

Thinking about Jhāna

Ajaan Fuang, my primary teacher, once said that people coming to the practice of concentration fall into two types: those who think too much and those who don't think enough. This, of course, raises the question of how much thinking, in the context of concentration, is just right. This question requires a clear answer because there are many ways in which the mind can be concentrated, anywhere from those in which the concentration consists totally of thinking to those in which the mind is so forcefully and narrowly focused that all sense of the body and of the five senses is blotted out and in which it's impossible to think.

When we look into the suttas, or discourses of the Pali Canon, the earliest extant record of the Buddha's teachings, we find that the Buddha's discussions of the four jhānas—his standard definition of right concentration—recommend a middle way between these two extremes. However, the “just-rightness” of the practice of jhāna is not only a matter of how much you think, but also of what you think about, how you think, and when.

The suttas' descriptions of the role of thinking in concentration practice fall into four stages of practice:

- 1) thinking prior to jhāna,
- 2) thinking in the first jhāna,
- 3) mental activity in the remaining jhānas, and
- 4) the mental activity of discernment based on the jhānas.

These stages are demarcated mainly by questions of vocabulary focused on two sets of words.

- The first set consists of the word *jhāna* itself, along with its accompanying verb, *jhāyati*.

- The second set consists of the general Pali word for thinking, *vitakka*; the word for evaluation, *vicāra*, which is often paired with *vitakka*; and their accompanying verbs: *vitakkati*, *vicarati*, *anuvitakketi*, and *anuvicāreti*.

In the context of the four stages we've just mentioned, jhāna applies directly only to stages two and three, although the fourth stage can be practiced while you're in jhāna. As for *vitakka* and *vicāra*, they're used only in the first two stages.

Unfortunately, what these two words mean in these stages has provoked controversy. So before we can go into detail about how they function in the different stages of the practice, we have to resolve the controversies around both of them.

JHĀNA

The best way to resolve the controversy around the word *jhāna* is to start by quoting the standard sutta passages describing the four jhānas, and then the standard list of similes that expand on that description.

“There is the case where a monk—quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful dhammas—enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by vitakka & vicāra.

“With the stilling of vitakkas & vicāras, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from vitakka & vicāra—internal assurance.

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

“With the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain.” — SN 45:8

As for the similes:

The first jhāna: “Just as if a dexterous bathman or bathman’s apprentice would pour bath powder into a brass basin and knead it together, sprinkling it again & again with water, so that his ball of bath powder—saturated, moisture-laden, permeated within & without—would nevertheless not drip; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of seclusion. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of seclusion.”

The second jhāna: “Just like a lake with spring-water welling up from within, having no inflow from the east, west, north, or south, and with the skies supplying abundant showers time & again, so that the cool fount of water welling up from within the lake would permeate & pervade, suffuse & fill it with cool waters, there being no part of the lake unpervaded by the cool waters; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of concentration. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of concentration.”

The third jhāna: “Just as in a lotus pond, some of the lotuses, born & growing in the water, stay immersed in the water and flourish without standing up out of the water, so that they are permeated & pervaded, suffused & filled with cool water from their roots to their tips, and nothing of those lotuses would be unpervaded with cool water; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the pleasure divested of rapture. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded with pleasure divested of rapture.”

The fourth jhāna: “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; in the same way, the monk sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness.” — DN 2

The word *jhāna* is usually translated as absorption, and although it’s mainly used in the suttas to denote the four jhānas of right concentration, MN 108 shows that it can also be applied to excessive absorption in unskillful thoughts of sensual passion, ill will, sloth and drowsiness, restlessness and anxiety, and

doubt—what are called the five hindrances. The excessive and absorbing nature of this thinking is indicated by the way the relevant passage in MN 108 plays with the verbs that describe it:

“It wasn’t the case, brahman, that the Blessed One praised mental absorption [*jhāna*] of every sort, nor did he criticize mental absorption of every sort. And what sort of mental absorption did he not praise? There is the case where a certain person dwells with his awareness overcome by sensual passion, seized with sensual passion. He does not discern the escape, as it has come to be, from sensual passion once it has arisen. Making that sensual passion the focal point, he absorbs himself with it, besorbs, resorbs, & supersorbs [*jhāyati pajjhāyati nijjhāyati apajjhāyati*] himself with it.

