



The Theory of the Four Stages of Liberation in Pāli Literature

AMRITA NANDA

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ABBREVIATIONS¹

AK	<i>Abhidharmakośa</i> of Vasubandhu
AKB	<i>Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam</i> of Vasubandhu
AN	<i>Aṅguttaranikāya</i>
AN-A	<i>Aṅguttaranikāya Aṭṭhakathā</i> (<i>Manorathapūraṇī</i>)
AN-ṭīkā	<i>Aṅguttaranikāya ṭīkā</i>
Bv	<i>Buddhavamsa</i>
Bv-A	<i>Buddhavamsa Aṭṭhakathā</i> (<i>Manurattbavilāsinī</i>)
CDB	The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (English Translation of the <i>Samyuttanikāya</i> by Bhikkhu Bodhi)
CSCD	<i>Chattasāṅgāyana</i> CD-ROM version 4
Dhp	<i>Dhammapāda</i>
Dhs	<i>Dhammasaṅgaṇī</i>
Dh-A	<i>Dhammapāda Aṭṭhakathā</i>
Dhs-A	<i>Dhammasaṅgaṇī Aṭṭhakathā</i> (<i>Atthasālinī</i>)
DN	<i>Dīghanikāya</i>
DN-A	<i>Dīghanikāya Aṭṭhakathā</i> (<i>Sumaṅgalavilāsinī</i>)
DN-ṭīkā	<i>Dīghanikāya ṭīkā</i>

¹In this book, the Pāli quotations of the Pāli Canonical texts and the Pāli commentaries are from the Pāli Text Society (PTS) editions. Some of the Pāli quotations of the sub-commentaries (*ṭīkā*) are from the Vipassana Research Institute (VRI) editions.

All translations from primary sources are mine unless otherwise stated.

In this book, the term Pāli *Nikāyas* refers to the five *nikāyas* of the Pāli *Suttapiṭaka*.

Iti	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
Iti-A	<i>Itivuttaka Aṭṭhakathā</i>
Kv	<i>Kathāvatthu</i>
Kv-A	<i>Kathāvatthu Aṭṭhakathā</i>
LDB	The Long Discourses of the Buddha (English translation of the <i>Dīghanikāya</i> by Maurice Walshe)
MN	<i>Majjhimanikāya</i>
MN-A	<i>Majjhimanikāya Aṭṭhakathā</i> (<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>)
MN-ṭīkā	<i>Majjhimanikāya ṭīkā</i>
MDB	The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (English Translation of the <i>Majjhimanikāya</i> by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi)
NDB	Numerical Discourses of the Buddha (English translation of <i>Aṅguttaranikāya</i> by Bhikkhu Bodhi)
Patis-A	<i>Paṭisambhidāmagga Aṭṭhakathā</i> (<i>Saddhammappakāsinī</i>)
Pug	<i>Puggalapaññatti</i>
Pug-A	<i>Puggalapaññatti Aṭṭhakathā</i>
SN	<i>Samyuttanikāya</i>
SN-A	<i>Samyuttanikāya Aṭṭhakathā</i> (<i>Sāratthappakāsinī</i>)
SN-ṭīkā	<i>Samyuttanikāya ṭīkā</i>
Sn	<i>Suttanipāta</i>
Sn-A	<i>Suttanipāta Aṭṭhakathā</i> (<i>Paramatthajotikā II</i>)
Tha	<i>Theragāthā</i>
Thera-A	<i>Theragāthā Aṭṭhakathā</i> (<i>Paramatthadīpanī V</i>)
Thī	<i>Therīgāthā</i>
Therī-A	<i>Therīgāthā Aṭṭhakathā</i> (<i>Paramatthadīpanī VI</i>)
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
Udāna-A	<i>Udāna Aṭṭhakathā</i> (<i>Paramatthadīpanī I</i>)
Vbh	<i>Vibhaṅga</i>
Vbh-A	<i>Vibhaṅga Aṭṭhakathā</i> (<i>Sammohavinodanī</i>)
Vism-ṭīkā	<i>Visuddhimagga Mahāṭīkā</i>

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Introduction

The early Buddhist theory of four stages to liberation refers to an exhaustive list of stages that a Buddhist practitioner may pass through in his or her progress towards liberation. This journey can occur through this or subsequent lifetimes in various cosmological realms, depending on the individual's circumstances and commitment to spiritual practice. In the early Buddhist literature, they are defined as four fruits (*catvāri-phalāni*): the fruit of stream-entry (*sotāpatti-phalam*), the fruit of once-returning (*sakadāmi-phalam*), the fruit of non-returning (*anāgāmi-phalam*), and fruit of arahantship (*arahatta-phalam*).¹ Sometimes, these fruits occur with four respective paths: the path of stream-entry (*sotāpatti-magga*), the path of once-returning (*sakadāgamimagga*), the path of non-returning (*anāgānimagga*), and the path of arahantship (*arahattamagga*).² I have chosen to define them as 'the theory of four stages to liberation' to highlight two of its important aspects. First, the theory seeks to classify and arrange a variety of soteriological path schemes and practices under the four stages to thus make them a coherent single inclusive path to liberation. Secondly, the theory shows a logical plan and establishes an orderly system for several Buddhist religious orientations and lifestyles. The theory functions mainly at the soteriological and normative levels.

