand and insight (*vipassanā*) or discernment (*paññā*) on the other, the question of what

<sup>9</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 228.

<sup>10</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 228.

<sup>11</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 229.

<sup>12</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 236-7.

we mean by *jhāna* assumes some importance. Everyone agrees that some degree of concentration is necessary for insight; but how much? Is *jhāna* itself necessary? Ṭhānissaro comments:

The role of *jhāna* as a condition for transcendent discernment is one of the most controversial issues in the Theravada tradition. Three basic positions have been advanced in modern writings. One, following the commentarial tradition, asserts that *jhāna* is not necessary for any of the four levels of Awakening and that there is a class of individuals – called “dry insight” meditators – who are “released through discernment” based on a level of concentration lower than that of *jhāna*. A second position, citing a passage in the Canon [A.III.88; MFU, pp. 103] stating that concentration is mastered only on the level of non-returning, holds that *jhāna* is necessary for the attainment of non-returning and Arahantship, but not for the lower levels of Awakening. The third position states that the attainment of at least the first level of *jhāna* is essential for all four levels of Awakening.

Evidence from the Canon supports the third position, but not the other two.<sup>13</sup>

Ṭhānissaro supports this position by arguing that attainment of stream entry, the lowest level of awakening and the target, for example, of Mahāsī Sayādaw’s approach to *vipassanā* meditation, includes right concentration, and right concentration is defined as *jhāna*. Further, no passage in the Canon speaks of transcendent discernment without some skill in *jhāna*. While there are some *arahants* described as “released through discernment,” this refers to people who have awakened without experiencing the *formless jhānas*, not people who have not experienced *jhāna* at all.<sup>14</sup>

Ṭhānissaro points out that this controversy is caused in part “by the fact that the commentaries define *jhāna* in terms that bear little resemblance to the canonical description,” where Buddhaghosa, in his *Visuddhimagga*, describes *jhāna* in terms of a *kasīna* practice that is not described in the Canon.<sup>15</sup>

So it would seem that what *jhāna* means in the commentaries is something quite different from what it means in the Canon. Because of this difference we can say that the commentaries are right in viewing their type of *jhāna* as unnecessary for Awakening, but Awakening cannot occur without the attainment of *jhāna* in the canonical sense.<sup>16</sup>

What is this canonical sense of *jhāna*? Much of the debate in modern Theravāda revolves around the *kind* of concentration implicit in the concept of “*jhāna*,” and it is worth mentioning that the Buddha defines *jhāna* only in terms of the absence of the hindrances and the possession of the *jhāna* factors. But a mind in possession of these factors could have very different experiences depending on what kind of meditation object it was attending to, and what kind of attention it was practising.

For example, Ṭhānissaro points out that the commentarial explanation of *jhāna* is based on the use of *kasīna* as meditation object. A *kasīna* is a coloured disk that the

<sup>13</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 248.

<sup>14</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 248-9.

<sup>15</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 249.

<sup>16</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 249.

practitioner looks at and absorbs into. It is located outside the body, and the point of access is through sight. As concentration develops, the image becomes imprinted on the mind, and this mental image is the *nimitta*, “sign” or “theme,” that takes the practitioner into concentration. It is a very disembodied practice.

But Ṭhānissaro’s approach to meditation is based on the breath as object, a very embodied approach. And as concentration develops, his interest shifts towards the nature of the mind doing the practice, absorbing into the object. This would give a very different experience of *jhāna* than Buddhaghosa’s approach. Yet in both cases, the hindrances would be abandoned and the *jhāna* factors cultivated.

As for the Buddha himself, in his definition or explanation of *jhāna* he never refers to any specific object. He simply states how the mind changes as it concentrates; what mental factors become dominant and in what order. At no point does he try to limit *jhāna* to one particular approach to meditation.

So we need to be alert to what *kind* of *jhāna* is being referred to. Ṭhānissaro uses the term in ways similar to that spoken of in the Mahāsī Sayādaw lineage, where some teachers speak of *vipassanā jhāna*, the absorption cultivated in the course of developing insight. We can see this when Ṭhānissaro examines the relationship between concentration and discernment, which he says is mutually supporting. Both are necessary for awakening. His approach emphasises bringing discernment to bear on the concentrated mind itself. This is the fifth factor of the five-factored noble right concentration.

