

Ascending to the Jhânas

[Translated from the German. Suggestions to improve the style are welcome. Remarks in square brackets are the translator's. Background: Dr. ..., a German Buddhist and young professor-to-be of international law, is spending his summer holiday in Switzerland, trying to meditate. His letter to his teacher in Germany, who introduced him into Buddhism, reads as follows:]

St. Abbondio, 28th June 1955

I wish you the quiet I have here, and I wish us all a hermit's hut in Ceylon just like the "Villa Capra" here. Because of it I have become quite independent from the Voltz household; they also have become much quieter regarding evening conversations. Every morning I climb my mountain where I have discovered a nice new spot; and I stay there until Sakko makes it thunder in the afternoon to remind me not to overdo it. Since I've been here I've gone there every day (without books). I have realised all kinds of practical and theoretical things. The most important things would be the problem about the expedition to the absorptions [used here as the English translation for jhânas]. In your youthful thoughtlessness you once said that it is shocking how easy it is to attain the absorptions. I took that as a subjective assessment of your own situation. I would rather be inclined to say that it is shockingly difficult; but this assessment is just as changeable as yours. Certainly, the plan of operations is more important. There are now two things I find particularly noteworthy:

1. The inability to let go, i.e. to pacify the awareness that is watching closely. I have noticed that prior practice of the pillars of mindfulness makes attention so sharp that it rushes at all phenomena and registers them. Thus sati and samâdhi could be said to be different. My personal experience is that — having appeased the coarser mental creations [sankhâras] — I either sink into a waking dream or my awareness is overly sharp. It is here that the golden middle path must be found. In ... [his home town] I used to

think that the former reaction was the normal result of the usual tiredness in everyday life; but here I notice that this is not the reason. I have already told you several times that the enigma of sleep is very interesting to me. After all, it's the only case of consciousness falling away, and from that I want to make use in analogy to absorption.

2. Lack of experience in the field of well-being. At one of your talks I said once that it's much easier for the real Christians to attain the absorptions because emotionally they have built a suprasensuous world, which they can move into when the sensuous world falls away. But for us — for me at least — suprasensuous worlds are only clear as an abstraction; and not at all emotionally. This is the situation most Westerners are in who aren't Christians. Perhaps you don't understand this but I cannot find a better way to put it into words. Moreover, in practice the difference between sensuous and suprasensuous well-being is not clear at all. "He feels a happiness in the body" — this is a sensuous well-being inasmuch as it occurs by way of the five senses, but on the other hand it is different from the happiness of desire. And this ambiguity reaches further than one might think. It is important practically because, after all, one is set on denying all sensuous well-being. This way uncertainty arises, and if denying is taken too far one obstructs one's way to the absorptions because one prevents an essential characteristic (well-being). But if denying doesn't reach far enough subtle sensuous feelings of well-being are tolerated and thus obstruct the absorptions.

Further: Access to the absorptions as well-being is only gained by changing from the well-being of desire to the well-being of virtue and the well-being of renunciation. Here, the second transition is difficult because it is the transition from acting to non-acting, the well-being of which discloses itself only after rather long practice. Therefore it is necessary, I find, to practise the pillars of mindfulness for a prolonged period of time to cultivate the right preparation. Only when that level has been gained comprehensively does one become assured enough to hold awareness less tightly because it is no longer necessary to be watchful like a hawk. All this applies if absorption is not attained accidentally without any preparation, in

sense-restraint is contained. This well-being grows ever deeper. External and noisy things more and more jar that person out of well-being; what is heartfelt and quiet draw him in. The well-being of the absorptions is a step of this development of well-being in general. And whoever does and has done these four steps: from seeing through to fading, from fading to turning away, from turning away to alienation — whoever is established in these four steps, whoever sticks to them and grows in them and remembers what the Awakened one said about entry to the absorptions — such a one will soon gain the absorptions. I believe your thinking is somewhat too theoretical regarding these things, and from that you see more barriers than necessary. You could have it easier regarding this point.

Concerning the four pillars of mindfulness: I am completely certain — it can be worked out, so to speak — that the practice of the first pillar of mindfulness is entirely sufficient to gain at least the first two of the four absorptions. But they are only sufficient if they are not practised regarding the details of the exercise but regarding seeing through and detachment. Here the process of development has to be maintained throughout the four stages. The necessary changes cannot be expected overnight. They rather happen over days, sometimes over weeks or years. Additionally, not only the intensity of effort but also several other things play a role. If one person has gained absorption relatively early on, then, if he is not established in the four stages, he can regain it only occasionally. If another gains the absorptions for the first time only after being established in the four stages then he has much more mastery over them and can repeat them more easily and progress in them more quickly. — "Predestination", too, has two sides to it.