¹ DN I 156.

² MN III 254; DN III 255; AN IV 292.

This theory functions within the confines of early Indian Buddhist and Theravāda Buddhist soteriology, aiming at imparting soteriological evaluation of several Buddhist modes of life. In this sense, the theory of four stages is crucially important, as it provides a soteriological framework for lay Buddhists, encompassing a comprehensive structure into which an array of practices and attainments is incorporated. As various Abhidhamma and Pāli commentaries elaborate (e.g. *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, *Visuddhimagga*, *Puggalapaññatti Atthakathā*, etc.), this soteriological system includes numerous meditative states, cosmic realms, cognitive stages, varieties of religious and psychological aspirants, religious practices, and spiritual hierarchies. I have shown that the term ‘stream-entrant’, in all likelihood, indicates the lifestyle of an ideal lay Buddhist who, though not yet ready to renounce mundane affairs, aligns their life according to Buddhist faith and ethics while living a mundane life. And long before the formulation of the theory of four stages, the stages of arahantship and non-returning had emerged as the pivotal concept of Buddhist soteriology.

It appears that the theory of four stages to liberation in the Pāli *Nikāyas* sought to bring the mutually exclusive lifestyles of monastics and lay Buddhists within the orbit of Buddhist soteriology. The aim was to give a soteriological framework and meaning to different lifestyles within the contents of Buddhist philosophy and soteriology. It thus legitimizes all types of lifestyles, including householders, within the same Buddhist path but at a different depth.

Even though this theory was mainly a soteriological construct, it was not divorced from socio-religious factors. In other words, it did not operate in a historical vacuum. Therefore, we need to examine the early Buddhist socio-religious background if we are to understand the origins and historical development of the theory.

Among the scholars who have theorized the development of the four stages in Indian Buddhism, I.B. Horner, George D. Bond, and Peter Masefield have each contributed to the understanding of the dynamics of this concept’s evolution.³ While Horner argues that arahantship only became dominant in the ‘monastic period’ (50–100 years after the death of the Buddha)⁴ of Buddhism, with *sotāpanno* of primacy earlier, Bond theorizes that the stage of *sotāpanno* and the other two stages developed as arahantship receded into the background of the early saṅgha. Masefield,

³Horner (1936), Bond (1988) and Masefield (1986).

⁴This dating is only proximate, and a concrete dating is extremely difficult, if not impossible, in part because the exact year of the death of the Buddha is not agreed upon.

in contrast, contends that the failure of *sāvaka*-s to bring others into arahantship resulted in the emergence of the four stages. While these scholars have attempted to model such shifts in their own frameworks, each argument ignores certain socio-historical factors. This oversight calls for a revised understanding of the dynamics of the evolution of the four stages, a revision that this book seeks to provide.

To do this, we need to recover and reconstruct the religious and socio-historical intentions underlying the development of the theory of four stages to arahantship. Is there a dichotomy between the discretion of the four stages and praxis in the early Buddhist discourses and the Abhidhamma (150 BCE to 150 CE) and Pāli commentaries (500 CE to 700 CE)? If so, what are the social and historical conditions that led to this shift in Buddhist soteriology? Thus, this study considers the origin and development of the theory of four stages to liberation from the *Nikāyas* to Pāli commentarial literature in order to understand it from a broader perspective. It argues that a multiplicity of motives, including the desire of Buddhist community members to assert a sectarian identity and to make Buddhist soteriology appealing and applicable to all people, undoubtedly influenced the development of this Buddhist soteriological structure. This approach indicates a differentiation of religious life, comprising an elite, the general population, and the monastic enterprise. This offers a unique focus on the socio-religious background within which this theory developed, illustrating either explicit or implicit links to Buddhist soteriological ideals and socio-religious factors.

A great deal of contemporary Buddhist soteriology suffers from a lack of historical and social self-awareness, and thus, this research argues that soteriological understandings should not be explored in abstraction from socio-cultural aspects. In short, the development of religious thought cannot be isolated from the social background in and from which it develops.

In the original formulation, the four stages were considered as four alternative paths open to Buddhists, any one of which could be freely chosen based on their own social and religious circumstances. Those who sought immediate liberation would follow the path of arahantship, while others who were not yet ready to abandon all mundane affairs for liberation would follow the path of stream-entry. In a later period (Abhidhamma and Pāli commentaries), they became the prescriptive four successive stages one passes through.

1.1 THE ROLE OF THE FOUR STAGES IN BUDDHIST LITERATURE

To gauge the need for this research, it is important to start with an appreciation of the role of the four stages in Buddhist literature summarized here.⁵ This theory holds a significant place in the Pāli *Nikāyas* as well as the *Āgama-s* (i.e. the early Buddhist discourses), reflected in its inclusion in many of these discourses,⁶ where they appear either independently or together. The later *Abhidhamma* path-structure represents a tendency to develop an all-inclusive, taxonomically complete soteriological path. Even in early Mahāyāna literature, such as the *Prajñāparāmitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) literature (100 BCE and 600 CE),⁷ these stages appear many times. This shows that the theory of the four stages to liberation predates sectarian Buddhism (circa 366 BCE).⁸ In fact, it seems the theory of four stages was the *only* systematically organized path to arahantship in pre-sectarian Buddhism.