And furthermore, the monk has his theme of reflection well in hand, well attended to, well pondered, well tuned (well penetrated) by means of discernment.

Just as if one person were to reflect on another, or a standing person were to reflect on a sitting person, or a sitting person were to reflect on a person lying down; even so, monks, the monk has his theme of reflection well in hand, well attended to, well pondered, well tuned (well penetrated) by means of discernment. This is the fifth development of the five-factored noble right concentration.

When a monk has developed & pursued the five-factored noble right concentration in this way, then whichever of the six higher knowledges he turns his mind to know & realize, he can witness them for himself whenever there is an opening. [A.V.28]<sup>17</sup>

This indicates a reflexive stepping back and making the *jhāna* itself the object of *jhāna*, and it is this ability to step back and make awareness itself the object of awareness that allows the movement from concentration to discernment. Take, for example, this quotation from Anupada Sutta.

§172. Monks, Sāriputta is wise, of great discernment, deep discernment, wide ... joyous ... rapid ... quick ... penetrating discernment ... There is the case where Sāriputta ... enters & remains in the first *jhāna*. Whatever qualities there are in the first *jhāna* – applied thought, evaluation, rapture, pleasure, singleness of mind, contact, feeling, perception, intention, consciousness (*vl.* intent), desire, decision, persistence,

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<sup>17</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 235-6.

mindfulness, equanimity, & attention – he ferrets them out one by one. Known to him they arise, known to him they remain, known to him they subside. ... [M.111]<sup>18</sup>

This is an example of what in the Mahāsī Sayādaw lineage is called *vipassanā jhāna*, and in Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is called *paṭivipassanā*, “reflexive insight.” It is insight into *the operations of the meditating mind* itself. But for such sensitivity of discernment to arise, there must be a grounding of *samādhi*. As a result of this practice Sāriputta gained a mastery of *jhāna*, and so an ability to move through the levels of *jhāna* quickly and easily, and attain to discernment quickly and easily. He began with concentration, proceeded to discernment, and then used discernment as a foundation for further mastery of concentration.

§173. I tell you, the ending of the effluents [*āsavas*] depends on the first *jhāna* ... the second *jhāna* ... the third *jhāna* ... the fourth *jhāna* ... the sphere of the infinitude of space ... the sphere of the infinitude of consciousness ... the sphere of nothingness ... the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception.

“I tell you, the ending of the effluents depends on the first *jhāna*.” Thus it has been said. In reference to what has it been said? ... Suppose that an archer or archer’s apprentice were to practice on a straw man or mound of clay, so that after a while he would become able to shoot long distances, to fire accurate shots in rapid succession, and to pierce great masses. In the same way, there is the case where a monk ... enters and remains in the first *jhāna* ... He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, & consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, a void, not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: “This is peace, this is exquisite – the resolution of all fabrications; the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; Unbinding. ... [A.IX.36]<sup>19</sup>

In this example we see *paṭivipassanā* (reflexive insight) into *the one who is meditating* – the five aggregates that make up the meditator. Ṭhānissaro himself seems to emphasise Sāriputta’s approach, of using concentration as a foundation for gaining insight into the concentrating mind; but concentration can also be a foundation for gaining insight into the meditator herself. In either case, a particular *type* of *jhāna* is being cultivated for a specific purpose.

We see another example of using concentration as a foundation for insight into oneself in the following.

§167. Then Ven. Anuruddha went to where Ven. Sāriputta was staying and, on arrival, greeted him courteously. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat down to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to Ven. Sāriputta: By means of the divine eye, purified & surpassing the human, I see the thousand-fold cosmos. My persistence is aroused & unsluggish. My mindfulness is established & unshaken. My body is calm & unaroused. My mind is concentrated into singleness. And yet my mind is not released from the effluents through lack of clinging/sustenance.

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<sup>18</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 255.

<sup>19</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 256.

