

The Jhānas

A Comparison of Teachings on Absorption Concentration in the Theravadan Tradition



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Abstract

What is jhāna? This is the question that this thesis seeks to answer. Three prominent jhāna teachers have three different ideas about what jhāna is, and three different methods of getting into jhāna. These differences push us to ponder: ‘what *really* is jhāna, and what practice should I follow to *really* get into jhāna?’ The purpose of this thesis is to investigate and elucidate the differences in the ways that three prominent Theravadan jhāna teachers conceive of and teach jhāna practice, and eventually find some resolution to this issue. This thesis is divided into five parts: an introduction, a conclusion, and three in depth investigations into the differing meditation methods of these three teachers. These investigations are meant to explicate the differences in opinion over what jhāna is, and the methods whereby one gets into jhāna. The conclusion seeks to make sense of these important differences, and bring some resolution to the debates.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In this vast Universe, there exists a galaxy that humans call the Milky Way. In that enormous galaxy, there exists a solar system of which the planet Earth is a part. On the planet Earth, there is a religion called Buddhism. Within Buddhism, there are three main divisions: Vajrayana, Mahayana, and Theravada. Within Theravadan Buddhism, there are lots of different ways to meditate. Of all those ways to meditate, one is of particular interest to me. Closing the eyes, brining all the attention to the breath, and entering into a state of jhāna.

So what is jhāna? This is the question that this thesis investigates. This thesis will explore what jhāna is, and how one gets into a state of jhāna. There is major disagreement among jhāna teachers on this topic, but there is some basic agreement about jhāna generally.

Everyone agrees that jhāna is a state of absorption that is experienced when the mind unifies on one thing. One thing that the mind can unify on is the breath. There are disagreements over *where* and *how* one should pay attention to the breath so as to unify on it, but this will be discussed later. With the unification comes *pīti* and *sukha*. *Pīti* is a Pāli language word that is often translated into English as joy, rapture, or refreshment, but there is some disagreement over these translations too. *Sukha* is a Pāli word that is often translated as ease, bliss or happiness. So- there is consensus that paying attention to the breath can induce either mild experiences of ease and refreshment or intense experiences of bliss and rapture. There is also agreement that this absorption state can at least be helpful to a person who aims at nibbana (some say it is necessary). At this point, the reader of this thesis may reasonably think something like ‘Hm. Those things sound

pretty good, I'd like to try that. What exactly is the path of practice that will lead me to entering into a state of jhāna?' This is a very good question.

The problem is this: three highly eminent Theravadan jhāna teachers have different ideas about what jhāna is, and about which practices lead to the experience of jhāna. These disagreements between the three teachers (and subsequently, between the three groups of students of each of the teachers) are often heated. The three different perspectives all claim that their way is the right way, and in some cases, that the other conceptions of jhāna (and the other methods of 'attaining' it) are flat out wrong.

The basis for the discord among the three perspectives lies in the differences in opinion surrounding which texts should be relied on as being authoritative, the different ways that each teacher defines the terms involved in the texts, the different opinions and methods of the teachers that taught these three teachers, and possibly, the differing histories of the countries of origin of each teacher. This thesis will explore both the differences in perspective, and also the bases for the different perspectives. It will also attempt to pass some sort of judgment on whether there is a teacher or teachers that are 'right', and a teacher or teachers that are 'wrong'.

I have chosen to structure this thesis in five chapters. The first chapter is this, the introduction. The following three chapters will be about each of these three eminent jhāna teachers in turn. I have chosen to structure each of those chapters first with a short biography of the meditation teacher, then with their assertion about which texts are authoritative, and finally with an exposition of their method of getting into jhāna and their understanding of what jhāna is. In the later chapters, this exposition is combined with discussions of the distinctions between the methods and views of the teachers. The

conclusion includes a summary of the distinctions, a discussion of why each camp believes that their method and conception should be preferred over the other ones, an attempt to make sense of these different methods and theories, and an attempt to bring some resolution to the debates. The three eminent teachers that I have chosen to compare in this thesis are Pa-Auk Sayadaw (Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw), Ajahn Geoff (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu), and Ajahn Chah (Phra Bodhiñāna Thera).

A good question here is, why write about these Theravadan teachers, and not others? One reason is that they are all monastics. Another reason is that there is an enormous amount of material written by or about each of them. A third reason is that each has a clearly distinct method for getting into jhāna, and a clearly distinct idea about what jhāna is. A fourth is that I personally have visited a monastery in each of the traditions. A fifth is that these three monks are three of the giants when it comes to jhāna teaching in the last 100 years. There are a very small number of other well-known and prolific Theravadan jhāna teachers (Leigh Brasington and Ajahn Brahm are the only two that I am aware of as of the writing of this thesis) today who might also count as giants, and they are mentioned in other parts of this work. I did not write separate chapters on Leigh and Ajahn Brahm (and their methods) in an attempt to keep things simple. However, a comparison of these five teachers and their methods would be a worthwhile topic for a future study.

Finally, I hope that this thesis will give us some insight into the wider world of Buddhism as a whole. The fact is that this thesis shows that within the Theravadan tradition there exist major disagreements over doctrine and practice when it comes to one very specific meditation practice. This ‘little picture’ is reflective of the big picture of

Buddhism as a whole. In Buddhism as a whole, there are major disagreements in doctrine and practice between different traditions, sects, teachers, and practitioners. This is why generalizing about Buddhism as a whole is often a risky endeavor—the speaker is prone to fall into the trap of lumping a highly variable and nuanced set of traditions into one all encompassing whole with one definite philosophy, goal, or set of practices. Even simple innocuous statements like ‘Buddhists worship the Buddha’ or ‘Buddhists aim at nirvana’ can be seen from many different angles, and mean different things to different Buddhists. Indeed, there seems to be a large number of ‘Buddhisms’ rather than just one monolithic ‘Buddhism’. My paper is a reflection of this fact. In the same way that a mere branch on a tree resembles the whole tree itself, the nature of the disagreements over jhāna practice resemble the nature of the disagreements in Buddhism as a whole. It is common to find a Buddhist who thinks ‘*I* have the authentic teaching’, or that ‘*my* teachers know or knew what the Buddha *really* taught’, and who also disagrees vehemently with the differing beliefs or practices of other Buddhists that similarly think that they too have the authentic teachings. This tendency for Buddhists to fundamentally disagree with each other is perhaps one of the only unifiers of Buddhism in general, although I need to be careful here, else I fall prey to the snare of generalizing about Buddhism. After all, there’s probably a Buddhist school of thought out there that would disagree with me on this point (or at best, neither agree nor disagree with me).

Having said all of that, I will now commence with the original endeavor, which is to highlight the differences between how three highly respected and prolific jhāna teachers understand jhāna, and how they teach their students to attain it. I will start by looking at the method of Pa-Auk Sayadaw.

Chapter 2: Pa-Auk Sayadaw

The Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw was born in 1934 in a village located about 100 miles northwest of what is now Yangon, Myanmar. At age 10, Pa-Auk Sayadaw ordained as a novice monk and was given the name Āciṇṇa Bhikkhu. By age 20, Āciṇṇa Bhikkhu was a fully ordained monk who had passed several Pāli language examinations (Pa-Auk Forest Monastery Website). By age 30, Āciṇṇa Bhikkhu had passed other prestigious examinations and was studying with Mahasi Sayadaw and Sayadaw U Pandita, who are two of the most famous Burmese Vipassana meditation teachers of the 20th century (*Our Spiritual Leader*). After 1964, Āciṇṇa Bhikkhu “made forest dwelling his primary practice” (Pa-Auk Forest Monastery Website). This basically means that Pa-Auk Sayadaw began to focus primarily on solitary meditation practice. In 1981, an abbot called the Venerable Aggapanna asked Āciṇṇa Bhikkhu to take over abbotship at his monastery, called the Pa-Auk Forest Monastery. When Āciṇṇa Bhikkhu became the abbot at Pa-Auk Forest Monastery, his name changed to Pa-Auk Sayadaw. Since then, Pa-Auk Sayadaw has written many books and been bestowed with several honorific titles by the government of Myanmar. The Pa-Auk Forest monastery was accessible to westerners in the 1980’s and 1990’s at least in part because Pa-Auk Sayadaw was and is fluent in English (Snyder Interview). The monastery was a popular destination for westerners interested in practicing meditation, and Pa-Auk Sayadaw and his monastery have become more and more famous in the west over the years.

Pa-Auk Sayadaw makes it clear that two ancient Theravadan texts are authoritative: the Pāli Canon, and the Visuddhimagga. The Pāli Canon is an ordered collection of scriptures that was definitively “closed around the fifth century CE”

(Gethin, xiv). The Pāli Canon is the smallest (although admittedly, it is huge) and oldest complete Buddhist scripture. It is called the ‘Pali Canon’ because it was written in the language of Pāli (see Gethin xxiii for how the Pāli Canon got its name). Indeed, at least some of the Pāli texts most likely date back to “the third or second century BCE” (Gethin, xxv). They are basically the oldest Buddhist texts around, and purport to be the words and teachings of the historical Buddha himself and his disciples (who lived in about the fifth or sixth century BCE). The Pāli Canon lays out the Buddha’s teaching, and includes instructions on meditation. In the Pāli Canon, samatha (tranquility) and vipassana (discernment/insight) are described as two **qualities** that should be present in meditation.

The Visuddhimagga is a commentary on the Pāli Canon, and was composed around the fifth century CE in present day Sri Lanka. The Visuddhimagga distinguishes between samatha meditation and vipassana meditation as being separate meditation **practices** with distinct instructions on how to practice each kind of meditation (Visuddhimagga, xlii-xlix). According to the Visuddhimagga, only samatha meditation can lead to apana samādhi or ‘fixed concentration’ (jhāna), while vipassana meditation can only lead to kanika samādhi or ‘momentary concentration’ (not jhāna) (Snyder Interview). Thus, it is the instructions on samatha meditation in the Visuddhimagga that we will pay attention to in this thesis, as opposed to the instructions on vipassana meditation. Pa-Auk Sayadaw teaches both samatha and vipassana meditation, but usually requires that the yogi master samatha meditation (meaning, the jhānas) before moving on to vipassana.

At this point, a metaphor (that I think) I came up with will be instructive in helping

to explain the difference between the two meditation practices of samatha and vipassana in the Visuddhimagga. Imagine that a yogi is watching a movie of a still bowl of water. The movie is old, and is played by using a projector and a reel of film. As with all old movies, each frame is just one picture on a piece of film. When the rate at which each picture is projected on the screen is sped up, the viewer (the yogi) is under the impression that movement is occurring on the screen. What really are a series of pictures appear to be a steady stream of movement to the viewer.

The yogi has two options when she watches the movie- she can either pay her full attention just to the bowl of water, or she can pay attention to each individual slide of the movie as it arises and passes away. She can try to focus her attention on one point (the bowl) in the movie, or she can try to be aware of the flickering quality of the screen, trying to see each individual frame/picture.

Similarly, in the Visuddhimagga, while samatha meditation is the focusing of one's attention one pointedly on one small meditation object, vipassana meditation is the focusing of one's attention broadly on the flickering experience of each present moment. This distinction between a one pointed awareness and a present moment awareness is the main distinction between the two types of meditation in the Visuddhimagga, and in the Pa-Auk Sayadaw's teachings.