During the *Abhidhamma* period (200 BCE–200 CE), the theory did not substantially change in terms of structure. Both the extant Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda canonical Abhidharma literature show that the *Ābhidharmika-s* also assigned an important position to the theory of four stages. They, too, interpreted the four stages as a monopolistic path to arahantship, subsuming into it all other factors related to the Buddhist soteriological path. This attempt seems to have first started in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (*Path to Analytical Knowledge*, the 12th book of the *Khuddaka nikāya*) and saw its full development in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*

⁵ See Chaps. 1, 2 and 3 for further detail.

⁶ Mahāli sutta, Lohicca sutta, Mahāgovinda sutta, Sampasādanīya sutta, Pāsādika sutta, Mahāparinibbāna sutta, of DN; Cūḷasihanāda of MN; several short passages in SN and AN. See Chap. 4.

⁷ See E. Conze (1993).

⁸ This dating is approximate as well as controversial. This date is based on the general consensus among scholars that sectarian Buddhism emerged around 100 years after the passing away of the Buddha. There are two problems here. First is the date of the passing away of the Buddha. There are different opinions among different Buddhist traditions and among modern Buddhist studies scholars on this date. According to the Sri Lankan chronicles, the Buddha passed away in 544 BCE. Maurice Winternitz (1933: 597) argues that this date cannot be traced with certainty. Hajime Nakamura (1996: 13) argues this dating is incompatible with the Chronology of the King of Magadha. The Chinese records mention the date of the Buddha's passing away as 486 BCE. Pachow 1965 places the date of the passing away of the Buddha as 483 BCE.

(*Enumeration of Factors*, the first book of the Theravāda *Abhidhammapitaka*). Its presence in the *Kathāvatthu* (*Points of Controversy*, the seventh book of the Theravāda *Abhidhammapitaka*), extant Sanskrit Buddhist literature and the *Āgama*-s preserved in Chinese translation all demonstrate that the theory of four stages to liberation was given a significant place in almost all early Indian schools of Buddhist thoughts. Further, it was given a prominent position in the soteriology of the Sarvāstivāda.⁹

After the development of the sectarian Buddhism, however, the theory of four stages to arahantship lost its primary position in the *Mahāsāṃghika*, one of the mainstream schools of Indian Buddhism, as well as the schools that branched off from it (e.g. the *Lokottaravāda* and *Kaukkutika*). This is because they developed an alternative path to liberation, i.e. the *bodhisattva* path, a path available to all practitioners and not just monastics. Gradually, the concept of arahantship was superseded by the concept of the *bodhisattva* (beings who aspire to become perfectly enlightened Buddhas and liberate all sentient beings from suffering). Even so, these schools still recognized the theory of four stages to arahantship held by the *śrāvakayanas* (those who follow the ideal of arahantship).¹⁰ The *Prajñāpāramitā* literature shows that the early Mahāyāna also accepted the four stages.¹¹ Theravāda Buddhists today, who are more aligned to early Buddhism (at least in principle), continue to define their soteriology in terms of the progressive four-stage attainment either in one lifetime or over a wider spectrum of time and space.

While this book focuses on how the theory of four stages developed in the Theravāda tradition, particularly from the early Buddhist discourses to Pāli commentaries, it should be pointed out that the theory also appears in other Buddhist traditions. For example, James Apple has demonstrated that it occupies an important place in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism, although the four stages are extended to twenty in Tibetan Buddhism.¹²

⁹ Chapter 6 of AKB III; Dhammajoti (2009: 433–63).

¹⁰ Masuda (1978: 20–27).

¹¹ Dhammajoti (2013: 301–4),

¹² Apple (2003).

1.1.1 *Development of Theory: When and Why*

While we can identify the various appearances of the theory across time and texts, the origin of the theory of four stages to liberation or, more specifically, determining the original intention behind the theory itself is not a simple matter historically, as this approach generally necessitates a chronological delineation of the content of the Pāli *Nikāyas*, something which is, if not impossible, extremely difficult.

One of the difficulties is that the Buddhism we have today is generally classified into two phases by scholars in Buddhist studies: the early Buddhist teachings and later Buddhist teachings. Teachings enshrined in the Pāli *Nikāyas* are generally considered as early Buddhism, and those enshrined in the *Abhidhamma* and Pāli commentaries and other sectarian Buddhist teachings are classified as later Buddhism. Although objectively, a clear cleavage between the two phases is not always justifiable, a rough distinction between the two is generally accepted. Several late twentieth-century Buddhist studies have very convincingly demonstrated that teachings in the Pāli *Nikāyas* themselves reflect several strata of development and editions.¹³ The contents of the Pāli *Nikāyas* reflect a development over several centuries following the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha, an observation also noted by Horner.¹⁴ Hence, it is impossible to consider that the discourses we have today are the exact words of the Buddha. Further, it is possible, indeed likely, that the Buddha may have changed certain aspects of teachings in his lifetime to meet various needs or circumstances the Buddha faced (i.e. *upāya* or skilful means) and that this continued after the passing away of the Buddha.