“[Similarly with the remaining hindrances.]” — MN 108

The longstanding habit of translating *jhāna* as “absorption” has been called into question, largely because the verb *jhāyati* is often translated in a more generic way as “meditate.” From this, it’s been argued that, because the verb has a generic meaning, the noun should, too. From that, it’s been further argued that because the suttas devote more space to the practice of using thought to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful qualities than it does to absorptive practices like mindfulness of breathing, that kind of thought most deserves to be called right concentration. In fact, absorptive practices, devoid of thought, would get in the way of the skillful use of thought, so they should be excluded from the definition of *jhāna*. Therefore, the *jhānas* must not involve absorption in physical sensations, as is commonly believed.

In other words, this argument defines *jhāna* in a way to be more inclusive, but then uses the newly included inductees to exclude the practices more traditionally associated with *jhāna*: “X must include not only Y but also Z; but then, because Z, which is more numerous, is included in X, Y has to be shunted off to the side.”

But even if we ignore the argument’s strange logic, we can note that its starting point—the persistent habit of translating *jhāyati* as “meditate”—is itself questionable. There’s nothing in the suttas to indicate that *jhāyati*, when used in a positive sense in the context of meditation, means anything other than specifically, “do *jhāna*.” The habit of translating it in a more generic sense as “meditate” came from the post-canonical belief, unsupported in the suttas, that it’s possible to attain awakening without having attained any of the four *jhānas*.

So when the Buddha pointed to the roots of trees and told the monks *jhāyatha*—the plural imperative form of the verb—he was telling them explicitly to do *jhāna* there.

Second, even though the suttas do devote a lot of space to the practice of using thought to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful qualities, that doesn’t mean that such a practice should be called *jhāna*. The actual fact of the matter, as we will see, is that the suttas describe this practice as a step *prior* to *jhāna* (DN 2, MN 19, AN 10:99), and not as *jhāna* itself.

Third, as we will also see below, MN 44 defines the themes of concentration as the four establishing of mindfulness. In other words, right concentration is

focused on the activity of right mindfulness. In fact, the descriptions of right mindfulness show how to get the mind into right concentration. This is why right mindfulness precedes right concentration in the factors of the path.

Now, the extended descriptions of right mindfulness in MN 10 and DN 22 start with the first four steps of mindfulness of breathing, which SN 54:8 indicates is both a mindfulness and a concentration practice. This means that the suttas' descriptions of how to get the mind into jhāna actually start with mindfulness of breathing. So that practice shouldn't be excluded from the definition of jhāna.

Fourth, and most graphically, the fact that doing jhāna would involve, not just thinking, but actual absorption in physical and mental sensations, is shown in the similes we've quoted above: The meditator is said to pervade the body with feelings of pleasure to the point where, in the third jhāna, nothing in the body is unpervaded, and then moving on to a state in which the body is filled with a pure bright awareness. It's hard to interpret this simply as a process of thinking, and not to see it as a state of full-body absorption in bodily and mental sensations.

What's more, the suttas frequently describe the fourth jhāna as the basis for developing such psychic powers as the ability to read minds and to recollect past lifetimes. This would be impossible if the fourth jhāna were simply a thinking process of abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones. But it would be entirely possible that these psychic powers could develop from a still, full-body awareness.

VITAKKA & VICĀRA

As for vitakka and vicāra: In the suttas' descriptions of the stage prior to jhāna, these terms can refer either to skillful thinking and evaluating or to unskillful thinking and evaluating. In the first jhāna, though, the vitakka and vicāra that act as component factors of the jhāna are exclusively skillful.

The controversy here is over whether vitakka and vicāra mean the same thing both prior to jhāna and in the first jhāna. It has been argued that vitakka and vicāra in the first jhāna cannot mean thinking and evaluating, and that instead they have a technical meaning totally divorced from thinking and evaluating. But here again, the fundamental basis for this argument is extrinsic to the suttas: There are states of concentration so one-pointed and oblivious to the body that they make thinking impossible. From this fact, the argument states that they, and they alone, should be identified with the four jhānas. But nothing in the suttas indicates that this is so.

To begin with, the standard similes indicate that the jhānas are states of full-body awareness.

But here there's a counter-argument, that "body" in the similes doesn't mean the physical body but a mental body, because the physical body cannot be perceived while you're in jhāna. But if that were the case, why would the Buddha have used the similes to begin with? He would have described jhāna by using

similes of narrow single-pointedness and darkness, avoiding mention of the body altogether, so as not to confuse people, rather than using similes of brightness, expansion, and full-body sensations.

