THE STILLNESS OF THE JHĀNAS

—THE SEEING THAT LIBERATES—

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DE STILTE VAN DE JHĀNA'S
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Dhamma books

• Spiritual wisdom is a gift to be shared with insight and compassion and not exploited for vulgar personal gain. When wisdom is commercialized—'marketed'—it loses its purity and degenerates into a commodity, giving profound insights a valuation, which undermines their transformative power. •

(Guy E. Dubois)

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‘ *Yaṃ kiñci samudaya dhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirōdha dhammam—All that is subject to arising, is subject to passing away.* ’

Alan Watts

CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

❛ *When the mind comes to rest within itself, a knowing reveals itself that reaches deeper than words. The silence of the jhānas is not emptiness, but a gateway to truth.* ❜

This book is not a general introduction to Buddhism. It does not provide an overview of doctrines, nor a systematic exposition of the various traditions.

The spark for this book was ignited during an extensive, contemplative conversation with Jotika Hermsen about the necessity of *samatha* as a prerequisite for the unfolding of insight. Not so much nourished by study, but carried by practice in silence—by what could deepen and clarify in stillness. What arose was neither a question nor an answer, but a direct experience: a shared inner space, a spiritual connectedness that was lived in silence and is quietly held to this day.

What touched me was her recognition of the *jhānas* as I experience and attempt to describe them—without naming them as such. An encounter understood in silence, a recognition that echoed in the heart of another. This book is steeped in personal meditation. I therefore dedicate this practice to her.

This book is an exploration of a forgotten path—not a technical manual, nor a contemplative overview, but a gradual unfolding of insight from inner calm.

A path frequently mentioned in the early Buddhist suttas, yet never thoroughly explained. It is the path of the *jhānas*—from which insight can blossom when the mind is refined to rest, equanimity, and one-pointedness.

The *Pāli Canon* does provide descriptions of meditative experiences, but these are usually brief, formulaic, and functional. They generally lack detailed psychological or phenomenological interpretation, especially when compared to later commentaries or modern meditation literature.

This is particularly true for the *jhānas*.

Instead, standardized formulations are used repeatedly, as if they were fixed patterns of memory. This is not a flaw, but a natural consequence of the way the teachings were transmitted.

For nearly five centuries after the *parinibbāna* [1] of the Buddha in the fifth century BCE, until around 32 years before the start of our era, his teachings were passed down orally.

This transmission followed a meticulously organized oral tradition, with groups of monks—*bhaṇaka (Skt: bhaṇakaḥ)* [2]—entrusted with the verbatim memorization and transmission of specific portions of the teachings to future generations.

Some specialized in the discourses *(suttas),* [3] others in monastic discipline *(vinaya),* [4] and still others in the psychological teachings *(abhidhamma).* [5] Each text was recited rhythmically, often in groups, allowing errors to be immediately noticed and corrected.

In such a context, it was crucial that the formulations were simple, repeatable, and standardized. The teachings were not to be analyzed by the *bhaṇaka*, but memorized—remembered. That is, not dissected and intellectually grasped, but passed on as something living. [6]

A good example of this is the formula with which the first *jhāna* is described almost everywhere in the canon:

❛ *Vivicc'eva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekajaṃ pītisukhaṃ paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati — Free from sensual desires and unwholesome mental states, he enters upon and dwells in the first jhāna: born of seclusion, filled with joy and happiness, sustained by applied and sustained thought.* ❜

This formula appears dozens of times, without further explanation or contextual elaboration. However powerful and carefully constructed, the description remains succinct.

What does it mean to '*enter upon the first jhāna*'*?* What exactly is meant by '*savitakka*' and '*savicāra*'—initial and sustained thought? How is that joy and happiness experienced, and what is its nature?

The text remains silent. The experience is not explained—only mentioned. What becomes clear is that the key does not lie in words, but in practice.

The fixed formulas we encounter repeatedly in the canon—not only those describing the *jhānas*—were not meant to articulate inner states in psychological terms, but to make their essence recognizable to those who had experienced them directly.

The texts pointed the way, but it was assumed that the listener grasped the transmission not conceptually, but through direct experience or personal instruction from a teacher.