Therefore, it is not at all easy to precisely determine what constitutes early and later materials in the Pāli *Nikāyas*. In addition, there is no clear instance in the Pāli *Nikāyas* that definitively discloses the origins of the theory of four stages. Nor is this theory presented in the Pāli *Nikāyas* as a homogeneous whole. The variation of its presentation suggests possible later interpolations in the *Nikāyas*. On the basis of the *Abhidhamma*, it is also probable that the contents of the *suttas* have been edited. Thus, separating early and late contents in the *suttas* is a very difficult task. Some scholars have made a valiant effort to critically examine different Pāli *Nikāyas* in this way. Although they have cast some light on

¹³Schmithausen (1992: 100–147).

¹⁴Horner (1936: 32).

understanding early Buddhist doctrine and its gradual development, it remains very difficult to sift early and later materials in the *suttas* objectively. Therefore, I think a certain measure of *subjective* construction and speculation is involved in this process of stratification.

Thus, just as the presentation of the doctrine did not stay the same over time, so the theory of the four stages to liberation did not remain static. Rather, it went through a substantial transformation as it evolved from its original formulation in the *Nikāyas* to its standardized elaborate theory in the *Abhidhamma* and Pāli commentaries.

With that provision in mind, this book argues that the theory of four stages was developed as a response to different socio-religious needs. In the process of establishing Buddhism as an institutionalized religion as well as for its own sustainability, there must have been a strong demand for a soteriological system that catered to the psychological and spiritual needs of different strata of people. The early Buddhist goal of arahantship, which requires a complete withdrawal from mundane life and adopting an ascetic lifestyle, was perhaps fit for only a small portion of the population. Hence, this original ideal developed so as to be accessible to the expanding character of Buddhist followers.

1.2 THE NECESSITY OF THIS RESEARCH

Some may object that such an investigation is a trifling enterprise. Many modern traditional Buddhist scholars and practitioners do not question these developments or even the discrepancies outlined below and throughout the book but take them for granted as representations of the actual descriptions of the attainment of the Buddha and early Buddhists. But in my view, such investigation is important in understanding the development of Buddhist soteriology. Two points can illustrate this.

First, within the early Indian Buddhist tradition in which the theory originated, we see ambiguity and ambivalence towards the theory of four stages to liberation. When one surveys the Pāli *Nikāyas*, this theory is absent in the liberating experiences of the Buddha and his early disciples. One would easily justify that the theory was not applicable to the Buddha because it is applicable only to disciples. However, in the contents of Buddhist liberation documented in many early Buddhist discourses in the Pāli *Nikāyas*, there is not a *single* case history recorded in the Pāli *Nikāyas* in which the description of arahantship of early disciples includes passing through these four stages. In the *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā*, which

are considered as the descriptions of how early monks and nuns went through the process of liberation, there is not a single record of any disciple passing through these four stages to become an *arahant*. Rather, they show that they attained arahantship directly.

The four stages were often described in the Pāli *Nikāyas* as the fruit of asceticism. For instance, in the Dasuttara sutta of the Dighanikāya, it is stated that practitioners of the Buddhist path should aim at realizing the four stages of asceticism: the stages of the stream-entry, once-return, non-return, and arahantship.¹⁵ In the *Mahāparinibbāna sutta* of the same *Nikāya*, it is mentioned that the dispensation (*sāsana*) of the Buddha is not feasible in the absence of the four stages. In other words, it is claimed that the four stages are the exclusive doctrine of Buddhism, not shared by any other contemporaneous religious systems. Indeed, it is clearly stated in a passage in *Āṅguttaranikāya* that other religions are empty of these four types of ascetics.¹⁶ On the other hand, the theory of four stages is conspicuously absent from the *Sāmaññaphala sutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*, a discourse which specifically discusses the question of stages of the Buddhist spiritual life from an ordinary person to the attainment of arahantship.¹⁷ If this omission occurred only in this particular discourse, it is possible to assume that it was dropped by mistake in the editorial process. But the scheme of the path as presented in the *Sāmaññaphala sutta* is repeated in many discourses in the Pāli *Nikāyas*, in particular in the first section of *Dīghanikāya*, where all discourses except the last are identical to the content of *Sāmaññaphala sutta*.¹⁸ In none of these discourses the theory of four stages is mentioned. In addition to the Pāli version, there are six versions of the discourse in Chinese translation.¹⁹ The contents of these versions are similar in regard to the absence of the theory of four stages.

The *Satipatṭhāna sutta* is another popular discourse that lays out a scheme of the path to liberation. Appearing in both the *Dīghanikāya* (DN II 290) and *Majjhimanikāya* (MN I 55), it mentions only the last two

¹⁵ DN III 272: katame cattāro dhammā sacchikatabbā? cattāri samaññaphala sotāpatti-phalam sakadāgāmi-phalam, anāgāmi-phalam arahatta-phalam.

¹⁶ AN II 238 idh'eva bhikkhave samaṇo, idha dutiyo samaṇo, idha tatiyo samaṇo, idha catuttho samaṇo suññā parappavādā samaṇehi aññe.

