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BUDDHIST MEDITATION AND THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING: SOME MISGIVINGS

Philip Novak

Buddhism is a wisdom tradition whose oft-stated goal is to enable human beings to see things as they truly are. For such seeing is said to free one, by degrees, from the poisons of craving, aversion, and misunderstanding to which human beings are subject. And such freeing eventuates in one's becoming a wise and noble person, that is, one who emits less and less suffering-causing behavior and more and more healing-conducive behavior into the interdependently arising Totality of which we all are temporary, though luminous, pulsations.

In the Buddhist Pali Scriptures reference is made to three kinds of wisdom (*panna*): *suta-maya-panna* or wisdom gained from listening to others; *cinta-maya-panna* or wisdom gained by one's own intellectual analysis and discernment; and *bhavana-maya-panna* or wisdom gained through mental culture, that is, through the practice of Buddhism's highly articulated meditation disciplines. All are to be cultivated and none is to be scorned, but the tradition leaves no doubt as to the unique value of the third kind of wisdom.

In his *Buddhist Meditation*, Edward Conze puts it plainly: "Meditational practices constitute the very core of the Buddhist approach to life."¹ To presume that the wisdom gained from mental culture is equally available to intellectual analysis, even of the highly refined and subtle sort, is to presume that a job requiring a laser can be done equally well with a blowtorch. The Buddha's deepest insights are *available* to the intellect, and powerfully so,

but it is only when those insights are discovered and *absorbed*, by a psyche made especially keen and receptive by long coursing in meditative discipline, that they begin to find their fullest realization and effectiveness.

Precisely because of the inestimable importance of meditation practice in Buddhism, we shall adopt it as a perspective from which to assess the notion of the "Triple World," a Buddhist version of the hierarchical ontology or "Great Chain of Being" we often find represented in traditional worldviews.

HIERARCHICAL ONTOLOGY OR THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING

Let us first clarify the notion of "hierarchical ontology." To talk ontology (from the Greek *on* = being) is to ask questions about the reality or existence of something. To ask whether a dream is more or less or just as real as waking life, or whether God is more or less or just as real as the world, is to ask ontological questions. When a religious tradition espouses a *hierarchical* ontology, it believes that reality admits of degrees and that everything that exists takes its place on a spectrum that runs from the greatest, or ultimate, reality, to the least, flimsiest existent. It testifies that there are 'levels' of reality or 'planes' of existence; that each contains its own special kind of existents; and that all the levels or planes are included, transcended, and empowered by the first and final ultimate reality. The phrase "Great Chain of Being" is a metaphorical encapsulation of such an outlook.

We shall grant for the purposes of this essay that Buddhism contains a hierarchical ontology, primarily in its notion of the Triple World, but we hasten to warn the reader that some Buddhist scholars would not go even this far.² We shall not be concerned, then, with the question of the existence of a hierarchical ontology in Buddhism, but rather with the question of its relative importance and function in that tradition. Our tasks will be three: 1) to describe the Buddhist Triple World ontological hierarchy (using Neoplatonist ontology as a point of reference); 2) to argue that it plays an ancillary role in the practice of Buddhist meditation and a negligible role in the awakening of Buddhist wisdom; and 3) to ask anew about the real function of hierarchical ontologies in wisdom traditions.

THE BUDDHIST ONTOLOGICAL HIERARCHY: THE TRIPLE WORLD

In Buddhism, the term '*samsara*' stands for the totality of phenomenal existence. *Samsara* has traditionally been divided into

three principal realms (i.e., the Triple World), namely, the Desire Realm, the Form Realm, and the Formless Realm. Each of these realms has numerous subdivisions, yielding a total of thirty-one realms of phenomenal existence. 'Beyond' these realms there is the transcendental, non-dual state of Nibbana (Nirvana). (See diagram 1 at end of article.)