What '*savitakka*' and '*savicāra*' meant in the living, direct experience of the meditator was not explained. The function of these texts was therefore not didactic in the modern sense; they served as pillars of memory, not as psychological treatises.

Those who wished to understand these states had to practice them—not analyze them. The deeper insight was not

contained in the words themselves, but in the experience to which they pointed. What mattered was not the form, but the essence.

It was only toward the end of the first century BCE that the orally transmitted teachings were first committed to writing —on palm leaves, in Pāli, in Sri Lanka (then known as Tambapaṇṇī or Ceylon). This likely occurred out of necessity, as periods of famine and political unrest threatened the collective memory of the *Saṅgha*. What had until then been preserved in living memory was, for the first time, transformed into text. The *Pāli Canon* is one of the oldest complete literary transmissions from ancient India to have been preserved in its entirety.

This also means that we should not read the canon as we read modern books. The words are preserved, but what they truly signify must be understood from within. The texts preserve the formulations, but the meaning resides elsewhere—not in thinking, but in becoming still; not in understanding, but in seeing.

Those who listen to these texts with the heart can hear what is not said—clear, silent, and wise.

The descriptions of the *jhānas* are not a manual but a reference. They speak in the rhythm of memory, not in the vocabulary of analysis. These are states of mind that cannot be captured in words—refined, direct experiences that mature through practice, not through analysis. In the end, the ancient texts offer us a veil, not a technical manual. They are invitations to practice, not to intellectual dissection.

To understand, one must practice. To know, one must let go —and ask the right questions. Only then does what is hidden in the texts become visible.

This book does not aim to provide dogmatic answers, but rather offers an invitation to exploration. The *jhānas* are not

a theory, nor an end in themselves. They are moments of deep stillness—a purification of mind and heart; a merging of attention and calm into a living force that opens toward wisdom.

The texts in this book have emerged from practice. They are not academic in nature, but grounded in direct experience and contemplation—rooted in the ancient teachings of Theravāda Buddhism, and enriched with comparative reflections from other traditions, wherever these felt meaningful to me.

The approach is intense, but not closed; personal, but not self-important. What is shared here does not aim to proclaim a truth, but to open a space in which the reader can taste, test, and realize for themselves.

In this book, the *jhānas* are not presented as a final goal, but as a necessary deepening along the path to *vipassanā*/*vipaśyanā*—the seeing that liberates. They offer a silent foundation, a fertile ground where insight can take root and grow.

This work invites the reader to explore that inner ground—layer by layer, step by step—with patience, clarity, and a willingness to truly become still. This inner surrender does not refer merely to outer silence, but to a deep attitude of openness and receptivity. It is the willingness to set aside the familiar stream of thoughts, judgments, and concepts, and to turn inward with quiet attention.

True silence does not arise from forcing anything, but from softening—by releasing resistance to what is, and resting in a deeper listening. In this silence, the need to name, to understand, or to control gently begins to fade.

This silence resides in a realm of rarefied stillness.

Space opens up to allow for direct experience *(paccanubhoti; pratibudhyate)* [7]—free from interference by conceptual thought. It is a state of being in which clarity, stillness, and insight naturally come to the forefront—precisely because nothing is added, and everything is allowed to be as it is.

Whoever reads this book is not merely reading about the *jhānas*. They are reading about the path inward. About attention ripening. About a mind learning to let go. And about the quiet joy of seeing that nothing is lacking. About the quiet realization that everything is perfectly fine just as it is.

In the context of meditative deepening and the path of the *jhānas,* this seeing signifies an inner breakthrough: a moment of silent and effortless presence, in which the mind no longer searches, compares, or feels lack. What remains is simplicity—the quiet completeness that was never lost, only forgotten.

It is an intuitive knowing that reality, in its original simplicity, is enough—that the fullness of being is present right here and now, when the mind comes to rest. *Samādhi*.

Up until now, the focus has been on experience, on becoming still, and on inner understanding. But on the path of meditation, there is also a need for clarity: for insight into what hinders, confuses, or distracts us. Silence is vulnerable. It needs protection—and for that, insight is required.

The tone now shifts accordingly.

