

Erroneous Interpretations and Misconceptions: A Study of Jhanas in Theravāda Buddhist Meditation

W. H. S. Fernando¹

Introduction

There is a rapid improvement in spreading erroneous interpretations and misconceptions in the modern society. Misconceptions and erroneous interpretations respectively refer to ‘wrong or misbeliefs’ and ‘an action of interpreting something wrongly’. This situation occurs due to the inability to accept the reality as it is and the ignorance of the society as they only read or understand the surface meaning except the deeper meaning (ayoniso manasikaro).

As a consequence, these misinterpretations and illusions can be seen in Theravāda Buddhism, especially in the field of meditation. As the Buddha himself has accepted the meditative attainments namely Jhanas that refer to a set of states of deep mental unification (Gunaratana 1995), meditation is often identified as the core practice of Buddhism. Hence, the society brings out various interpretations and perceptions on meditation and Jhanas that are harmful for the status of the religion.

Therefore, this research study critically examines the recent erroneous interpretations and misconceptions of Jhanas in Theravāda Buddhism comparing to the true teaching of Lord Buddha by conducting a questionnaire survey and interviews.

Research Objective

The main aim of this study is to investigate the erroneous interpretations and misconceptions of Jhanas in Theravāda Buddhism and enlighten the society on the true teachings of Lord Buddha regarding the tranquility meditation and Jhanas.

Research Methodology

A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches are used in the data analysis by using the related articles and conducting a questionnaire survey and interviews among meditators (both

¹. Department of English Language Teaching, Faculty of Humanities, University of Kelaniya.
palitha8133@gmail.com or *assignment.uok96@gmail.com*

monks and lay people) to find out the erroneous interpretations and misconceptions of Jhanas in the present society while examining the Pāli Canon (Tipitaka) and its commentaries as the primary resources and the related articles and books as the secondary resources to strengthen the true conceptions and interpretations respectively.

Research Problems

This research study seeks to address the following questions:

- What are the erroneous interpretations and misconceptions of Jhanas in Theravāda Buddhism in the modern world?
- What are the true teachings of Lord Buddha regarding the Tranquility meditation and Jhanas?

Research Literature Review

The primary sacred resource of Theravāda Buddhists, the Pāli Canon which contains all the teachings of Lord Buddha and its Pāli commentaries such as “Visuddhimagga” by Buddhaghosa (trans. Ñānamoli 2010) exhibit the importance and the correct path of attaining Jhanas as the Jhanas encountered repeatedly in the scriptural texts of early Buddhism. Yet, there are some resources that interpret the Buddha’s doctrine misleadingly. The study of Tan (2010) has reported that “If one starts out with wrong view, one’s meditation experiences are likely to simply reinforce one’s preconceptions.” and if one practises samadhi with the right view, “one will get what one wishes for (Sujato, 2004b).” Thus, conceptions on Jhanas can also misunderstood by the meditators. Further, Gunaratana (1980) found that the first two books of Abhidhammapitaka, Dhammasangani and Vibhanga clarify some tricky and complicated points concerning the Jhanas.

Research Framework

After selecting the research topic and identifying its objectives and problems, the researcher thoroughly examines both the primary and secondary resources such as the Tipitaka and its commentaries and other related articles and books. Here, the main aim is to look into the true perspectives of Lord Buddha related to the meditative attainments specially Jhanas.

Next, the researcher conducts a questionnaire survey and interviews to inquire about the false perceptions and interpretations of the average people. Further, related articles are also used in this stage.

Finally, using the collected data, a comparative analysis has been done quantitatively and qualitatively in order to eliminate all the contradictory ideas and strengthen the true conceptions and interpretation of Jhanas.

Research Discussion

Referring to ‘Visuddhimagga’, Buddhaghosa (trans. Ñānamoli 2010) explains Jhanas as the “happiness, bliss, and unification of mind” which result from centering the mind upon a single object. As mentioned in Gunaratana (1980), the Buddha has introduced the differences between the mundane Jhanas, the four fine-material Jhanas and the four immaterial Jhanas pertain to the stage of concentration that cannot ensure the complete deliverance without the four stages of Arahant hood.

The factors found in this analysis are the recent misconceptions and misinterpretations of Jhanas in Theravāda Buddhism, as follows: the society,

- misunderstand the Anariya Jhanas as Ariya Jhanas and try to find solace by suppressing the five hindrances.
- misbelieve that they can attain Nibbana or something close to it when attain Jhanas.
- misinterpret erroneously that they can be new beings or spirits when attain Jhanas.
- misbelieve that attaining Jhanas can be done only by monks or holy men and
- misbelieve that attaining Jhanas is only a relaxation technique via meditation, where they don’t aim at the final goal, Nibbana.
- misunderstand that attaining Jhanas is going to a trance, where they think that it makes them emotionless and unconscious.

Research Conclusion

Thus, the paper shows an improvement of spreading misconceptions of Jhanas in Theravāda Buddhism and paves the correct path to solve this problem referring to the primary and secondary resources.

Research Suggestions

However, as a considerable amount of research studies hasn't been published on this subject matter, current discussions and research studies should be conducted to enlighten the society on the true concepts of meditation.

Key words: Misconceptions, Jhanas, Tranquility Meditation, Theravāda Buddhism

References

- Buddhaghosa, B. **The path of purification: Visuddhimagga**. (2010) (tr). Ñānamoli, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Gunaratana, H. (1980). **A critical analysis of Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist meditation**, Sri Lanka: Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc.
- Gunaratana, H. (1995). 'Chapter 02-what meditation is not?'.
- Gunaratana, H. (1995). 'The Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist meditation', **Access to Insight**, <<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/index.html>>.
- 'Power of the human mind – Anariya or mundane Jhānas', <<https://puredhamma.net/dhamma/what-is-buddha-dhamma/power-of-the-human-mind-the-anariya-or-mundane-jhanas/>>.
- Tan, P 2010, 'The nature of dhyana as a basis for liberation', **The Buddha discovered dhyana**, vol. 33, no.1b.