In either instance—his use of the terms “*vitakka*” and “*vicāra*” in the description of the first *jhāna*, and his use of the term “body” in the similes—if he had meant for these terms to have special meanings in the context of *jhāna*, he would have said so. But he never does. In fact, the opposite is the case. In MN 19, he describes the first and second stages of the practice, using the word “*vitakka*” to describe thinking prior to *jhāna* and then continuing to use the same word in the context of the first *jhāna*. Had he meant the word to have a different meaning when changing the context, he would have said so. But he doesn’t. Similarly in MN 119, where he uses the word “body” when describing mindfulness immersed in the body, obviously meaning the physical body, and then he proceeds to use the same word in the similes for the *jhānas*: If he had meant it to have a different meaning in the second context, he would have said so. But again, he doesn’t.

So given that the one-pointed oblivious definition of *jhāna* requires that the Buddha was either devious or incompetent in his teachings—using “body” to mean not-body, and “thinking” to mean not-thinking—we have to reject that definition of what *jhāna* entails.

In other words, we have to assume that *vitakka* and *vicāra* have the same meaning both in the first *jhāna* and in the stage prior to it. This means that the difference between the first *jhāna* and the stage prior to it is not a matter of thinking and not thinking. As we’ll see, it’s more a matter of what you’re thinking about and why.

STAGE ONE: PRIOR TO JHĀNA

The standard description of the first *jhāna* says that it begins when you’re secluded or withdrawn from sensuality and from unskillful mental qualities. So the duty of mental activity in the stage of the practice prior to the first *jhāna* is to rid the mind of these activities.

Different passages in the suttas define these unskillful mental activities in slightly different ways. AN 6:63 defines sensuality as passion for one’s resolves for sensual pleasures. In other words, it means, not the sensual pleasure themselves, but your fascination with thinking about them. SN 45:22 defines unskillful mental qualities (*dhammas*) as the factors of the eightfold wrong path, from wrong view through wrong concentration. DN 2, which treats the stages of practice, describes this stage of secluding the mind as the act of getting rid of hindrances. MN 19 describes it as getting rid of thoughts (*vitakka*) related to wrong resolve: thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of harmfulness.

Of these passages, MN 19 is most explicit in describing what kind of mental activity this stage entails. It falls basically into two sorts. The first involves replacing unskillful thoughts with their opposite, skillful thoughts (*vitakka*):

thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of non-ill will, and thoughts of harmlessness. The verbs used here are *anuvitakketi* and *anuvicāreti*: You keep thinking and evaluating these skillful themes.

The second sort of activity involves acts of metacognition, in which you step back from your thinking, observe it, and decide whether it's worth doing. In the context of the Buddha's instructions for meditation, the purpose of metacognition is basically to develop dispassion for the mental processes you're observing. In other words, the metacognition is aimed at arriving at the conclusion that, no, they're not worth the effort that goes into them, and are best abandoned. The verbs used in this case are not *anuvitakketi* or *anuvicāreti*. Instead, they're *pajānāti*, to discern; *paṭisañcikhati*, to notice, reflect, or consider; *paccavekkhati*, to reflect or examine; and *samanupassati*, to regard or to envision. Although these verbs may be used to describe both skillful and unskillful mental activities outside of the practice of meditation, they're used within that practice exclusively to describe skillful mental activities aimed at inducing dispassion.

Note that these verbs do not indicate bare awareness or bare attention. Instead, you reflect on skillful and unskillful thinking as actions, you discern that they lead to consequences, you envision the long-term consequences, and then you judge whether they're worth pursuing, based on the consequences you see and anticipate. Although this sort of metacognition does involve a type of thinking and evaluating, the Buddha never used the terms *vitakka* or *vicāra* to describe it. Apparently, he wanted to indicate that meditative metacognition involved mental activity of a special sort.

“Thinking [*vitakka*] imbued with sensuality arose in me. I discerned [*pajānāmi*] that ‘Thinking imbued with sensuality has arisen in me; and that leads to my own affliction or to the affliction of others or to the affliction of both. It obstructs discernment, promotes vexation, & doesn’t lead to unbinding.’

“When I had noticed [*paṭisañcikhato*] that it leads to my own affliction, it subsided. When I had noticed that it leads to the affliction of others... to the affliction of both... it obstructs discernment, promotes vexation, & doesn’t lead to unbinding, it subsided. Whenever thinking imbued with sensuality had arisen, I simply abandoned it, destroyed it, dispelled it, wiped it out of existence.