In this chapter, we will only be investigating what Pa-Auk Sayadaw teaches when it comes to samatha meditation and jhāna. An excellent book was written by westerners, for westerners about the samatha portion of the Pa-Auk method called *Practicing the Jhānas* by Stephen Snyder and Tina Rasmussen. Snyder and Rasmussen are long time meditators who became students of Pa-Auk Sayadaw at a two-month retreat in 2005. The

pair “attain[ed] mastery” of samatha meditation, and “have written this book based on our direct experience as dedicated practitioners” (Snyder and Rasmussen, vii, ix).

Here we get down to brass tacks and ask, what exactly is the Pa-Auk method of practice, based on the Visuddhimagga, that gets one into jhāna? The simple answer to this question is: samatha meditation. The two authors give a good description of samatha meditation in their book. “The word samatha can be translated as ‘tranquility’ or ‘serenity.’ In the samatha practices, our primary task is to focus on one object to the exclusion of everything else—in other words, to develop concentration. The Buddha taught more than forty meditation objects for samatha practice, which are described in detail in the Visuddhimagga. The most widely used of these objects is the natural breath as found in the anapanasati meditation practice” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 12). Anapana is the Pāli language word for breath, and sati is the Pāli word for mindfulness. (Anapanasati means the practice of keeping the breath in mind). In this passage, the authors are telling the reader that the breath is the ‘most widely used’ object of the 40 possible objects of meditation in the Pa-Auk method. They are simply saying that in most cases, people starting to practice the Pa-Auk method begin with anapanasati. “The Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw instructs meditators to know the breath as it enters and leaves the body at the point at or below the nostrils” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 15). This point at the nostrils is the anapana (breath) spot, and is the only place in your entire body or mind that your attention should be fixed on. The method is to know the “whole breath body” (the entire duration of one breath) at the anapana spot for an extended period of time without wavering (Snyder and Rasmussen, 15). This is the basis for the samatha meditation practice—unwavering attention on one point for a long period of time.

The Pa-Auk method instructs the yogi to become aware of the full breath at one single point: the anapana (breath) spot. The authors tell us that “On retreat, even when you are not meditating, your attention should always remain on the breath crossing the anapana spot. ... Immediately upon awakening in the morning, place and sustain your attention on the knowing of the breath as it crosses the anapana spot. If your attention wavers at any time, gently return it to the object. Around this time, the mind settles enough to extend meditation periods up to several hours, fostering arising of the nimitta” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 17). The nimitta is a very important component of the Pa-Auk method. “The nimitta usually starts as a faint flickering of light. ... The nimitta is light seen in the mind’s eye, not light seen with the human eye(s)” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 58).

Here, the authors are asserting that we are biologically hard-wired to see a fuzzy disk of light in our mind’s eye, simply by focusing exclusively on the breath at the tip of the nose. This mental image of a light-disk gradually increases in size and clarity, and more consistently arises during meditation, just with practice. To quickly advance one’s practice, the authors advise that the yogi not let “more than an hour pass without a formal sitting period” while on retreat (Snyder and Rasmussen, 59). Through this process of consistently attending to the anapana spot all day long, the authors assert that the nimitta will become “stable”, then “solid and energized”, and eventually will move “toward merging with the anapana spot” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 60, 61). Eventually, “the breath crossing the anapana spot and the nimitta merge into one” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 61). This “anapana nimitta” then becomes the object of concentration from which one enters the first jhāna (Snyder and Rasmussen, 61).

Here we might reasonably ask: what is jhāna in this context? How do the authors of the book (and Pa-Auk Sayadaw, and the Visuddhimagga) define jhāna? “The words jhāna and absorption are synonymous. In absorption concentration, awareness is pulled into the jhāna with a ‘snap’” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 27). So, simply, jhāna is absorption. But, what does that mean?

The mind ‘snaps’ into absorption- the first jhāna. The Pāli Canon and the Visuddhimagga both tell us that the five factors (qualities) of the first jhāna are vitakka, vicāra, pīti, sukha, and ekaggatā. The English translation of these five factors in Pa-Auk Sayadaw’s book *Knowing and Seeing* are, in order, applied thought, sustained thought, joy, bliss, and one-pointedness of mind (Pa-Auk, 55). English translations of these five factors of first jhāna vary from teacher to teacher, as we will see in subsequent chapters. Here, again just to be clear, the authors Snyder and Rasmussen (along with Pa-Auk Sayadaw) are asserting that humans are biologically hard-wired to experience joy and bliss simply by focusing exclusively on the breath.

There are four levels of “material jhānas”, that is, four levels of absorption where a material object (the breath, for example) is the object of focus (Snyder and Rasmussen, 74). The difference between each of these four levels or stages of jhāna is just a difference in “factors” or qualities present in each one (Snyder and Rasmussen, 74). I have already stated and defined the five qualities of the first jhāna above. They are vitakka, vicāra, pīti, sukha, and ekaggatā.

Second jhāna is characterized by only the qualities of pīti, sukha, and ekaggatā; that is to say, joy, bliss and one-pointedness. The qualities of vitakka and vicāra (applied thought and sustained thought) have dropped away. Third jhāna only has the qualities of

bliss and one-pointedness, and fourth jhāna is characterized just by one-pointedness and equanimity. The Pa-Auk method requires that the yogi attain the “five masteries in each jhāna before moving to the next jhāna” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 75). These masteries are the abilities to “direct attention to the jhāna factors, to enter jhāna whenever desired, to resolve to stay in jhāna for a determined duration of time and keep the time resolve, to emerge from jhāna at the determined time, and to review the jhāna factors” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 75). This must be done with each level of jhāna before moving from first to second, second to third, third to fourth, etc.

After mastering each of the four jhānas using the anapana spot as the point of concentration, the Pa-Auk method suggests that the yogi move on to using some of the other 40 objects outlined in the Visuddhimagga as the point of concentration. This is where things get a little confusing. The objects that Pa-Auk Sayadaw next instructs yogis to use to enter the jhānas are the “white, nila, yellow, red, earth, water, fire, wind, light, and space kasinas” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 82, 83). The kasinas are “dislike images of various colors or elements used as objects of meditation. The meditator enters the jhānas using the different kasinas, each of which has a distinct flavor of experience” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 87). In short, the practice here is basically to take a physical object and stare at it (with eyes open) until the yogi can hold a mental image of it clearly in mind (with eyes closed). This mental image is the kasina. Thus, for example, the red kasina is basically a mental image of a red disk that becomes the yogi’s only object of concentration. By focusing on each of these mental images of disks (kasinas) in turn, the yogi enters into and then masters the (first) four jhānas.

The yogi must also master the jhānas using “the thirty two body parts meditation,

[and] the skeleton meditation” as points of concentration before moving on to further practices (Snyder and Rasmussen, 102). After mastering the four levels of jhāna using these 12 (out of 40) objects, the Pa-Auk method requires that the yogi move on to the four immaterial jhānas. These jhānas are usually known as jhānas number five through eight. The objects of focus for these jhānas are not *material* objects (like the breath or the kasinas for example), rather the objects of focus in each of these jhānas is something *immaterial*. These immaterial objects, in order, are boundless space (fifth jhāna), boundless consciousness (sixth jhāna), nothingness (seventh jhāna), and neither perception nor non-perception (eighth jhāna) (Snyder and Rasmussen, 102). The characteristics of jhānas five through eight are the one-pointedness and equanimity that comes from the fourth (material) jhāna, combined with the immaterial ‘objects’ listed above as the objects of the concentration (Snyder and Rasmussen, 102).

The detailed process by which one enters the fifth jhāna in the Pa-Auk method is fascinating but complicated. If one is interested in the theoretical process of how one goes from the fourth jhāna to fifth jhāna, one would do well to just read the book, because the process is too nuanced to be described in detail here. Basically though, a material object is used to get into the fourth jhāna, then the yogi shifts the focus from the material object to the immaterial one. In this way, the material object is a kind of springboard that the yogi uses to get into the immaterial jhānas. The descriptions of this process in the actual book though are more detailed than this and not as confusing. For the purposes of giving a brief overview of the paradigm of samatha meditation exemplified by the Pa-Auk method, it will be enough to say that after mastering the four immaterial jhānas with the earth kasina as the ‘springboard’, the yogi is advised to use the

“water, fire, wind, nila, yellow, red, white, and light kasinas as the objects of entry into the four immaterial jhānas” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 111).

When one has totally mastered both the material and immaterial jhānas, one may apply one’s efforts to the attainment of “supra-natural” powers. These powers theoretically include shape shifting, flight, the ability to pass through solid objects, and others. A nun at a Pa-Auk monastery outside of Yangon explained to me exactly how this all is done, but I won’t include the contents of that conversation here. Descriptions of the different powers can be found in the *Visuddhimagga* on page 378.

Whether or not the practice next becomes a pursuit of supra-natural powers is up to the individual yogi. An alternative to this pursuit (after mastering the eight jhānas) is to progress to the next stage of practice: “to complete the sublime abiding and protective meditations” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 115). This next set of practices is meant specifically to “provide a solid base of support as the meditator progresses toward the insight practice of vipassana” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 116). The sublime abidings are: loving kindness (good will/metta), compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These four attitudes are the points of focus of the samatha meditation (instead of the breath, for example) (Snyder and Rasmussen, 115). The four protective meditation objects are: loving kindness, recollection of the Buddha, foulness, and the recollection of death (Snyder and Rasmussen, 115).

From here, one progresses to using the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air as the objects of concentration. The authors tell us that this “four elements meditation serves as the bridge that completes the samatha practices and begins the vipassana practice” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 119,120).

After the yogi masters the four elements meditation, the yogi learns to take a step back from the body and perceive “your crystal body” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 125). From here, the yogi observes the crystal body until the crystal body suddenly breaks down into small particles called rupa-kalapas, which are “the subatomic particles of materiality that comprise all matter. Seeing rupa-kalapas is the final stage of samatha practice before you begin analyzing the rupa-kalapas. Analyzing the rupa-kalapas is the first stage of the vipassana practice, according to the Buddha’s teaching as presented by the Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw” (Snyder and Rasmussen, 126). The authors here are asserting that at this highly advanced stage of samatha meditation, one can observe (and then analyze) the tiny particles that all matter is made of. This is very profound.

This is the end of the exposition of the Pa-Auk method. In summary, the Pa-Auk method instructs the yogi to master samatha meditation and the jhānas before moving on to vipassana practice. This is done by attending to the breath at the tip of the nose until a nimitta made of light arises in the mind’s eye. Then the attention is to be placed on the nimitta, and the nimitta merges with the breath spot at the tip of the nose. When this happens, the mind snaps into first jhāna, the factors of which are applied thought, sustained thought, joy, bliss and one-pointedness of mind. Mastery of each jhāna is said to have occurred when the five jhāna masteries have been attained for each state of absorption. Once the four jhānas are mastered using the breath as the object, the meditator is to move on to using the kasinas as the objects. The ten kasinas are then used as the objects by which one enters jhāna, and then the thirty two parts of the body and the skeleton meditation are used to enter jhāna. Once this has been accomplished, the meditator may move on to the four immaterial jhānas (jhānas five through eight). This is

done by using one of the kasinas as a springboard for entering into the immaterial (formless) jhānas. Mastery of the material and immaterial jhānas is necessary for the pursuit of supra-normal powers of flight and passing through walls. Finally, one masters the four protective meditations and the four elements meditation before moving on to perceiving their crystal body that is composed of rupa-kalapas, the subatomic particles that compose all matter. Analyzing these rupa-kalapas is the first step of vipassana (insight) meditation.