The peculiarities of this Buddhist world picture appear in sharp relief when set against the ontological hierarchy of Plotinus, the third century Neoplatonist, who significantly shaped the metaphysical articulations of all three monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Plotinus also conceived of a "triple world" transcended by a supreme, ineffable "One" and would thus seem to present an obvious case of cross-cultural similarity. A closer look, however, reveals that the task of cross-mapping will be much more difficult than it at first seems. Plotinus' triple world, when compared with the Buddhist picture, is a rather undifferentiated affair consisting of divisions between Matter, Soul, and Intellect, and no further subdivisions save perhaps a rather general distinction between the activities of the higher and lower Soul. So let us note, for starters, that the Buddhist Triple World actually contains thirty-one levels, while Plotinus' contains three or four.

Second, Plotinus' cosmology is dynamic. The lower realms derive from the higher realms and return thereto in a timeless process of emanation and reversion. By comparison, the Buddhist cosmology is static. It is never said that Nibbana "emanates" nor that lower levels of being revert to it. Nibbana is never described as a Cosmic-Creative Principle, perhaps in accord with the Buddha's repeated lack of interest in questions about how the world came to be. On this score there is nearly complete incommensurability between Plotinus' One and the Buddhist Nibbana.

Third, there is between the two ontologies a marked attitudinal difference regarding matter and embodiment. The Buddhist Form Realm suggests that materiality is *not* incommensurable with 'divinity' (the various 'gods' of realms twelve through twenty-seven) nor with rarified states of contemplative introversion (the first through the fourth *jhanas*). While Plotinus allows for degrees of materiality and insists that even "matter" and embodiment are the result of the Emanation of the One—Plotinus is no metaphysical dualist—matter and embodiment are for him far 'grosser,' less 'transparent,' and more intrinsically 'limiting' than for the Buddhist.

Fourth, the lowest Buddhist realm is not named after an objec-

tive quality, i.e., "matter," as it is in Plotinus, but after a far more subjective one—"desire." When we recall, in addition, that scholars have long debated whether or not early Buddhism has an ontology at all, we can suggest that Buddhism was more interested in psychology than ontology, whereas for Plotinus, perhaps, the reverse is true. The Buddhist's rather fanciful onto-cosmology seems to be derived from a psychology, whereas Plotinus' psychology seems to be derived from his onto-cosmology.

Fifth, the Desire Realm is subdivided into ten other realms, six of which are "divine" in the sense of containing gods who abide therein in sweet, but ultimately impermanent bliss.³ This mixture of divinity (of some sort) and rather gross materiality seems fundamentally at odds with anything we find in Neoplatonist ontology.

Sixth, and finally, though both Plotinus and the Buddhist tradition agree that the depth of one's 'contemplation' determines the realm to which one will transmigrate, they differ starkly in the degree of specificity with which they speak about levels of contemplation and onto-cosmological locales.

In sum, it seems untenable to say that these onto-cosmological maps have much more in common than a general sense of the multi-dimensionality of reality and of an 'ultimate real' which places those dimensions in relief.

I have burdened the reader with these observations because the essays in this volume of *Listening* stem from a seminar whose director, world-religions philosopher Huston Smith, advances two important theses. The first is that the Great Chain of Being is a primordial intuition of *homo religiosus* and that varying articulations of it can be found in all of humankind's significant religious traditions. The second is that amid these widely varying articulations, there can be discerned a common core-structure, a thesis which, if true, graces the chain-of-being outlook with a powerful transcultural unanimity.

With the first thesis we can readily agree, but the second seems highly problematic. As we have just begun to see, a careful comparison between the Buddhist Triple World and Plotinus' influential metaphysic reveals considerable problems of cross-mapping. These problems multiply as psychological and ontological maps from other traditions are added to the mix. In the summer of 1987, thirteen rather like-minded philosophers who have spent their entire adult lives grappling with such problems found themselves maddeningly unable even to cross-map Plotinus' ontology with that of Plato whose faithful interpreter Plotinus claimed to have been! The closer one looks at the various

ontological maps of the traditions, the less one can shake the feeling that ontological mapmaking is dogged by human presumptuousness.

