

The Samatha Jhanas (Pure Concentration States)

Basics: These states are temporary, enjoyable, conducive to developing strong concentration and emotional balance.

They are also potentially addictive and can fool people into thinking they are ultimate insights.

1st: applied and sustained attention (aiming and rubbing), rapture, happiness, and concentration.

2nd: aiming and rubbing dropped, so rapture, happiness and concentration predominate.

3rd: rapture dropped, so mindfulness and equanimity predominate with “bodily” bliss present.

4th: equanimity predominates, with neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling predominating, basis for jhanas 5-8.

5th: Boundless Space, equanimity

6th: Boundless Consciousness, equanimity

7th: Nothingness (out of phase with phenomena), equanimity

8th: Neither Perception Nor Yet Non-perception

9th: Nirodha Samapatti: Cessation of Perception and Feeling, only attained by Anagamis with good samatha skills.

Note: the siddhis/powers arise from pure concentration states. They are not related to wisdom. Explore with caution, and good guidance from experienced teachers. Avoid long side-tracks into this territory.

The Vipassana Jhanas

These are like the samatha jhanas in some ways, but they involve direct perception of the Three Characteristics of sensations: impermanence at a very fine level (many times per second), no-self (that things arise on their own and are not an observer), and suffering (the fundamental painful tension created by how the mind holds itself to prop up the illusion of a self, center-point, agent, observer, doer, etc.). Each jhana has its sub-jhana aspects, like finer parts of a fractal.

The Ñanas

These are stages of direct and heightened perception of aspects of how sensate reality actually is. As our concentration and investigation improve, insight develops in a fairly predictable pattern regardless of tradition. Each ñana has its specific perceptual thresholds, intensities, levels of clarity, emotional and physical side effects, and raptures. That said, some stages are similar to each other, such as the 3rd and 10th, and the 4th and 11th. It is easy to confuse these.

The Ten Corruptions of Insight of the 4th ñana

Illumination, knowledge, rapture, tranquility, bliss, resolute confidence, exertion, assurance, equanimity and attachment. Perceiving the Three Characteristics of these sensations moves things along.

The Dark Night, Ñanas 5-10

These are often difficult stages, but need not be, so do not be scripted into having problems here. Make time for practice. Keep a firm hand on negativity. Keep difficult emotional side-effects from bleeding out onto your life. Investigate all types of sensations that arise, no matter how unpleasant. Avoid rash decisions and harsh words if possible.

The Three Doors

Ñanas 12-14 and subsequent entrances into Fruition involve the complete understanding of two of the Three Characteristics at the level of Formations for three quick pulses. Formations are complete, momentary panoramic experiences of the whole, undivided sensate field simultaneously, including space and everything in it. When we have gotten into the 11th ñana with sufficient acceptance and precision, one of The Three Doors arises naturally. Thus, work to understand the Three Characteristics in each of the vipassana jhanas in a way that tries to be very inclusive.

The Four Paths of Enlightenment

1st/Stream Enterer/Sotapanna: changes relationship to attachment to rites and rituals, personality belief, and skeptical doubt. Dharma Eye opens.

2nd/Once Returner/Sakadagammī: changes relationship to part of everyday fundamental attraction and aversion

3rd/Never Returner/Anagami: changes relationship to the rest of everyday fundamental attraction and aversion

4th/Saint, Conqueror/Arahat: changes relationship to conceit, attachment to formed (1-4) and formless (5-8) jhanas, restlessness and worry, and the last veil of unknowing. Wisdom Eye opens beyond the cycles.

The Tibetan Five Path and Ten Bhumī Models

Path of Accumulation: corresponds to 1st-4th ñanas.

Path of Renunciation/Unification: corresponds to 5th-11th ñanas.

Path of Seeing: corresponds to 12th-15th ñanas/stream entry, realization of ultimate bodhichitta.

Path of Meditation: corresponds to 16th ñana (Review) of stream entry through last stages of Anagamihood or Arahatship. Also encompasses the 1st-10th bhumis (complex topic).

Path of No-Learning: Buddhahood, the 11th bhumi, possibly includes arahatship.