It is important to note that the entirety of the Pa-Auk method is meticulously based on writings from the Pāli Canon and/or the Visuddhimagga. Pa-Auk Sayadaw and his students place particular emphasis and importance on the Visuddhimagga. This is in stark contrast with the views of Ajahn Geoff, as we will see in the next chapter, who relies little on the Visuddhimagga but heavily on the Pāli Canon.

Chapter 3: Ajahn Geoff

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Ajahn Geoff) was born with the name Geoffrey DeGraff in 1949. DeGraff grew up in New York and Virginia, and went to Oberlin College, graduating in 1971 (Orloff, 1). He ordained as a monk in Thailand in 1976, and established the Metta Forest Monastery in San Diego County in 1991 where he is still the abbot today (Orloff, 1). Ajahn Geoff is a prolific author and translator, and nearly every day delivers two short Buddhist sermons (called Dhamma talks) at his monastery in California. The mealtime talk is usually about 5 minutes long, and the nighttime talk is about 15 minutes long. These talks are recorded, and talks that he has given going back to the year 2000 are available online at Ṭhānissaro.dhammatalks.org. There are thousands of talks accessible on the site. The topics of the talks range from straightforward meditation instruction for beginners, to in-depth descriptions of the path to awakening.

Ajahn Geoff draws from three main sources in his books and in his talks. Those three sources are the Pāli Canon, Ajahn Geoff's meditation teacher Ajahn Fuang, and Ajahn Fuang's teacher Ajahn Lee. The Pāli Canon, as stated at the start of the previous chapter, is a canonical scripture containing what purports to be the words of the historical Buddha himself. The scripture is broken up into three sections. Those are the Vinaya Pitaka, the Suttanta Pitaka, and the Abhidhamma Pitaka. Pitaka is widely translated as 'basket', and the three sections together are often referred to as the Tipitaka or 'the three baskets'. The Vinaya contains the rules that the Buddha set up for the monks, the Suttas are the discourses of the Buddha, and the Abhidhamma breaks down the processes of the mind. Although Ajahn Geoff is a Vinaya scholar and has translated the Vinaya Pitaka with various revised editions and with copious notes, the citations that he most often

gives during his talks and in his books come from the Suttanta Pitaka. The suttas are written from the perspective of one of the enlightened disciples that was closest to the Buddha while he was alive, and often start with the phrase: “Thus have I heard...”. After this phrase, the ‘author’ (Ven. Ānanda) of the sutta then goes on to recite the Buddha’s words as he (the disciple) heard them. This background information on the Pāli Canon helps us understand why Ajahn Geoff thinks that the Canon, and specifically the suttas, are so authoritative and important. In Ajahn Geoff’s words, “I learned this practice in Thailand, and learned it in Thai. Maybe there are some disadvantages of having learned Pāli through Thai, but there are also some advantages that you wouldn’t get in a Buddhist culture that was heavily influenced by the Visuddhimagga. Thailand of the three main Theravadan countries is the least woven into the Visuddhimagga, or the least influenced by that point of view. From my point of view, I think it was very fortunate that the [Thai] Forest Tradition got its start at a time when the Canon was coming back into Thailand, but the commentarial tradition had not made its way back in again. *It’s sort of a more direct view of what the Buddha had to say without having to force it through the commentarial lens*” [emphasis added] (Interview, 25 minute mark).

This is in clear opposition to the teachings of Pa-Auk Sayadaw that we read about in the previous chapter.

In this chapter, we will be investigating Ajahn Geoff’s teachings on jhāna, and how they differ from those of Pa-Auk Sayadaw. I will be relying heavily on Ajahn Geoff’s book *With Each and Every Breath*, which describes the meditation technique that he teaches in great detail. As Ajahn Geoff tells us in the introduction to this book,

“The meditation technique described here is drawn from two sources. The first source is the Buddha’s set of instructions on how to use the breath in training the mind.

These instructions are found in the Pāli Canon, the oldest extant record of the Buddha's teachings. As the Canon states, the Buddha found the breath to be a restful meditation topic—both for body and mind—as well as an ideal topic for developing mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. In fact, it was the topic he himself used on the path to his awakening. That's why he recommended it to more people and taught it in more detail than any other topic of meditation.

The second source is a method of breath meditation developed in the last century by Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, a master of a branch of Buddhism known in Thailand as the Wilderness [or Forest] Tradition. Ajaan Lee's method builds on the Buddha's instructions, explaining in detail many of the points that the Buddha left in a condensed form. I trained in this technique for ten years under Ajaan Fuang Jotiko, one of Ajaan Lee's students, so some of the insights here come from my training with Ajaan Fuang as well" (Tānissaro, 5, 6).

It is important to stress again here that Ajahn Geoff does not look to the Visuddhimagga for authoritative instruction. In an interview with Richard Shankman, Ajahn Geoff said of the Visuddhimagga "where do the commentaries get their seal of approval? They're just one scholastic tradition that you can take into consideration, but there's no guarantee that the scholars got it right. The only real authority you have in cases like this is the honesty of the individual practitioner. You have to be honest with yourself as to what results you're getting out of your practice, where there's still suffering, and what further work still needs to be done [to put an end to suffering]" (Shankman, 118).

Ajahn Geoff's take fits with that of his teacher's teacher, Ajahn Lee, who in his book *Frames of Reference* wrote that he believed that "the Dhamma exists in nature" and that "nature is the teacher", not the scripture (Ajahn Lee, 1). He was constantly reminded of "Lord Buddha and his disciples. They studied and learned from the principles of nature. None of them followed a textbook" (Ajahn Lee, 1).

Having said that, Ajahn Geoff arguably has strong command of the Canon. In a phone interview with me on March 9, 2015 Ajahn Geoff cited "Anguttara 10" off the top

of his head to prove a point that he was trying to make about how samatha and vipassana are two qualities that one brings to their meditation practice, rather than two separate meditation practices (Interview, March 9). Ajahn Geoff thinks that this point about ‘different qualities’ versus ‘different practices’ is a big difference between how jhāna is portrayed in the Pāli Canon, versus how jhāna is portrayed in the Visuddhimagga. As Ajahn Geoff put it in the interview, “It’s possible in terms of the Canon that yes you can have some vipassana going on in your jhāna. It’s not just pure samatha.” (17 minutes, 30 seconds) [emphasis added]. This directly contradicts the beliefs of Pa-Auk Sayadaw and his students that vipassana is not a part of jhāna practice at all.

Here, to illustrate his point, Ajahn Geoff cited Anguttara 10. Upon some investigation, I found that the Kankha Sutta in the Anguttara Nikaya in the Suttana Pitakka at (10:71) says:

“If a monk would wish, ‘May I attain—whenever I want, without strain, without difficulty—the four jhānas that are heightened mental states, pleasant abidings in the here & now,’ then he should be one who brings the precepts to perfection, who is committed to inner tranquility of awareness [samatha], who doesn’t neglect jhāna, who is endowed with insight [vipassana], and who frequents empty dwellings.”

This quote seems ambiguous to me, but it is clear that Ajahn Geoff is firm in his conviction that samatha and vipassana are two components of jhāna. This paradigm of jhāna practice is totally different from that which is taught in the Pa-Auk method and described in the Visuddhimagga. Again, as we saw in the previous chapter, the Pa-Auk method stresses the division of samatha meditation and vipassana meditation into two different meditation practices, with only samatha meditation leading to jhāna, the Ajahn Geoff method stresses that tranquility and insight (samatha and vipassana) are necessary components of the jhānas. As Ajahn Geoff says himself in the interview with Shankman,

"...if you take the Canon on one side and the commentaries on the other, they are really talking about two very different things. When you read the descriptions of nimitta and of jhāna in the Canon, they're very different from the nimitta and the jhāna you find in the commentaries. The Visuddhimagga uses a very different paradigm for concentration from what you find in the Canon. ... why do the commentaries differ so radically? Nobody knows" (Shankman, 117).

This view that the Canon and the Visuddhimagga differ radically is the opposite of the view that Pa-Auk Sayadaw and his students hold. They believe that the Visuddhimagga merely clarifies what the Buddha said in the Canon (Conversation with Snyder, February 1, 2015)

All of this is important background information for understanding Ajahn Geoff's method, which he lays out in *With Each and Every Breath*. In that book, Ajahn Geoff starts by explaining that

"This technique is part of a comprehensive path of mind training that involves not only meditation but also the development of generosity and virtue. The basic approach in each part of this training is the same: to understand all your actions as part of a chain of causes and effects, so that you can direct the causes in a more positive direction" (Ṭhānissaro, 6).

The idea here is that the yogi should train in being generous, and in abstaining from hurting other people and herself (Ṭhānissaro, 12). When a yogi approaches their life in this manner, the yogi will find that when it comes time to sit in meditation, the mind will be full of good feelings and happiness, rather than feelings of regret, fear, or the tight feeling that comes from stinginess. This view is similar to the views expressed in the writings of Pa-Auk Sayadaw, Snyder and Rasmussen, and the Visuddhimagga.

When this approach to life is well established, the yogi should sit down comfortably and train in concentration, i.e. jhāna. As Ajahn Geoff writes,

"The second aspect of the training is concentration. Concentration is the skill of keeping the mind centered on a single object, such as the breath, with a sense of ease, refreshment, and equanimity—equanimity being the ability to watch things without

falling under the sway of likes and dislikes. Attaining concentration requires developing three qualities of mind:

- Alertness—the ability to know what’s happening in the body and mind while it’s happening.
- Ardency—the desire and effort to abandon any unskillful [akusala] qualities that may arise in the mind, and to develop skillful [kusala] qualities in their place.
- Mindfulness—the ability to keep something in mind. In the case of breath meditation, this means remembering to stay with the breath and to maintain the qualities of alertness and ardency with every in-and-out breath.

When these three qualities become strong, they can bring the mind to a state of strong concentration called *jhāna*, or meditative absorption, which we will discuss in Part Four” (Ṭhānissaro, 12).

These three qualities of mind are emphasized in Ajahn Geoff’s method, but it is not clear whether or not the development of these qualities of mind are contained in Pa-Auk Sayadaw’s method (and they are certainly not emphasized in the same way). In Part Four, Ajahn Geoff goes more in depth into the practice of *jhāna*, and it is here that we see some clear differences from the Pa-Auk method.

“Traditionally, the first *jhāna* has five factors: directed thought, evaluation, singleness of preoccupation (the theme you’re focused on), rapture, and pleasure. The first three factors are the causes; the last two, the results. In other words, you don’t do rapture and pleasure. They come about when you do the first three factors well” (Ṭhānissaro, 103).