“[Similarly with thoughts of ill will and harmfulness.]” — *MN 19*

Two things are worth noticing in this step of the practice. First, one of the drawbacks that the Buddha discerned about unskillful thinking is that it leads to the affliction of others. In other words, it would lead him to act in ways that would harm them. The fact that he saw this as a drawback meant that he was concerned not only with the state of his own mind, but also with the impact of his actions on others. In this way, his contemplation had a moral dimension, which explains why right speech, right action, and right livelihood function as necessary parts of the path. Only if your actions truly avoid afflicting others can you say that you've definitely set unskillful thinking aside.

The second point worth noticing is that the Buddha, while seeing the rewards of skillful thinking, saw that it, too, had its drawbacks:

“And as I remained thus heedful, ardent, & resolute, thinking [*vitakka*] imbued with renunciation arose in me. I discerned [*pajānāmi*] that ‘Thinking imbued with renunciation has arisen in me; and that leads neither to my own affliction, nor to the affliction of others, nor to the affliction of both. It fosters discernment, promotes lack of vexation, & leads to unbinding. If I were to keep thinking & evaluating [*anuvitakketi anuvicāreti*] in line with that even for a night... even for a day... even for a day & night, I do not envision [*samanupassāmi*] any danger that would come from it, except that from thinking & evaluating [*anuvitakkayato anuvicārayato*] a long time the body would be tired. When the body is tired, the mind is disturbed, and a disturbed mind is far from concentration.’ So I steadied my mind right within, settled, unified, & concentrated it. Why is that? So that my mind would not be disturbed.

“[Similarly with thoughts of non-ill will and harmlessness.]” — MN 19

This passage provides one of the reasons why you as a meditator would want to go beyond even skillful *vitakka*: You want to reach a state in which the body is not tired and the mind is undisturbed. In other words, resting the mind from thought doesn’t get in the way of skillful thought. It gives the mind a chance to rest and to gather its strength—as we will see below—for more precise discernment.

As DN 2 explains, the fact that you’re able to get past the hindrances calms the body and gives rise to a sense of joy, gladness, and rapture, all of which are conducive to getting the mind into *jhāna*. MN 19 adds that the fact that you’ve eliminated unskillful thinking puts the mind in a state where its mindfulness is unclouded. It’s in this way that skillful thinking and metacognition can prepare the mind for an alert state of concentration in which it doesn’t have to think.

But as the description of the first *jhāna* indicates, there is still some more thinking that has to be done before the mind can attain a state where *vitakka* and *vicāra* can be totally dropped. Although, with one possible exception, the verbs used to indicate metacognition—to discern, to reflect, to regard—don’t appear in any of the descriptions of pure *jhāna* practice in the second and third stages of the practice, they will reappear in the fourth stage, where the meditator reflects on the drawbacks of *jhāna*. *Vitakka* and *vicāra*, however, still appear in descriptions of the second stage of the practice, the first *jhāna*, only to disappear from descriptions of the remaining two stages.

STAGE TWO: THE FIRST JHĀNA

Two questions then arise: What kind of thinking and evaluating occur in the first *jhāna*? And what purpose do they serve? The suttas don’t provide direct, explicit answers to these questions, but they do state in an indirect way that the thinking and evaluating are focused on the topic or theme (*nimitta*) of the *jhāna* itself, and that their purpose is to maximize the pleasure and rapture that can be derived from focusing on that theme.

MN 44 defines concentration as singleness of mind: *cittass’ekaggatā*, literally “one gathering-placed-ness of mind” (*eka* = one; *agga* = gathering place; *-tā* = -ness). This suggests that the activity of *vitakka* and *vicāra* have to stay within the

bounds of the one object of the first jhāna. Otherwise, the mind wouldn't be gathered in or around one place.

As we noted above, MN 44 also states that the themes of concentration—and here it must be speaking of right concentration—are the four establishing of mindfulness. These are defined in SN 48:5 as follows:

“And what, monks, is right mindfulness? There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—having subdued greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on the mind in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—having subdued greed & distress with reference to the world. This, monks, is called right mindfulness.”

AN 8:70 expands on this point, showing how the practice of right mindfulness leads directly to the practice of the four jhānas, although it inserts an extra step between the first jhāna and the second:

“You should then train yourself thus: ‘I will remain focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—having subdued greed & distress with reference to the world.’ That’s how you should train yourself. When you have developed this concentration in this way, you should develop this concentration with vitakka & vicāra, you should develop it with no vitakka & a modicum of vicāra, you should develop it with no vitakka & no vicāra, you should develop it accompanied by rapture... not accompanied by rapture... endowed with a sense of enjoyment; you should develop it endowed with equanimity. [Similarly with the other establishing of mindfulness.]” —
AN 8:70

Curiously, the suttas provide detailed instructions for how to develop concentration using only one of the four frames of reference on which mindfulness is established: the body. However, the suttas’ most detailed instructions on how to focus on the body take the breath as their object, and they make the point that if you follow their instructions on how to focus on the breath, you at the same time establish mindfulness in the remaining three frames of reference as well (MN 118; SN 54:13).

