

Silence Isn't Mandatory

SENSORY PERCEPTION IN THE JHĀNAS

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On the afternoon of his last day, as he was walking to the park where he would pass away, the Buddha stopped to rest at the foot of a tree by the side of the road. There he was approached by Pukkusa Mallaputta—a student of the Buddha's first teacher, Āḷāra Kālāma—who proceeded to praise Āḷāra for the strength of his concentration: Āḷāra had sat in concentration, percipient and alert, as 500 carts passed by on a nearby road, but he neither saw them nor heard a sound. Only later did he learn about them, when another man traveling along the road asked him whether he had seen or heard the carts pass by.

The Buddha responded by telling Pukkusa of a time when he had been sitting in concentration in a threshing barn, percipient and alert, when the rain was pouring, lightning was flashing, and a thunderbolt killed two men and four oxen nearby, and yet he hadn't seen anything nor heard a sound. He, too, didn't know what had happened until he left the barn and asked someone why so many people had gathered nearby.

Pukkusa was so impressed by this story that, in his words, he took his conviction in Āḷāra and "winnowed it before a high wind" and "washed it away in the swift current of a river." He then took refuge in the Triple Gem, presented the Buddha with a pair of gold-colored robes, and left.

This incident provides a curious footnote to an incident in an earlier set of stories: the Buddha's own account of the events leading up to his awakening. After leaving home, he had studied with Āḷāra, who had taught him how to reach a formless concentration attainment called the dimension of nothingness, in which the mind is focused on a single perception: "There is nothing." Yet when the Buddha-to-be had mastered that attainment, he realized that it didn't constitute the end of suffering. So he left Āḷāra in search of a better teacher, and eventually pursued awakening on his own. The point of this account was that, to gain awakening, the Buddha needed more than just a concentration attainment. He also needed to master the skills of the four noble truths so as to develop dispassion for all fabricated states of mind, including the most profound states of concentration. Only then could he reach the deathless.

The story of the Buddha's conversation with Pukkusa, in contrast, reads like an anti-climax. Pukkusa's interest goes no further than concentration, and he bases his conviction in the Buddha simply on the fact that the latter's concentration was very strong. As for whether the Buddha's concentration was actually stronger than Āḷāra's, there's no way of knowing, because Āḷāra wasn't presented with the same test.

The story does, however, raise an important question. It shows that the Canon recognizes stages of concentration in which the physical senses fall silent—and that the Buddha, as an awakened one, had mastered those stages—but it says nothing about whether those stages are necessary for awakening. Buddhaghosa—in his *Visuddhimagga* and in the commentaries he compiled from the ancient Sinhalese commentaries on the Pali suttas, or discourses—says that it is a mandatory feature of jhāna that the external senses fall silent, but that jhāna is not necessary for awakening. Some modern practice traditions agree with Buddhaghosa on both counts, but others—who disagree with Buddhaghosa on the second count, saying that jhāna *is* necessary for awakening—differ from one another on the first: some groups maintaining that, Yes, the external senses must fall silent in jhāna, others maintaining that, No, they don't.

I have already explored elsewhere the issue of whether jhāna is necessary for awakening—concluding that, according to the Pali suttas, it is (see *Right Mindfulness*, Appendix Three). Here I would like to examine what the suttas have to say about the other issue: whether jhāna counts as jhāna only if the external senses fall silent. If the answer is Yes, that means that a person can attain awakening only after developing concentration to the point where all input from the external senses is blocked. This is clearly an issue of great practical importance for anyone aiming at true release.

BACKGROUND: THE NINE ATTAINMENTS

Any attempt to determine the suttas' stance on this issue has to begin by analyzing how they describe the stages of concentration that can act as the bases for awakening. The suttas' most extensive standard list describes nine stages in all. The first four stages, called the four jhānas, are the only members of the list included in the standard definition of right concentration in discussions of the noble eightfold path (see SN 45:8). However, according to MN 140, the remaining stages—which the suttas call the “formlessnesses beyond forms,” and which modern discussions call the “formless jhānas”—are simply applications of the equanimity found in the fourth jhāna. (Here, for the purpose of keeping these formless stages distinct from the four jhānas while at the same time saving space,

I will refer to them as the “formless attainments.” Any reference to “the jhānas” will mean the four jhānas, and not the formless attainments.)

Because many passages in the suttas describe how awakening can be based on any of the four jhānas or the five formless attainments, all nine stages seem to be rightly classed as right concentration.

The standard description of the nine stages is this:

[1] “There is the case where a monk, quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful mental qualities, enters and remains in the first jhāna: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation.

[2] “With the stilling of directed thoughts and evaluations, he enters and remains in the second jhāna: rapture and pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought and evaluation—internal assurance.

[3] “With the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, and alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters and remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous and mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.’

[4] “With the abandoning of pleasure and pain—as with the earlier disappearance of joy and distress—he enters and remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity and mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain.

[5] “With the complete transcending of perceptions [mental notes] of (physical) form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, and not attending to perceptions of multiplicity, (perceiving,) ‘Infinite space,’ he enters and remains in the dimension of the infinitude of space.

[6] “With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of space, (perceiving,) ‘Infinite consciousness,’ he enters and remains in the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness.

[7] “With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, (perceiving,) ‘There is nothing,’ he enters and remains in the dimension of nothingness. [This was the stage mastered by Āḷāra.]

[8] “With the complete transcending of the dimension of nothingness, he enters and remains in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception.

[9] “With the complete transcending of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, he enters and remains in the cessation of perception and feeling.” — AN 9:32

Some suttas—such as MN 121 and SN 40:9—mention another stage of concentration, called the themeless concentration of awareness (*animitta-ceto-samādhi*), that can also be used as a basis for awakening:

The monk—not attending to the perception of the dimension of nothingness, not attending to the perception of the dimension of neither perception nor non-

perception—attends to the singleness based on the themeless concentration of awareness.” — *MN 121*

Because this themeless concentration of awareness, like the cessation of perception and feeling, follows on the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, there is the question as to whether the two stages are identical. *MN 44* suggests that they’re not, saying that “themeless contact” is one of the first contacts that a meditator experiences on emerging from the cessation of perception and feeling. This suggests that the themeless concentration lies on the threshold of the cessation of perception and feeling, but is not identical with it.