BUDDHIST MEDITATION AND THE TRIPLE WORLD

In the previous section, one of the ways we used to point to the peculiarity of the Buddhist hierarchical ontology was by drawing attention to the psychological aspects of the Triple World, noting that many of the levels of reality therein described were correlated with states of meditative absorption (*jhana*). This would seem to imply that the Triple World ontological hierarchy, or a map of it, is crucial to the establishment, practice, and fruition of the Buddhist meditative effort. But in this section, it is precisely this that we will deny. We will argue that though these states of concentrative absorption (*jhana*) are indeed prominently mentioned in the lore, their actual role in the cultivation of Buddhist wisdom is dubious and, in the last analysis, negligible. As we shall see, *none* of them is indispensable for progress on the path to Buddhist enlightenment. All are supererogatory, and though often beneficial, they are also looked upon as potentially counterproductive.

Our argument thus depends upon a de-emphasis of the importance of *jhana*-cultivation on the path of Buddhist wisdom. Its logic is as follows: 1) if the *ghanas* are intimately tied to the classic articulation of ontological hierarchy in Buddhism (an assumption based on diagram 1); and 2) if the *ghanas* play a negligible role in the attainment of Buddhist wisdom (an argument to be made below); then 3) the ontological hierarchy of the Triple World plays a similarly negligible role.

The various forms of meditation, Buddhist and otherwise, are rooted in an effort at concentration, an effort to focus and sustain attention, to establish some stability within the usual mental flux. Sustained attention is not the end of meditation, but it is the gateway, the means by which the meditative work can be carried out. In spiritual traditions there are a bewildering number of meditational paths, aims, and procedures, but all begin with the effort to sustain attention.

In the Buddhist tradition, this crucial process is called *samatha*, often translated as "calming down" or "tranquility." Tranquility, of course, admits of degrees, and in 2500 years of experimentation, the Indian (Hindu-Buddhist) yogic traditions have discovered the literally unimaginable depths to which it can be cultivat-

ed. Tranquility begins with simple attentional training and leads, ultimately, to the profound states of absorption we have been calling *jhana*. But the spectrum of tranquility is only half, in fact far less than half, of the story of Buddhist meditation.

Grounds for this assertion exist not only in the technical literature on meditation but also in the scriptural accounts of the Buddha's life. It is clear that knowledge of all eight *jhanas* predates the Buddha, for the accounts point out that under his first meditation teacher (Alara Kalama) the Buddha mastered the seventh *jhana*, and under his second teacher (Uddaka Ramaputta), the eighth. The Buddha, however, finds that his virtuoso mastery of these and other rarified states of transic absorption cannot completely eliminate the poisons of existence (craving, aversion, and misunderstanding). Therefore, he abandons them, as the scriptures say, "in disgust."⁴ The learned Buddhist commentator, Sangharakshita, says that, "to get 'stuck' in a superconscious state [*jhana*][—]the fate that befalls so many mystics[—]without understanding the necessity of developing insight, is for Buddhism not a blessing but an unmitigated disaster."⁵

Sangharakshita's stress on the shortcomings of trance and the necessity of insight [*vipassana*] is fully traditional. The Buddha's supreme enlightenment experience is marked not by a superconscious ecstasy or a transic blank, but by direct, communicable insights into the nature of the arising and passing away of the manifest world. "Concentration," says Sangharakshita "is not an end in itself but a means to an end. That end is Wisdom, the seeing of things as in truth and reality they are."⁶ Though a certain degree of *samatha* is an absolute prerequisite for the path of insight, *samatha* and the *jhanas* remain relatively barren with regard to the transformative process of insight at which the Buddhist aims. In fact, the only degree of *samatha* that is indispensable to the full unfolding of insight is a degree *below* even the first *jhana*. (It is called *upacarasamadhi* or "access concentration.") The parting of the ways between absorption and insight may be illustrated and can be found in Diagram 2 at the end of this article.

The foregoing raises two questions. First, if the *jhanas* are as peripheral to the attainment of wisdom as we have claimed, how have they held their prominent place in the literature down through the Buddhist centuries? Perhaps a better way to ask this question is to ask just what *jhanas* are for—i.e., what good are they? The second question concerns the nature of insight. Just what does insight see? Certainly the answer we have given so

far—the true nature of things—is vague. Does it glimpse higher levels of reality, or what?