The definitions of the five *jhāna* factors that Ajahn Geoff uses are totally different from those that Pa-Auk Sayadaw uses. Here, the factors of *vitakka*, *vicāra*, and *ekaggatā* are translated as directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation. This is quite different than “applied thought and sustained thought”, and “one-pointedness of mind” (Pa-Auk, 55). We will see in a moment how these differences in defining a few terms have a huge impact on Ajahn Geoff’s meditation instructions.

The question is: why does Ajahn Geoff use the definitions that he does, and reject the Pa-Auk definitions? When I asked him this question in our interview, he responded,

“Well, with the evaluation and the directed thought, those are as straight as I

could make translations of how Ajahn Lee uses the terms. He has a section where he's talking about vicāra, and then in parentheses he gives a Thai term for it which is 'drong' which is basically when you're thinking about something and evaluating it. And then for vitakka he has 'drik' which means basically when you think of something, hold something in mind when the thought occurs to you. And those two terms I was specifically trying to get as close as I could to Ajahn Lee's meaning of the terms. Then when I started translating the Pāli, I looked around at how vitakka is used in the Canon both in the context of jhāna and outside of the context of jhāna and it fits, and especially with vicāra, with evaluation with thinking things through. The whole idea of vitakka as being applied thought and vicāra as being sustained thought, that comes very much from the Visuddhimagga way of looking at jhāna. And of course with that you can't do any thinking at all: it's just the applying a thought label to something and then just holding that sustaining it. That's why/where they came up with those ways of interpreting it.

Now there's one school of interpretation that says well vitakka and vicāra in the context of jhāna have very different meanings from what they would have in ordinary every day conversation, and the question is well why would the Buddha use them that way [in the Pāli Canon] without explaining that this is a special meaning of the term. This [interpretation] would make you wonder well, why would the Buddha be such a good teacher (chuckling) if he wasn't trying to make things clear?" (Interview, 23:00).

Here, Ajahn Geoff makes the assertion that the Visuddhimagga and the Pāli Canon are talking about two different ways of getting into 'jhāna'. On the one hand, the Pāli Canon asks the yogi to think and evaluate his or her way into jhāna, while on the other hand, the Visuddhimagga asks the yogi not to think at all, just to sustain the attention on a thought label (as we saw in the previous chapter).

So, what exactly does Ajahn Geoff think the Pāli Canon is instructing us to do when it talks about vitakka and vicāra? In *With Each and Every Breath*, Ajahn Geoff continues,

"In this case, directed thought means that you keep directing your thoughts to the breath. You don't direct them anywhere else. This is the factor that helps you stay concentrated on one thing.

"Evaluation [vicāra] is the discernment factor, and it covers several activities. You evaluate how comfortable the breath is, and how well you're staying with the breath. You think up ways of improving either your breath or the way you're focused on the breath; then you try them out, evaluating the results of your experiments. If they don't turn out well, you try to think up new approaches. If they do turn out well, you try to figure out how to get the most out of them. This last aspect of evaluation includes the act of spreading good breath energy into different parts of the body, spreading your

awareness to fill the body as well, and then maintaining that sense of full-body breath and full-body awareness. Evaluation also plays a role in fighting off any wandering thoughts that might arise: It quickly assesses the damage that would come to your concentration if you followed such thoughts, and reminds you of why you want to come back on topic. When the meditation is going well, evaluation has less work to do in this area and can focus more directly on the breath and the quality of your focus on the breath” (Ṭhānissaro, 103).

It is here that we see what a big difference simply changing a couple of definitions can make on a whole method of practice. While in the Pa-Auk method the yogi is instructed not to think at all, in the Ajahn Geoff method the yogi is instructed to do a whole lot of thinking, evaluating, spreading of both good breath energy and awareness in the whole body, etc.

Two more definitional distinctions are relevant here. The first is ‘the whole body of the breath’ versus ‘the breath in the whole body’, and the second is the definitions of ‘ekaggatā’. The first definitional distinction comes from a famous passage in the Maha-Satipatthana Sutta (the Great Frames of Reference Sutta/the Foundations of Mindfulness Sutta) which is a sutta in the Pāli Canon that contains instructions on meditation practice. In this sutta, there is a phrase that can be translated in two ways: sabbakāya patisamvedi. While on the one hand the Visuddhimagga interprets the ambiguous Pāli phrase as instructing the yogi to attend to ‘the whole body of the breath’ i.e. to the entirety of the breath at the tip of the nose (anapana region from last chapter), Ajahn Geoff interprets the phrase as one which instructs the yogi to attend to the breath in the whole body. Ajahn Geoff claims that this interpretation makes more sense in the context of the rest of the Canon, specifically in the context of a particular sutta (MN 119) which likens the process of getting the mind into first jhāna to the process of kneading moisture through a ball of bath-powder. Ajahn Geoff thinks that that metaphor is supposed to represent kneading

the pleasant sensations that come from attending to the breath in the whole body (moisture) *throughout* the whole body (the ball of bath-powder).

The definition of ekaggatā is similarly nuanced, with Pa-Auk’s camp on the side of defining it as ‘one pointedness’, while Ajahn Geoff defines it as “singleness of preoccupation” (Thānissaro, 104). To Ajahn Geoff,

“Singleness of preoccupation means two things: First, it refers to the fact that your directed thought and evaluation both stay with nothing but the breath. In other words, your preoccupation is single *in the sense that it’s the one thing you’re focused on*. Second, your preoccupation is single in the sense that one thing—the breath—fills your awareness. You may be able to hear sounds outside the body, but your attention doesn’t run to them. They’re totally in the background. (This point applies to all the jhānas, and can even apply to the formless attainments, although some people, on reaching the formless attainments, find that they don’t hear sounds)” (Thānissaro, 103) (emphasis added).

This definition is very different from the Pa-Auk, Visuddhimagga inspired definition that would say that your preoccupation is single *in the sense that your attention is on one point and one point only- at the point just below the nostrils where the air passes in and out of the nose*. This distinction gives rise to two very different ways of getting into jhāna. One side advocates for a singleness of preoccupation on the breath (or breath energy) in the whole body, the other side advocates for a one-pointed concentration on the point where the breath enters and leaves the nose.

As I stated earlier, some argue that the Pāli Canon and the Visuddhimagga are not different paradigms at all; rather, the Visuddhimagga makes clear what the Canon left vague. Stephen Snyder, author of *Practicing the Jhānas*, stated that in the time of the Buddha, everyone the Buddha was talking to knew what he meant when he said ‘go, do jhāna’. By the time the Visuddhimagga was written, how to get into jhāna had become un-clear, and the author of the Visuddhimagga, Buddhaghosa, had to clarify what the

Buddha had said (Conversation with Snyder, Feb 1, 2015).

Needless to say, this directly conflicts with Ajahn Geoff's assertion that the Visuddhimagga and the Canon are fundamentally two different paradigms that are talking about two different things, to the point where three fundamentally different definitions of three fundamentally important terms are warranted. Ajahn Geoff reasons that an influential English translation of the Visuddhimagga early on in the history of Buddhism coming to the West played a big role in the current general acceptance of the Visuddhimagga definitions and paradigm as being the dominant paradigm, even though the definitions don't make sense in the context of the Pāli Canon when read on its own (without the Visuddhimagga). As Ajahn Geoff said in his own words,

“The first real attempt to give a systematic set of definitions to all the terms was Ñanamoli's translation of the Visuddhimagga. Once that had been set out, the terms were defined in terms of how they are used in that text, and then they start getting applied back to the Canon. That had a huge influence right there. I came from a different background which was, you know, I learned this practice in Thailand, and learned it in Thai” (Interview, 25 minutes).

Whether the Visuddhimagga and the Pāli Canon actually are talking about two different things or not, it certainly is clear that there is fundamental disagreement in Theravadan circles over this fundamental practice of jhāna.

Ajahn Geoff continues with the exposition of what he understands to be the *real* way of practicing jhāna—what he believes to be the method taught by the historical Buddha himself. The following is an excerpt from the book that I hope will be instructive in displaying the paradigm that Ajahn Geoff is working with.

“When these three factors [vitakka, vicāra, and ekaggatā] are solid and skillful, rapture and pleasure arise. The word “rapture” here is a translation of a Pāli word—*pīti*—that can also mean refreshment. It's basically a form of energy and can be experienced in many ways: either as a quiet, still fullness in body and mind; or else as a moving energy, such as a thrill running through the body or waves washing over you. Sometimes it will

cause the body to move. With some people, the experience is intense; for others, it's gentler. This can, in part, be determined by how much your body is hungering for the energy. If it's really hungry, the experience will be intense. If not, the experience may hardly be noticeable. ... Pleasure is the sense of ease and well-being that come when the body feels soothed by the breath, and the mind is pleasurable interested in the work of the meditation. ... Instead, use your awareness of the breath and your powers of evaluation to allow—that's the operative word: allow—the feelings of rapture and pleasure to fill the body. When rapture and pleasure totally interpenetrate the body, they strengthen the singleness of your preoccupation with the whole-body breath" (Thānissaro, 106).

Here again, we see the distinction between Ajahn Geoff's method of developing singleness of preoccupation with the whole body and Pa-Auk Sayadaw's method of developing a one-pointed awareness of the point where the breath enters and leaves the nose.

"In this way, the activity of evaluation, instead of being an unfortunate unsteadiness in your concentration, actually strengthens it, so that the mind is ready to settle down more securely. ... You're simply allowing all the aspects of breath energy to connect. The connectedness is what allows them all to become full. The same principle applies to your awareness: You're not trying to create new awareness. You want your focused awareness simply to connect with your background awareness so that they form a solid, fully alert whole. As both the breath and the awareness come together in this way, you enter the second jhāna" (Thānissaro, 106).

Notice here that there is no mention of a nimitta, nor of a sudden 'snap' into jhāna. Ajahn Geoff has said of the nimitta that some people get one, some people don't, but that the nimitta is not necessary for jhāna. This is an important distinction from the Pa-Auk method.

"The second jhāna has three factors: singleness of preoccupation, rapture, and pleasure. As the breath and awareness become one, they begin to feel saturated. No matter how much you try to make them feel even more full, they can't fill any further. At this point, directed thought and evaluation have no further work to do. You can let them go. This allows the mind to enter an even stronger sense of oneness. ... It's as if, in the first jhāna, you were identifying with one part of your breath and one part of your awareness as you worked another part of the breath through another part of your awareness. Now those dividing lines are erased. Awareness becomes one, the breath becomes one, and both become one with each other. Another analogy is to think of the mind as the lens of a camera. In first jhāna, the focal point is located in front of the lens. In the second, it moves into the lens itself. This sense of oneness is maintained through

all the remaining jhānas and formless states up through the level known as the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness (see below)” (Ṭhānissaro, 106).

This description is distinct from the Pa-Auk method in that there is no mention of ‘jhāna masteries’ being required before moving from one jhāna to the next, rather the process seems less structured and more natural.

“Here in the second jhāna, both the pleasure and the rapture become more prominent, but there’s no need to consciously spread them through the body. They spread on their own. The rapture, though, is a moving energy. Although it may feel extremely refreshing to begin with, it can ultimately become tiresome.