It’s important to note that the mere attainment of any of these stages of concentration does not guarantee awakening. As *AN 4:178* notes, it is possible to attain a “peaceful awareness-release” without one’s heart leaping at the idea of the cessation of self-identification or the breaching of ignorance. *MN 113* notes that a person can go as far as the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception and, lacking integrity, exalt himself and disparage others over the fact that he has gained that attainment whereas other people haven’t. *MN 106* notes that it’s possible, on reaching the same level, to relish and cling to the subtle equanimity experienced there. In all of these cases, if these defects of insight and character are not remedied, the meditator will make no further progress toward awakening.

The one possible exception to the principle that right concentration, on its own, cannot achieve awakening is the ninth stage in the standard list: the cessation of perception and feeling. *Perception*, here, means the mental note that identifies and recognizes things and events. *Feeling* means feeling-tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. The *Visuddhimagga* (XXIII.18) states that anyone who has reached this attainment must also attain, at the very least, the penultimate stage of awakening: non-return. The suttas, however, are more equivocal on the issue. On the one hand, *MN 113* does not list this attainment as a stage of concentration that a person without integrity could attain. At the same time, many of the suttas’ descriptions of this attainment include the phrase, “and, as he sees (that) with discernment, his effluents are completely ended.” These two points suggest that, as one leaves this attainment, the depth of concentration has automatically primed the mind for liberating insight. However, not all of the suttas’ descriptions of this attainment include that concluding phrase (see, for example, *DN 15* and *AN 9:32*), which may imply that the insight is not automatic.

At the same time, even if the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling *does* automatically lead to awakening, we should note that it’s not the only totally non-percipient stage of concentration recognized by the suttas. The other is the meditation that leads a person, after death, to be reborn in the

dimension of non-percipient beings. This dimension is mentioned in DN 1 and DN 15, but the meditation leading there is not part of the standard list of concentration attainments, nor is it described by the suttas in any detail. What the suttas do indicate clearly is that the dimension of non-percipient beings is not a noble attainment, for as DN 1 notes, if a perception arises in the mind of a being there, that being falls from the dimension. If the being is then reborn in the human world and practices meditation, he/she will be unable to remember previous lifetimes and so may come to a conclusion that fosters wrong view: that beings arise out of nothing, spontaneously and without cause. This view would not occur to a person who has reached even the first stage of awakening, so the dimension of non-percipient beings is obviously not a noble state.

So the mere attainment of concentration—even to the extent of being totally free from perception—does not guarantee awakening.

This fact is reflected in the two main ways in which the suttas describe a person practicing concentration. In some cases, they say simply that the meditator enters and remains in a particular stage of concentration. In others, they say that the meditator, while remaining in that stage, analyzes it in terms of the fabrications of which it is composed, gains a sense of dispassion for those fabrications, and as a result gains release. The first sort of description falls under what AN 4:41 calls the “development of concentration that leads to a pleasant abiding in the here and now”; the second falls under what the same sutta calls the “development of concentration that leads to the ending of the effluents.” This element of analysis added to the practice of concentration is what can lead to awakening.

MN 52 and AN 9:36 describe how this happens, with the latter giving the more extensive description of the two. After mastering a particular stage of concentration, the meditator analyzes it in terms of the five aggregates of which it is composed and then develops a series of perceptions around those aggregates aimed at developing a sense of disenchantment and dispassion for them. The dispassion is what then leads to release. For instance, with the first jhāna:

“There is the case where a monk... enters and remains in the first jhāna: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and 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—he is due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world.” — *AN 9:36*

The sutta then describes a similar process for each of the concentration attainments up through the dimension of nothingness, after which it concludes:

“Thus, as far as the perception-attainments go, that is as far as gnosis-penetration goes. As for these two dimensions—the attainment of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception and the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling—I tell you that they are to be rightly explained by those monks who are meditators, skilled at attainment, skilled at attainment-emergence, who have attained and emerged in dependence on them.” — *AN 9:36*

In other words, unlike its treatment of the first seven stages of concentration, the sutta does not describe how one might analyze the last two attainments so as to gain release. Why these two attainments are treated differently from the others is suggested by a similar discussion in MN 111. There the Buddha praises Ven. Sāriputta for his penetrating discernment in being able to ferret out mental qualities as he experiences them in the practice of concentration. The discussion applies a standard formula to each attainment from the first jhāna up through the dimension of nothingness, and then switches gear to a second formula that differs from the first formula in two important respects. The difference can be illustrated by comparing the discussion for the dimension of nothingness, which follows the first formula, and the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, which follows the second:

“And further, with the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, (perceiving,) ‘There is nothing,’ Sāriputta entered and remained in the dimension of nothingness. Whatever qualities there are in the dimension of nothingness—the perception of the dimension of nothingness, singleness of mind, contact, feeling, perception, intention, consciousness, desire, decision, persistence, mindfulness, equanimity, and attention—he ferreted them out one after another. Known to him they arose, known to him they became established, known to him they subsided. He discerned, ‘So this is how these qualities, not having been, come into play. Having been, they vanish.’ He remained unattracted and unrepelled with regard to those qualities, independent, detached, released, dissociated, with an awareness rid of barriers. He discerned that ‘There is a further escape,’ and pursuing it, he confirmed that ‘There is.’

“And further, with the complete transcending of the dimension of nothingness, Sāriputta entered and remained in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. He emerged mindfully from that attainment. On

emerging mindfully from that attainment, he regarded the past qualities that had ceased and changed: ‘So this is how these qualities, not having been, come into play. Having been, they vanish.’ He remained unattracted and unrepelled with regard to those qualities, independent, detached, released, dissociated, with an awareness rid of barriers. He discerned that ‘There is a further escape,’ and pursuing it, he confirmed that ‘There is.’” — MN 111

The important differences in the two formulae are these: (1) The first formula lists in great detail the qualities that Sāriputta ferreted out, whereas the second doesn’t. This may relate to the fact that perception in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception is so subtle and attenuated that a meditator in that dimension cannot label mental qualities clearly. (2) In the second formula, the Buddha is careful to say that Sāriputta did the analysis *after* emerging from the attainment, and that the analysis referred to *past* qualities, whereas he doesn’t qualify the earlier discussion in this way. This indicates that it is possible to do this sort of analysis while staying in any of the attainments up through the dimension of nothingness, whereas in the final two attainments, the level of perception is so attenuated that any of the perceptions used in analysis would destroy the attainment. For this reason, these two attainments can be analyzed only after the meditator has emerged from them.

