

# Cessation Experiences and the Notion of Enlightenment

*Tentative Findings  
of a  
Preliminary Research*

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CESSATION EXPERIENCES  
AND THE  
NOTION OF ENLIGHTENMENT

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*To the sincere, humble and earnest yogi  
who will rest content  
not with mere cessation experiences  
but only with the utter cessation  
of defilements.*

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Copyright has been reserved because I intend, at some later date, to elaborate on the subject by including case accounts, references from scriptural and other authoritative sources, and conclusions drawn from an impartial, objective and critical perspective.

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## *Introduction*

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**Y**ogis who meditate in order to eradicate defilements and thus put an end to samsaric suffering are prone to encounter cessation experiences during the course of their practice. This makes them wonder whether they have attained enlightenment or not, since meditation teachers talk of the experience of Nibbana as a cessation of mental and material phenomena. With the view of helping honest, humble, eager yogis clear their own doubts, or at least save themselves from the hazard of overestimating their own practice, I propose to discuss different types of cessation experiences and successive stages of enlightenment, including different types of negative mental states (defilements, etc.) eradicated at each respective stage.

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## CHAPTER ONE

\*

### *What is a Cessation Experience?*

*"—probably means that an apparent loss of  
consciousness had occurred during meditation for a split second . . ."*



**W**hen a yogi reports that he has had a cessation experience, he probably means that an apparent loss of consciousness had occurred during meditation for a split second, a few moments, a few minutes or even a few hours depending on circumstances. This apparent loss of consciousness could have occurred gradually as one's strength of awareness slackens, or abruptly when mindfulness is crystal clear. In the former case one wakes up feeling rather drowsy, but in the latter case rather refreshed and alert. On "regaining" consciousness one's sitting posture could still be as upright and stiff as ever in both cases, although in the former case it is likely to be stooped and limp. It is the latter case that we are interested in here for there is no doubt that the former is a case of unmindful drowsiness.

At this point, I would like to pose an interesting question: The Abhidhamma says that as long as one is alive, mind and matter are arising and passing away all the time; and if there is mind, there must be consciousness and the object which it is

conscious of—so can anyone (yogi or non-yogi) really be unconscious?

The answer to the question is: Yes, Anagamis and Arahants who have mastered the eight Mundane Attainments<sup>1</sup> can suspend the occurrence of mental phenomena and mind-born material phenomena<sup>2</sup> for as long as seven days. This state is called *nirodha-samāpatti* (Cessation Attainment) in the Scriptures; in this article I would also like to call it Real Cessation Experience (RCE). Please note that Anagamis and Arahants who practise **only** vipassana, without doing samatha and mastering the eight Mundane Attainments, can never have such RCE's, not to mention pure vipassana yogis who are not Anagamis or Arahants.

If such is the case, then another interesting question crops up: But nowadays, pure samatha yogis as well as pure vipassana yogis report having cessation experiences, don't they? What then are they referring to?

As I mentioned earlier, they are probably referring to an **apparent** loss of consciousness during meditation because they could not be aware that they **were being** conscious then, although in some cases they could recall, after "waking up" from that state, that they had been conscious of a particular object. Here, I would like to call these states Apparent Cessation Experiences (ACE's).

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<sup>1</sup> The eight Mundane Attainments are the four *rūpa jhānas* and the four *arūpa jhānas* which can only be attained by the practice of samatha meditation i.e. kasina.

<sup>2</sup> Only mind-born matter are suspended; matter produced by temperature, kamma and nutriment continue to arise and pass away incessantly.

## CHAPTER TWO

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### *Types of Cessation Experience*

*"—It is of utmost importance not to be deluded by it into thinking that it is jhana, phala-samapatti or nirodha-samāpatti because if one thinks so, one will frequently get into bhavanga and thus will never be able to make further progress . . ."*

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**B**efore proceeding to explain why yogis are unable to be conscious that they are being conscious during an ACE, let me first list the different types of Cessation Experiences, and tabulate some of their corresponding features:

1. BACE (S) ..... Bhavanga Apparent Cessation Experience of Samatha Yogis.
2. BACE (V) .... Bhavanga Apparent Cessation Experience of Vipassana Yogis.
3. JACE ..... Jhana Apparent Cessation Experience of Samatha Yogis.
4. MACE ..... Magga Apparent Cessation Experience of Ariyan Vipassana Yogis.
5. PACE ..... Phala Apparent Cessation Experience of Ariyas.
6. RCE ..... Real Cessation Experience (*nirodha-samāpatti*) of Anagamis and Arahants who have mastered the eight Mundane Attainments.