When that happens, try to refine the focus of your attention to a level of breath energy that’s not affected by the movements of rapture. You might think of it as tuning your radio from one station playing loud music to another playing softer music. Even though the radio waves of both stations can exist in the same place, the act of tuning-in to one enables you to tune-out the other. When you can stay with that more refined level of energy, you enter the third jhāna.

The third jhāna has two factors: singleness of preoccupation and pleasure. The sense of pleasure here feels very still in the body. As it fills the body, there’s no sense that you’re filling the body with moving breath energy. Instead, you’re allowing the body to be filled with a solid, still energy. People have also described this breath as “resilient” or “steely.” There is still a subtle sense of the flow of the breath around the edges of the body, but it feels like the movement of water vapor around an ice cube, surrounding the ice but not causing it to expand or contract. Because the mind doesn’t have to deal with the movement of the breath energy, it can grow more settled and still. It too becomes more solid and equanimous in the presence of the bodily pleasure. As the mind gets even more centered and still in this way, it enters the fourth jhāna” (Ṭhānissaro, 106).

Again, the flow from one jhāna to the next is described as very natural and intuitive, with there seeming to be a natural progression to the practice.

“The fourth jhāna has two factors: singleness of preoccupation and equanimity. At this point, even the subtle movement of the in-and-out breath falls still. There are no waves or gaps in the breath energy. Because the mind is so still, the brain is converting less oxygen into carbon dioxide, so the chemical sensors in the brain feel no need to tell the body to breathe. The oxygen that the body absorbs passively is enough to provide for its needs. Awareness fills the body, breath fills the body, breath fills awareness: This is singleness of preoccupation in full. It’s also the point in concentration practice where mindfulness becomes pure: There are no lapses in your ability to remember to stay with the breath. Because both the mind and the breath are still, equanimity becomes pure as well. The mind is at total equilibrium” (Ṭhānissaro, 106).

The fourth jhāna is marked by the cessation of the in and out breath. This fact will

be important later.

By now, it should be clear that there are big differences between Ajahn Geoff's method and Pa-Auk Sayadaw's method. There is also a question as to whether there really is a difference between the paradigm that the Pāli Canon is based on, and the paradigm that the Visuddhimagga follows. Perhaps there are even differences between Thai meditation practice in general and Burmese meditation practice in general? Certainly it is true that Burmese teachers almost universally make the samatha meditation/vipassana meditation distinction, and also rely heavily on the Visuddhimagga. Perhaps one form of concentration really is 'right', and the other is 'wrong'? Ajahn Geoff seems to think that this may be the case, for under the heading "Wrong Concentration", Ajahn Geoff writes

"The state of non-perception comes about from making your focus extremely one-pointed and so refined that it refuses to settle on or label even the most fleeting mental objects. You drop into a state in which you lose all sense of the body, of any internal or external sounds, or of any thoughts or perceptions at all. There's just enough tiny awareness to let you know, when you emerge, that you haven't been asleep. You can stay there for many hours, and yet time passes very quickly. Two hours can seem like two minutes. You can also program yourself to come out at a particular time.

This state does have its uses—as when you're in severe pain and want some respite from it. As long as you recognize that it's not right concentration or release, the only danger is that you may decide that you like hiding out there so much that you don't want to do the work needed to go further in the practice" (Ṭhānissaro, 109).

It seems that Ajahn Geoff may be taking a stab at the Pa-Auk method here, although Ajahn Geoff's description of what happens when you make your focus extremely one-pointed does not match up with Pa-Auk Sayadaw's students description of what happens when you make your focus extremely one-pointed. This stab, and responses and counter-attacks to these claims by Stephen Snyder and others will further be taken up in the conclusion (among other important topics). For now, we turn our

attention to the meditation method of Ajahn Chah, the third of the great jhāna teachers of our time whose teachings we will investigate.

Chapter 4: Ajahn Chah

Ajahn Chah was born in northeast Thailand in 1918, and died in 1992. Ajahn Chah was a novice monk for three years in his youth, and then in 1939 at the age of 20, was fully ordained as a Bhikkhu (Evans, 3). Ajahn Chah stayed in a village monastery studying texts and learning Pāli for several years, and in 1946 left the village monastery and walked to central Thailand, becoming a Tudong or Forest monk for the first time (Evans, 3). Tudong monks wander around the forests, visit forest monasteries, and devote themselves primarily to meditation (Evans, 3). After years of doing Tudong practice, he eventually founded Wat Nong Pah Pong in 1954 in northeast Thailand (Wat Nong Pah Pong Official Site). Word of Ajahn Chah's teaching ability spread, and in 1966, a man from England who had ordained as a Theravadan monk at a different Thai monastery came to live at Wat Nong Pah Pong. After this first westerner arrived, more westerners arrived, and Ajahn Chah started to become increasingly popular with westerners and, eventually, increasingly popular in the west. Subsequently, many of Ajahn Chah's talks were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English.

In one of these talks, titled *On Meditation* published in the book *A Taste of Freedom* (translated by Puriso; Bruce Evans), Ajahn Chah describes the meditation practice that leads the yogi into jhāna. Ajahn Chah neither directly cites the Pāli Canon nor the commentaries, and neither describes attending to the breath in the whole body (as Ajahn Geoff does) nor does he make a definite distinction between samatha practice and vipassana practice (as Pa-Auk Sayadaw does). Rather, his approach seems to be something of the combination of the two paradigms discussed above, which we will see

when we consider the excerpts from this talk, which we will begin to examine here.

Ajahn Chah starts the exposition of his method with a simple instruction.

“When we breathe in, the beginning of the breath is at the nose-tip, the middle of the breath at the chest, the end of the breath at the abdomen. This is the path of the breath. Simply take note of this path of the breath... We take note of these three points to make the mind firm.” (Evans, 14)

Here we see that the first step is to note the path of the breath. In doing so, the yogi narrows her focus down to just her experience of breathing.

“When our attention settles on these three points, we can let them go and note the in and out breathing, concentrating solely at the nose-tip or the upper lip, where the air passes on its in and out passage. We don’t have to follow the breath, we just establish mindfulness in front of us, and note the breath at this one point- entering, leaving, entering, leaving.” (Evans, 15)

This step sounds like something that Pa-Auk Sayadaw’s method for samatha meditation would have the yogi do. The passage in the Pāli Canon that Ajahn Geoff thinks instructs the yogi to ‘attend to the breath in the whole body’, but which was interpreted by the Visuddhimagga as ‘attend to the full body of the breath at one point’ that we discussed earlier seems to have been understood by Ajahn Chah in the way that the Visuddhimagga (and Pa-Auk Sayadaw) understands it.

“There’s no need to think of anything special, just concentrate on this simple task for now, having continual presence of mind. There’s nothing more to do, just breathe in and breathe out. Soon the mind becomes peaceful, the breath refined. The mind and body become light. This is the right state for the work of meditation.

“When sitting in meditation the mind becomes refined, but whatever state it is in we should try to be aware of it, to know it. Mental activity is there together with tranquility. There is vitakka. Vitakka is the action of bringing the mind to the theme of contemplation. If there is not much mindfulness, then there will not be much vitakka. Then vicāra, the contemplation around that theme, follows.” (Evans, 15)

We must note three things here. The first is the absence of any description of the nimitta (the disk of light that, according to the Pa-Auk teachings, we are hard-wired to see when we focus our attention on the breath at the tip of the nose). In fact, the nimitta is

not mentioned once in the whole book *A Taste of Freedom* except for in the glossary of Pāli words at the back.

The second thing that we must note is the fact that the definitions/ translations/ understandings that the translator employs for vitakka and vicāra are very close to those employed by Ajahn Geoff, and far off from those utilized in the Pa-Auk paradigm. Vicāra in particular in this passage is notably different from vicāra in the Pa-Auk method, as in that method it is translated and understood as ‘sustained thought’. To what extent Ajahn Chah defined vitakka and vicāra when he was giving this talk, and to what extent the definitions of the translator (Bhikkhu Puriso; Bruce Evans) were imposed on Ajahn Chah’s words, I do not know. We will come back to this question later in this chapter, as Ajahn Geoff has some things to say on the subject.

The third thing we must note is that vitakka and vicāra are not things that we *do*; they are not causes that give rise to pīti and sukha. Rather, they are mental activities that we can become aware of as happening in the mind when we simply have continual presence of mind on the point at the tip of the nose where the breath enters and leaves the nostrils. This is very different from Ajahn Geoff’s method, where vitakka and vicāra (directed thought and evaluation by Ajahn Geoff’s translations) are both activities that we do to get into the first jhāna, and also characteristics of the first jhāna itself. (It should be noted here that sometimes, Ajahn Geoff describes the process of how alertness, ardency and mindfulness, when they become very strong, naturally turn into the three jhāna factors of vitakka, vicāra and ekaggatā when the yogi enters into jhāna). It is also different from Pa-Auk Sayadaw’s method, because he instructs yogis to apply the thought

to the anapana spot, and then sustain the thought there. Here already, we see practical differences in Ajahn Chah's method.

“To have a peaceful mind does not mean that there's nothing happening, mental impressions do arise. For instance, when we talk about the first level of absorption, we say it has five factors. Along with vitakka and vicāra, pīti (rapture) arises with the theme of contemplation and the sukha (happiness). These four things all lie together in the mind established in tranquility. They are as one state.

“The fifth factor is ekaggatā or one-pointedness. You may wonder how there can be one-pointedness when there are all these other factors as well. This is because they all become unified on that foundation of tranquility. Together they are called a state of samādhi. They are not everyday states of mind, they are factors of absorption. There are these five characteristics, but they do not disturb the basic tranquility. There is vitakka, but it does not disturb the mind; vicāra, rapture and happiness arise but do not disturb the mind. The mind is therefore as one with these factors. The first level of absorption is like this (Evans, 15).

Here, ekaggatā is translated as Pa-Auk Sayadaw would translate it, not how Ajahn Geoff would translate it. However, while Pa-Auk Sayadaw thinks that ekaggatā means a one-pointed focus on the anapana *spot* (at the tip of the nose), Ajahn Chah seems to think that the one-pointedness is in reference to the mind's unity of the other four factors with the tranquility of mind. Perhaps a more careful reader might disagree with me on this point, but this is how I understand this passage. Both of these understandings of ekaggatā are different from Ajahn Geoff's understanding, which is that ekaggatā is singleness of preoccupation on the theme of contemplation, which to Ajahn Geoff would be the breath in the whole body in general.

“We don't have to call it first jhāna, second jhāna, third jhāna and so on, let's just call it 'a peaceful mind'. As the mind becomes progressively calmer, it will dispense with vitakka and vicāra, leaving only rapture and happiness. Why does the mind discard vitakka and vicāra? This is because, as the mind becomes more refined, the activities of vitakka and vicāra are too coarse to remain. At this stage, as the mind leaves off vitakka and vicāra, feelings of great rapture can arise, tears may gush out. But as the samādhi deepens, rapture too is discarded, leaving only happiness and one-pointedness, until finally even happiness goes and the mind reaches its greatest refinement. There are only equanimity and one-pointedness, all else has been left behind. The mind stands unmoving.

Once the mind is peaceful this can happen. You don't have to think about it, it just happens by itself when the causal factors are ripe. This is called the energy of a peaceful mind" (Evans, 16).