Neither answer need detain us long. The *jhanas*, while dispensable, are not necessarily antithetical to the path of insight. Sole-Leris has written that *jhana*-directed meditation “provides access to states of consciousness characterized by experiences of a holistic nature, which have . . . great intrinsic value. . . . Experiences of this order, in which extremely comprehensive states of bliss, tranquility and meaningfulness are achieved, cannot but help to have a generally positive influence on the meditator’s mentality, with correspondingly beneficial effects on his everyday behavior, attitudes and states of mind.”⁷⁷ This statement alone goes a long way in helping us to understand how such states would certainly be highly regarded by a tradition whose central interest is psychological transformation. The essential danger of *jhanic* practice seems to be the lure they offer an immature mind. They are marked, for the most part, by a rather intense joy or blissful peace, attachment to which can be counterproductive. Again, Sole-Leris: “The absorptions may entail their own kind of risk in that—precisely because of the achievement of temporary but highly rewarding altered states of consciousness—the meditator may come to consider the absorptions as ends in themselves, in which case they will hinder rather than help the progress of insight.”⁷⁸

As strange as it may sound, the *jhanas* also appear to have a certain ‘recreational’ or therapeutic value. A Burmese-trained meditation master has told us, without a touch of facetiousness, that the Buddha taught the *jhanas* to his monks to give them a pleasant way to pass the time when there was no particular matter that needed attention. Moreover, a psychiatrist friend of ours who has given a significant portion of his last six or seven years to the intensive practice of Buddhist meditation has reported that while in Burma his fellow, deeply-experienced practitioners considered the *jhanas* a helpful mental refuge, a kind of temporary retreat, when the *dukkha* (actual physical and sometimes mental pain) encountered in the process of insight became unbearable.

The second question—what does insight see?—takes us to the heart of the matter and sheds light on our central question, namely, the relative importance of the notion of a hierarchical ontology in the cultivation of Buddhist wisdom. So what *does* insight see? In what *does* wisdom consist? It consists in the discovery and rediscovery at ever subtler levels of perception that all phenomena within the framework of the body (including “mental”

phenomena)—and, by logical extension, all phenomena whatsoever—are marked by impermanence, causal interdependence, and the intrinsic inability to satisfy. In standard terminology, it discovers that phenomena are marked by *anicca* (impermanence), *anatta* (lack of self-subsistence), and *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness). And to the degree that the aspirant discovers and rediscovers this at ever subtler levels of perception, absorbing these insights into the structural marrow of his/her being, to that same degree do grasping, aversion, and delusion, the three “poisons” which have constituted the personality and predisposed it toward unfortunate modes of self-centered thought and behavior, begin to dissolve. One might wonder: is this all? Oh, but this is much, very much indeed, a project for a lifetime and more. (And let us not ask about Nirvana until we are in the presence of someone who will freely assert that s/he has been there).

In all this, what is there of three or thirty-one worlds? Nothing. In the progress of Buddhist insight, does one get a glimpse of the stratified nature of reality? No, not unless we equate reality with states of consciousness, in which case reality would admit of so many levels that Plotinus’ metaphysic, just to name an example, would be exposed as sorely inadequate. More importantly, is the map of an ontologically stratified reality an important guide to the progress of insight? Again, no.

If we have been accurate in the foregoing, then it seems clear that on the Buddhist path to wisdom, hierarchical ontology, if understood as anything more than the heuristic positing of a this shore and a yonder shore to evoke an existential orientation, plays a negligible role. Positing it in its full specificity is not a prerequisite for beginning the Buddhist path, nor does the unfolding of that Path require significant reference to or reliance upon it.

SO WHAT IS A HIERARCHICAL ONTOLOGY FOR?

Let us consider the following words of Frithjof Schuon:

The doctrines of the Buddhas are only ‘celestial mirages’ intended to catch, as in a golden net, the greatest possible number of creatures plunged in ignorance, suffering and transmigration, and that it is therefore the benefit of creatures and not the suchness of the Universe which determines the form which the Buddhist message must take.⁹

Schuon is exactly right about this: in Buddhist metaphysics, onto-cosmological accuracy is subordinate to pragmatic, soteriological

intent. But does this eloquent assertion of the poetic and 'upayic' (i.e., skillful means for producing strong religious aspiration) nature of metaphysics apply only to Buddhism? If we substituted for the Buddhist soteriological terms in the passage analogous terms from other religious traditions, would we not also find ourselves asserting the same thing about the metaphysical visions of those traditions, namely, that they are "celestial mirages" intended to catch, as if in a golden net, the greatest possible number of creatures plunged in sin, *avidya* (Skt: ignorance) or *ghaflah* (Arabic: forgetfulness of God)?