The direct connection between right mindfulness and right concentration is shown in an interesting passage in MN 125, where the Buddha compares the training of a monk to the training of a wild elephant. The sutta lists the same steps for the monk’s training set forth in other suttas that provide similar maps of the practice, such as DN 2 and AN 10:99, but with an important difference: In the spot where the other suttas place the practice of the first jhāna, this sutta mentions training in the four establishing of mindfulness. But its treatment of these establishing shows that when they are successfully mastered, they’re equivalent to the first jhāna. It also gives an important clue to what the thinking and evaluating in the first jhāna are about.

“Having abandoned these five hindrances—imperfections of awareness that weaken discernment—he remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—having subdued greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings... mind... mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—having subdued greed & distress with reference to the world. Just as when the elephant tamer plants a large post in the ground and binds the wilderness elephant to it by the neck in order to break it of its wilderness habits, its wilderness memories & resolves, its distraction, fatigue, & fever over leaving the wilderness, to make it delight in the town and to inculcate in it habits congenial to human beings; in the same way, these four establishings of mindfulness are bindings for the awareness of the disciple of the noble ones, to break him of his household habits, his household memories & resolves, his distraction, fatigue, & fever over leaving the household life, for the attainment of the right method and the realization of unbinding.

“Then the Tathāgata trains him further: ‘Come, monk, remain focused on the body in & of itself, but do not think any thoughts connected with the body [*mā ca kāyūpasañhitāni vitakkāni vitakkesi*]. Remain focused on feelings in & of themselves, but do not think any thoughts connected with feelings. Remain focused on the mind in & of itself, but do not think any thoughts connected with mind. Remain focused on mental qualities in & of themselves, but do not think any thoughts connected with mental qualities.’ With the stilling of vitakkas & vicāras, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from vitakka & vicāra—internal assurance.” — MN 125

These instructions for entering the second jhāna—to remain focused on the body, etc., in and of itself but without thinking thoughts connected with the body—suggest that in the first jhāna, one is focused on the body in and of itself while thinking thoughts about the body. And the reason you’re thinking those thoughts is so that you can delight in remaining focused on the body, just as the elephant is being taught to delight in staying in the town.

This point is seconded by the image of the bathman in the standard simile for the first jhāna: Of the four similes, it’s the only one where a conscious agent is purposefully doing something: kneading the water through the soap powder. Water in these similes stands for pleasure; movement, for rapture. The bathman apparently stands for vitakka and vicāra, as they work to spread the rapture and pleasure of the first jhāna throughout the body, maximizing the pleasure that can be found by staying focused with a full-body awareness.

The pleasure of the first jhāna is a necessary part of the concentration not only because it makes it easier to stay concentrated, but also because it’s nourishing. AN 7:63 explicitly compares the jhānas to food for the soldiers of right effort.

What’s more, MN 13 makes the point that even when a monk can see the drawbacks of sensuality, if he cannot attain the pleasure of the first jhāna or something higher, he won’t be able to resist going back to sensuality.

So this is a second reason why the practice of stilling the mind in a sense of well-being is a necessary part of the path: It strengthens your resolve not to revert to sensuality.

This passage also indicates that the phrase, “secluded from sensuality” in the definition of the first jhāna doesn’t mean that meditators must have totally abandoned sensuality once and for all before entering the first jhāna. It simply means that they’ve withdrawn the mind temporarily from sensual thoughts. After all, if they had totally abandoned sensuality, they would have no need to use the pleasure of the first jhāna to fortify their resistance against going back to sensuality.

At first glance, it may not seem that there’s much difference between the vitakka and vicāra in the first jhāna and the activities of metacognition described in stage one of the practice. After all, both involve observation and passing judgment. However, the differences are there.

The first difference has to do with purpose. The activities of metacognition described in stage one—and to be further described in stage four—are done with the purpose of developing dispassion. Vitakka and vicāra in the first jhāna, though, are done not for the sake of dispassion but for the sake of enjoyment and strengthening concentration.

