

The Structure and Dynamics of the Attainment of Cessation in Theravada Meditation

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ABSTRACT

The attainment of cessation (*nirodha-samāpatti*) is the highest meditational state possible in Theravada Buddhism. Those in this state are to all appearances dead, for it is the extinction of all feeling and perception, continuing for as long as seven days. It is seen as the actual realization of Nibbana in this life.

The basic technique of this achievement is yogic. The meditator proceeds through four *jhānic* states, each one of deeper concentration than the previous one, and then on through four "formless meditations" by an increasing subtilization of the object of meditation and a correlate weakening of the sense of individuality. The eighth level has "neither perception nor non-perception" as its object and is "semi-conscious." All these states are transic in nature, i.e., locked into speechless, conceptionless, irresponsive concentration on one object. Cessation is the consummation of this process.

Yet there is another absolutely necessary component: *vipassanā*, or insight meditation. Only those who have pursued this route to its perfection, and are at the same time *jhānic adepts*, can attain to cessation. Now *vipassanā* is the sine qua non of enlightenment; it is the fully existentialized comprehension that all existent entities, including the self, are impermanent, empty of true reality and instinct with suffering (and rebirth). It can form a separate, non-*jhānic*, *Buddhist* style of meditation in its own right. But it may also be used in conjunction with the *jhānic* mode to produce cessation.

How then can and do these two disparate, seemingly antagonistic disciplines together produce the attainment of cessation? The methodology is as follows: Fully intending cessation the meditator enters the first *jhāna* and then successively goes up the transic ladder to neither perception nor non-perception, whence he vaults on into cessation. *But after each emergence from jhānic trance, he "reviews" it in vipassanic terms; "This too is impermanent, empty, instinct with pain."*

What are the implications? (1) Obviously the two techniques are interacting at every stage but with *vipassanā* dominating the consciousness. (2) Both seek states which are transcendent of ordinary subject-object consciousness: The *jhānic* "peaceful abidings" overcome all "materiality"; *vipassanā* brings Path-awareness in which Nibbana itself is directly apprehended. (3) Both inevitably tend toward a climactic experience; the *jhānic-yogic* progresses toward a non-dual awareness; the *vipassanic* toward a "going-out" into the "Unconditioned." Hence a fully "unconscious" state of transic nature and achieved by yogic means *if seen as nibbanic realization* constitutes a joint climax.

To this the *jhānic-yogic* strand contributes techniques and gives depth, stability and transic quality; *vipassanā* contributes the all-pervasive conviction (pre- and post-cessation) of cessation's identity with Nibbana.

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