What follows is a more analytical approach, intended to clarify the nature of the Five Hindrances—and their subtle impact on body and mind. This analysis is not an end in itself, but a support for practice. Understanding where the mind becomes entangled makes letting go possible. The language becomes sharper, the view more focused—but the

aim remains the same: freedom of mind, clarity of heart. It is from that clarity that this analysis is offered.

Concentration begins with overcoming the Five Hindrances *(pañca nīvaraṇāni)*—the primary obstacles to meditative progress.

The Five Hindrances are:

- Sensual desire *(kāmacchanda; id.):* the craving for pleasant sensory experiences.

- Ill will *(vyāpāda; id.):* aversion, anger and negative emotions directed towards others.

- Sloth and torpor *(thīna-middha; styāna):* mental and physical dullness, leading to lethargy and a lack of energy.

- Restlessness and remorse *(uddhacca-kukkucca; uddhatya-kaukṛtya):* a restless mind preoccupied with future concerns or regrets about the past.

- Doubt *(vicikicchā; vicikitsā):* uncertainty or a lack of confidence in the path, or in one's own capacity for awakening.

These Hindrances are overcome through the cultivation of mindfulness *(sati; smṛti)* and the development of the four form-based meditative absorptions *(rūpa-jhānas).* These *jhānas* are composed of specific mental factors *(jhānāṅga/jhānāṅgāni; dhyānāṅga/dhyānāṅgāni),* which counteract or transcend the influence of the hindrances. [8] In these meditative states, the practitioner reaches deep levels of mental calm *(samatha; śamatha)* and concentration *(samādhi; id.),* free from the influence of the Five Hindrances.

Samatha and *samādhi* are closely related concepts in Buddhism, yet they carry different meanings and functions within the meditative path.

Samatha means 'calming', 'mental stillness', or 'resting in tranquility', and refers to the process of stabilizing and soothing the mind. This is accomplished by directing attention to a single object, such as the breath, the rising and falling of the abdomen with each inhalation and exhalation, the flame of a candle, or the silent repetition of a *mantra*.

The purpose is to diminish disruptive emotions such as restlessness, desire, and fear, allowing a state of deep calm and inner balance to arise. A tranquil mind forms the necessary foundation for further meditative development.

Samādhi means 'concentration' or 'absorption' and refers to the state of one-pointed mental focus *(ekaggatā; ekāgratā)* that arises from successful *samatha* practice, reaching its culmination in the *fourth jhāna.* In this state, the mind is completely free from distraction and fully absorbed in the chosen meditation object, dissolving the boundary between subject and object—an ideal ground for the arising of insight *(vipassanā; vipaśyanā).*

Samādhi is not only the result of *samatha;* it is also an essential condition for gaining deep insight into the true nature of reality. It supports the practitioner in directly experiencing the three fundamental characteristics of existence—impermanence *(anicca; anitya),* suffering *(dukkha; duḥkha),* and the absence of a fixed self *(anattā; anātman).*

Thus, the difference between *samatha* and *samādhi* lies in their role and function. *Samatha* is the process of calming and stabilizing the mind, while *samādhi* is the concentrated state that naturally emerges from it.

Both are essential within the Buddhist meditative path and complement one another. *Samatha* prepares the mind for the depth of *samādhi,* and this concentrated state facilitates the arising of insight through *vipassanā* into the nature of existence.

Although meditation is a deeply personal journey and results may vary, it is recommended to practice under the guidance of an experienced teacher.

This helps ensure that techniques are applied correctly and that the full benefit of the practice can unfold. Ultimately, however, it is up to each *yogi* to choose the approach that best suits their needs and aspirations. It is not the teacher who takes the lead; it is the practitioner who determines the direction.

In what follows, the form-based *jhānas* are briefly described, presenting the characteristics through which deep concentration becomes visible and accessible.