As for the second difference, it’s not always the case that vitakka and vicāra in the first jhāna are limited to direct observation. This can be seen in the alternative description of vitakka and vicāra in what amounts to the first jhāna described in SN 47:10. That sutta notes that when you have trouble focusing on any of the standard themes for right concentration, the frames of reference for establishing mindfulness—when, in its words, a fever based on that frame of reference arises in the body, there’s sluggishness in your awareness, or your mind is scattered externally—your mind should be directed (*paṇidahitabbam*) to an inspiring theme (*pasādaniye nimitte*).

The sutta doesn’t give examples to illustrate what it means by “inspiring theme,” but some possible candidates would include the six recollections described in AN 3:71 or the four sublime attitudes described in SN 48:2. None of these themes involved direct observation. Instead, they’re more discursive, and yet they appear to qualify as proper objects for vitakka and vicāra in the first jhāna.

According to SN 47:10, the purpose of thinking of these themes is to gladden the mind in a way that induces rapture, calms the body, induces pleasure, and promotes concentration. When you receive these results, you can withdraw the mind from the inspiring theme and remain mindful and at ease while engaged in no vitakka or vicāra at all. Apparently, this means that you return to the frames of reference for establishing mindfulness and enter the second jhāna.

What’s important in either case—whether you focus on observing any of the frames of reference or on thinking discursively of an inspiring theme—is that vitakka and vicāra in the first jhāna are focused on relating to your chosen theme of concentration in a way that induces and maximizes pleasure and rapture. This requires active thought as you make adjustments in the mind or in the object of meditation, and not mere acts of setting the mind on its object and keeping it connected there. Only when the mind and the object have been brought into

harmony through thought and evaluation can vitakka and vicāra have the desired effect, allowing the mind to settle down pleasurably into even deeper concentration and to ward off any further thoughts of sensuality.

STAGE THREE: THE REMAINING JHĀNAS

As MN 125 notes, beginning with the second jhāna, you keep track of your frame of reference—such as the breath—but without thinking thoughts about or evaluating the breath. This is where full absorption in the experience of the body, etc., begins. This, apparently, is what the phrase in the definition of the second jhāna, *cetaso ekodi-bhāvaṃ*, unification of awareness, means: Your awareness seems to become one with its object.

And these levels of jhāna are apparently what Sister Vimalā is referring to in one of the verses attributed to her:

“Today, wrapped in a double cloak,
my head shaven,
having wandered for alms,
I sit at the foot of a tree
and attain the state of no-thought [*a-vitakkam*].” — *Thig* 5:2

Awareness still pervades the body, as indicated by the similes for the second through fourth jhānas, but as the similes also indicate, no discursive thought is required to allow feelings of rapture or pleasure to pervade the body. There’s no conscious agent spreading cool water through the lake in the simile for the second jhāna. The cool water of the spring permeates the lake effortlessly. In the simile for the third, there’s no motion at all, reflecting the fact that rapture has faded, and the lotuses are simply saturated from their roots to their tips with cool, still water.

In the simile for the fourth jhāna, as in the simile for the third, everything is perfectly still. In fact it’s so still that, as SN 36:11 and AN 10:72 indicate, in-and-out breathing has stopped. The lack of water in this simile symbolizes the transcending of pleasure, and all that remains is a pure, bright awareness filling the body.

These similes don’t describe a narrow concentration where all awareness is blotted out. And they don’t describe an experience that consists simply of skillful thinking. They indicate full absorption in the sense of the body. Yet even in these states of absorption, some mental activity is going on. After all, they’re fabricated and have to be maintained.

MN 111 gives a detailed description of what mental activities are required to maintain absorption. This sutta describes Ven. Sāriputta’s special ability to get these activities ferreted out one by one (*anupada-vavatthikā*) even while he was in these states of jhāna. Here it must be noted that his ability properly pertains to the fourth stage of the practice, to be discussed in the next section, but what Ven. Sāriputta was able to perceive must be present in all these states of concentration, regardless of whether you can detect them while in these states or not.

The list of mental qualities falls into two parts: those qualities that are present in all four of the jhānas, and those that are particular to each individual jhāna.

The qualities they all have in common are these: the five activities that are listed under “name” in dependent co-arising—contact, feeling, perception, intention, and attention (SN 12:2); three qualities that constitute right effort—desire, persistence, and intent; and then four qualities that do not form a standard list from elsewhere in the suttas—decision, mindfulness, equanimity, and the defining feature of concentration: singleness of mind. What’s interesting in this part of the list is that the three qualities constituting right effort are also three of the bases of success (*iddhipāda*). The fourth basis of success—discrimination, which is identical with the activity of metacognition—is missing. This is one of the indications that metacognition is not an intrinsic part of the practice of the jhānas.