The natural quality by which the mind descends further and further into jhāna is reminiscent of Ajahn Geoff's method, but the fact that Ajahn Chah says that the mind becomes progressively calmer by itself when the causal factors are ripe starkly distinguishes his method from what Ajahn Geoff teaches. Ajahn Geoff teaches that discernment (vipassana or insight) is what allows the mind to get into deeper and deeper stages of concentration, and that discernment is something that the mind does. It doesn't just happen on its own. Vipassana (discernment) and samatha (tranquility) are linked in this way.

However, it seems that Ajahn Chah would agree with Ajahn Geoff on this point that samatha and vipassana are linked in the practice. As Ajahn Chah says in *In Body & Mind*, a talk transcribed and translated by Ajahn Geoff in his book *Still, Flowing Water*,

"As for practicing vipassanā, that's the same as practicing concentration. In some places they say, "Now we're doing concentration, and only later will we do vipassanā. Right now we're doing tranquility meditation." That kind of thing. Don't put them far away from each other that way. Tranquility is the source of discernment; discernment, the fruit of tranquility. It's not that now you're going to do tranquility, and later you're going to do vipassanā. You can't really separate them out that way. They're separate only in name. They're like a machete: The edge of the blade is on one side; the back of the blade is on the other. You can't separate them. If you pick up just the handle, both the edge of the blade and the back of the blade come along with it. They don't lie anywhere else" (Chah and Ṭhānissaro, 68).

(It may be of interest to the reader to continue reading the full context of this quote in Appendix A). This view on the interconnectivity of samatha and vipassana that Ajahn Geoff and Ajahn Chah seem to share is clearly distinct from the understanding of the Pa-Auk method, and different too from how the Visuddhimagga separates samatha and vipassana into totally different meditation practices.

In this exposition so far, we have seen how Ajahn Chah's meditation method and understanding of jhāna is both similar to and different from both Pa-Auk Sayadaw's understanding of jhāna and Ajahn Geoff's understanding of jhāna in several ways. Some of these differences, however, hinge on questions of translation.

It is of interest that Ajahn Geoff is very opinionated when it comes to the reliability of the transcriptions and translations of Ajahn Chah's talks that Ajahn Chah's western students transcribed and translated. As Ajahn Geoff put it, "There was a lot of editing that went on when they were first doing the transcriptions and doing the translations of Ajahn Chah. I think there was a concern that 'there are parts of Ajahn Chah that westerners wouldn't understand, so let's just leave them out for the time being'. And then they just got left out" (Thānissaro, 26:48).

Indeed, I found a passage in a 1987 translation of '*A Still Forest Pool: The Insight Meditation of Achaan Chah*', (the very title of which implies that Ajahn Chah distinguishes vipassana (insight) meditation from samatha meditation) which was compiled and edited by Jack Kornfield and Paul Breiter that seems to directly contradict the passage above that Ajahn Geoff translated about not making a distinction between samatha mediation and vipassana meditation. In an introduction to a talk titled '*The Essence of Vipassana: Observing Your Mind*' (again, the very title of which would suggest a distinction between samatha meditation and vipassana mediation) the authors say "however, absorption is not the goal of the practice as taught by Achaan Chah, even though for some it may arise naturally in the course of meditation. Students are instructed to use the concentration and stillness they develop through mindfulness of breathing to aid in the second aspect of their practice. Once the mind is somewhat quiet and focused,

one is instructed to begin to examine the workings of the mind and body [i.e. do vipassana meditation] (Kornfield and Breiter, 77) To what extent are the teachers forcing Ajahn Chah's teachings through a Visuddhimagga-influenced lens, and to what extent did Ajahn Chah himself follow the teachings of the commentaries? The answer is uncertain in my view, but Ajahn Geoff certainly has a strong opinion on the matter.

Further on this point, as we saw above, the translations of the jhāna factors that the western disciples of Ajahn Chah used in their translations of the talks differ from the translations of the jhāna factors that Ajahn Geoff uses, especially in the case of ekaggatā. Ajahn Geoff translates vitakka, vicāra and ekaggatā as directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation, whereas the translator of *A Taste of Freedom* (Bruce Evans) translates them as 'the action of bringing the mind to the theme of contemplation', 'contemplation around that theme', and 'one-pointedness'. Ajahn Geoff believes that the discrepancy between the translations occurs because, "Those [translations that the western disciples used] were regarded as the standard translations at the time, and the monks who were involved in the project didn't want to introduce any new alternative translations because they thought, you know, people would look down on them. I was a little bit more adventuresome in that area, I figured I'd learned something here in this tradition and I thought it was really valuable. I wanted to get it across as clearly as I can and as accurately as I can, in terms of how say Ajahn Lee and Ajahn Fuang would have understood the terms as well" (Ṭhānissaro, 30:20).

The implication here is that perhaps had the monks and translators been a little more adventuresome and been willing to translate the terms in the way that Ajahn Chah had understood them, rather than in accord with the standard (Visuddhimagga influenced)

translations at the time, then perhaps the jhāna factors would have been translated as Ajahn Geoff translates them, and Ajahn Chah’s method would not look very different from Ajahn Geoff’s method in that way.

These differences in translation would not account for why Ajahn Chah instructs the yogi to direct their attention to the breath at the nose-tip rather than in the whole body, or why Ajahn Chah says that the samādhi deepens by itself when the causal factors are ripe, which could be reason to believe that Ajahn Chah’s method is more different from Ajahn Geoff’s method than Ajahn Geoff thinks it is.

It is interesting to note here that Ajahn Chah talks about three different levels of samādhi regularly discussed in the Visuddhimagga- kanika samādhi, upacara samādhi, and apana samādhi (see appendix B for Ajahn Chah’s description of what these are). As Ajahn Geoff says himself, “Ok, those words do not appear in the canon. At least not in the suttas. They’re terms you find in the commentaries” (Ṭhānissaro, 18:40). Wouldn’t Ajahn Chah’s tendency to talk about these three kinds of samādhi imply that he was going off of the Visuddhimagga? Again, Ajahn Geoff has a response for why Ajahn Chah would use those terms, but not be doing so in accord with the paradigm of the Visuddhimagga. The reasoning is that Ajahn Chah uses those terms “because the terms are there. This is something you find throughout the forest tradition – that they didn’t really agree with the scholarly monks on all the definitions of the terms, but given the fact that the terms are there in the society they had to use them. They had to have some sort of way of integrating them into their analysis of what was involved in the practice” (19:50). The claim here is that the famous Ajahns had to be flexible with their vocabulary, and define words that were present in the vernacular of the day.

All in all, Ajahn Chah's understanding of jhāna is different from Ajahn Geoff's understanding in some ways, and is different from Pa-Auk system in some ways. These facts, and the interplay between the three systems will be discussed further in the next chapter, the conclusion.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

As we have seen, the three teachers differ significantly when it comes to jhāna practice. Here is a quick summary of those differences. As we saw, Pa-Auk Sayadaw relies heavily on the Visuddhimagga, Ajahn Geoff relies solely on the Pāli Canon, and Ajahn Chah is somewhere in the middle. Pa-Auk Sayadaw divides samatha meditation and vipassana meditation into two separate practices, while Ajahn Geoff and Ajahn Chah do not. Ajahn Geoff instructs the yogi to pay attention to the breath in their whole physical body, while Pa-Auk Sayadaw and Ajahn Chah instruct the yogi to pay attention to the breath at the tip of the nose. Pa-Auk Sayadaw teaches (and emphasizes) kasina practice, while Ajahn Geoff and Ajahn Chah do not. Pa-Auk Sayadaw and Ajahn Chah define ekaggatā as ‘one pointedness’, while Ajahn Geoff defines it as ‘singleness of preoccupation’. Pa-Auk Sayadaw defines vitakka and vicāra as ‘applied thought and sustained thought’, Ajahn Geoff defines those terms as ‘directed thought and evaluation’, and Ajahn Chah is somewhere in the middle. Pa-Auk Sayadaw and Ajahn Chah use the terms ‘kanika samādhi, upacara samādhi, and apana samādhi’, while Ajahn Geoff does not. Pa-Auk Sayadaw emphasizes the necessity of the arising of the nimitta for entrance into jhāna, while Ajahn Geoff does not, and there is some ambiguity as to whether Ajahn Chah does or not.

This question of where Ajahn Chah stands on the question of the nimitta is an interesting one. Ajahn Brahm, one of Ajahn Chah’s long-term students (9 years, 1974-1983), emphasizes that the presence of the nimitta is necessary for entrance into jhāna (Who is Ajahn Brahm; Ajahn Brahm, 149). Considering that Ajahn Brahm was one of Ajahn Chah’s students, and presumably learned meditation from Ajahn Chah, one would

think that he learned this technique from Ajahn Chah. However, Ajahn Chah does not often talk about the nimitta in his dhamma talks or books. Some digging turned up one single dhamma talk, called *Evening Sitting*, in which Ajahn Chah talks about the nimitta.

In this talk, he says:

“So it might be that you are just sitting there and there's no breath. Really, the breath is still there, but it has become so refined that it seems to have disappeared. Why? Because the mind is at its most refined, with a special kind of knowing. All that remains is the knowing. Even though the breath has vanished, the mind is still concentrated with the knowledge that the breath is not there. As you continue, what should you take up as the object of meditation? Take this very knowing as the meditation object - in other words the knowledge that there is no breath - and sustain this. You could say that a specific kind of knowledge has been established in the mind.

“At this point, some people might have doubts arising, because it is here that *nimitta* can arise. These can be of many kinds, including both forms and sounds. It is here that all sorts of unexpected things can arise in the course of the practice. If *nimitta* do arise (some people have them, some don't) you must understand them in accordance with the truth. Don't doubt or allow yourself to become alarmed.

“At this stage, you should make the mind unshakeable in its concentration and be especially mindful. Some people become startled when they notice that the breath has disappeared, because they're used to having the breath there. When it appears that the breath has gone, you might panic or become afraid that you are going to die. Here you must establish the understanding that it is just the nature of the practice to progress in this way. What will you observe as the object of meditation now? Observe this feeling that there is no breath and sustain it as the object of awareness as you continue to meditate. The Buddha described this as the firmest, most unshakeable form of *samādhi*.” (*Evening Sitting*, 1) [emphasis added]

Here we see that in at least one instance, Ajahn Chah taught that some people get a nimitta, and some don't. It remains unclear whether Ajahn Chah taught Ajahn Brahm the method that he teaches today which emphasizes the nimitta.

We also see that Ajahn Chah talks about a point in the meditation when the in and out breath stops. As we saw in chapter 3 of this present thesis, Ajahn Geoff holds that the in and out breath only stops when the mind enters the fourth jhāna. Surprisingly, Pa-Auk Sayadaw agrees with him on this point, as he says “with the attainment of the fourth jhāna, the breath stops completely” (*Knowing and Seeing*, 58).