• The *first jhāna* is characterized by joy *(pīti; prīti)* and happiness *(sukha; id.),* accompanied by applied *(vitakka; vitarka)* and sustained attention *(vicāra; id.),* and one-pointedness of mind *(ekaggatā; ekāgratā).* In this *first jhāna,* the five *jhāna*-factors *(jhānāṅgāni; dhyānāṅgāni)* [9] are present and play a central role in stabilizing meditative absorption. [10]

• The *second jhāna* drops *vitakka* and *vicāra,* and is characterized by joy *(pīti; prīti),* happiness *(sukha; id.),* and one-pointedness *(ekaggatā; ekāgratā).*

• The *third jhāna* lets go of *pīti* and is marked by happiness *(sukha; id.)* and one-pointedness *(ekaggatā; ekāgratā).* Equanimity *(upekkhā; upekṣā)* is not formally a *jhāna*-factor, but it becomes prominent in the *third* and *fourth jhānas*.

• The *fourth jhāna* lets go of *sukha* and is defined by one-pointedness *(ekaggatā; ekāgratā)* with a strong presence of pure equanimity *(upekkhā; upekṣā).*

In short, the *jhāna*-factors evolve through the successive *jhānas* as follows:

- The *first jhāna* includes all five factors.

- The *second jhāna* lets go of *vitakka* and *vicāra*.
- The *third jhāna* abandons *pīti*.
- The *fourth jhāna* releases *sukha* and retains only *ekaggatā*.

With a calmed and one-pointedly concentrated mind, the *yogi* then develops insight *(vipassanā; vipaśyanā).* Insight meditation is directed toward seeing the three characteristics of existence: impermanence *(anicca; anitya),* unsatisfactoriness *(dukkha; duḥkha),* and not-self *(anattā; anātman).*

By recognizing and deeply understanding these insights *(pariyatti; paryāpti),* [11] embodying them through practice *(paṭipatti; pratipatti),* [12] and realizing them directly *(paṭivedha; prativedha),* [13] the *yogi* sees into the true nature of reality and releases craving *(taṇhā; tṛṣṇā)* and attachment *(upādāna; id.).*

Through the realization of this deep insight, the *yogi* attains the first 'fruit' *(phala)* [14] of the path: the stage of 'stream-enterer' *(sotāpanna; śrotāpanna).*

A *sotāpanna* has entered the stream that flows toward liberation and has broken free from the first three fetters *(saṃyojana; id.):* [15] the belief in a fixed, unchanging self *(sakkāya-diṭṭhi; satkāya-dṛṣṭi),* attachment to rites and rituals *(sīlabbata-parāmāsa; śīlavrata-parāmarśa),* and doubt *(vicikicchā; vicikitsā).* Such a person will no longer be reborn in the lower realms *(apāya)* [16] and is assured of final liberation within seven life-times.

The final paragraph is evocative and vivid, but may benefit from further clarification.

In the traditional teachings of Buddhism, the *sotāpanna*—or 'stream-enterer'—is one who has seen into the essence of the *Dhamma,* not through conceptual reasoning, but through direct and transformative experience. This first stage of awakening marks an irreversible shift: the *yogi* has

entered the stream of liberation, the current that flows unerringly toward *nibbāna (nirvāṇa).*

When the *suttas* state that a *sotāpanna* no longer returns to the '*lower realms,*' they mean that, through insight, this *yogi* will never again engage in karmic actions that give rise to rebirth—*to becoming (bhava; id.)* [17]—in unfortunate or unwholesome planes of existence, such as those of animals, hungry ghosts, or beings in hell. Yet this is not merely a metaphorical way of describing a 'cosmological' destiny.

These *'lower realms of existence'* may also be understood as inner states of consciousness: lives governed by instinct, greed, aggression, or delusion—where ignorance, confusion, fear, and craving prevail.

A *sotāpanna* is freed from such states—not because suffering no longer arises, but because they have seen through the mechanism that perpetuates it. Their confidence in the *Dhamma* has become unshakable.

This is what the second half of the phrase points to: *'assured of final liberation within seven lifetimes.'* This is not to be taken as a literal number, but as an expression of inner certainty—that the path will inevitably lead to full liberation, however long it may take. The reference to seven lives symbolizes a finite and traversable span of the journey—a conclusion already set in motion through stream-entry *(sotāpatti; srotāpatti).*

There is no longer any danger of becoming lost, of turning back, or of falling into fundamental confusion. More broadly, this metaphor speaks of irreversibility and direction.