The qualities particular to each jhāna are these:

The first jhāna: vitakka, vicāra, rapture, pleasure.

The second: internal assurance or confidence, rapture, pleasure.

The third: equanimity, pleasure, mindfulness, alertness.

The fourth: a feeling of equanimity, neither pleasure nor pain; unconcern due to calmness or purity of awareness. (“Calmness” is the Burmese reading here; “purity,” the Thai reading).

There are some anomalies in this second part of the list, especially in regard to the third jhāna: Equanimity and mindfulness get listed twice—both as qualities that apply to all four jhānas and as qualities that apply specifically to the third; and for some reason alertness is listed under the third but not under the other jhānas.

The important point is that the mental activities cited in both parts of the list are needed to keep the mind focused and absorbed. Those who say that, beginning with the second jhāna, the mind isn’t engaged in any activity at all are blind to what’s actually going on. At the same time, none of these activities require discursive thinking. They can simply maintain the decision to stay absorbed in repeating the same mental acts, most prominently around the two activities that MN 44 lists as mental fabrication: feeling and perception. The importance of these two activities is reflected in the fact that standard description of each jhāna defines it by its feeling tone, and AN 9:36 classifies all these jhānas as perception attainments.

Although staying in a particular jhāna doesn’t require active thought beyond the qualities included in MN 111’s list, the sutta does raise the question of whether moving from one jhāna to another requires a separate act of discernment. In Ven. Sāriputta’s case, we’re told that after ferreting out the activities in each jhāna, he discerned the higher escape from that jhāna, and so was able to move to progressively deeper states of absorption. This discernment would be an act of metacognition. As AN 9:41 indicates, it could include seeing the drawbacks of whatever is the disturbing factor in the earlier state of jhāna and understanding the reward of abandoning it. However, it’s also possible that

meditators can simply incline their minds to more and more restful states of absorption without being consciously aware of where they are on the map of the jhānas.

What's important to note is that, aside from cases in which an act of discernment plays a role in progressing from a lower jhāna to a higher one, none of the metacognition verbs are used to describe the practice of the jhānas in and of themselves.

STAGE FOUR: DISCERNMENT BASED ON JHĀNA

Of course, given that the jhānas are part of the path, they're not done in and of themselves for their own sake. They're done for the sake of a further purpose. AN 4:41 lists four legitimate purposes for right concentration: as a pleasant abiding in the here and now, as a basis for psychic powers, as a basis for mindfulness and alertness, and as a basis for ending the mental effluents. The discussion in AN 4:41 can give the impression that it's talking about four different types of concentration, with the four jhānas mentioned explicitly for only the first purpose, as a pleasant abiding, but other passages in the suttas show that the jhānas must be understood as implicitly involved in the other three purposes as well. DN 2, MN 39, and many other suttas that provide a map for the whole practice show that the jhānas are a basis for the psychic powers. MN 122 shows that they can provide a basis for alertness, and, of course, the standard definition of the fourth jhāna shows that it's the mental state in which mindfulness becomes pure.

Here we're most directly concerned with the fourth purpose—the awakening that puts an end to the mental effluents—and here again there are many suttas showing that the discernment leading to awakening can be developed within any of the jhānas. In fact, the meditator doesn't need to leave any of the four jhānas to do the analysis required by discernment at all. Among these suttas are MN 52, MN 111, MN 140, AN 5:28, and AN 9:36. These suttas show most definitively that thinking is possible even in the higher jhānas. It's important to note, though, that this thinking is not intrinsic to any of the higher jhānas, and that it's never described as vitakka or vicāra. Instead, it's described by the verbs related to metacognition.

A few examples:

“Further, with the stilling of vitakkas & vicāras, the monk enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from vitakka & vicāra—internal assurance. He reflects [*paṭisañcīkati*] on this and discerns [*pajānāti*], ‘This second jhāna is fabricated & intended. Now whatever is fabricated & intended is inconstant & subject to cessation.’ 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.” — MN 52

“Just as if one person were to reflect [*paccavekkheyya*] 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 [who has attained the four jhānas] has his theme of reflection [*paccavekkhaṇā-nimittāni*] well-grasped, well-attended to, well-pondered, well-penetrated [*suggahitaṃ sumanasikataṃ sūpadhāritaṃ suppaṭividdhaṃ*] by means of discernment [*paññāya*]. This is the fifth development of the five-factored noble right concentration.” — AN 5:28

“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, a monk, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of joy & distress—enters and remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither-pleasure nor pain. He regards [*samanupassati*] 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 [*patitthāpeti*] his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so, inclines [*upasaṃharati*] his mind to the property of deathlessness: ‘This is peace, this is exquisite—the pacification 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

As with the metacognition described in stage one, the acts of metacognition described here involve stepping back from one’s state of mind and observing (reflecting, regarding, discerning) it with the purpose of developing dispassion for it (turning the mind away from it and inclining it elsewhere). The simile in AN 5:28 of the sitting person reflecting on the person lying down, etc., gives an especially clear image of the need to step back from what your mind is doing in order to engage in this type of metacognition.

