

The Early Buddhist Meditation

—A Comparative Study—

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1. In a recent study, Johannes Bronkhorst has shown that the early Jaina and Hindu scriptures describe forms of meditation which belong to the same tradition. All the important features of early Jaina meditation are found in the early Hindu scriptures. In both, “meditation is only one aspect of a more general process in which all bodily and mental activities are stopped. Fasting to death and stopping the breath, both of which are characteristic accompaniments of early Jaina meditation, are also present in the Hindu scriptures. The same is true of bodily motionlessness, which is compared with the state of a stone, of a pillar, of a mountain”. (J. Bronkhorst: The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India, Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GmbH, Stuttgart, 1986, pp. 46–7).

2. The Buddha relates that he had two teachers in his early life after renunciation. They were Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. From the former he learned the stage of Nothingness, from the latter the stage of ‘Neither Ideation nor Non-ideation’. These two stages can be compared with the third and the fourth stage of the Buddhist ārūpya meditation, viz. ākīñcanyāyatana and naiva-saṃjñānāsaṃjñāyatana. But these were not the essential part of the higher category of the Buddhist meditation, namely, vipaśyanā, which was discovered by the Buddha through his own experience.

3. In the Mahāsaccakasutta of the Majjhima Nikāya, the Buddha describes his ‘meditation without breath’ and ‘reduced intake of food’, and relates his resultant experience in the following words:

“But indeed I do not attain, through these severe and difficult practices, excellence in knowledge and insight which is truly noble and transcends the human condition. Could there be another road toward enlightenment”.

na kho panāhaṃ imāya kaṭukāya dukkarakārikāya adhigacchāmi uttarim
manussadhammā alamariyañānadassanavisesaṃ, siyā nu kho añño
maggo bodhāyā’ti.

4. At this stage of spiritual crisis, the Buddha is said to recall his first meditative experience when he was young, that he depicts as follows:

“Then, Aggivessana, I thought: ‘I remember, indeed, that once during the work of my father the Sakka, while sitting in the cool shade of the rose-apple tree, separated from desires, separated from bad psychic states, I reached the first dhyāna, which is savitakka (accompanied by thought) and savicāra (accompanied by reflection), born from separation, consisting of pīti (joy) and sukha (bliss), and remained there. Could this perhaps be the road to enlightenment?’ Then, Aggivessana, following this memory, I had this knowledge: ‘This is really the road toward enlightenment.’ Then, Aggivessana, I thought: ‘Indeed, I do not fear that bliss, a bliss which is apart from desires, apart from bad psychic states.’”

tassa mayhaṃ aggivessana etad ahoṣi: abhijānāmi kho paṇāhaṃ pitu sakkassa kammante sītāya jambucchāyāya nisinno vivicca kāmehi vivicca akusaladhammehi savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekajaṃ pītisukhaṃ paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharitā, siyā nu kho eso maggo bodhāyā’ti. tassa mayhaṃ aggivessana satānusāri viññānam ahoṣi: eso va maggo bodhāyā’ti. tassa mayhaṃ aggivessana etad ahoṣi: kin nu kho ahaṃ tassa sukhasa bhāyāmi yan taṃ sukhaṃ aññatreva kāmehi aññatra akusalehi dhammehī’ti. tassa mayhaṃ aggivessana etad ahoṣi: na kho ahaṃ tassa sukhasa bhāyāmi yan taṃ sukhaṃ aññatreva kāmehi aññatra akusalehi dhammehī’ti.

5. The same Mahāsacchakasutta concludes with the following description of the four dhyānas that lead to the state of complete equanimity and detachment:

“Then indeed, Aggivessana, having taken edible food, and having recovered strength, being separated from desires, separated from bad psychic states, I reached the first dhyāna, which is savitakka (accompanied with thought) and savicāra (accompanied with reflection), born from separation, and consists of pīti (joy) and sukha (bliss), and resided there. Even such a blissful experience, Aggivessana, when it happened to me, did not in the least take hold of my mind.

As a result of appeasing thought and reflection, I reached the second dhyāna, which is an inner tranquillization, a unification of the mind, avitakka (free from thought) and avicāra (free from reflection), consisting of joy and bliss that is born from concentration, and resided there. Even such a ... my mind.

As a result of detachment from joy, I remained indifferent, attentive and mindful. I experienced with my body the bliss which the noble ones describe (in

these terms): ‘indifferent, with attentiveness, residing in bliss’, thus I reached the third dhyāna and resided there. Even such a ... my mind.