¹⁷ DN I 47.

¹⁸ The *Jāliya sutta*, the *Mahāsīhanāda sutta*, the *Subba sutta*, the *Kevaddha sutta*, the *Tevija sutta*, the *Cakkavatti Sīhanāda sutta*, etc. The content of this discourse is repeated in the first 18 discourses of DN with only slight variation.

¹⁹ Macqeen (1988: 12–19).

stages of the four. Further, most of the discourses that are considered to belong to the earlier stratum of the Pāli canon, such as those of the *Aṭṭhakavaṅga* and the *Pārāyanavaṅga*, of the *Suttanipāta* as well as many discourses in the *Nikāyas* urge practitioners to seek liberation as soon as possible. The attainment of liberation at some distant time and space, as implied by the four stages, seems inconceivable in these discourses. Buddhist monks and nuns are exhorted to renounce sensual desire (*kāmarāga*) and attachment to becoming (*bhavarāga*) and to strive to attain liberation in this very life. This raises the question of why the Buddha and his early disciples followed one path to liberation and then prescribed a different path for others.

Secondly, there is a controversy and confusion among Theravāda Buddhists today regarding the attainment of any one of the four paths or four stages. Some people are overly enthusiastic about the ability to achieve these paths and stages and argue that they are easily attainable. Thus, they offer certificates of the attainment of either one of the paths or the stages to participants after meditation retreats and interviews. This occurs today both in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. On the other hand, conservative groups consider that these paths and stages are not attainable in one lifetime. Some go on to say that they will have to wait until the arrival of the next Buddha to attain even the first path, i.e. stream-entry. This controversy is prevalent among the Buddhists in Bangladesh, as some monks there have started to claim attainment of either one of the four paths or four stages. An investigation of the historical and gradual development of the four stages to liberation can give a better picture of the theory for Buddhist practitioners.

1.3 A NEW EXPLORATION OF THE PATHS AND STAGES

My initial interest in this study was sparked when I was approached to comment on the claim of some monks in Bangladesh about the attainment of noble paths and stages. When I looked at the *suttas* in the *Nikāyas* as well as the Theravāda Pāli commentarial literature, particularly the *Visuddhimagga* (which has a great influence on Theravāda Buddhist soteriology), the inconsistencies among the sources were obvious.

1.3.1 Ordinary Person or Saint?

To be more precise, there is a blatant discrepancy between the *Sotāpattisamyutta* of the *Samyuttanikāya* and the *Visuddhimagga* with regards to the interpretation of the stream-entry stage. The *Sotāpattisamyutta* presents the stream-entrant as an ordinary person who is striving with all their mundane problems but has faith in the Buddha, Dhamma, and *Saṅgha*. The Pāli Nikāyas record that once a lay follower named Dhammadinna approached the Buddha, the Buddha taught him the *dhamma*. He stated to the Buddha that what the Buddha taught him is very profound and supramundane relating to emptiness (*ye te suttantā tathāgatabhāsītā gambhīra gambhirathā lokottarā suññatapaṭisamyuttā*). But as a layperson, it is difficult to reflect on those teachings while living at home with children. The Buddha then advised him to cultivate the four factors of stream-entry. And when he had accomplished these four factors, he was declared as a stream-entrant.²⁰ This is further supported by another incident, here with Anāthapiṇḍika, a great patron of the Buddha. Despite becoming a stream-entrant at his very first meeting with the Buddha,²¹ he lamented on his deathbed and that he had never heard the doctrine of impermanence and non-self. A more interesting point is that on this occasion, the Venerable Sariputta told Anāthapiṇḍika that such doctrines are not taught to the laity.²² But most of the stream-entrants as they appeared in the *Sotāpattisamyutta* were laity. Another incident recorded in the same section shows that stream-entrants sometimes had moral lapses. For instance, a layman named Sarakāṇi was declared by the Buddha as a stream-entrant upon his death. This caused some confusion among people, some of whom started to criticize the Buddha for declaring him a stream-entrant as he had moral lapses, particularly related to intoxication. When the matter was reported to the Buddha, he defended his declaration, saying that anyone who has gone for refuge to the Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Saṅgha* for a long time is a stream-entrant.²³

This is further supported by the statement in the *Mahāparinibbāna sutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*, where it is recorded that the Buddha told the Venerable Ānanda that a noble disciple is one who is endowed with unshakable faith in the Buddha, *Dhamma*, *Saṅgha* and also possesses

²⁰ SN V 408.

²¹ Vin II 157.

²² MN I 143.