So, dear ..., I'll stop here otherwise you will not get this letter at all. Have a pleasant time and good luck as well.

the well-being of absorptions. The expression points to a locality. One thinks a certain world should be reached. But it isn't like that at all. I can tell you what it is when answering your subsequent question where you say the difference between sensual and suprasensual well-being is not at all clear in practice. With well-being we have to distinguish between the cause from which it originates and the place where we feel it. The bodily velvety feeling in access concentration indeed has its place in the body but no sensual cause.

It hasn't arisen from desire or from fulfilling desire. As the Awakened One's introductory series to the absorption shows, it stems from serenity of heart, from the quietening of the body well-being arises. The bodily happy feeling that introduces the third absorption has the same source. As long as there is sensuous perception and this kind of happy feeling (and the merging of both is what we call access concentration), for that long the body is the place of that feeling of happiness. But as soon as sensuous perception falls away there is happiness that has no dwelling place — it is universal. Then there is only happiness itself. Therefore it can no longer be called "velvety". Any well-being that hasn't been aimed at and attained by sensual desire, no matter where it dwells, should be pursued. Therefore, well-being is assessed according to its cause and not according to the place it resides. You are right to point out these two levels. They are very far-reaching. And the yardstick I have just mentioned solves the problem.

Then you say that absorptions can only be gained by changing from the well-being of desire to the well-being of virtue and from there to the well-being of renunciation. The second transition is supposedly more difficult because it represents the transition from acting to not acting. — I would say that whoever walks the Eightfold Path with a deep knowledge about welfare and harm, about Samsara and Nibbana, such a one already always has a very strong sense of well-being because he realizes that he is on the path from misfortune to fortune. Above that he can derive further well-being from several individual successes from overcoming despair and doubt, by gaining certainty, etc. Herein all well-being virtue and

other words through predestination (like Suso, e.g.) Since this was also the case with you, you might be seeing the problems of others, who experience this rather normal situation, less clearly.

Reply:

4th July 1955

My dear ...,

You know how much I want to finish the work for ... [the Buddhist magazine he was the editor of]. But what you write to me about the absorptions is so important that in any case I want to comment on it; and since your holiday is limited I am keen to do so quickly. It's a real expedition to the absorptions. In every aspect this expression can be taken seriously for it takes thorough preparations and then a thorough multi-phased fight to gain them. But the more I see how reliably everybody who has understood the teachings can also gain the absorptions, the more I am surprised and shocked how only few among monks and lay people experience the absorptions to my knowledge.

Let's not misunderstand this statement, we have talked about the prerequisites for absorptions and we know that they cannot be attained without "ardent and fervent endeavour". Nor have my accounts about my experiences left any doubt about that. First of all I would like to reiterate generalities; what belongs to the absorptions and is capable of leading to them; and then I'd like to respond to the various remarks about the absorptions in your letter. I think this is the best way. There's not much new to you in all that I've got to say here. We have already talked about it all several times. What counts is the arrangement and having things ready at the right time.

I would like to compare the absorptions to the interior of a castle high up on a mountain. Everybody who wants to get there has to do two things: first he has to reach that mountain top from the place where he is and then has to open the door of the castle and enter. All

climbing up is useless if one cannot open that door, and all skill in opening that door is useless if one hasn't reached the castle yet. Both things have to go together. One has to have reached that place and has to be able to open the door. That co-ordination presents a certain difficulty.

Indeed both exercises are totally different, but you can't just say that one exercise is more difficult than the other. The first exercise is the broad preparation; the other is the final trigger. The first exercise is strain and exertion for the natural, sensuous person; the second one is to calm and relax. For most people only one of these two fits them — exertion suits one person more, relaxation suits another more — there are only few that find both suitable from the start. However, there are only few understanding people who couldn't master both by persistent practice. One has to get to know the character of both exercises well; one needs to know one's own nature and has to train oneself accordingly.