As a result of abandoning bliss, and abandoning pain, as a result of the earlier disappearance of cheerfulness and dejection, I reached the fourth dhyāna, which is free from pain and bliss, the complete purity of equanimity and attentiveness, and resided there. Even such a ... my mind”.

so kho ahaṃ aggivessana oḷārikaṃ āhāraṃ āhāritvā balaṃ gahetvā vivicca kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekaṃ pītisukhaṃ paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja vihāsim. evarūpā pi kho me aggivessana uppannā sukhā vedanā cittaṃ na pariyādāya tiṭṭhati.

vitakkavicāraṇaṃ upasamā ajjhattaṃ sampasādanaṃ cetaso ekodibhāvaṃ avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ samādhijaṃ pītisukhaṃ dutiyaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja vihāsim. evarūpā pi kho me aggivessana uppannā sukhā vedanā cittaṃ na pariyādāya tiṭṭhati.

pītiyā ca virāgā upekhako ca vihāsim sato ca sampajāno sukhaṃ ca kāyena paṭisaṃvedisaṃ yan taṃ ariyā ācikkhanti: upekhako satimā sukhavihārīti tatiyaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja vihāsim. evarūpā pi kho me aggivessana uppannā sukhā vedanā cittaṃ na pariyādāya tiṭṭhati.

sukhassa ca pahānā dukkhassa ca pahānā pubbeva somanassadomanassānaṃ atthagamā adukkaṃ asukhaṃ upekhāsatipārisuddhiṃ catuthaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja vihāsim. evarūpāpi kho me aggivessana uppannā vedanā cittaṃ na pariyādāya tiṭṭhati.

6. In addition to the four jhānas just mentioned, which are called rūpa jhāna, we have another category of four jhānas called arūpa jhānas, namely, ākāśānañcāyatana (dwelling on the infinity of space), viññāṇānañcāyatana (dwelling on the infinity of consciousness), ākiñcaññāyatana (dwelling on nothingness), and nevasaññānāsaññāyatana (dwelling on neither ideation nor non-ideation). Of these four, we have referred to the last two in the first paragraph above which the Buddha was said to have learned from Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta respectively.

7. Beside these rūpa and arūpa jhānas, we find a higher category of meditation called vipassanā embodied in several Suttas of the Sutta Piṭaka, concerned with the cultivation of satipaṭṭhāna. There are four kinds of satipaṭṭhāna (steadfast vigilance), namely, kāyānupassanā (contemplation of the body), vedanānupassanā (contemplation of the feelings), cittānupassanā (contemplation of the

mind), and dhammānupassanā (contemplation of the elements). The satipaṭṭhāna had been very highly eulogized by the Buddha as conducive to the radical elimination of the kleśas whereas the rūpa and arūpa jhānas were prescribed as capable of suppressing the kleśas for the time being. The rūpa and arūpa jhāna are designated samatha (quiescence of the kleśas) while the satipaṭṭhāna is called vipassanā (penetrative insight into the nature of truth that leads to the elimination of the kleśas).

8. After this very brief account of the nature of the early Buddhist meditation that may be considered the original contribution of the Buddha, we should like to have a look at the earliest stratum of Jaina scripture to find the nature of Jaina meditation. In the first book of the Āyāro which definitely contains the earliest features of Jaina meditation, we find the depiction of the ascetic life of Mahāvīra who spent more than twelve years in fasting and meditation. He is said to have taken only 350 meals in that period and remained engrossed in meditation all through. It is not however possible to know the exact nature of that meditation, but there is no doubt that it was concerned with reaching the state of absolute immobility. Fasting unto death is the highest form of asceticism that we find described in great detail in the Jaina scripture, both śvetāmbara and Digambara. Such fasting, however, was necessarily accompanied with absolute peace of mind induced by the highest form of meditation.

9. The classical formulation of the Jaina doctrine of auspicious meditation viz. dhamma and sukka is found in the following extract of the Thāṇamga (IV. 65–72):

“The dhamma meditation is considered under four heads. (Under the first head) there are four viḥāras (contemplations), namely, contemplation on the commandment, contemplation on sin, contemplation on the result of karma, contemplation on the configuration of the universe. (Under the second head) there are the four characteristics of the dhamma meditation, namely, liking for the commandment, natural liking, liking for the scripture, deepest liking. (Under the third head) there are the four supports of the dhamma meditation, namely, recitation, questioning, repetition, reflection (aṇuppehā). (Under the fourth head) there are the four reflections of the dhamma meditation, namely, reflection on being alone, reflection on impermanence (aṇiccāṇuppehā), reflection on there being no refuge, reflection on transmigrations.