The stream-enterer has crossed the Rubicon. The current now carries them forward, beyond the point of return: the *yogi* has become a traveler on a path no longer governed by ignorance. What began as insight *(paññā; prajñā)* will, in

time, unfold into liberation *(vimutti; vimukti)* and ultimately culminate in final extinction *(nibbāna; nirvāṇa).* [18]

In summary, on the Buddhist path, the overcoming of the Five Hindrances and the attainment of the *jhānas* provide the foundation for the development of insight *(paññā; prajñā).* This process leads the practitioner from the state of an ordinary worldling *(puthujjana; pṛthagjana)* [19] to that of a noble disciple *(ariya-puggala; ārya-pudgala)* [20]—a term synonymous with stream-enterer *(sotāpanna; śrotāpanna)*—in which moral discipline *(sīla; id.)*, concentration *(samādhi; id.),* and insight *(paññā; prajñā)* play a central role in their spiritual development.

This book is not simply an introduction to the *jhānas,* but above all an invitation to understand why these meditative states are essential for the unfolding of spiritual wisdom and the realization of awakening.

But what exactly are these *jhānas?*

In the Theravāda tradition, where *Pāli* is the primary language, the term *jhāna* is used. In Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism, which draw on Sanskrit, the corresponding term is *dhyāna*. Both point to the same meditative state of deep stillness, concentration, and absorption (*samādhi; id.*).

Two broad categories are usually distinguished: the *form jhānas (rūpa-jhānas; rūpa-dhyānas),* which are associated with material form; and the *formless jhānas (arūpa-jhānas; arūpa-dhyānas),* which are oriented toward immaterial or formless meditative dimensions.

Rūpa [21] refers to meditative states associated with form and materiality, as they are gradually revealed to the practitioner in deep concentration.

The *rūpa-jhānas* are characterized by deep absorption in an object with form—be it physical or conceptual. The *arūpa-*

jhānas go beyond this world of form, drawing the mind into refined, formless dimensions of awareness.

Entering the *jhānas* nurtures a still and refined inner space, in which profound insight into the nature of reality can naturally unfold.

When the mind rests in calm, clarity, and concentration—as it does within the *jhānas*—it opens to the subtle layers of experience and consciousness. From this stillness, insight can arise into the three marks of existence: impermanence *(anicca; anitya),* suffering *(dukkha; duḥkha),* and not-self *(anattā; anātman).*

Grounded in the stability and clarity of the *jhānas,* the practitioner begins to perceive these insights directly, as lived experience—an essential unfolding on the path toward liberation *(nibbāna; nirvāṇa).*

Meditation is an intimate and personal journey. Each practitioner arrives with their own experiences, temperament, and ways of seeing. It is thus no surprise that a wide range of meditative paths has taken shape.

Throughout the Buddhist tradition, many techniques and methods have taken shape. At the heart of these approaches lie two foundational practices: *samatha (Skt.: śamatha)*—the cultivation of calm—and *vipassanā (Skt.: vipaśyanā)*—the development of insight.

Samatha meditation is the quieting of the mind through calm and stillness; *vipassanā* is the clear seeing into the nature of reality. These two form the foundation upon which the Buddhist meditative path rests.

Samatha meditation supports the calming and steadying of the mind by focusing on a single object, such as the breath, a mantra, or a visual form. This process gradually leads to a

state of inner stillness and one-pointed concentration *(ekaggatā; ekāgratā).*

Vipassanā meditation invites a deep and direct inquiry into the nature of experience—into thoughts, emotions, and sensations as they arise. Its aim is to reveal the three marks of existence *(tilakkhaṇa; trilakṣaṇa):* impermanence, suffering, and not-self. From this seeing, wisdom *(paññā; prajñā)* naturally unfolds, opening the way to liberation *(vimutti; vimukti)* and awakening *(nibbāna; nirvāṇa).*

Though deeply valuable, *samatha* meditation alone does not in itself lead to liberation *(vimutti; vimukti).* It calms and stabilizes the mind, but without the deep wisdom *(paññā; prajñā)* that penetrates the true nature of reality, extinguishing *(nibbāna; nirvāṇa)* [22]—the ending of 'becoming' *(bhava)*—does not occur.

Yet the true potential of *samatha* only becomes clear when one first sees what clouds the mind's natural clarity.