However in Ajahn Chah's system (and Ajahn Brahm's system) the nimitta only arises when the breath stops (Evening Sitting, 1; Brahm, 137). To Ajahn Brahm (and Pa-Auk Sayadaw), the arising of the nimitta comes prior to the *first* jhāna. However, as we see in this passage above of Ajahn Chah's, it is ambiguous whether Ajahn Chah is claiming that this "firmest, most unshakable form of samādhi" that the Buddha described is the fourth jhāna, or apana (as opposed to kanika or upacara) samādhi. To make things even more complex, Ajahn Geoff stated in our interview that even his teacher's teacher, Ajahn Lee, was not entirely clear on this point. As Ajahn Geoff said, "Some of the forest Ajahns will talk about it, you know, Ajahn Lee talks about them [kanika, upacara, and apana samādhi] quite a bit, and there's a question of even does apana start with the first jhāna or does it start with the fourth jhāna, and in one of his books he classes the first jhāna as apana and all your other concentration efforts up to that as kanika and upacara. Then there's another one where he says that the first jhāna through the third is upacara and the fourth is apana samādhi." (Interview, 18:45). In short, there is some disagreement here about whether the breath stops in first jhāna or fourth jhāna between Ajahn Brahm on the one hand and Pa-Auk Sayadaw and Ajahn Geoff on the other, with some ambiguity as to where Ajahn Chah stands. There is also some ambiguity as to where Ajahn Geoff stands when it comes to whether apana concentration starts with the first jhāna (as Pa-Auk Sayadaw holds) or whether apana concentration starts with the fourth jhāna (which may or may not be the position of both Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Lee). This leads us nicely into a look at how these sorts of disagreements turn slowly into the banter that we see flying around between practitioners of the three methods.

Stephen Snyder, who was certified to teach by Pa-Auk Sayadaw, holds that there is only one set of jhānas, which was laid out generally in the Pāli Canon and then expanded upon and clarified by the Visuddhimagga (Snyder Interview). He also holds that a nimitta is necessary for entry into the first jhāna (Snyder Interview). It follows from this that (if there is no nimitta, then) Ajahn Geoff is really getting into jhāna, or teaching people to get into jhāna. Snyder does not explicitly make this assertion, but if he were to, Ajahn Geoff would probably find the assertion to be laughable or insulting.

Next, we see how disagreement turns into banter. In response to a question about whether these sorts of practical differences matter, Ajahn Geoff said in our interview:

I must admit my own personal feeling is you know, the people I've heard of coming from the Pa-Auk tradition who are certified this certified that, I look at them and say 'Nah, I'm sorry this doesn't cut it from my perspective'. And I'm sure they look at us, I mean we had monks coming from Burma back in those days, (here we're talking about the mid-eighties), where it was very difficult to stay in Burma for any length of time. If you were going to study there [in Burma] you had to come out and spend your time in Thailand for a bit, and they'd all been told you know 'don't study with any Thai teachers, Thai teachers don't know the Dharma at all, they don't know the Visuddhimagga, they don't know the Abbidhamma, and so then when they would be reading say Ajahn Maha Bua or Ajahn Lee they would kind of just brush it off.' (See full context in Appendix C) (Interview, 43:43).

To be fair here, Ajahn Geoff may have mis-spoke. He may have been confusing the Mahasi teachers who are 'certified awakened' with the Pa-Auk students who are certified 'this or that', (see Appendix C) but still, it is clear that Ajahn Geoff doesn't like the Pa-Auk method, and is prepared to return a perceived insult with an insult. When asked whether the Pa-Auk method was right concentration, he replied, "It's hard to tell, because there's something about the people I've met who do the Pa-Auk method that I get turned off by. I haven't really explored their method much. ... I can't really tell you about where they're going, but meeting the people I think 'ugh, something's wrong

here”’. (Interview, 1:09:05) Just as an aside, here Ajahn Geoff is likely referring to one person that he met who had experimented with Kasina practice to the point where he couldn’t tell whether his thoughts were coming out of his mouth or not, and two others (Interview, 12:42).

On the one hand, students of the Pa-Auk method will say things like “oh the Thais... They don’t get into as deep states of concentration as the Burmese” and “the Pa-Auk method is harder than the Thai method, which means you concentrate more, so you get into deeper states of concentration” whereas students of the Ajahn Geoff method will say things like “ah, well the lay teachers in the Pa-Auk method (like Snyder and Rasmussen) charge money for their teachings, which is something that authentic teachers of the Dharma don’t do” (anonymous in person and phone interviews). A lay lady that I met at Amaravati, a Buddhist monastery in the lineage of Ajahn Chah, explained to me that someone had explained to her that the Pa-Auk method was quite new, and that it was a social product of British colonialism. The British liked structure and levels, and the Pa-Auk system, with all its different tasks and hoops and the graded nature of it all smacked heavily of British colonialism. This British influence makes the Burmese method seem impure, and not really what the Buddha taught. There are lots of gentle insults and quiet attacks that get thrown around between the students of the three methods.

We see clearly here that within Theravadan Buddhism, there exist clear disagreements over which teachings are the authentic, true teachings, and over which teachings are misguided or plain wrong. These disagreements can easily lead both to insults and to an entrenched feeling of self-righteousness. As I suggested in the

introduction, I think that we can use this lens to learn something about the big picture of Buddhism as a whole.

The small-picture that we have examined here tells us about the nature of some of the disagreements within Theravadan Buddhism. I would like to suggest that this small-picture can also tell us about the nature of some of the disagreements in Buddhism in general. In the same way that devout practitioners from the Pa-Auk, Geoff, and Chah schools of thought believe that they themselves have the right teachings and practices, devout practitioners from Vajrayana, Mahayana, and Theravadan schools of thought similarly believe that *they themselves* have the right teachings and follow the right practices. Indeed, this is an unavoidable part about being a devout practitioner of any religious tradition—after all, if you did not believe that your teachers, practices, and school are ‘right’, then why would you identify as being a devout practitioner of that school? Unfortunately, to call one’s own tradition (Buddhist or otherwise) ‘right’ is to call all other traditions ‘wrong’. This leads to insults, disrespect, and sometimes, war!

Having said that, deep down people don’t want war, and it is not uncommon to attempt to move past these sorts of disagreements by saying that all religions, sects and practices are right (religious pluralism or relativism), wrong (materialism or atheism), or ‘who knows!’ (agnosticism). There are good reasons for believing any one of these doctrines, but the problem surfaces again when the atheists insult the pluralists, the pluralists argue with the agnostics, and the agnostics challenge both the pluralists and the atheists to show how exactly they know that their beliefs are true *for sure*. This is why I like the old adage: ‘he who holds to a position holds the wrong position’, or as Ajahn Chah said, ‘things are uncertain’.

...

At this point, we return to the original question that this thesis set out to answer. What *really* is jhāna, and how should we practice so that we *really* enter into a state of jhāna? In light of the fact that we now clearly see that there are at least three (Leigh Brasington, for example, presents a fourth, and Ajahn Brahm, discussed above, a fifth) different ways of defining jhāna and the methods of attaining it, we can approach this question in a couple different ways.

Option 1: Settle on one of the methods. We could go about this in one of two ways. Either we would define real jhāna as what the Buddha taught, or we would define real jhāna as what leads to the best results, and then decide which method best meets the criteria. Now, all three teachers claim that their method is what the Buddha really taught, and all three teachers claim that their method leads to the best results.

I think that we have no way of definitively settling the question of ‘what method of jhāna practice did the Buddha *really* teach’, absent a time-machine. This is debatable, but is simply the informed opinion that I have developed over the course of my research. However there could be potential for answering the question ‘what method of jhāna practice leads to the best results’. We are in luck in this venture, because this thesis explores both the different meditation methods of each of the teachers, and descriptions of the different results that come from each method.

From this lens, we might agree that the Pa-Auk method *sounds* the best given the descriptions in *Practicing the Jhānas*: un-equivocal bliss and rapture, born from focusing exclusively on a single point. This sounds more intense than the ‘peaceful mind’ that Ajahn Chah talks about, or the ‘ease and refreshment’ of Ajahn Geoff. However, this

point is highly debatable, and anyhow, shouldn't 'best results' be defined as 'nibbana' in this context? From this lens, we might note that Ajahn Geoff is the only teacher of the three (or five) that clearly describes the moments leading up to an experience of nibbana, and clearly describes how his method leads up to those moments. On the other hand, Ajahn Chah is the only teacher of the three with a student who is widely recognized to be an Arahant. This student is Ajahn Dtun, a Thai Monk who ordained under Ajahn Chah in the late 70s, and unfortunately, I don't have a citation. There is a citation from Stephen Snyder however that "Monastics are forbidden by the Monastic Code from discussing their meditative attainments. The Sayadaw adheres to the Monastic Code, [t]hus, no one knows what level of attain[ment] he has realized. The speculation among [s]ome of the senior lay students and benefactors is he is far along on the Theravadan stages of enlightenment" (Snyder Interview).

Here, we have reason to believe that all three methods lead to 'the best results', as defined as nibbana. But how could this be? All three methods are so different, how is it that following any one of them could lead to an experience of nibbana? This leads us to...

Option 2: Settle on the assertion that all of the methods are right methods, but right for different people with different temperaments. Perhaps different methods speak to different people, and we are lucky that we have so many different options to choose from when it comes to practices that still the mind into a peaceful state. It's not that what *jhāna really* is is different for different people, rather, different people have different opinions about what *jhāna really* is, and each of these opinions are to be respected as being the right conception of *jhāna* for each person. If all methods have been shown to lead to Theravadan enlightenment, then option 2 seems to be reasonable.

Intuitively, this makes sense to me. Different people will be attracted to different methods based on their psychology, dispositions, and exposure. The question as to whether one method is objectively right might be re-framed as ‘which method is right, *for you?*’

The problem here though is obviously that the Buddha didn’t teach two or three of these methods of getting into jhāna, he taught one. (‘And that’s the one that I do’, said everyone).

Option 3: Use *experience*, rather than testimony or theory, to arrive at a decision as to whether we should settle on option 1 or option 2. That is to say, if the reader of this thesis wants to make a judgment about which method is the *real* method, then the reader would do well to take up all of the methods, one at a time, and follow all the paths to their ends. Then, see through experience which one yields the best results. If all of them work, then the reader might affirm option 2 (that all are right), although with some hesitation. If only one of them worked, then we might affirm option 1 (that there is only one right path), although again, with some hesitation. We would hesitate because we might reasonably wonder: how would the reader be sure that it was not the case that something subjective about the reader, some disposition of *his/hers*, was either allowing him or her to experience enlightenment by using only one of the methods, or for that matter, allowing him/her to experience enlightenment using all of the methods. In that case, we could only say that one method/all of the methods was ‘right’ for the reader (subjectively), not right in general (objectively). Also, how could the reader really be sure that he/she had really experienced nibbana, and in addition, and as an aside, this option 3 would take an inordinate amount of time.

Now I admit, I was being a little facetious here in option 3. Obviously following just one of the three paths to their end is an incredibly difficult task that requires that one devote their whole life to the endeavor, and is not something that the average reader of this thesis is likely to do. There is some wisdom to be gained from option 3 though. A yogi seeking to understand jhāna would do well to experiment with the three different methods that are laid out in this thesis, and arrive at a personal conclusion about which practice they want to pursue.