This is why the Buddha treats the arising of discernment with regard to these final two attainments in much less detail than he does with regard to the lower seven. This point will have an important bearing on the following discussion.

But the main lesson to draw from these passages is that concentration, simply as a pleasant abiding in the here and now, cannot lead to awakening. It needs the added activity of discernment for there to be full release.

SILENCE IN THE FORMLESS ATTAINMENTS

Modern discussions of the question as to whether the external senses have to fall silent in right concentration for there to be the possibility of awakening tend to focus on the first jhāna, and for two connected reasons: (1) It is the lowest stage of concentration to be classed as right concentration. (2) As MN 52 and AN 9:36 show, a meditator practicing for the sake of awakening need not master all nine stages of concentration. It’s possible to gain awakening based on a mastery of just the first. Thus, if a stage of concentration in which the physical senses fall silent is required for awakening, this stipulation must apply to the first jhāna.

Three passages in the suttas seem to provide clear evidence that this proposition is incorrect, in that they describe attainments where the external senses fall silent, but without including the first jhāna—or any of the other jhānas—in their descriptions.

A.1: The first passage is AN 9:37, where Ven. Ānanda discusses four levels of concentration in which the meditator can be percipient yet without any sensitivity to the physical senses. Three of these levels are the first three of the formless attainments. The fourth is the concentration that follows on the attainment of full awakening. The four jhānas, however, are not mentioned as meeting this description at all.

Ven. Ānanda said, “It’s amazing, friends, it’s astounding, how the Blessed One who knows and sees, the worthy one, rightly self-awakened, has attained and recognized an opening in a confined place for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and distress, for the attainment of the right method, and for the realization of unbinding, where the eye will be, and those forms, and yet one will not be sensitive to that dimension; where the ear will be, and those sounds... where the nose will be, and those aromas... where the tongue will be, and those flavors... where the body will be, and those tactile sensations, and yet one will not be sensitive to that dimension.”

When this was said, Ven. Udāyin said to Ven. Ānanda, “Is one percipient when not sensitive to that dimension, my friend, or unpercipient?”

[Ven. Ānanda:] “One is percipient when not sensitive to that dimension, my friend, not unpercipient.”

[Ven. Udāyin:] “When not sensitive to that dimension, my friend, one is percipient of what?”

[Ven. Ānanda:] “There is the case where, with the complete transcending of perceptions of (physical) form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, and not attending to perceptions of multiplicity, (perceiving,) ‘Infinite space,’ one enters and remains in the dimension of the infinitude of space. Percipient in this way, one is not sensitive to that dimension [i.e., the dimensions of the five physical senses].

“And further, with the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of space, (perceiving,) ‘Infinite consciousness,’ one enters and remains in the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. Percipient in this way, too, one is not sensitive to that dimension.

“And further, with the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, (perceiving,) ‘There is nothing,’ one enters and remains in the dimension of nothingness. Percipient in this way, too, one is not sensitive to that dimension.

“Once, friend, when I was staying in Sāketa at the Game Refuge in the Black Forest, the nun Jaṭila-Bhāgikā went to where I was staying, and on arrival—having bowed to me—stood to one side. As she was standing there, she said to me: ‘The concentration whereby—neither pressed down nor forced back, nor with fabrication kept blocked or suppressed—still as a result of release, contented as a result of standing still, and as a result of contentment one is not agitated: This concentration is said by the Blessed One to be the fruit of what?’

“I said to her, ‘Sister, the concentration whereby—neither pressed down nor forced back, nor kept in place by the fabrications of forceful restraint—still as a result of release, contented as a result of standing still, and as a result of contentment one is not agitated: This concentration is said by the Blessed One to be the fruit of gnosis [arahantship].’ Percipient in this way, too, one is not sensitive to that dimension.” — AN 9:37

Because this passage, when describing attainments where the external senses fall silent even when the meditator is percipient, mentions only the first three formless attainments and the concentration of arahantship, it seems to give clear support to the idea that there is no need for the physical senses to fall silent in every level of right concentration. A person could attain any of the four jhānas and yet still hear sounds, etc., and—as AN 9:36 notes—could use that stage of concentration to attain full awakening.

A.2: A careful look at another passage—the standard description of the dimension of the infinitude of space, the first attainment in Ven. Ānanda’s list—shows why the attainments in his list differ from the four jhānas in this regard. The description states that the meditator enters and remains in this dimension “with the complete transcending of perceptions of form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, and not attending to perceptions of multiplicity.” As noted above, the word “perception” here carries the meaning of mental note or label, the act of recognizing or identifying a mental object. So, to move from the fourth jhāna to the dimension of the infinitude of space, it’s necessary that mental labels of resistance disappear, and that the meditator transcend mental labels of form and pay no attention to mental labels of multiplicity.

Two of these terms, *resistance* and *multiplicity*, require explanation.

“Resistance” (*paṭigha*) can be understood in two ways. DN 15 identifies it as the type of contact that allows mental activity to detect the presence of forms. What this apparently means is that mental acts can recognize the presence of physical objects primarily because physical objects put up resistance to any other objects that might invade their space.

However, Buddhaghosa, in the *Visuddhimagga* (X.16), follows the Abhidhamma in defining “resistance” as contact at the five external senses. Because he gives no sutta reference to support this interpretation, it is the weaker of the two.

However, there is a sutta passage—in MN 137—that defines “multiplicity (*nānattā*)” as the objects of the five senses: forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations. In other words, this passage assigns to “multiplicity” the meaning that Buddhaghosa assigns to “resistance.” MN 137 then contrasts

multiplicity with the word, “singleness (*ekattā*),” which it identifies as the first four formless attainments.

Thus, regardless of whether perceptions of sensory input are called perceptions of resistance or perceptions of multiplicity, the practical upshot is that a meditator entering and staying in the dimension of the infinitude of space would, at the very least, have to pay no attention to any mental labels that would recognize or identify objects present to the physical senses. If “resistance” means contact at the five senses, then such perceptions would have to disappear.