The sukka (pure) meditation is considered under four heads. (Under the first head) there are the four categories, namely, puhattavitakke saviyārī (Sanskrit

prthaktva-vitarka-savicāra), that is, accompanied by multiple vitarka and accompanied by vicāra, egattavitakke-aviyārī (Sanskrit ekatvavitarka-avicāra), that is, accompanied by unitary vitarka, and free from vicāra, with subtle activity and no-return, with all activity cut off and without fall. (Under the second head) there are the four characteristics of pure meditation, namely, absence of anguish, absence of delusion, discriminating insight, renunciation. (Under the third head) there are the four supports of pure meditation, namely, forbearance, freedom, straightness, softness. (Under the fourth head) there are the four reflections (aṇuppehāo) of pure meditation, namely, reflection on infinity, reflection on change (vipariṇāmāṇuppehā), reflection on what is ugly (asubhāṇuppehā), reflection on sin.”

dhamme jhāṇe cauviṇṇe cauppaḍḍoyāre paṇṇatte, taṃ jahā-āṇāvijaye, avāyavijaye, vivāgavijaye, saṃthāṇavijaye. dhammassa ṇaṃ jhāṇassa cattāri lakkhaṇā paṇṇattā, taṃ jahā-āṇārū, ṇisaggarū, suttarū, ogāḍharū. dhammassa ṇaṃ jhāṇassa cattāri ālambaṇā paṇṇattā, taṃ jahā-vāyaṇā, paḍipucchaṇā, pariyaṭṭaṇā, aṇuppehā. dhammassa ṇaṃ jhāṇassa cattāri aṇuppehāo paṇṇattāo, taṃ jahā-egāṇuppehā, aṇiccāṇuppehā, asar-aṇāṇuppehā, saṃsārāṇuppehā.

sukke jhāṇe cauviṇṇe cauppaḍḍoyāre paṇṇatte, taṃ jahā-puhattavitakke saviyārī, egattavitakke aviyārī, suhumakirie aṇiyattī, samucchinnakirie appaḍḍivātī. sukkassa ṇaṃ jhāṇassa cattāri lakkhaṇā paṇṇattā, taṃ jahā-khaṃtī, muttī, ajjave, maddave. sukkassa ṇaṃ jhāṇassa cattāri aṇuppehāo paṇṇattāo, taṃ jahā-aṇaṃtavattiyāṇuppehā, vipariṇāmāṇuppehā, asubhāṇuppehā, avāyāṇuppehā.

In this description of dhyāna, there is the mention of some words which deserve notice for comparison of them with the Buddhist concepts. For instance, the word vijaya in āṇāvijaya, etc., whose Sanskrit equivalent is vicaya, can be compared with vicaya in dharma-vicaya (=prajñā, vipāśyanā) of the Buddhists. Similarly, the Prakrit word aṇuppehā (Sanskrit anuprekṣā) in aṇiccāṇuppehā, vipariṇāmāṇuppehā, asubhāṇuppehā, etc., may be compared with the Buddhist expression anupassanā in aniccānupassanā, dukkhānupassanā (Abhidhammattha-saṅgaho, IX. 6). Again the words, puhattavitakke saviyārī, egattavitakke aviyārī can be compared with the Pāli savitakka-savicāra, avitakka-avicāra. Here it should be noticed that in Jainism savitarka-savicāra is followed by savitarka-avicāra, that is, vicāra is eliminated earlier than vitarka — a position that goes against both Buddhism and Pātāñjala Yoga where vitarka is eliminated earlier

than vicāra. This discrepancy is significant as throwing doubt on the authenticity of the Jaina tradition in this respect.

There is another intriguing problem. Vitarka and vicāra obtain in lower categories of meditation in Buddhism as well as Patañjala Yoga. But the Jains have transferred them to the highest stage of meditation, perhaps to suit them to their philosophy of absolute immobility as prelude to final disembodied emancipation.