We know what it means to climb to a mountain top. By various persistently cultivated exercises, by "fervent and ardent endeavour", particularly by the correct practice of satipatthâna, one starts to see through the world of the senses more and more; from that it loses its lure more and more, from that, one increasingly turns away from it and gains an ever-growing alienation. These four stages of overcoming arise from each other like horse-tail plants: only from thorough and persistent practice the sensuous world is seen through; only from progressively seeing through, the lure of the sensuous world starts to fade; only from its progressively fading, one increasingly turns away from it; and only from progressively turning away does the practitioner's alienation start to set in. None of the steps needs to be fully completed, but every step must have been trodden and alienation towards the sensuous world must already have been felt several times. Only then that altitude is reached at which absorptions are possible. Turning away and alienation will get the practitioner to the point, where he can attain the absorptions "as he wishes and desires in their fullness and depth". Where the handed-down discourses alone talk about the absorptions and the way leading there, it can be clearly recognised

to extract oneself from it. That's why whether this afternoon or tomorrow morning, whether talking to others or taking a bath or reading the mail one wants to stay mindful of the escape, wants to hold on to detachment and turning away. Doing this one ensures that the fruit gained in sati spreads more and more over one's whole thinking, that the whole of everyday life is permeated by it, that one is making progress in breaking free. Then gradually alienation is felt, too. The first time it happens, some time or other, is in a presentiment, then in a thought, then in an experience, then more often. Who has gone thus far with satipatthâna, will no longer stand in forced attention but in deep calm. Such a one has completely reduced and suspended the chasm between sati and samâdhi and easily walks across. Let us not forget that Govindo [in a Digha Nikâya Sutta] seemingly in vain spent the whole four months of the rainy season practising the divine abidings and only towards the end of this time, as if it were by chance, he experienced Brahma.

I think it's dangerous to compare the absorptions to sleep in any way. For nothing within the absorptions is comparable to sleep. Sleep is never one hundred per cent there, and sensuous perception in sleep is never one hundred per cent gone. It's always a mixture of both, whereas absorption and sensuous perception are totally incompatible. The proof is that it's possible to be aroused from sleep by noise or glaring light but never from absorption. The feeling in absorption, the blissful serenity, and the unworldly serenity afterwards, arise exactly because a huge burden has been put down with the falling away of sensuous perception. That's why this feeling is completely missing in sleep. The difference, however, between the complete purity in the fourth absorption and a so-called dreamless sleep is the biggest of all. Whoever wants to bring these two together is still far from understanding the nature of the absorptions. — But it is possible to compare the entry into the absorptions with entry into sleep. In both cases it's necessary to have that relaxation and that fine balance of carefully guiding and letting it happen. And in both cases strenuous exertion and strong activity is truly an obstacle.

Regarding your statement about lack of experience of well-being: The expression "suprasensuous worlds" is most unsuited to define

Sammâ sati is not sammâ samâdhi yet; we know this. It's only the way to gradually get there — and this is where the problems lie for some. For the normal person, i.e. the one that is firmly rooted in this world, the practice of sammâ sati requires great exertion, strain and attention. With that attitude the absorptions are not possible. But when he practises sammâ sati more and more often and progresses in it more and more, then the relevant ideas are ever more ready at hand, and he can hold them in his awareness with less and less exertion and strain; then he's already much closer to the absorptions. But to get there takes long, long thorough practice for the normal person. On this way, the attachment to this world has to be loosened (for it is the reason that developing sati is so strenuous). On this way ever more fading away and from it ever more turning away and ever more alienation must have grown and keep growing. This is climbing the mountain; this is "fervent, ardent endeavour". Sati is not always exhausting and straining and therefore is not a contrast to samâdhi as such. But as long as it is still strenuous one is still on the way to samâdhi, not yet at the goal. We have talked about that as well repeatedly, and I have described the daily hour-long exercises that were practiced for weeks. If sati is practised with dedication in this way then calming down and liberation grow from it from which the absorptions can arise.

Let us now deal with the questions in your letter. I see that some things have already been answered in what I have said so far. You're talking about the inability to pacify the closely watching awareness in order to make the absorptions arise. My comment on this is that the initially strenuous close watching becomes a silent watching in the course of progressive practice, by which sati comes close to samâdhi. But it is never samâdhi. And as long as sati hasn't grown close to samâdhi one has to work towards that. This is best done in the following way: Having gained a certain degree of seeing through after a few hours of sati exercises, one soothes the overly sharp attention in the thought or the observation that the body and the sensuous world as a whole are just as observed by attention, and that the sensuous perception is by its nature not the place of well-being. For that reason one doesn't want to take deeper roots in it but

that and why this degree of purification is the prerequisite for the absorptions. If in his youth, before his Enlightenment, the Awakened One might have known nothing about alienation from the world when he attained the first absorption, then that was only possible because he didn't need to alienate himself from it because he wasn't familiar with it.