This leads to a question: Following the interpretation drawn from MN 137, why would the simple act of not paying attention to perceptions of the objects of the senses make a meditator insensitive to the presence of those objects? The answer lies in the fact that, in the suttas’ descriptions of the stages of sensory awareness, perception plays a role at two stages in the process.

—In MN 18, for instance, perception comes *after* sensory contact and the feelings that arise based on the contact. To ignore perceptions of multiplicity at this stage of the process would not make one insensitive to the objects of the senses. They would be present enough to give rise to perceptions, but the meditator would simply pay those perceptions no attention.

—However, in the standard formula for dependent co-arising (see, for example, SN 12:2), perception—as a sub-factor of fabrication (see MN 44)—also occurs *prior to* sensory contact. To pay no attention to perceptions of multiplicity at this stage of the process, and to pay sole attention to the perception, “infinite space” instead, would allow the meditator to become insensitive to the physical senses and their objects. The same would be true if perceptions of sensory input were indicated by “perceptions of resistance” and those perceptions were to disappear.

It would seem clear that because the standard formula for the nine concentration attainments mentions these requirements beginning only with the dimension of the infinitude of space, they are not required for any of the lower levels. For a meditator in, say, the fourth jhāna, perceptions identifying sounds would not have disappeared. Even though he/she would ordinarily not pay attention to those perceptions, he or she could, for a brief moment, note a perception identifying a sound and then drop it, returning to the object of his/her concentration, and—as long as this is done mindfully and with equanimity—this would still count as being in the fourth jhāna.

Thus there seems good reason to take AN 9:37 and the standard formula for the dimension of the infinitude of space as authoritative in showing that it is not necessary for the physical senses to fall silent in any of the four jhānas.

A.3: Further support for this reading of AN 9:37 comes from a passage in MN 43 in which Ven. Sāriputta lists the attainments that can be known with a purified intellect-consciousness—the consciousness of mental phenomena—divorced from the five physical sense faculties: i.e., the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body. His list consists of the first three formless attainments, and makes no mention of the four jhānas.

[Ven. Mahā Koṭṭhita:] “Friend, what can be known with the purified intellect-consciousness divorced from the five (sense) faculties?”

[Ven. Sāriputta:] “Friend, with the purified intellect-consciousness divorced from the five faculties, the dimension of the infinitude of space can be known (as) ‘infinite space,’ the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness can be known (as) ‘infinite consciousness,’ the dimension of nothingness can be known (as) ‘There is nothing.’”

[Ven. Mahā Koṭṭhita:] “With what does one know a quality that can be known?”

[Ven. Sāriputta:] “One knows a quality that can be known with the eye of discernment.”

[Ven. Mahā Koṭṭhita:] “And what is the purpose of discernment?”

[Ven. Sāriputta:] “The purpose of discernment is direct knowledge, its purpose is full comprehension, its purpose is abandoning.” — *MN 43*

In other words, the only concentration attainments that can be known by a purified intellect-consciousness divorced from the five physical sense faculties are the first three formless attainments. The passage from MN 111 quoted above helps to explain why the remaining two formless attainments are not listed here: They cannot be known through the eye of discernment while one is in those attainments. A meditator can analyze them with discernment only after he/she has left the attainment.

The same point would also apply to the fourth attainment in Ven. Ānanda’s list, the fruit of gnosis.

Thus to be included in Ven. Sāriputta’s list in MN 43, an attainment has to meet three criteria: (a) One can analyze it with discernment while one is in that attainment, and one’s consciousness is (b) purified and (c) divorced from the five physical sense faculties.

Ven. Sāriputta does not explain what he means by “purified” here. Ostensibly, it could mean any of three things: purified of defilement, as in the Buddha’s standard description of his own mastery of the fourth jhāna (see, for example, MN 4); having purity of equanimity and mindfulness (as in the standard description of the fourth jhāna); or, alternatively, it could simply be another way of saying “purely divorced from the five physical senses,” in which case the second criterion above (b) would be identical with the third (c).

Now, of the three criteria, MN 111 shows that all four jhānas meet the first criterion, because a meditator can analyze them with discernment while dwelling in them, and the fourth jhāna meets the first two possible meanings of the second. The fact that the fourth jhāna is not listed in MN 43 means that it does not meet the third criterion (or, what amounts to the same thing, the third possible meaning of the second). In other words, one's consciousness while in the fourth jhāna is not divorced from the five physical senses. If those senses do not fall silent in the fourth jhāna, the same could be said of the lower three jhānas as well.

In this way, all three passages—AN 9:37, MN 43, and the standard description of the dimension of the infinitude of space—clearly show that there is no need for the physical senses to fall silent while in the four jhānas. This means further that, to gain awakening, there is no need to attain a stage of concentration that blocks out all awareness of those senses. Awakening can occur when based on any of the four jhānas even when a background awareness of the physical senses is present.

BUDDHAGHOSA'S INTERPRETATIONS

Buddhaghosa, however, argues that none of these three passages should be taken at face value in proving that a meditator can sense external sensory input in the jhānas, and instead should be interpreted to allow for the opposite: that the external senses actually fall silent in the first jhāna. But when we examine his arguments—and those of his modern supporters—to prove his interpretations of these passages, we find that they leave much to be desired.

Because his most substantial argument focuses on passage A.2, we will begin with his discussion of that passage first.

A.2: In *Visuddhimagga* X.17, he argues that the phrase, “with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, and not attending to perceptions of multiplicity,” should not be read as indicating a step that occurs only with the entry into the dimension of the infinitude of space. Instead, it should be read as describing a step that had already occurred earlier in the ascending stages of concentration.

He bases his argument on two analogies. The first is that, in the formula for the fourth jhāna, the phrase, “with the abandoning of pleasure and pain” is actually describing a step that occurred earlier in the stages of concentration, and not just with the fourth jhāna.

There is, however, no basis for his drawing this analogy here. The third jhāna, even though it is marked by equanimity, is also marked by “pleasure sensed

with the body.” This pleasure is abandoned only with the entry into the fourth jhāna.

Furthermore, MN 44 shows why pain is not really abandoned until pleasure is also abandoned:

[Visākha:] “In what way is pleasant feeling pleasant, lady, and in what way painful?”