In this connection, the contents of the first book of the Āyāro should be carefully considered. The concepts of vijaya (Buddhist dharma-vicaya or dharma-pravicaya), and loga-vipassī (Buddhist vipassī) mentioned there disclose close relationship between early Jainism and Buddhism, rather the influence of the former on the latter. The Buddha might have adapted the Jaina concepts to his philosophy of the Madhyamā Pratipadā (Middle Path), rejecting the extreme asceticism of the nirgranthas prescribing fasting and voluntary endurance of hardship for the elimination of karma bound in the past, for achieving quick emancipation.

10. In early Hinduism, as in Jainism, meditation was considered subordinate to asceticism for liberation. Thus the Mahābhārata, I. 86. 16, says: Emaciated by austerities, patient, with his flesh, bones and blood wasted away, when the muni becomes free from the pair (such as heat and cold), then he really behaves like a muni. Then, having conquered this world, he gains the other world:

tapasā karṣitaḥ kṣāmaḥ kṣīṇamāmsāsthīṣṇitaḥ/
yadā bhavati nirdvandvo munir maunaṃ samāsthitaḥ/
atha lokam imaṃ jītvā lokam vijayate param//

The Śvetaśvatara Upaniṣad, II. 8–9, gives the essence of the early form of Hindu meditation as follows: Holding the body straight, three parts of it stretched up, causing the senses to enter into the heart by means of the mind, the wise one should cross over all the frightening streams with the help of the raft which is Brahman. Having suppressed his breaths and having brought his movements under control, when his breath has been diminished, he should take breath through his nose. Being careful, the wise one should restrain his mind like the chariot yoked with vicious horses:

trir unnataṃ sthāpya samaṃ śarīraṃ
hṛdīndriyāṇi manasā samniveśya/
brahmoḍupena pratareta vidvān
srotāṃsi sarvāṇi bhayāvahāni//

prāṇān prapīḍyeha sa yuktaceṣṭaḥ
kṣiṇe prāṇe nāsikayocchvasīta/
duṣṭāśvayuktam iva vāham enaṃ
vidvān mano dhārayetāpramattaḥ//

The Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad, 6. 18, speaks of a six-membered yoga: prā-
nāyāmaḥ pratyāhāro dhyānaṃ dhāraṇa tarkaḥ samādhiḥ ṣaḍaṅga ity ucyate
yogaḥ.

These ideas about meditation were systematized by Patañjali in his Yoga-
darśana, taking full advantage of the meditational system devised by the Buddha
and developed by his early followers.

11. In the classical Hindu Yoga as codified by Patañjali in his Yogadarśana,
we find the eight members, namely, yama, niyama, āsana, prāṇāyāma, pratyāhāra,
dhāraṇā, dyāna and samādhi. The four stages of samprajñāta samādhi, namely,
vitarkānugata, vicārānugata, ānandānugata and asmitānugata mentioned by
Patañjali remind us of the four factors of the rūpa jhāna, namely, vitarka, vicāra,
prīti and sukha. The conception of the twofold asamprajñāta samādhi in the
Yogadarśana — one leading to the condition of videhas (gods) or merger in the
Prakṛti, and the other to spiritual advancement through cultivation of śraddhā,
vīrya, smṛti, samādhi and prajñā — is comparable to the twofold meditation in
Buddhism — one leading to the āsaṃjñika-samāpatti which is a condition of
miserable pitfall, and the other to the nirodha-samāpatti on the elimination of the
kleśas, also called samjñāvedayitanirodha. The Jaina conception of upaśamaśre-
ṇi (ladder of suppression of kleśas) and kṣapakaśreṇi (ladder of their elimina-
tion) is quite similar to the two forms of asamprajñāta samādhi.

12. This brief comparative study of Buddhist meditation will show, I hope,
that meditation in some form or other was a common factor in all schools of In-
dian thought from their very inception. The Buddha adopted a middle course by
rejecting the practice of self-mortification on the one extreme and the indulgence
in worldly pleasures on the other. And this Middle Path was the new discipline
of meditation that he invented in order to avoid voluntary hardship amounting to
self-torture for achieving emancipation. Meditation which was only a minor part
of asceticism was reformed radically by the Buddha and allotted a major role in
the spiritual discipline that was flourishing in those days. This had a great im-
pact on the spiritual lifestyle of ancient India, that ushered a new pattern of
thinking replacing ritualism by mental and moral discipline, and theological
dogmatism by rationalistic approach to the problems of ethics and religion.