If the absorptions are attained so shockingly seldom these days the reason for this is almost exclusively that hardly a genuine turning away let alone an alienation from the sensuous world is attained. Almost all practitioners, let alone non-practitioners, live in this sensuous world too much as a matter of course, too securely and too deeply rooted. They have settled down here and regard their living place or their books or their duties to people as their home. Their turning away is an occasional start and try; it doesn't include the will to jump off for good. To be an "inhabitant of the four directions" means to do away with the world and places, means no longer to want to have a home in the kâma loka (world of sense), means to have turned away from the "bait of the world" once and for all. We have already talked about this frequently.

The prerequisite for this turning away and the alienation is seeing through. All practices — even those with the most glorious names — are futile if they don't lead to seeing through. I have found — and we have frequently talked about this too — that no guidelines to conduct satipatthâna fruitfully are more suited than those extant in the satipatthâna sutta of the Middle Length Discourses. In this handed-down discourse the essence of practice that alone bears fruit, has been preserved in the word itself. Here the practice is not the master but the servant; it is in the service of the ever-growing insight that this body, being of the constitution to constantly change has absolutely nothing in common with that unchanging stillness and freedom — it cannot have anything in common with it because that wonderful, untouchable stillness is completely beyond it. It's only this penetrating sight that leads to turning away, to alienation, to detachment. To gain that penetrating sight is the purpose of the first satipatthâna. And satipatthâna is only useful to the extent it reaches that goal. But I see with many people that they have directed their

whole attention far more to the exercise itself and the various details, and that's why they don't gain that penetrating and liberating sight in spite of all practice. And that's why they can't get the will to detach either.

Whoever by genuine practice of satipatthâna sees salvation as being beyond the body, immediately also recognises that the whole sensuous world that can only be seen, heard, smelled, tasted and felt through this body is likewise contrary to welfare. Such a person recognises that clinging to the body or the sensuous world obstructs the path to welfare. Only this is the penetrative vision. Only from here the fading away of the sensuous world sets in. Only now it no longer appears to him as so alluring and glittering. Only from here he by and by arrives at turning away and from there gradually evolves to alienation.

Therefore the most important thing, both with satipatthâna and all other practices, is that they are practised in the spirit that leads to seeing through because from there all other welfare springs. If we realise that, we understand that that part of the work, i.e. climbing to the mountain top is the more extensive of the jobs but not necessarily the more difficult one. For this exercise almost every normal person needs a disproportionately bigger part of the entire time of the practice necessary to reach the absorptions. Only from this thorough-going detachment, consciousness gradually becomes as purified as is necessary for the absorptions.

The second part of the practice, opening the door to the castle, the actual last preparation of absorption is something completely different. — I have often felt that this step can't be better expressed, however much one may want, than the Awakened One himself expresses it again and again:

“Whoever recognises that these five hindrances are abandoned in him becomes glad; being glad he becomes serene; being serene the body becomes tranquil; with the body being tranquil he feels well-being; with that feeling of well-being his mind becomes unified. Thus, far from desires, far from unwholesome states he gains ...”

Whoever gently traces the development described here, how one results from the other, will view them like the stages of dawn after the jumble of the night; becoming ever brighter, ever deeper, ever clearer until the sun rises.

And the whole process takes place in deep silence and profound happiness: that is samâdhi. Samâdhi is not exertion but relaxation. It is not struggle but rest. But samâdhi is the rest outside of and above lust, outside of and above sensual enjoyment. Samâdhi is rest in detaching and gaining alienation from the sensuous world.

We have occasionally talked about this entrance to the absorptions. It's the most tender and subtle thing that can be thought and felt at all; it's a very fine mixture of careful turning inward and keeping still and letting it happen. Turning inward is the quiet reflection that the five hindrances have been abandoned; and from this reflection, gladness by and by arises and from that serenity and from that tranquilisation of the body and from that the feeling of well-being and from that unification of mind. And by quietly following this and letting it happen the door opens. And if one isn't successful the tenth time or even the fiftieth time — one will unfailingly reach it if he just keeps practising feeling his way in and letting it happen at that stage over and above any worldly desire.

Between these two basic exercises, between climbing the mountain and opening the door, between sati and samâdhi, the contradiction is merely one of appearance. Why is that so? — Because the absorptions can arise only beyond worldly worrying and planning, only from negating attachment to the world of the senses, only from detachment and alienation; that's why one cannot gain the absorptions as long as one is rooted in this sensuous world. Every normal person that doesn't become familiar with the teachings gets rooted more and more deeply in this world. If he wants to gain samâdhi, he must loosen that attachment. But for that, seeing through the apparent pleasantness to the shortcomings, unworthiness and wretchedness of the body and world is necessary. From seeing through, fading away, detachment and alienation arise. For this seeing through, sammâ sati, right mindfulness, is indispensable. Thus only sati leads to samâdhi.