How the 11 Bhumis and the Four Paths correspond is controversial and not essential to investigation or progress.

Was that Emptiness (The 15th ñana, Fruition)?

If there was any sense of time, duration, experience, oneness, nothingness, somethingness, perspective, space, anything you could remember or describe in even the vaguest terms, it definitely was not a Fruition/emptiness.

Have I Attained Stream Entry?

Stream enterers cycle through ñanas 4-11 and then 15 (see above) in all the hours of their waking life. These are inescapable. Mere intention to investigate causes the immediate arising of the 4th ñana. Be very careful about what you say to people soon after attaining a path or what you think was a path. It is embarrassing to be wrong. Give things time, at least weeks or months, and see what holds up and what fades.

Do Not Be Fooled

The Arising and Passing Away is very prone to fooling people into thinking they are enlightened, as it brings so much insight and is generally rather spectacular. Beware. In fact, there are a very large number of experiences that can fool even seasoned meditators into thinking they are something much higher and more profound than they actually were. The formless realms are another great example, as are profound unitive experiences that can temporarily arise in the pure concentration states (samatha jhanas). Realizations are not subject to the changing world, do not fade or change, and are not bound up in any experience of unity, duality, nothingness, bliss, peace or anything else.

Advice for Diagnosing “Where You Are”

Please be careful with all of this map terminology. It is extremely easy to be wrong. Work with good teachers who know this territory and have traversed it back and forth for many years. Retain a healthy and inquisitive skepticism. If an event occurs, keep investigating with good concentration, mindfulness, precision, and equanimity. If it repeats itself many times, perhaps you will begin to get a good sense of what it is, what proceeds it and follows it, what has changed and not changed by its arising and passing. Even the most profound experiences come and go. That said, when trying to diagnose which ñana you are in, pay very careful attention to all criteria, particularly the frequencies of vibrations, what preceded it, what follows it, what the emotional, physical and mental qualities associated with it are, and the narrowness or width of your attention during it. These can often but not always give you a sense of “where you are”. This will be gone instantly, so do not get stuck in your map trip; it is not you. These stages and experiences are not yours. They are a natural, causal part of the universe doing its thing. Remember, continued investigation of the Three Characteristics of whatever arises is the key to wisdom.

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment often contain implied or explicit promises of limiting the emotional range, the experiential range or the range of possible actions that can occur. These models all err to various degrees and can cause some substantial problems for those that believe them. They are more prone to cause ugly shadow sides and serious denial of the obvious nature of the human condition than awakening. We are born human, and we have to learn to deal with that. Realizations can change a fundamental aspect of how we relate to phenomena. How phenomena manifest are subject to the laws of cause and effect that have always been in place. Deny the wide ranges of the heart and mind at your peril. Take care how you use your body and words in the face of these. Transcendence comes hand in hand with a profound and direct intimacy with life. Cultivating a profound and direct intimacy with life leads to Transcendence. You can’t have the one without the other.

The Stages of Insight

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These maps and the associated terminology and meditation technology can contribute to the skillful navigation of the territory of awakening.

Please do not become bound up in rigid adherence to dogma, as all conceptual frameworks are at best crude descriptions of a reality that is far richer and more complex than can ever be told.

Maps can have the opposite effect, creating obsession with attainments, judgment, comparison and competition that are simply unhelpful and potentially destructive. Please try to avoid these.

Continued precise practice in sufficient dose and with sufficient acceptance of the wide range of human experience at the sensate level is the essential point.

These maps are merely tools to help keep us from getting stuck, sidetracked, damaged or fooled on our journey.

Go to www.interactivebuddha.com for an extensive reading list, free online writings on this and other topics, a list of local groups that promote wisdom and places to go on retreat, and other useful things. The free online book Mastering the Core Teachings of The Buddha, gives a very in-depth treatment of these maps and practices that are conducive to progress and insight.

Simple kindness to yourself and others, a sense of humor, and clear awareness of the experiences of life are treasures to be cultivated without restraint. Do not be afraid to exert yourself in these areas.

Best wishes on your adventure into your own heart, mind and body.