In the end, the important thing is that we acknowledge and *ponder* the differences between the three methods, and move forward practicing in an informed and fruitful way that we are comfortable with. The purpose of this thesis is not, then, to settle the question once and for all about who has the *real* teachings. Rather, this work merely attempts to shed new light on distinctions and disagreements that often get brushed under the rug. This information is highly relevant to yogis who seek to understand and experiment with their samādhi.

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Appendix A: Excerpt from *Still, Flowing Water*, By Ajahn Chah, Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

“As for practicing vipassanā, that’s the same as practicing concentration. In some places they say, “Now we’re doing concentration, and only later will we do vipassanā. Right now we’re doing tranquility meditation.” That kind of thing. Don’t put them far away from each other that way. Tranquility is the source of discernment; discernment, the fruit of tranquility. It’s not that now you’re going to do tranquility, and later you’re going to do vipassanā. You can’t really separate them out that way. They’re separate only in name. They’re like a machete: The edge of the blade is on one side; the back of the blade is on the other. You can’t separate them. If you pick up just the handle, both the edge of the blade and the back of the blade come along with it. They don’t lie anywhere else.”

When there’s stillness, discernment arises right there in the stillness. See them as a single chunk of wood. Where do these things come from? They have a mother or father to give birth to them, you know, just as all of us have to come from a mother and father to be sitting here. Where does the Dhamma come from? Virtue is the mother and father of the Dhamma. In the beginning there has to be virtue. And this virtue is stillness—meaning that there’s no wrongdoing in terms of your body or mind. When there’s no wrongdoing, there’s no trouble because there’s no wrong. When there’s no trouble, stillness can arise. The mind gives rise to concentration right at the same time. This is why we’re taught that virtue, concentration, and discernment—the path by which the noble ones go to nibbāna—are all one and the same thing.

To put it even more briefly: Virtue, concentration, and discernment are one and the same thing—one and the same piece of Dhamma. Virtue is concentration; concentration is virtue. Concentration is discernment; discernment is concentration. It’s like a mango. When it’s still a flower, we call it a mango flower. When it’s a little fruit, we call it a baby mango. When it gets bigger, we call it a biggish mango. When it gets bigger and almost ripe, we call it a half-ripe mango. When it’s fully ripe, we call it a ripe mango. It’s all the same mango, simply that it keeps changing, changing, changing, changing. When it’s big, it’s big coming from little. When it’s little, it’s little heading for big. You could call it different mangos, or you could call it all the same mango. (Chah and Thānissaro, 68)

Appendix B: Excerpt from *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*, Ch. 36

“A further aspect of mental development that leads to clearer and deeper insight is meditating on an object to calm the mind down. Calm mind is the mind that is firm and stable in samādhi. This can be khanika samādhi, momentary concentration, upacara samādhi, neighborhood concentration or apana samādhi, absorption. The level of concentration is determined by the refinement of consciousness from moment to moment as you train the mind to maintain awareness on a meditation object. In khanika samādhi, momentary concentration, the mind unifies for just a short space of time. It calms down in samādhi, but having gathered together momentarily, immediately it withdraws from that peaceful state. As concentration becomes more refined in the course of meditation, many similar characteristics of a tranquil mind are experienced at each level. So each one is described as a level of samādhi, whether its khanika, upacara, or apana. At each level, the mind is calm. But the level of the samādhi varies, and the nature of the peaceful mental state differs. On one level the mind is still subject to movement and can wander, but moves around within the confines of the concentrated state. It doesn’t get caught in activity that leads to agitation and distraction. Your awareness might follow some wholesome mental object for a while, before returning to settle down at a point of stillness, where it remains for a period.

“You could compare the experience of khanika samādhi with a physical activity like taking a walk somewhere. You might walk for a period before stopping for a rest, and having rested, start walking again until its time to stop for another rest. Even though you interrupt the journey periodically to stop walking to take rests, each time remaining completely still, it’s only a temporary stillness of the body. After a short space of time, you have to start moving again to continue the journey. This is what happens within the mind as it experiences such a level of concentration. If you practice meditation focusing on an object to calm the mind and reach a level of calm where the mind is firmly in samādhi, but there is still some mental movement occurring, that’s known as upacara samādhi. In upacara samādhi, the mind can still move around. This movement takes place within certain limits. The mind doesn’t move beyond them. The boundaries within which the mind can move are determined by the firmness and stability of concentration. The experience is if you alternate between a state of calm, and a certain amount of mental activity. The mind is calm for some of the time, and active for the rest. Within that activity there is a certain level of calm and concentration that persists, but the mind is not completely still or immovable. It’s still thinking a little and wandering about. Its like you’re wandering around inside your own home. You wander around within the limits of your concentration. Without losing awareness and moving outdoors away from the meditation object, the movement of the mind stays within the bounds of the wholesome (kusala, wholesome mental states), it doesn’t get caught in any mental proliferation based on unwholesome or akusala mental states. Any thinking remains wholesome. Once the

mind is calm, it necessarily experiences wholesome mental states from moment to moment. During the time it's concentrated, the mind only experiences wholesome mental states and periodically settles down to become completely still and one pointed on its object. So, the mind still experiences some movement, circling around its object. It can still wander. It might wander around within the confines set by the level of concentration, but no real harm arises from this movement, because the mind is calm in samādhi. This is how the development of the mind precedes in the course of practice.

“In apana samādhi, the mind calms down and is stilled to a level where it is at its most subtle and skillful. Even if you experience sense impingement from the outside, such as sounds and physical sensations, it remains external and is unable to disturb the mind. You might hear a sound, but it won't distract your concentration. There is the hearing of the sound, but the experience is as if you don't hear anything. There is awareness of the impingement, but it is as if you are not aware. This is because you let go. The mind lets go automatically. The concentration is so deep and firm, that you let go of attachment to sense impingement quite naturally. The mind can absorb into this state for long periods. Having stayed inside for an appropriate amount of time, it then withdraws. Sometimes as you withdraw from such a deep level of concentration a mental image of some aspect of your own body can appear. It might be a mental image displaying an aspect of the unattractive nature of your body that arises into consciousness. As the mind withdraws from the refined state, the image of the body appears to emerge and expand from within the mind. Any aspect of the body could come up as a mental image, and fill up the mind's eye at that point. Images that come up in this way are extremely clear and unmistakable” (Chapter 36, Clarity of Insight. Audio recording available on amaravati.org, this excerpt starts at 12:00).

Appendix C: Recorded Phone Interview Joseph Marques (JM) with Ajahn Geoff (AG) on 3/9/15 (43:24 to 45:54)

JM: “Is there really that big of a difference between the [different methods of getting into jhāna]” AG: “there is there is there is. It comes down to how you interpret what jhāna is; what its role is in the practice, to what extent one particular type of concentration actually is efficient for the goal, what kind of concentration is actually pulling you away from the goal, because there are forms of wrong concentration.

“As a student writing from the outside, it’s hard for you to pass those kinds of value judgments, but these kinds of things do come down to real differences in the practice. I must admit my own personal feeling is you know, the people I’ve heard of coming from the Pa-Auk tradition who are certified this certified that, I look at them and say ‘Nah, I’m sorry this doesn’t cut it from my perspective’. And I’m sure they look at us, I mean we had monks coming from Burma back in those days, (here we’re talking about the mid-eighties), where it was very difficult to stay in Burma for any length of time. If you were going to study there [in Burma] you had to come out and spend your time in Thailand for a bit, and they’d all been told you know ‘don’t study with any Thai teachers, Thai teachers don’t know the Dharma at all, they don’t know the Visuddhimagga, they don’t know the Abhidhamma, and so then when they would be reading say Ajahn Maha Bua or Ajahn Lee they would kind of just brush it off. And I don’t think it’s just tribalism, I think there really are very different approaches to what counts as awakening and what counts as adequate and helpful practice for the purpose of awakening.”

“JM: Do you think that there’s a difference between the awakenings that are described by those in the Thai Forest tradition versus those with more of a Visuddhimagga method, a more Pa-Auk method?” “AG: Well I don’t know much about the Pa-Auk method or how they classify things. I have had some experience talking with people who are ‘certified awakened’ in the Mahasi tradition, and from what I learned from Ajahn Fuang and what is touched on briefly by Ajahn Lee, it sounds like they got into a state of what Ajahn Lee would have called ‘non-perception’ where you kind of blank out for a bit and then come back in. And then they read that as you know the cessation of Nirvana, which is kind of a blanking out.” “JM: And that’s totally different from the experience of the unconditioned [Nirvana]” “AG: Right. Ya.”

At that point in the interview, Ajahn Geoff went on to describe in detail how exactly his method of practice and understanding of jhāna leads to the experience of nibbana (the unconditioned). That description ends at (50:21)

Appendix D: Email Interview Joseph Marques (JM) with Stephen Snyder (SS) on April 5, 2015

JM: Without further ado, here are the questions. Please feel free to decline to answer any of the questions, and take your time answering them, but the thesis is due on Friday 4/10/15. I'd love to send you a copy of the work in a PDF when I'm done. Again, thank you so much. JM

1. From your perspective, is it true that vipassana meditation can only lead to *kanika samādhi*, while samatha meditation can only lead to *apana samādhi*?

2. Do you know whether or not there were English language translators resident at Pa-Auk forest monastery during the 1980s and 1990s? If you don't know, do you think there would be a way for me to find this out? Also, is the Sayadaw fluent in English? Why do you think the Pa-Auk method has become increasingly popular with westerners over the years? Does English-language accessibility have anything to do with it, perhaps?

3. Does the *Visuddhimagga* clarify the meditation instructions contained in the canon, or do the meditation instructions in the canon differ radically from the instructions in the *Visuddhimagga*? Are there two kinds of *jhānas*- *sutta jhānas* and *Visuddhimagga jhānas*? Can you get into *jhāna* without a (visual- as defined in *Practicing the Jhānas*) *nimitta*?

4. Is Pa-Auk Sayadaw an Arahant?

...

SS: So as to your questions:

1. *Kanika samādhi*: I understand this to be translated as "momentary concentration". Tina and I teach that both samatha and vipassana meditations have momentary concentration and access concentration available. *Apana samādhi*: I understand this to refer to absorption concentration. Of the three levels of concentration: momentary, access, and absorption, only in the samatha practices/ meditations can concentration develop to the absorption level.

2. As far as I know Pa-Auk Sayadaw is, and has been, fluent in English, and Pāli. I suspect that because Burma was occupied by the British for so many years that many older Burmese speak English. As to the popularity of his teaching, I believe it is both his depth of presence as well as the clarity and precision offered in his lineage that are attractive to people.

3. I am of the opinion that the suttas have general information as to some of the practices. The *Visuddhimagga* is a more detailed manual that expands upon the generalized directions in the suttas. Tina and I hold the experiential view that there are not two sets of *jhāna*. In the Pa-Auk lineage we are taught, and experience, that a *nimitta* is necessary for the arising of 1st *jhāna*.

4. Monastics are forbidden by the Monastic Code from discussing their meditative attainments. The Sayadaw adheres to the Monastic Code, Thus, no one knows what level of attain he has realized. The speculation among some of the senior lay students and benefactors is he is far along on the Theravadan stages of enlightenment.

Good luck on completion of your thesis. I'd be happy to see it when it's

completed.