²³ SN V 375.

morality dear to noble ones, which are unbroken, without defect. If he wishes, he can declare himself, “I have destroyed the realms of hell, rebirth as animals, the ghost realm, downfalls and rebirth in unfortunate existences. I am a stream-entrant, not subject to falling into unfortunate existence and certain of perfect enlightenment.”²⁴ The last factor is defined as the alignment of one’s life with the five precepts. This shows that anyone who takes refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha and abides by basic morality is qualified to be a stream-entrant. This is clearly spelled out in a passage in the *Āṅguttaranikāya*, where it is stated that anyone who possesses the four factors of a stream-entrant and abides by the five precepts can declare himself as stream-entrant.²⁵ In another instance in the *Sotāpattisaṃyutta*, there is a noble disciple who is endowed with the seven good qualities; if he wishes, he can declare himself as a stream-entrant.²⁶ Here, the seven good qualities refer to the alignment of one’s life with the five precepts: abstaining from slandering speech, harsh speech, useless gossip, and unshakable faith in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha.²⁷ Sometimes, the last factor is replaced with other factors such as generosity towards good people.²⁸ There are innumerable passages which show that people are described as stream-entrants after their first meeting with the Buddha or his disciples. In fact, there are incidents that imply stream-entrants may not understand the doctrine that deals with no-self and dependent origination; sometimes even moral perfection is not required for the attainment of stream-entry.

In stark contrast to the Pāli *Nikāyas*, the *Abhidhamma* and Pāli commentarial literature present a stream-entrant as a highly advanced saint, one who has already almost attained liberation. For instance, the four paths (*magga*) and four stages (*phala*) constitute the supramundane state of consciousness. *Nibbāna* is presented as their cognitive object.²⁹ These stream-entrants are impulse-free (*anāsava*)³⁰ and are not subject to

²⁴ DN 11 93.

²⁵ AN III 211.

²⁶ SN V 356: yato kho gahapatayo ariyasāvako imehi sattehi sadhammehi samannāgato hoti so ākaṅkhāmo attanā va attānaṃ vyākareyya khīṇanirayo ‘mhi khīṇatiracchāyoniko khīṇapittivasayo khīṇāpāyaduggativinipāto sotāpanno’ham asmi avinipāto dhammo niyato sambodhiparāyaṇo.

²⁷ SN V 356.

²⁸ SN V 352.

²⁹ Dhs 992, 1287.

³⁰ Dhs 1104.

rebirth.³¹ Buddhaghosa subsumed the four stages in the *Visuddhimagga* under the heading of purification of knowledge and vision, which is the culmination of the sevenfold stages of purification that he followed to construct the Theravāda soteriological path. Through a simile, Buddhaghosa interpreted that stream-entrants are close to the attainment of *Nibbāna*.³² He might have drawn this explanation from the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (*The Path of Discrimination*), which states that at the moment of stream-entry, one's thought becomes impulse-free (*anāsava*), and the noble eightfold path becomes perfected.

At the moment of stream-entry path, all *dhammas* born, except for cognizance originated materiality, are profitable, free from impulses, going out (going out from *Samsāra*), lead to dispersal, belong to the supramundane having *Nibbāna* as their (supporting) object.³³

The state of an impulse-free mind usually refers to the mind of an *arahant*. In the *Dhammasaṅgani*, the four stages are defined as supramundane states, which indicates that stream-entry, etc., inhabit extremely lofty spiritual stages, possibly not different from arahantship itself.

The Theravāda tradition, which generally sees the four stages through the lens of Buddhaghosa, believes that the four stages are the peak spiritual experience one attains sequentially in order to become an *arahant*. Except for a short article by Sumangala, not many scholars have paid attention to this issue, except for a few sweeping comments.³⁴ Rhys Davids asserts that a stream-entrant is simply an individual who has converted to Buddhism,³⁵

³¹ Dhs 1121, 1014.

³² The Path of Purification 786–7.

³³ *Paṭisambhidāmagga* I 116 (author's translation): sotāpattimaggakkhaṇe jātā dhammā tṭhapetvā cittasamuṭṭhānaṃ rūpaṃ sabbe 'va kusalā honti, sabbe 'va anāsava honti, sabbe 'va niyyanikā honti, sabbe 'va apacayaḡāmino honti, sabbe 'va lokuttarā honti sabbe 'va nibbānārammaṇā honti.

³⁴ Sumangala (1981: 18) This is a very short article on the concept of stream-entry. He points out the discrepancy between the *Nikāya* interpretation of the concept and the Pāli commentarial interpretation of the concept. He strongly asserts that a stream-entrant originally simply referred to a Buddhist; it does not even require any form of meditation practices, whereas Pāli commentators exalted the stream-entrant to a spiritual saint. The article does not address the question of how the concept of stream-entrant was developed and how it went through several stages of growth.

³⁵ Rhys David (tr) (1899: 200. r).

and Manne agrees with him.³⁶ Further, Sumangala says that a stream-entrant is an ordinary, intelligent Buddhist who is keen on the *dhamma* and that even taking the refuges is not necessarily essential to becoming a stream-entrant. He argues that for the three fetters to be abandoned by a stream-entrant, they must abandon understanding. According to him, this understanding does not refer to the realization through wisdom but is derived from listening to the *dhamma*. On a practical level, he argues that some practitioners, seeing the *dhamma* through the eyes of Buddhaghosa, refrain from declaring the state of stream-entry, taking it to be a supra-mundane state, thus fearing the breaching of one of the four *pārājika* rules.³⁷