[Sister Dhammadinnā:] “Pleasant feeling is pleasant in remaining, and painful in changing, friend Visākha. Painful feeling is painful in remaining and pleasant in changing. Neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling is pleasant in occurring together with knowledge, and painful in occurring without knowledge.”

In other words, even pleasant feeling contains pain in the fact that it changes. Thus the meditator, when going through the stages of jhāna, does not abandon either pleasure or pain until entering the fourth jhāna. The phrase describing this step is not referring to anything that happened earlier in the stages of concentration. For this reason, Buddhaghosa’s first argument by analogy does not hold.

His second argument by analogy is that the description of the third noble path—the path to non-return—mentions the abandoning of fetters, such as self-identity view, that were already abandoned as a result of the earlier noble paths, and so the description of the entry into the dimension of the infinitude of space should be read the same way, as mentioning something that had already happened earlier.

This argument, too, does not hold. In the descriptions of the noble paths, the fetters abandoned with each path are explicitly mentioned in the description of that path, with the ascending descriptions being cumulative: A person who has attained the first path has abandoned x ; a person attaining the third has abandoned x and y ; and so forth. For there to be an analogy here, then if the disappearance of perceptions of resistance and lack of attention to perceptions of multiplicity were a feature of the first jhāna, they would have to be mentioned in the description of the first jhāna. But they aren’t. This is why Buddhaghosa’s second argument by analogy also does not hold.

A.1: As for AN 9:37—in which Ven. Ānanda lists the attainments where one is percipient without being percipient of the five external senses and their objects—Buddhaghosa’s commentary to that sutta explains the absence of the four jhānas in Ven. Ānanda’s list as follows: The object of the four jhānas—the internal mental image on which they are focused—counts as a “form” and so, to avoid confusion with the forms that are the objects of the eye, Ven. Ānanda chose to exclude those jhānas from his list. This explanation, however, ignores the fact

that Ven. Ānanda explicitly assigns “those forms” to the eye—as he assigns “those sounds” to the ear, etc.—so if he had meant to include the four jhānas in his list, he could have done so without causing confusion. His listeners would have known clearly that “those forms” referred to forms seen by the eye, and not to internal forms seen by the mind.

Thus Buddhaghosa’s argument here, too, is unconvincing. It’s more likely that Ven. Ānanda excluded the four jhānas from his list because the meditator can still be sensitive to the five external senses when in those jhānas.

Still, modern proponents of the position that the external senses fall silent in the first jhāna have proposed another reason for not taking AN 9:37 at face value in this way. Their proposal is that Ven. Ānanda originally included the four jhānas in his list, but—through a faulty transmission of the text—those jhānas disappeared between his time and ours.

The argument in support of this proposal focuses on the form of the sutta: Because the sutta is found in the Nines section of the Aṅguttara Nikāya, and because it’s part of a chapter in which all the other suttas list all nine concentration attainments, it should list them all as well, replacing the cessation of perception and feeling with the concentration that is the fruit of arahantship.

This argument, however, misses two important points. The first is that AN 9:37, following the general pattern in the Nines, contains nine items already: the five physical senses, the first three formless attainments, and the concentration that is the fruit of arahantship. Five plus three plus one equals nine. Thus the sutta already qualifies for the Nines.

The second point is that not all the formless attainments qualify for inclusion in this sutta. Ven. Ānanda here is talking about states in which the meditator is percipient. As AN 9:36 points out, the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception and the cessation of perception and feeling do *not* count as percipient states, so they can’t be included in Ven. Ānanda’s list. Thus only the first three formless attainments qualify for inclusion. To include the four jhānas along with them and the concentration that is the fruit of arahantship—four plus three plus one—would give a total of eight, which would actually disqualify the sutta from inclusion in the Nines.

For these reasons, the modern argument from form is unconvincing—which means that the face-value interpretation of AN 9:37 still stands: A meditator can still be sensitive to the five external senses when in the four jhānas.

A.3: As for MN 43—in which Ven. Sāriputta lists what can be known by the purified intellect-consciousness divorced from the five faculties—Buddhaghosa, in his commentary to that sutta, maintains that the phrase, “purified intellect-consciousness divorced from the five faculties,” is a reference to the fourth jhāna.

This presents him with a problem, though, in that the consciousness of the fourth jhāna does not directly know the three formless attainments given in Ven. Sāriputta's list. One would have to be *in* those attainments for one's consciousness to directly know them. To get around this problem, Buddhaghosa maintains that "can be known by" can also mean, "can be known as a result of"—in other words, a meditator can attain the three formless attainments as a result of attaining the consciousness of the fourth jhāna.

This is not an idiomatic reading of the passage, but grammatically it is a legitimate interpretation of the instrumental case, the case in which the word "consciousness" appears in the sutta, and it allows Buddhaghosa to maintain that consciousness is divorced from the physical senses in the fourth jhāna. Because, as noted above, the suttas do not describe the jhānas below the fourth as "purified," Buddhaghosa apparently felt no need to mention the lower jhānas in this context.

However, his interpretation presents him with a further question: If "can be known," means, "can be experienced as a result of the fourth jhāna," why is the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception not listed as well? To answer this question, Buddhaghosa quotes part of the above passage from MN 111 to add a further stipulation to the meaning of "known," saying that the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception is not listed because no one except the Buddha—not even Ven. Sāriputta—can resolve it distinctly into its individual phenomena. In other words, "can be known" must also mean, "can be analyzed into its individual phenomena." This would fit with the statement in MN 43 that "can be known," means, "can be known with the eye of discernment."

The question that Buddhaghosa fails to address, however, is this: Why doesn't Ven. Sāriputta include the fourth jhāna in his list? After all, it meets both of Buddhaghosa's stipulations for "can be known": As MN 111 shows, the fourth jhāna can be known as a result of attaining the fourth jhāna, and it can be analyzed into its individual phenomena. If it met Buddhaghosa's underlying assumption—that consciousness in the fourth jhāna is divorced from the five physical senses—then it would have to be included in the list as well. But it's not.

This leaves a gaping hole in Buddhaghosa's interpretation—an inconsistency that undermines the interpretation as a whole.