For true deepening in meditation, what clouds clear awareness must first be recognized. The Five Hindrances are not abstractions, but living forces that manifest in many forms—such as restlessness, desire, and doubt.

When these disturbances have been calmed, the space opens for *samatha* to arise: a gentle, sustaining stillness in which the mind becomes clear, simple, and undisturbed.

Within this stillness, *vipassanā* ripens: the direct seeing of the three characteristics of existence *(anicca, dukkha, anattā),* not as ideas, but as living reality. Insight breaks through, the veil of ignorance falls away, and the path to awakening unfolds.

Samatha and *vipassanā* are like two wings of the same bird: *samatha* carries the mind into stillness, *vipassanā* opens the eyes to what has always been so.

Some practitioners deepen in the *jhānas* to steady the mind and rest in calm; others devote themselves to insight meditation and the direct seeing of impermanence. Yet whatever the emphasis—stillness or insight—the path points to the same destination: liberation, awakening, the end of illusion.

The *jhānas*, though understood in different ways, appear across all major Buddhist traditions. In Theravāda, they are given a central role in the meditative path. In Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, the language and approach may differ, yet the cultivation of deep meditative absorption remains a shared pursuit.

Within Theravāda Buddhism, the *jhānas* are regarded as a central pillar of meditative practice. The path typically begins with *samatha*—the quieting of the mind—followed by *vipassanā*, the unfolding of insight into the nature of reality.

In the Theravāda tradition, the *jhānas* are regarded as important stages on the path to deep insight and, ultimately, awakening. The emphasis falls primarily on the four *material jhānas (rūpa-jhānas),* with less—and sometimes no—focus on the four *immaterial jhānas (arūpa-jhānas)*.

In the Theravāda tradition, the four *rūpa-jhānas* are seen as powerful stages of *samādhi*—concentration that purifies and gently refines the mind, preparing it for deep insight *(vipassanā; vipaśyanā).* Through these absorptions, the *yogi* overcomes the Five Hindrances *(pañca nīvaraṇāni; pañca nivāraṇāḥ)* and settles into a field of inner calm and clarity. From this stillness, liberating insight can arise—into impermanence *(anicca; anitya),* unsatisfactoriness *(dukkha; duḥkha),* and not-self *(anattā; anātman).*

The *formless jhānas (arūpa-jhānas)* are recognized in Theravāda as subtle and refined states of concentration. They extend beyond the *rūpa-jhānas* in meditative absorption, but are not seen as essential for the realization of *nibbāna/nirvāṇa*. Though tranquil and expansive, they do not inher-

ently lead to deeper insight into the three characteristics of existence *(tilakkhaṇa; trilakṣaṇa).*

On the contrary, there is a clear warning that the subtle bliss and abstraction of these meditative states can give rise to attachment to refined forms of becoming, thereby obstructing the process of liberation. For this reason, the *vipassanā* tradition within Theravāda emphasizes the four *rūpa-jhānas* as a stable and sufficient basis for the unfolding of liberating insight.

In both the canonical texts and traditional meditative practice, the Buddha consistently highlights the first four *jhānas* as the direct foundation for the realization of liberation.

By contrast, the formless attainments *(arūpa-samāpattis)* [23] are generally seen as optional. While deeply refined, they are not liberating in themselves. Some teachers view them as the most subtle expression of conditioned existence—something an *arahant* ultimately leaves behind.

The *rūpa-jhānas* provide a stable and reliable basis for contemplation, free from the risk of becoming entangled in the subtle ecstasies of the formless realms—states that, while refined, are not liberating in themselves.

In this book, the *arūpa-jhānas* are acknowledged and discussed—not as meditative stages to be actively pursued, but for the sake of completeness: as an additional possibility for *yogis* with exceptionally refined concentration.