1.4 IS THIS A LIFETIME OR A DISTANT ONE?

A second and intriguing point is the divergence in the earliest Buddhist spirit and soteriology in terms of the theory of four stages. Several early Buddhist *suttas* make it clear that the essence of Buddhist teaching is suffering and its cessation, i.e. the attainment of *nibbāna*. The device to attain this state is named as meditation. To be successful in one's practice requires full-time devotion and commitment. In order to facilitate this commitment, early Buddhism describes an ascetic lifestyle, i.e. the monastic community, to detach oneself from the mundane affairs of family and society. Early Buddhism views social affairs not only as an obstruction to meditation but also as a source of developing craving that prolongs one's *samsāric* journey. Thus, the essence of the early Buddhist soteriology is to withdraw from mundane worldly affairs. And this liberation is to be attained *in this very lifetime*, not in some distant time and space. So, the heart of the early Buddhist soteriology was monasticism, which correlates with an ascetic way of life. But when one looks at the theory of four stages to liberation, it shifts liberation to a distant time and space; in between, many other mundane achievements, such as births in good human conditions, worldly prosperity, and heavenly bliss, are experienced. This book will investigate how this transformation took place.

This research interest is shaped by my own curiosity, together with the lack of effort in contemporary Buddhist studies to provide a solid

³⁶ Manne (1995a: 95).

³⁷ *pārājika* rules refer to serious transgressions causing the loss of the status of monkhood for life. There are four *pārājika* rules: sexual intercourse, theft; murder; theft, murder, and false claim about attainments of either one of the four stages or other spiritual stages.

theoretical foundation required to understand this soteriological change. Perhaps this is because there is no explicit answer to this question either in the Pāli *Nikāyas* or in subsequent Pāli Buddhist literature. Indeed, some may object to such investigation because they may argue that the Buddha taught differently to different people. For instance, Somaratne considers the doctrine of four stages as diverse ways of presenting the *dhamma* by the Buddha according to the interest of the listeners.³⁸

While this hypothesis is credible, Somaratne did not explain how such needs developed and how the theory subsequently became a monolithic path to arahantship. In fact, this view represents a later stage of the development of the theory of four stages found in the Pāli *Nikāyas*. The earliest stratum of the passages in the Pāli *Nikāyas*, such as that of the *Suttanipāta* and the *Sāmaññaphala sutta*, seem to show the earliest Buddhist interest was not in accommodating such diverse needs, but in prioritizing the liberation in this lifetime. Pande noted this, claiming that the theory of four stages cannot be part of the earliest Buddhist teaching.

About the theory of four spiritual stages, it may be observed that it could not have formed part of the earliest gospel. This is clear from the fact that we find an earlier non-technical use of the word *Anāgāmin* in the *Nikāyas*. Further, had the theory of the *maggas* and the corresponding *phalas* been early, we might have expected some references to them in the *Sāmaññaphala*. Finally, there is little positive evidence in favour of regarding the theory as early.³⁹

1.5 WHAT QUALIFIES FOR STREAM-ENTRY?

The discrepancy between the Pāli *Nikāyas* and *Abhidhamma* as well as Pāli commentarial literature in terms of the interpretation of stream-entrant, as it has been shown above, led me to another question, that is, to determine the exact requirements for the attainment of the stage of stream-entry.

³⁸ Somaratne (1999: 121, fn 2). ‘Buddhism could introduce arahantship here and now for those who came to it seeking no more rebirths. It could offer the stage of non–return for those who came with the aspiration to have an experience in a higher world before attaining the final goal. It could offer the stage of once–return for those who would like to come back to this world one more time to have more experiences as humans before attaining the supreme goal. Finally, it could offer the stage of stream–entry for those who are not really tired of either world but would like to have an assurance of attaining the supreme goal one day.’

³⁹ Pande (2006: 539).

This point is closely related to my first point. In looking at the *suttas* in the Pāli *Nikāyas*, we find the requirements for stream-entry are unlike the very exacting requirements of the later period. Indeed, in these *suttas*, stream-entry is easily attainable by any faithful and devoted Buddhist. When I started to dig into this dilemma more deeply, it became clear to me that the present Theravāda traditional view is based on the *Abhidhamma* and Pāli commentarial literature. As I have stated above, since this literature identifies stream-entry as a spiritual achievement beyond mundane people, their compilers conceived that the stage of stream-entry is a meditative attainment. Reassessing the path to this stage occurred in parallel, as more exacting practices, such as *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditation, are prescribed to attain the stage of stream-entry.⁴⁰ This view is largely based on the *Visuddhimagga*. According to Buddhaghosa's work, one attains the stage of stream-entry upon the mastery of *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditation. In fact, the *Visuddhimagga* presents the stage of stream-entry as the peak spiritual experience. This has led to doubt around the capacity of attaining the stage of stream-entry in one lifetime, even by monastics.

As noted, the Theravāda soteriological path is defined as a sevenfold progressive purification in the *Visuddhimagga*. According to this description, one attains the stage of the stream-entry in the last phase of this process. This is the purification of knowledge and vision (*nāṇadassana-visuddhi*), which is the summit of the Theravāda Buddhist soteriology as presented in the *Visuddhimagga*. Buddhaghosa goes on to state that one almost attains *nibbāna* at the moment of attainment of the stage of stream-entry.⁴¹ Based on the *Visuddhimagga*, the Theravāda tradition considers the stage of stream-entry as a supramundane stage attained through meditation. Whether or not this is what may actually occur is not the focus here. Rather, giving a historical perspective on how these requirements shifted from the *suttas* to the *Abhidhamma* and Pāli commentarial literature may give a better understanding to academic students as well as Buddhist practitioners, for both academic investigations into Buddhist soteriology and their own practice, respectively.