The most consistent interpretation of Ven. Sāriputta's list in MN 43 is the one stated above: To be included in the list, a concentration attainment needs to meet three criteria: A meditator can analyze it with discernment while in that attainment, his/her consciousness is purified, and that consciousness is divorced from the five physical sense faculties. Because the fourth jhāna meets the first two criteria, the fact that it is not listed in MN 43 is a sign that it does not meet

the third. In other words, one's consciousness while in that attainment—or in the lower jhānas—is not divorced from the five physical senses.

This means that, despite the various arguments proposed for interpreting AN 9:37, MN 43, and the standard description of the infinitude of space to support the opposite position, all three passages in fact offer clear proof that—from the perspective of the suttas—the physical senses do not need to fall silent in any of the four jhānas. Right concentration can still be right even when a background sensitivity to the physical senses is present.

MORE ARGUMENTS FOR SILENCE IN THE FIRST JHĀNA

However, proponents of the position that concentration counts as jhāna only when the physical senses fall silent do not focus only on sutta passages whose face value has to be denied in order to maintain their position. They also cite three passages that, they claim, give positive proof that the suttas openly support them. Buddhaghosa cites one of these passages—AN 10:72—but without explaining why it proves that the senses must fall silent in the first jhāna; modern supporters of his position provide an argument to bolster his citation, and add the other two citations to strengthen their case.

A close examination of these citations, though, shows that none of them actually support the position they are supposed to prove. To see why, we have to look carefully at what each of the three passages has to say. The following discussion treats them one by one, first quoting the passage, then stating the modern argument for “soundproof jhāna” based on it, and finally showing how the passage does not support the argument as claimed.

B.1: “Quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, one enters and remains in the first jhāna.” — DN 2

This passage at the beginning of the standard formula for the first jhāna states the prerequisite events for entering that jhāna. The argument based on it is this: “Sensuality” here means the objects of the five senses. Thus a meditator can enter the first jhāna only when input from the five senses falls away.

The problem with this argument is that the suttas *never* define “sensuality” as the objects of the five senses. Instead, they define sensuality as a passion for sensual resolves—the plans and intentions the mind formulates for sensual pleasures:

“There are these five strings of sensuality. Which five? Forms cognizable via the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing; sounds cognizable via the ear... aromas cognizable via the nose... flavors

cognizable via the tongue... tactile sensations cognizable via the body—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing. But these are not sensuality. They are called strings of sensuality in the discipline of the noble ones.”

The passion for his resolves is a man’s sensuality,
not the beautiful sensual pleasures
found in the world.

The passion for his resolves is a man’s sensuality.

The beauties remain as they are in the world,
while, in this regard,
the enlightened
subdue their desire. — *AN 6:63*

In light of this definition, “secluded from sensuality” simply means that one has subdued one’s passion for sensual resolves. One has not necessarily escaped the input from the senses. And one has not abandoned all resolves. As MN 73 points out, unskillful resolves are abandoned in the first jhāna. Because the first jhāna contains directed thought and evaluation, resolved on the single task of solidifying one’s focus on a single object, skillful resolves are actually a necessary part of the first jhāna. The singleness of the task taken on by directed thought and evaluation is what qualifies the first jhāna as a state of singleness. Only with the attainment of the second jhāna are skillful resolves abandoned as well, leading to singleness on a higher level.

However, it has been further argued that “sensuality” in the standard formula for the first jhāna has a special meaning—i.e., the objects of the five senses—different from the definition given in AN 6:63—or anywhere else in the suttas.

This argument, however, doesn’t accord with what we know of the Buddha’s teaching strategy. As he said in DN 16, he didn’t keep a secret teaching that he revealed only to a few people. And because he repeated the formula for the jhānas so many times, it’s unlikely that he would have forgotten to explain any special technical meanings for the terms the formula contains. Assuming that he would have wanted his instructions to be useful and clear, we have to conclude that he would have been careful to explain what he meant by his terms—which indicates that “sensuality” in the jhāna formula has the same meaning as in AN 6:63.

So the phrase “secluded from sensuality” in the description of the first jhāna means nothing more than that meditators entering and remaining in the first jhāna have to abandon sensual resolves. Although—in focusing their minds on their meditation theme—they shouldn’t focus attention on input from the

external senses, the standard formula doesn't require them to block that input entirely from their awareness.

B.2: "There is the case where a monk... enters and remains in the first jhāna: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. This is called a monk who, coming to the end of the cosmos, remains at the end of the cosmos.... There is the case where a monk... enters and remains in the second jhāna... the third jhāna... the fourth jhāna... the dimension of the infinitude of space... the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness... the dimension of nothingness... the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. This is called a monk who, coming to the end of the cosmos, remains at the end of the cosmos." — AN 9:38

The argument based on this passage states that "cosmos" (*loka*) here means the objects of the five senses. Thus a meditator who has entered the first jhāna—and all the remaining attainments—must have gone beyond the range of those senses.

This argument, however, ignores the definition for "cosmos" given in the same sutta:

"These five strings of sensuality are, in the discipline of the noble ones, called the cosmos. Which five? Forms cognizable via the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing; sounds cognizable via the ear... aromas cognizable via the nose... flavors cognizable via the tongue... tactile sensations cognizable via the body—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing. These are the five strings of sensuality that, in the discipline of the noble ones, are called the cosmos." — AN 9:38

In other words, the word "cosmos" in AN 9:38 means the pleasant and enticing objects of the senses. If the Buddha had wanted to state that all input from the physical senses is blotted out in all of the jhānas and formless attainments, he would have defined "cosmos" in this context as all objects of the physical senses. But he didn't. He limited it to *enticing* sensory objects. And as AN 6:63 states, when one has subdued sensual desire, the beautiful objects remain as they were. They are not blocked from awareness. They simply lose their power.

This means that AN 9:38 is not saying that input from the senses is totally blocked in the first jhāna. Instead, it's simply elaborating on one of the implications of the phrase "secluded from sensuality": When one is secluded from one's passion for sensual resolves, one has gone—at least temporarily—beyond the power of enticing objects of the senses to foster desire.

B.3: *“For the first jhāna, noise is a thorn.*

“For the second jhāna, directed thoughts and evaluations are thorns.

“For the third jhāna, rapture is a thorn.

“For the fourth jhāna, in-and-out breaths are thorns.” — AN 10:72

This is the one sutta citation that Buddhaghosa provides in the *Visuddhimagga* (X.17) to prove that the external senses must fall silent in the first jhāna. As noted above, though, he doesn't substantiate his case.