# COMPARATIVE FEATURES OF CESSATION EXPERIENCES

TYPE OF CESSATION EXPERIENCE	S T A T E O F M I N D			DURATION AND FREQUENCY
	BEFORE	DURING	AFTER	
<b>BACE (S)</b>	Mindfulness watching the meditation object e.g., kasina image is clear but not very strong.	Apparent loss of consciousness i.e., one is not aware that the mind is conscious of a particular object.	Cannot recall that one had been conscious of a particular object although mindfulness may be fresh and alert.	A few moments, minutes or even hours. Can occur innumerable times in a single life.
<b>BACE (V)</b>	Mindfulness watching objects at any of the six sense doors can be fuzzy, weak, or clear and alert.	same	same	same
<b>JACE</b>	Mindfulness watching the meditation object e.g., reflex image of kasina is intense, crystal clear and appears to converge or dive into it.	same	Can recall vividly that one had been totally absorbed in watching the meditation object e.g., reflex image of kasina.	From a split second to seven days non-stop. Can occur innumerable times in a single life.
<b>MACE</b>	Mindfulness watching one of the three signs in an object at one of the six sense doors is balanced and crystal clear. The noting of objects suddenly speeds up at an alarming rate.	same	Can recall vividly that one had, after the noting mind had stopped, been conscious of an object which is not mind or matter, but is subtle, clear, peaceful and incomparable.	A split second only. Can occur for a maximum of only four times throughout samsara.
<b>PACE</b>	Mindfulness watching one of the three signs in an object at one of the six sense doors is balanced, sharp and crystal clear. There is no sudden acceleration of noting.	same	Should be able to recall that one had been conscious of an object that is not nama-rupa, but is subtle, clear, peaceful and incomparable.	From a split second to seven days non-stop. Can occur innumerable times in a single lifetime.
<b>RCE (Nirodha-samāpatti)</b>	Watching consciousness of third arupa jhāna, then apparent loss of consciousness as fourth arupa jhāna occurs for a split second, i.e., JACE occurs.	Absolutely no consciousness at all.	PACE occurs for a split second followed by BACE. Emerging from that the mind is inclined, bent towards nibbana, the cessation of mind and matter.	From a split second to seven days non-stop. Can occur innumerable times in a lifetime.

### *Bhavanga Apparent Cessation Experience (BACE)*

*Bhavaṅga* is a Pali word often translated as "life continuum". *Bhava* means "life" and *anga* means "factor". *Bhavanga* is the factor of life that provides continuity to a sentient being's stream of consciousness. For human beings it is a type of resultant consciousness produced by wholesome (good) *kamma* done in a past existence. It has, as its object, one of the following:

- the intention or volition (*cetanā*) involved when a good deed was done in a past existence, e.g., the thought or intention of offering robes to the Sangha,
- the image or vision of the good deed done, e.g., the vision of oneself offering robes to the Sangha,
- the image or vision of one's present existence, e.g., the vision of one's mother, or place of birth.

Now, this type of wholesome resultant consciousness when it occurs

- for the first time in one's present existence is called Rebirth Consciousness (*paṭisandhi-citta*),
- during waking hours,<sup>3</sup> meditation, or deep sleep, is called Life-continuum Consciousness or Sub-consciousness (*bhavaṅga-citta*),
- for the last time in one's present existence is called Death Consciousness (*cuti-citta*).

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Abhidhamma, consciousness at the six sense doors occurs in a fixed linear series (i.e. one after another in a definite order) and one series is "connected" to another by the occurrence of *bhavanga* consciousness. In other words, between the acts of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking, *bhavanga* consciousness occurs, although the ordinary person is unable to notice it.



Whatever it is called—whether Rebirth Consciousness, Bhavanga, or Death Consciousness—it has the same object, i.e., it is conscious of one of the three objects mentioned above every time it occurs. When one is having a deep, dreamless sleep, bhavanga consciousness is arising and passing away continuously. Yet when one awakes, feeling refreshed and satisfied (perhaps even saying to oneself, “Wow, what a nice and peaceful sleep I just had!”), one is totally unable to recall what one had been conscious of. There were no dreams, and one had been sound asleep—totally “unconscious!” Why is that so? There are three plausible reasons for this:

1. bhavanga consciousness is a mundane resultant consciousness, and so the mental factors (especially *saññā*—the power of registering an object in the mind so that it can be recalled to memory) that arise together with it are weak;
2. the object of bhavanga consciousness is a past one first perceived just before death in one’s immediate past life;
3. the mind that awakes from a prolonged bhavanga state is weak, or has not been properly trained enough to recollect what had occurred during that state.