⁴⁰There is a controversy as to requirement of the *samatha* meditation. Some Theravāda masters think there is no requirement for *samatha* meditation; one can attain the stage of the stream-entry, the stage of the *arahatta*, only through *vipassanā* mediation. In his book, *Early Indian and Theravāda Buddhism: Soteriological Controversy and Diversity*, Clough (2012) included a long section on this controversy.

⁴¹*Visuddhimagga* 673.

1.6 ARE *JHĀNAS* NECESSARY?

I am particularly concerned about whether one needs to achieve *jhānas* for the attainment of stream-entry. When one observes the Pāli *Nikāyas*, there is no explicit evidence that the attainment of stream-entry requires meditation and particularly the attainment of *jhānas*. The four *jhānas* appear in innumerable discourses in the *Nikāyas* in the context of early Buddhist soteriology. However, they are conspicuously absent in the context of the attainment of the stage of stream-entry. Very often, even reference to simple meditation remains absent in the Pāli *Nikāyas* in the context of this attainment. There are several instances where lay followers were declared stream-entrants after a first meeting with the Buddha or his disciples. One may argue that they could have been practising meditation before this point, but when one observes certain instances critically, such an inference is not credible. For instance, in a Pāli Vinaya passage, it is mentioned that some hired killers were sent to kill the Buddha, but when they listened to the teachings of the Buddha, they became stream-entrants instantly.⁴² In another instance, the leper Suppabuddha had mistakenly thought a crowd listening to the Buddha was assembled for a free food distribution, and he approached with the hope of getting a meal. He received gradual instruction from the Buddha and instantly became a stream-entrant.⁴³ Can we expect that the hired killers had practised meditation earlier or assume that for the leper?

There are many more such instances recorded in the Pāli *Nikāyas*. Though an exhaustive study on the issue has not been done prior to this study, modern scholars in Buddhist studies have shed some light on the issue. Gethin asserts that although stream-entrants are not always presented in the Pāli *Nikāyas* in relation to meditation, they are usually presented as having a sudden radical change of heart after hearing the Buddha or his disciples. He thinks such sudden changes are only possible with prior gradual practices.⁴⁴ By this, he infers that meditation does play a role in the attainment of the stage of the stream-entry. Bhikkhu Sujāto concurs with Gethin, further arguing that *samādhi* is a requirement for the attainment of the stages of stream-entry and once-returner.⁴⁵ On the other

⁴² Vin II 192.

⁴³ Ud 48.

⁴⁴ Gethin (2001: 226).

⁴⁵ Sujato (2007: 135).

hand, Masefield thinks that the attainment of *jhānas*, or simply *meditation practice*, is not a requirement for the attainment of these two stages. He argues that stream-entrants and once-returners are born in the sensual realm (*kāmāvacara*). Therefore, they have not gone beyond the fifth factor of the noble eightfold path, i.e. right livelihood (*sammājīva*).⁴⁶ He further states that many stream-entrants who attain the stage through hearing the *dhamma* may not have practised meditation.⁴⁷ His second hypothesis is credible, but the first point is questionable. Being born in the sensual realm does not prove that they do not attain *jhānas*. Bhikkhu Anālayo proposes a related point. He states:

If stream-entrant and once-returner attain the *jhānas*, the concept of the once-returner would be superfluous, since not a single once-returner would ever return to this world.⁴⁸

In his article “The Jhānas and Lay Disciples According to the Pāli Suttas”, Bhikkhu Bodhi discusses the question of the relevance of attainment of the *jhānas* to attain four stages. He strongly asserts that while the *jhānas* do not play an important role in the attainment of the first stage, they are essential in order to unfold the path to higher stages.⁴⁹ However, he has not provided evidence or further analysis to prove this point. Sumangala claims even general meditation is not required to become a stream-entrant.⁵⁰ However, he has not substantiated this claim with sufficient textual evidence.

Thus, although scholars have given varying views and sweeping comments, no comprehensive study on this point has been undertaken. Manne notes that it is not clear whether the faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha is sufficient for one to become a stream-entrant. Harvey, on the other hand, thinks that mere faith is not sufficient to attain the stage of stream-entry. He argues that apart from faith in the Buddha, the

⁴⁶Here, Peter Masefield (1986): infers that stream-entrants only lead a moral life but do not practise meditation. This theory is not completely feasible, for the noble eightfold path is a sequential development rather than a spiritual development. However, in the early Buddhist discourses, particularly the *Sotāpattisamyutta* of the SN, stream-entrants were not necessarily serious meditation practitioners. 35–95.

⁴⁷Masefield (1986: 60).

⁴⁸Anālayo (2007: 81).

⁴⁹Bhikkhu Bodhi (2001: 138).

⁵⁰Sumangala (1981: 18).