To fill in this blank, modern arguments in support of Buddhaghosa's interpretation of these passages center on the meaning of the word “thorn” here, saying that it means something whose presence destroys what it pierces. Thus, to say that noise is a thorn for the first jhāna means that if one hears a noise while in that jhāna, the jhāna has been brought to an end. This interpretation is supported, the argument continues, by the pattern followed with regard to the remaining jhānas: The presence of directed thought and evaluation automatically ends the second jhāna; the presence of rapture ends the third; in-and-out breathing, the fourth.

However, there are altogether ten items in this sutta's list of “thorns,” and in some of them the “thorn” obviously does *not* destroy what it pierces. For example:

“For one guarding the sense doors, shows are a thorn.

“For one practicing celibacy, nearness to women is a thorn.”

If “thorn” were to mean something that cannot be present without destroying what it pierces, then nearness to women would automatically destroy a man's celibacy, or a show would destroy one's guarding of the senses, which isn't true in either case.

An interpretation of “thorn” that consistently fits all ten items in the list, however, would be that “thorn” means something that creates difficulties for what it touches. Thus to say that directed thought and evaluation is a thorn for the second jhāna means that these mental activities make it difficult to enter or remain in the second jhāna; to say that noise is a thorn for the first jhāna simply means that noise makes it difficult to enter or remain there.

This interpretation is supported by the background story in AN 10:72, the sutta where these thorns are listed. It begins by telling how a group of elder monks in a monastery frequented by noisy laypeople leave for a quieter monastery with the thought, “The jhānas are said by the Blessed One to be thorned by noise. What if we were to go to the Gosiṅga Sāla forest park? There we would live comfortably, with next-to-no noise, next-to-no crowding.” When the Buddha learns of what they have done, he praises them. Had he wanted to make the point that noise cannot be heard in the first jhāna, he would have

criticized them for going to the trouble of leaving the first monastery, and recommended that if they wanted to escape the disturbance of noise, they should have entered the first jhāna and dwelled comfortably there instead. But he didn't.

So this sutta proves nothing more than that noise makes it difficult to enter or maintain the first jhāna. It doesn't prove that noises cannot be heard while in the jhāna.

From the discussion of these three citations—DN 2, AN 9:38, and AN 10:72—we can conclude that none of them provide convincing proof that the physical senses have to fall silent in the first jhāna—or any of the four jhānas. This means that the conclusions drawn from AN 9:37, MN 43, and the standard formula for the dimension of the infinitude of space still stand: The physical senses may fall silent in the formless attainments, but there is no need for them to fall silent in the four jhānas. And because awakening can be based on any of the four jhānas, this means further that a meditator can attain awakening without entering into a concentration attainment where the senses are blocked from his/her awareness.

PURITY OF CONCENTRATION

This still leaves open, however, another question: Is it *necessary* for the external senses to fall silent in the formless attainments, or is it simply *possible* for them to fall silent in those attainments? In other words, when focusing on a formless perception, if one pays no heed to perceptions of multiplicity and yet they keep occurring in such a way that sensory input is not blocked out, would that still count as a formless attainment?

Causality as described in dependent co-arising leaves this open as a theoretical possibility, because causal influences within the mind can act not only immediately—as when inattention to perceptions of multiplicity right now could block an awareness of the external senses right now—but also over time, as when attention to perceptions in the past might allow for an awareness of the external senses right now. In other words, if a meditator pays attention to perceptions of sound consistently before entering concentration, that act of attention could theoretically allow those perceptions to persist during the subsequent period of concentration when he/she was no longer giving them any attention at all.

However, the suttas do not say whether this theoretical possibility actually applies in practice. In fact, the only narrative account that addresses the issue is found in the Vinaya—the division of the Canon dealing with monastic rules. Because it is so short, and because its primary concern is with disciplinary issues,

it does not address the Dhamma side of the issue in any conclusive detail. But it does raise some important points. The story is this:

Then Ven. Mahā Moggallāna addressed the monks: “Just now, friends, having attained the imperturbable concentration on the bank of the Sappinikā River, I heard the sound of elephants plunging in, crossing over, and making a trumpeting call.”

The monks were offended and annoyed and spread it about, “Now, how can Ven. Moggallāna say, ‘Just now, friends, having attained the imperturbable concentration on the bank of the Sappinikā River, I heard the sound of elephants plunging in, crossing over, and making a trumpeting call.’ He’s claiming a superior-human state.” They reported this matter to the Blessed One, (who said,) “There is that concentration, monks, but it is not purified. Moggallāna spoke truly, monks. There is no offense for him.” — *Pr 4*

This passage appears as part of the explanation of the fourth rule in the monks’ Pāṭimokkha, or monastic code, a rule covering false claims of meditative attainments. Its main concern is with whether Ven. Moggallāna violated this rule in making his statement about hearing the elephants.

There is, however, a technical Dhamma term at stake here: “imperturbable concentration (*āneñja-samādhi*).” MN 66 states that the first three jhānas are perturbable—subject to movement—whereas the fourth jhāna isn’t. The first jhāna is perturbable in that it includes directed thought and evaluation; the second, in that it includes rapture-pleasure; the third, in that it includes equanimity-pleasure. MN 66 does not describe exactly what qualities in the fourth jhāna make it imperturbable—aside from the fact that it lacks the preceding factors—but AN 9:34 and AN 9:41 provide a suggestion. They note that although the fourth jhāna is marked by purity of equanimity, it does not focus on *perceptions* dealing with equanimity. This means that even though phenomena apart from the object of concentration may be present, the mind neither focuses on them nor is it disturbed by thoughts or feeling tones around those perceptions.

But the fourth jhāna is not the only stage of concentration that counts as imperturbable. MN 106, without following the standard descriptions of the concentration attainments, cites an imperturbable concentration based on perceptions of forms—this is apparently the fourth jhāna—and one that is based on abandoning perceptions of forms. Because it goes on to say that the dimension of nothingness lies beyond the imperturbable, “imperturbable” would apply to two formless attainments: the dimension of the infinitude of space and the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. Thus there are three levels of imperturbable concentration in all.