Sāriputta: My friend, when the thought occurs to you, “By means of the divine eye, purified & surpassing the human, I see the thousand-fold cosmos,” that is related to your conceit. When the thought occurs to you, “My persistence is aroused & unsluggish. My mindfulness is established & unshaken. My body is calm & unaroused. My mind is concentrated into singleness,” that is related to your restlessness. When the thought occurs to you, “And yet my mind is not released from the effluents through lack of clinging/sustenance,” that is related to your anxiety. It would be well if – abandoning these three qualities, not attending to these three qualities – you directed your mind to the Deathless property. [A.III.128]<sup>20</sup>

Again we can see how attention swings from the meditation “object,” located out there somewhere, to the one meditating on the object, which is much more intimate. And this comes about through a shift from the “what” to the “how.” Not “*What* am I meditating on?,” but “*How* am I doing (or failing to do) this?”

These passages illustrate the general principle that sees concentration and discernment as two sides of the same coin.

§169. Develop concentration, monks. A concentrated monk discerns things as they actually are present. And what does he discern as it actually is present?

“This is stress,” he discerns as it actually is present. “This is the origination of stress ... This is the cessation of stress ... This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress,” he discerns as it actually is present ...

Therefore your duty is the contemplation, “This is stress ... This is the origination of stress ... This is the cessation of stress ... This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.” [S.LVI.1]<sup>21</sup>

## Fruit of gnosis

Concentration and discernment culminate and meet in a state that Ṭhānissaro calls the “fruit of gnosis” (*aññaphala samādhi*), but which could also be translated as the “result of knowledge concentration.”

§177. ... There is the case, Sandha, where for an excellent thoroughbred of a man the perception (mental note or label) of earth with regard to earth has ceased to exist; the perception of liquid with regard to liquid ... the perception of fire with regard to fire ... the perception wind with regard to wind ...

And so on through the meditative attainments, this world and the next world, and “whatever is seen, heard, sensed, cognised, attained, sought after, or pondered by the intellect.” Notice how here the “perception” of something as something has gone – yet the practitioner is still experiencing. Nothing is being projected on to experience, and so there is nothing that can be said of it.

Absorbed in this way, the excellent thoroughbred of a man is absorbed dependent neither on earth, liquid, fire, wind ... and yet he is absorbed. And to this excellent

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<sup>20</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 253.

<sup>21</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 254.

thoroughbred of a man, absorbed in this way, the gods, together with Indra, the Brahmas, & Pajāpati, pay homage from afar:

“Homage to you, O thoroughbred man.  
Homage to you, O superlative man –  
of whom we have no direct knowledge  
even by means of that with which  
you are absorbed.” [A.XI.10]<sup>22</sup>

In this state, concentration *is* discernment. Here the consciousness of the awakened one that is such that *devas* and *brahmās* cannot find its support, as this quote from Alagaddūpama Sutta shows.<sup>23</sup>

Bhikkhus, when the gods with Indra, with Brahmā and with Pajāpati seek a bhikkhu who is thus liberated in mind, they do not find anything of which they could say: “This is the support (*nissita*) of the *tathāgata*’s consciousness.” Why? A *tathāgata*, I declare, is untraceable (*ananuvejja*) here and now (*diṭṭheva*).” (M22)

This mysterious *samādhi* is referred to in other texts. For example, in *Ānguttara Nikāya* we read this description of the meditating awakened one.

He meditates without dependence on earth [so *neva paṭhaviṃ nissāya jhāyati*], ... without dependence on water ... fire ... air ... without dependence on whatever is seen, heard, sensed, known, attained, sought after, traversed by the mind. He does not meditate on any of that, yet he does meditate. (A V.324-5)

To meditate “without dependence” on anything, with no “support” is to practice without the mind being fixed on anything - in particular. This indicates a “signless” or “themeless” concentration (*animitta jhāna*) resulting in a themeless liberation (*animitta vimutti*). The verb translated here as “meditates” is *jhāyati*, from which we get the noun *jhāna*, “absorption.” *Jhāna* normally understood is characterised by absorption into a specific theme – in-&-out breathing, for example. The theme defines, and so limits, the *jhāna*, as first *jhāna*, second *jhāna*, and so on. But here is a *jhāna* characterised by the absence of a theme, and so the absence of fixity. It is “themeless,” an expression of intimacy, of emptiness.

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<sup>22</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 261.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of *aññaphala samādhi*, see Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda. *Concept and reality in early Buddhist thought. An essay on papañca and papañca-saññā-sankhā*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971: 58-61.