

How Pointy is One-pointedness?

THANISSARO BHIKKHU

A Pali sutta, MN 44, defines concentration as *cittass'ek'aggatā*, which is often translated as “one-pointedness of mind”: *cittassa* = “of the mind” or “of the heart,” *eka* = one, *agga* = point, *-tā* = -ness. MN 43 states further that one-pointedness is a factor of the first jhāna, the beginning level of right concentration.

From these passages, it has been argued that if one’s awareness in concentration or jhāna is truly one-pointed, it should be no larger than a point, which means that it would be incapable of thinking, of hearing sounds, or even of being aware of the physical body. However, this interpretation imposes too narrow a meaning on the word *ek'aggatā*, one that is foreign to the linguistic usage of the Pali Canon.

A. To begin with, *agga* has many other meanings besides “point.” In fact, it has two primary clusters of meanings, in neither of which is “point” the central focus.

The first cluster centers on the fact that a summit of a mountain is called its *agga*. Clustered around this meaning are ideas of *agga* as the topmost part of something (such as the ridge of a roof), the tip of something (such as the tip of a blade of grass), and the best or supreme example of something (such as the Buddha as the *agga* of all beings). AN 5:80 plays with these meanings of *agga* when it criticizes monks of the future who will “search for the tiptop flavors (*ras'agga*) with the tip of the tongue (*jivh'agga*).”

The second cluster of meanings for *agga* centers on the idea of “meeting place.” A hall where monks gather for the uposatha, for example, is called an *uposath'agga*. The spot where they gather for their meals is called a *bhatt'agga*.

Given that the object of concentration is said to be a dwelling (*vihāra*), and that a person enters and dwells (*viharati*) in the levels of jhāna, this second cluster of meanings may be the more relevant one here. A mind with a single *agga*, in this case, would simply be a mind gathered around one object, and need not be reduced to a single point.

B. An even more telling way to determine the meanings of *ek'agga* and *ek'aggatā* is, instead of dividing these words into their roots, to look at the ways in which the Canon uses them to describe minds.

1. Two passages, one from the Vinaya and one from a sutta, show what *ek'agga* means in the everyday context of listening to the Dhamma.

In Mv.II.3.4, the phrase, “we pay attention,” in the instructions for how to listen to the Pāṭimokkha, is defined as: “We listen with an *ek'agga* mind, an unscattered mind, an undistracted mind.” Even if *ek'agga* were translated as “one-pointed” here, the “point” is obviously not so restricted as to make the ears

fall silent. Otherwise, we would not be able to hear the Pāṭimokkha at all. And the fact that the mind is *ek'agga* doesn't mean that we can't also hear other sounds aside from the Pāṭimokkha. It's just that those sounds don't make the mind lose its focus on a single theme.

In AN 5:151, the Buddha lists five qualities that enable one, when listening to the true Dhamma, to “alight on assuredness, on the rightness of skillful qualities.” The five qualities are:

“One doesn't hold the talk in contempt.

“One doesn't hold the speaker in contempt.

“One doesn't hold oneself in contempt.

“One listens to the Dhamma with an unscattered mind, an *ek'agga* mind.

“One attends appropriately.”

Because appropriate attention means to contemplate experiences in terms of the four noble truths (see MN 2), this passage shows that when the mind is *ek'agga*, it's not only able to hear. It can also think at the same time. If it couldn't hear or think, it couldn't make sense of the Dhamma talk. So again, even if we translate *ek'agga* as “one-pointed,” the one-pointed mind is not so pointy that it cannot think or hear sounds. This would defeat the purpose of listening to the Dhamma and would get in the way of “alighting on assuredness.”

2. As for the way in which *ek'agga* is used in describing the mind in concentration, a passage in MN 43 defines the factors of the first jhāna as these: “directed thought, evaluation, rapture, pleasure, and one-pointedness of mind.” It has been argued that this statement contains a contradiction, in that the compilers of MN 43 did not realize that one-pointedness precluded thought and evaluation. But perhaps they knew their own language well enough to realize that *ek'aggatā*—being gathered into oneness—did not preclude the powers of thought.

3. The standard similes for right concentration (DN 2; AN 5:28; MN 119) all emphasize that the mind in right concentration is aware of the entire body. For example, here is the simile for the highest level of jhāna, the fourth:

“Then, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of joys & distresses—he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither-pleasure-nor-pain. He sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. Just as if a man were sitting covered from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of his body to which the white cloth did not extend; even so, the monk sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness.

To get around the reference to “entire body” in these similes, those who propose that a one-pointed mind can be aware of only one point interpret “body” in this context as meaning a purely mental body, such as the body of one's thoughts. But that would mean (a) that the similes' emphasis on pervading the entire body would be meaningless if the mental body is reduced to a small point

and (b) that the Buddha was extremely sloppy and misleading in his choice of similes to describe concentration. If the purpose of jhāna is blot out awareness of the body, why would he choose a simile for the fourth jhāna in which the entire body is pervaded with awareness?

4. MN 52, MN 111, and AN 9:36 show that the ability to use appropriate attention to analyze any of the four jhānas while still in the state of *ek'aggatā* is an important skill in reaching awakening. In each case, this analysis entails applying appropriate attention: seeing the experience of the jhāna in terms of the four noble truths, and applying the appropriate duty to each truth: comprehending stress, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path to its cessation. For instance, AN 9:36 describes how, after mastering the first jhāna, one might analyze it in a way that leads to release:

“Suppose that an archer or archer’s apprentice were to practice on a straw man or mound of clay, so that after a while he would become able to shoot long distances, to fire accurate shots in rapid succession, and to pierce great masses. In the same way, there is the case where a monk, quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: ‘This is peace, this is exquisite—the resolution of all fabrications; the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.’

“Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents. Or, if not, then—through this very Dhamma-passion, this Dhamma-delight, and from the total ending of the five lower fetters [self-identification views, grasping at habits & practices, uncertainty, sensual passion, and irritation]—he is due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world.”

As MN 111 makes especially clear, this sort of analysis can be accomplished while one is still in the state of jhāna. To view the phenomena experienced in the first jhāna in terms of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness is to regard them as instances of the five clinging-aggregates, which is the definition of the first noble truth. To regard them as inconstant, etc., is to apply the duty appropriate to the first noble truth, which is to comprehend that truth to the point of dispassion (SN 22:23).

In this way, the Buddha’s recommendations for alighting on the Dhamma while in jhāna parallel those for alighting on the Dhamma while listening to a Dhamma talk: Don’t hold the Buddha in contempt, i.e., give his teachings a fair hearing and a fair test. Show your lack of contempt for your meditation object by giving it your full attention and mastering concentration. Show your lack of contempt for yourself by convincing yourself that you can do this. Gather the

mind around its one object. And analyze the component factors of the mind's one-pointedness with appropriate attention.

This ability to analyze a state of concentration in this way while the mind is still gathered around its single object is a crucial skill in attaining release. For this reason, the term that defines concentration—*cittass'ek'aggatā*—shouldn't be defined in so narrow a sense that it would obstruct any efforts to master that skill and gain its benefits.