Pure vipassana yogis who maintain sharp continuous mindfulness throughout their waking hours can bear testimony to the fact that although their mindfulness can be so precise as to be aware of the last rising or falling movement of the abdomen just before falling sound asleep at night, and the first rising or

falling as soon as they awake in the morning, it cannot recall that the mind had been conscious of an object during sound sleep i.e., vipassana mindfulness cannot be aware of bhavanga consciousness and its object. However, samatha yogis who have mastered the eight Mundane Attainments, and are engaged in developing the psychic power of Recollecting Past Lives can perceive their own Rebirth Consciousness and its object. This shows that if the mind is properly trained, it can still be aware of a resultant consciousness in spite of the first two reasons stated above.

The Visuddhimagga (The Path of Purification, a meditation manual), in discussing the process of attaining jhana for a yogi working on the earth kasina, states that in the domain of *upacāra-samādhī* (access or threshold concentration) the mind is not strong or well balanced enough to keep focusing on the reflex image of the kasina for a long time, although it has succeeded in inhibiting the five Hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*); so it sinks into bhavanga every now and then.<sup>4</sup> This behaviour is in contrast to fixed concentration (*appanā-samādhī*), which can occur uninterruptedly (i.e., without sinking into bhavanga) for the whole day and night.

Pure vipassana yogis do not concentrate on just one particular object all the time like samatha yogis; so they cannot attain access (*upacāra*) or fixed (*appanā*) concentration in the strict sense of the words. But they are mindful of objects occurring at the six sense

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<sup>4</sup> To students of Abhidhamma this may not be so strange because, as already mentioned (see footnote 3), bhavanga consciousness spaces or connects the linear series of consciousness appearing at the six sense doors. But this statement is significant because it shows that in the domain of *upacāra samādhi*, the mind can drop into the bhavanga state for exceptionally long periods of time in a noticeable manner.

doors, and if their mindfulness is strong and continuous enough, they can attain momentary concentration (*khaṇika-samādhī*) which is equivalent to upacara samadhi in the sense of having the power to inhibit the five Hindrances. Therefore, as in the domain of upacara samadhi, the mind in the domain of khaṇika samadhi too is liable to sink into bhavanga in a noticeable manner. Mahasi Sayadaw, in his Manual of Vipassana Meditation (no translation available yet), observed that there can be apparent loss of consciousness when the following mental states are predominant:

- rapture, intense interest (*pīti*),
- calmness and peace (*passaddhi*),
- excessive concentration (*adhika-samādhī*),
- equanimity, balanced state (*upekkhā*),
- restlessness (*uddhacca*), and
- path and fruition experience (*magga-phala-vīthi*).

When bhavanga consciousness occurs one after another uninterruptedly for an extended period of time, it is conscious of one particular object (as mentioned on page 9) only, but the yogi is unable to recall the consciousness and its object when he awakes from the state (for reasons mentioned on page 10); so he thinks he had lost consciousness temporarily. But his idea of unconsciousness is more apparent than real. Furthermore, this drop into bhavanga can take place very abruptly even when mindfulness is sharp and clear, watching the arising and passing away of mental and material phenomena at the six sense doors. On emerging from bhavanga he is unable to recollect the

bhavanga consciousness and its object, but he can vividly remember noting *nāma* and *rūpa* at the six sense doors just before it happened. He may also feel refreshed and alert as he has emerged from a very peaceful and restful state, and his mindfulness continues to be as sharp as before, or even better. In conclusion, it can be said that this yogi has indeed experienced cessation of the noting mind and the normal objects of noting (i.e., *nama* and *rupa* at the six sense doors), BUT consciousness has not ceased as in *nirodha-samāpatti* (Cessation Attainment), and Nibbana has not been realised yet because bhavanga consciousness has been occurring uninterruptedly with a particular object of the past life.