Unfortunately, the account in Pr 4 does not indicate which of these three stages of concentration Ven. Moggallāna was in, so we cannot say for sure whether this account applies to any of the formless attainments. Nor does it explain what the Buddha meant by “not purified.” Given the different ways “purified” is used in the suttas, it could mean many things. As we noted above, “purified”—with reference to the fourth jhāna—is used in two senses: In the standard formula for the concentration attainments, “purified” refers to purity of mindfulness and equanimity. In the Buddha’s description of his own mastery of the fourth jhāna, “purified” appears in a list that suggests freedom from defilement: “When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability....”

With reference to the formless attainments, MN 43 uses the word “purified” in what may be another sense, indicating a consciousness divorced from the five sense faculties. This would seem to be the meaning of the word most relevant in the context of Ven. Moggallāna’s story. After all, simply hearing the sound of elephants is not a defilement (see SN 35:191(232)), and if the purity of equanimity and mindfulness in the fourth jhāna can be used to hear divine sounds (see MN 4), it can surely also be used to hear the sound of trumpeting elephants. However, given the uncertainty surrounding this story, there is no firm proof that this is what “purified” means here.

The Commentary to this story, in discussing the term “not purified,” assumes that Ven. Moggallāna had left the factors of jhāna entirely when he heard the sound of the elephants. The Sub-commentary seems closer to the mark in assuming that he had reverted briefly to factors of a lower jhāna, such as directed thought and evaluation. If Moggallāna had entirely left the jhānas when hearing the elephants, the Buddha would not have said that he had spoken truly about which stage of concentration he was in, and instead would have said that Moggallāna spoke out of a misunderstanding. That would have been enough to exonerate Moggallāna from an offense under the rule.

But because the Buddha said that Ven. Moggallāna spoke truly, we have to assume that Moggallāna was in a state of imperturbable concentration, even though the attainment of that concentration was not pure. This means that we have to further assume that the Canon allows for a certain amount of leeway in classifying what counts as a particular stage of right concentration. The fourth jhāna, for example, can vary somewhat in the extent to which it is purified of the factors of a lower jhāna—at least momentarily—and yet still qualify as being the fourth jhāna. The dimension of the infinitude of space might vary in the extent to which consciousness is purified of any connection to the five physical senses.

This point helps to explain an apparent anomaly in the way the suttas describe the attainment of the different stages of right concentration. As noted above, there are some cases in which they say simply that the meditator enters and remains in a particular stage. In others, they say that the meditator, while remaining in that stage, analyzes the stage in terms of the fabrications of which it is composed, gains a sense of dispassion for those fabrications, and as a result gains release.

As AN 9:36 shows, the process of analysis involves some fairly extensive use of perceptions, along with directed thought and evaluation, even while the meditator is in the state being analyzed. This would not be an anomaly in the case of the first jhāna, which includes directed thought and evaluation as one of its defining qualities. But the suttas state explicitly that this can also happen in the second jhāna—which is defined as resulting from the abandoning of directed thought and evaluation—and on up through the even more refined levels, including the dimension of nothingness. According to MN 111, the only attainments in which the meditator *must* mindfully leave the attainment before analyzing it are the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception and the cessation of perception and feeling.

If there were no leeway in the descriptions of the various concentration attainments, this sort of analysis would be impossible in any of the attainments beyond the first jhāna. However, given the Buddha’s comment in the story of Ven. Moggallāna, indicating that the concentration attainments can vary somewhat in their level of purity and still count as right concentration, this sort of analysis is possible. And, in fact, the ability to step back from one’s concentration while fabricating it is a useful skill, because it is one of the ways in which a meditator can achieve awakening.

This skill is what Ven. Sāriputta, in MN 43, calls “the eye of discernment.” AN 5:28 picks up the theme of vision to describe this skill with an analogy:

“And further, the monk [having mastered the four jhānas] has his theme of reflection well in hand, well attended to, well-pondered, well-tuned [well-penetrated] by means of discernment.

“Just as if one person were to reflect on another, or a standing person were to reflect on a sitting person, or a sitting person were to reflect on a person lying down; even so, monks, the monk has his theme of reflection well in hand, well attended to, well-pondered, well-tuned [well-penetrated] by means of discernment. This is the fifth development of the five-factored noble right concentration.” — AN 5:28

In other words, the meditator can step back or step above the attainment, without destroying it, and penetrate it by means of the eye of discernment to the point of awakening. To use a more modern analogy, a meditator developing

concentration for the sake of a pleasant abiding is like a hand fully snug in a glove; one developing concentration for the sake of the ending of the effluents is like a hand pulled slightly out of the glove but not so far that it leaves the glove. As the Buddha learned on the night of his awakening, the ability to analyze one's jhāna requires an even higher level of skill than the simple ability to enter and remain in the jhāna, for the latter skill, on its own, cannot bring about awakening (see AN 4:123), whereas the former skill can.

THE RIGHT USE OF CONCENTRATION

Thus, even though Ven. Mahā Moggallāna's story gives no hard evidence one way or the other as to whether a meditator in the formless attainments could hear sounds, it does clear up an important issue surrounding the practice of right concentration for the purpose of full release. An attainment of concentration does not have to be fully pure in order to qualify as right—and, in fact, if one knows how to use the impurity of one's attainment, it can actually be an aid to awakening.

And there's no need for right concentration to block out sounds. After all, one can gain awakening from any of the four jhānas. AN 9:37 and MN 43—in not listing those jhānas as among those where one is insensitive to or divorced from the physical senses—stand as proof that they don't automatically block out sensory input.

The important point about concentration is how one *uses* it. As the Buddha says in MN 152, if the consummate development of one's faculties simply consisted in the ability not to see sights or hear sounds, then blind and deaf people would count as consummate in their faculties. Consummation in this area actually consists of the discernment that allows one to be uninfluenced by sensory input even as one is fully aware of that input.

Āḷāra Kālāma had strong concentration—strong enough to block the sound of 500 carts passing by—but he took it no further. He treated it as an end rather than a means because he lacked insight into how to contemplate it with the eye of discernment to reach awakening. The same point applies to the inhabitants of the dimension of non-percipient beings. As for Ven. Mahā Moggallāna: Even though his concentration may not have been as pure as theirs—at least on the day he sat by the river—he was still able to use it as a means for going beyond all fabrication, and in that way reach total release.

In the final analysis, that's what counts.