The main difference between the metacognition employed during the first stage of the practice and that employed here in the fourth is that here it’s aimed, not at clearing the ground for jhāna practice, but at developing dispassion for jhāna itself and, by extension, for all other fabricated mental states as well.

As we noted when discussing the mental activities employed in all states of jhāna in stage three of the practice, the component activities of all the jhānas include all the factors of name in dependent co-arising. These are the factors that provide a basis for the craving that leads to further becoming—the second noble truth (SN 12:2). So when acts of metacognition can develop dispassion for these factors, it attacks the problem of suffering—the first noble truth—at the causes of its cause.

The component factors present in all the jhānas also include right mindfulness, the elements of right effort, and concentration itself. This means

that when dispassion can be developed for these factors, it allows the mind to let go of its last attachment, to the path—the fourth noble truth—itsself.

So here we see a third reason for getting the mind into a state of stillness with no vitakka or vicāra: It provides you with a background of stillness that allows you to ferret out the mental events that can lead to suffering, and to abandon them with finesse. Without that stillness, those events would remain hidden to you in a confusing blur of mental activity.

JUST RIGHT

When we see how the practice of meditation falls into four stages, and the care with which the Buddha described the types of thinking appropriate to each, we can understand why the answer to the question, “How much thinking is just right in the practice of concentration?” is not a simple one. Instead, it depends on three things:

- which stage of the practice you’re in;
- what kind of thinking is appropriate to that stage;
- what its purpose is.

In the first stage, prior to jhāna, you engage in enough skillful vitakka and vicāra to counteract any unskillful thoughts, and in enough metacognition to see the drawbacks of unskillful thinking, the relative merits of skillful thinking, and the need for the mind to rest even from skillful thinking by entering concentration.

In the second stage, the first jhāna, you engage in enough vitakka and vicāra focused on the theme of your concentration to maximize the pleasure and rapture you can gain from staying with that theme and to spread that pleasure and rapture throughout the body.

In the third stage, the remaining jhānas, you engage in just enough mental activity, devoid of vitakka and vicāra, to maintain the focus of your concentration. You might engage in metacognition only to the extent of moving the mind from a lower jhāna to a higher one, but even that much metacognition is not always required.

In the fourth stage, building on the practice of the jhānas, you engage in enough metacognition to see the drawbacks of the jhānas and, by extension, all fabricated phenomena. This metacognition is what leads to the noble attainments and, ultimately, to release from all suffering and stress.

Two practical considerations flow from this answer to our original question.

The first is that people who tend to think too little tend to dislike thinking. This is why they have to put extra effort into engaging in metacognition in the fourth stage, and not just to rest in the jhānas in the second and third stage. Otherwise, they’ll never reach any of the noble attainments.

Conversely, people who think too much tend to like thinking, which is why they have to be encouraged to engage in the sort of metacognition that sees the advantages that come from allowing the mind to stop thinking: to allow it to rest,

to strengthen its resolve against sensuality, and to clarify the mental activities of name and the path, so that they can deepen their dispassion for them.

The second practical consideration is that, just as thinking needs to be just right in order to get the best results from the meditation, concentration needs to be just right as well. If your concentration is devoted totally to thinking, it'll never yield the results that come from allowing the mind to be still. If it's so narrowly focused that it allows no room for thinking at all, it'll never allow for the sort of metacognition that's needed to lead the mind to the deathless.

So, just as the Buddha's path to the end of suffering follows a middle way in general, his teachings on the practice of right concentration teach a middle way, too. Of course, the middle here is not simply a matter of finding a halfway point between two extremes. It requires that you be sensitive to where you are in the practice and to the task at hand. In other words, for concentration to be right, it has to be just right for what's needed right now.

Further reading:

Right Mindfulness, Appendix Three: "Jhāna & Right Concentration"

On the Path: "Right Mindfulness"; "Right Concentration"

"Silence Isn't Mandatory"

"How Pointy Is One-pointedness?"