We do indeed find ourselves drawn to the view that all hierarchical ontologies are well-intended celestial mirages. Does this mean that such doctrines are mere illusions, have absolutely no referent, or that there is no reality greater than man? Not at all. We can readily agree that there is a "Way Things Are" whose liberating and graceful rhythm can often be felt by those willing to place themselves under certain conditions. But we also believe that all maps lie.¹⁰ To put it another way, the Way Things Are clearly allows its sweetness to drip into psyches with widely, even wildly, divergent onto-cosmologies. The various ontological maps of the traditions are different enough to justify a friendly, trustful agnosticism toward most details on them save one: the one that marks a gap between a here and a There in such a way as to give birth in each new human being to the self-transcending desire for the Good that alone can close that gap.

In the meantime, we can remain attentive to the manifold variety of the Great Chains of Being, awed by the unknown(s) to which they point, and grateful, while lost in this dark wood, for any maps whatsoever. The perennial cross-cultural vision of a hierarchical ontology does, we believe, bespeak a significant, if always indeterminate, truth about the Way Things Are, thereby providing the human will with both a decisive orientation to the truth and a helpful humility regarding its attainment.

Diagram 1
The Thirty-One Planes of Existence
of Buddhist Tradition¹¹

NĪBBANA

THE TRIPLE WORLD

The Formless Realm (*Arupa-loka*); Immaterial

<i>No. of Plane/Name</i>	<i>Access By</i>
31 Neither Perception nor Non-Perception	Formless Meditations
30 Nothingness	"
29 Infinity of Consciousness	"
28 Infinity of Space	"

The Form Realm (*Rupa-loka*); Fine Material

27 Sublime Gods	Fourth Jhana
26 Easily Seeing Gods	"
25 Easily Seen Gods	"
24 Untroubled Gods	"
23 Effortless Gods	"
22 Gods Without Perception	"
21 Richly Rewarded Gods	"
20 Completely Lustrous Gods	Third Jhana
19 Immeasurably Lustrous Gods	"
18 Limitedly Lustrous Gods	"
17 Radiant Gods	Second Jhana
16 Immeasurably Splendorous Gods	"
15 Limitedly Splendorous Gods	"
14 Great Brahmas	First Jhana
13 Priests of Brahma	"
12 Retinue of Brahma	"

The Desire Realm (*Kama-loka*); Sensuous World

Seven-Fold Realm of Bliss

11 Gods who control pleasure	Good Kamma
10 Gods who delight in fashioning	"
9 Satisfied Gods	"
8 Yama Gods	"
7 Thirty-three Gods	"
6 Four Great Kings	"
5 Human Plane of Existence	"