Within Mahāyāna Buddhism—widespread in countries such as China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam—daily and popular practice places less emphasis on the cultivation of the *jhānas*. Instead, meditations grounded in compassion *(karuṇā)* and wisdom *(prajñā)* take a central role, often making use of analytical reflection to deepen insight into the nature of reality. Meditation on emptiness *(śūnyatā)* is frequently central

to the path, and the *bodhisattva* aspiration remains ever-present. [24]

Yet in some Mahāyāna traditions, such as Zen Buddhism, deep concentration and meditative absorption remain essential—though not always named as *jhānas*. [25] In Zen, the silent practice of *zazen*, seated in stillness and unwavering presence, lies at the heart of the path. It resonates closely with the *jhānas* as they are described in the *Pāli* Canon. [26]

In Vajrayāna Buddhism, primarily practiced in Tibet, Bhutan, and Mongolia, meditative absorption and deep concentration are integrated into tantric practices. Although the terminology differs and the emphasis lies on visualizations, mantras, and rituals, these states of concentration remain an essential aspect of the yogic path.

Rooted in the Mahāyāna tradition, Vajrayāna introduces tantric methods aimed at transforming the mind and swiftly deepening insight. These include visualizations of enlightened beings, the recitation of mantras, and ritual practices that harmonize body, speech, and mind into a unified field of presence. Practices such as *tonglen*—the giving and taking of suffering and compassion—are also embraced within this sacred path. [27]

These practices are passed on through qualified teachers *(lamas)* and often require initiations *(abhisheka)* [28] and empowerments *(wangkur).* [29] Such initiations are not simply ritual forms, but deep spiritual transmissions—moments in which something essential is silently handed over from teacher to disciple, establishing a direct connection with the heart of the meditative path. [30]

The lama holds a central place within Vajrayāna—as spiritual guide, teacher, and embodiment of the path. Hence this brief clarification.

The Tibetan word *lama* literally means 'high' or 'exalted,' referring to one who, through direct experience and deep insight, is capable of guiding others toward liberation. Lamas are revered as the primary guides on the path, entrusted with the transmission of the rituals, visualizations, and meditative practices that define this tradition.

A *lama* serves as a spiritual mentor, offering personal guidance and instruction to their disciples. They are entrusted with the transmission of tantric knowledge and esoteric teachings, which form the heart of Vajrayāna practice. This includes rituals, mantra recitation, visualizations, and meditative techniques that are essential to the unfolding of the path.

Lamas confer initiations *(abhisheka),* which are essential for receiving these advanced teachings and practices. Such initiations open the door to profound insights that can only be transmitted through the direct blessing of an authorized *lama*.

The relationship between a *lama* and their students is grounded in deep trust and reverence. This trust is vital to the unfolding of both the learning and meditative process, as the *lama* is seen as an embodiment of enlightened beings or *bodhisattvas* who have appeared specifically to transmit the teachings. *Lamas* are living expressions of the Vajrayāna path—their personal conduct and meditative presence serve as a source of inspiration and a living model for their disciples.

Beyond their role as personal teachers, *lamas* also serve a vital function within the broader Buddhist community. They lead rituals, ceremonies, and daily religious observances, offering spiritual guidance and compassionate support to the community of practitioners.

In summary, *lamas* are central figures within Vajrayāna—guiding both individuals and communities along the path to

awakening, through profound teachings and the example of their lived practice.

¶

The integration of meditative approaches from various Buddhist traditions can deepen and accelerate insight into the true nature of reality. By weaving together different techniques and perspectives, experienced and independently-minded *yogis* cultivate a more balanced and holistic path toward realization. Such integration offers a wider range of tools and skilful means, enriching meditative practice, helping to dissolve obstacles, and supporting the unfolding of spiritual maturity and awakening.

The Theravāda approach offers the discipline and structure necessary to stabilize the mind. Mahāyāna methods help to weave compassion and wisdom into the fabric of daily life, while Vajrayāna techniques open the doorway to deep transformation through advanced meditative practices.

Combining these elements calls for insight, maturity, and inner freedom—but it can lead to a richer and more integrated spiritual path.

A few final remarks may help to offer clarity and support accurate interpretation.

To avoid possible misunderstandings, I have included the corresponding *Pāli* and *Sanskrit* terms alongside most key concepts. For the experienced reader or practitioner, these terms may serve as stepping stones toward deeper understanding—not merely as intellectual notions, but as invitations to silence, contemplation, and direct recognition.

This calls for some explanation.

The original terms often contain layers of meaning that go *beyond* standard translations. When approached with care,