Four-Fold Realm of Punishment

4 Demon World	Bad Kamma
3 Hungry Ghosts	"
2 Animal World	"
1 Hells or Purgatories	"

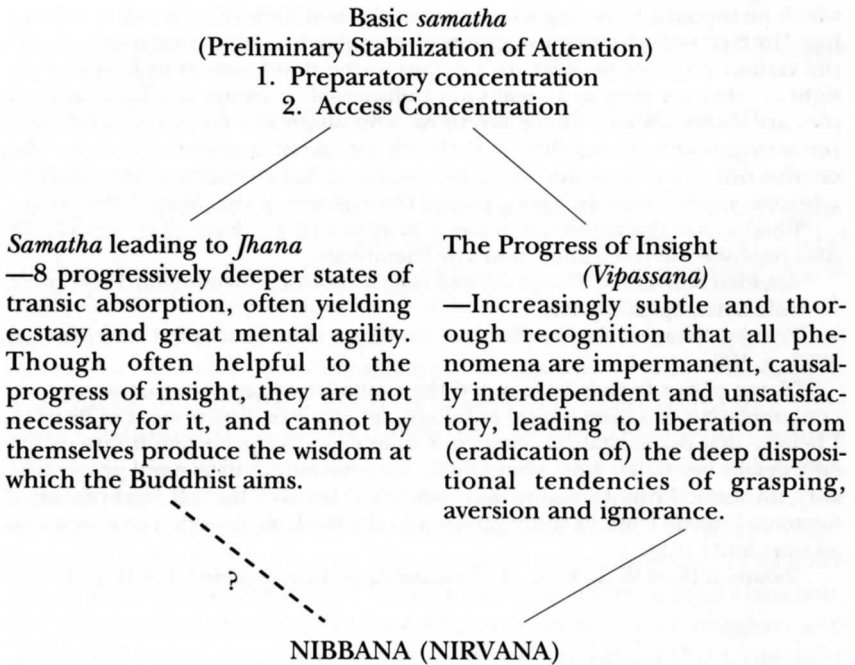
Diagram 2: *Samatha*, *Jhana* and *Vipassana*

Samatha: attentional exercises producing states of mental calm; the starting point of all Buddhist meditation

Jhana: absorption; states of trance resulting from progressively deeper *samatha*

Vipassana: insight into the true nature of phenomena

The Progress of Buddhist *Bhavana* (Mental Culture)



Notes

¹E. Conze, *Buddhist Meditation* (New York: Harper and Row), 1975, p. 11.

²They might argue, for example, that all Buddhist “worlds” including the ultimate state of Nirvana are *equally real* (no ontological difference) though of varying *worth*. They might say that dwelling in some worlds is simply better, fuller, and less painful, but that that does not make these worlds more real. Laughter and agony are equally real though of different worth. They would thus be arguing for an axiological hierarchy (a value hierarchy) but denying an ontological one.

³One might wish to dismiss the six abodes of the Desire Gods as products of the metaphysical imagination run amok, a far cry from the cool rationality of

Gautama Buddha. But this would be a highly questionable move. Mention of these Desire Gods occurs not in a florid Mahayana theophany, but in the Pali Scriptures and, in fact, in the finale to the Buddha's first sermon, the incalculably important "Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dharma" (Samyutta-Nikaya, V. 420), in which the Buddha summarizes his essential message. This does not prove one way or the other that their mention is authentically the Buddha's or a later accretion, but its conspicuous placement shows at the very least the high esteem in which such a conception was held by the Buddha's spiritual descendants.

⁴Majjhima Nikaya, I.240 ff. Quoted in Edward J. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1927, p. 63.

⁵Sangharakshita, op. cit., p. 172. Sangharakshita's full statement on this issue which he supports by noting a technical traditional distinction is well worth noting: "In fact, with the sole exception of neighborhood-concentration, though the various stages of *samadhi* are a means to the development of liberating insight . . . they are even as a means not indispensable. Hence two kinds of disciples are distinguished. There are those who attain the transcendental paths (*ariya-magga*) with "tranquility" as their vehicle (*samatha-yanika*) and those who, on the other hand, attain them by means of bare insight alone (*suddha-vipassana-yanika*), without having passed through any of the *jhanas*." (loc. cit.).

⁶Bhikkhu Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism* (Bangalore: 1957) pp. 171-72. Also published in the United States by Shambhala.

⁷Amadeo Sole-Leris, *Tranquility and Insight* (Boston: Shambhala) 1986, p. 22.

⁸Sole-Leris, op. cit., p. 24.

⁹Frithjof Schuon, *In The Tracks of Buddhism* (London: Allen and Unwin), 1968, p. 128.

¹⁰Some of our friends have noted the exaltative experience that stems from contemplation of a hierarchical ontology and intuitive discernment of its truth. I believe that the exaltation comes not from cognitive penetration into its specific details but rather from sympathetic immersion into its general proportionality, a Cosmic Proportionality that radically relativizes the self, and releases it for some interval from its stuffy prison into the fresh air provided by a view over all time and being.

¹¹Adapted from W. L. King, *A Thousand Lives Away* (Oxford, 1964), p. 113.