The duration of such BACE's can last from a few moments to many hours depending on circumstances such as strength of mind, practice and attachment. Yogis who think that it is a good thing to have such a BACE tend to encounter it frequently and for long periods of time; some even train their minds to develop skill in entering this state for prolonged hours, thinking that it is *phala-samāpatti* (Fruition Attainment) of enlightened ones. Admittedly, being in a state of apparent unconsciousness of this nature is better than sitting unmindfully thinking of this and that; but this cannot be called "*bhāvanā*" (which means cultivating, developing or ennobling the mind) because bhavanga is a resultant consciousness produced by past kamma already done. Therefore, if one goes into this state frequently, one is just taking a rest from doing good or bad kamma.

every yogi who has achieved some degree of concentration, whether *khanika* or *upacara samadhi*, is bound to encounter such BACE's. It is of utmost importance not to be deluded by it into thinking that it is *jhana*, *phala samapatti* or *nirodha samapatti* because if one thinks so, one will frequently get into *bhavanga* and thus will never be able to make further progress in one's meditation, whether *vipassana* or *samatha*. In other words, the yogi should not incline his mind towards this state—he should not think that it is a good thing to get BACE—instead he should make a **firm resolution** not to fall into this state, but to continue practice ardently in order to realise the Dhamma which he has not realised yet.

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### *Jhana Apparent Cessation Experience (JACE)*

The *samatha* yogi trying to concentrate on one particular object e.g., *kasina*, is aware that he is being conscious of it at the start, and even when he has achieved *upacara samadhi*, because the consciousness during that meditative state does not occur uninterruptedly for more than seven moments at a time, i.e., one linear series lasts for only seven units of consciousness<sup>5</sup> at the most, before sinking into *bhavanga* for a few moments.<sup>6</sup> On emerging from *bhavanga*, the mind either continues to watch the *kasina* image or reflects that it has been watching it. Even

<sup>5</sup> The *Abhidhamma* says that at the snap of the fingers, millions of units of consciousness have arisen and passed away. Yet the *vipassana* yogi who has trained his mind proficiently enough is able to perceive the arising and passing away of consciousness.

<sup>6</sup> The duration of *bhavanga* consciousness between each linear series is unpredictable. Here for the sake of convenience, the normally unnoticeable *bhavanga* spacing is mentioned. However, it should be remembered, as mentioned at page 13, that a BACE can last for many hours. See also footnotes 3 and 4.

though the mind in the domain of upacara samadhi is strong enough to inhibit the five Hindrances, nevertheless it still belongs to the sensual sphere (*kāmāvacara*); and it can go back and forth watching the reflex image, and reflecting on itself watching the reflex image. The speed of the mind is so fast that this activity may not normally be noticed, but nevertheless the yogi is aware that he is conscious of the meditation object.

When upacara samadhi reaches its apex and flicks into appana samadhi (fixed or absorption concentration), the mind behaves in an unusual manner that becomes immediately noticeable to the yogi. Instead of just watching the reflex image, it suddenly dives or converges into it; and at that moment there is no duality: no knower and the known, no mind and object. It appears as if the mind has stopped or ceased. This becomes even more prominent when appana samadhi occurs uninterruptedly for a few hours, because, unlike the mind in the domain of upacara samadhi where it can watch the meditation object for a while and then reflect on the fact that it is watching it, the mind in appana samadhi is totally absorbed in one single object without any break in between—for a linear series of this state can last for hours without being spaced by a single bhavanga at all. According to the Scriptures, an adept yogi can sit absorbed in JACE for as long as seven days without any interruption at all.

Upon emerging from JACE, however, even if it had occurred for the very first time (lasting for a split second only), the yogi can vividly recall that the mind had “plunged” into and was

totally absorbed in watching a very clear reflex image of the kasina. If he has trained the mind well enough, he can even review the jhanic factors which had occurred in the consciousness during JACE. Now this is in stark contrast to the state of mind emerging from BACE, where the yogi is totally at a loss as to what had happened before awakening. The plausible reasons for this inability have been discussed in the previous section (see page 10). Here I shall explain why the yogi emerging from JACE is capable of recollecting the past consciousness, its mental (jhanic) factors and its object.

This yogi has invested much time and effort in developing his mind to the level of appana samadhi; which means that he has transcended the sensual sphere (*kāmāvacara*) consciousness to produce a mind (charged with the power of samadhi) belonging to the fine material sphere (*rūpāvacara*). This background serves as a very strong foundation and influence that is responsible for conditioning the occurrence of a sharp, concentrated and powerful series of consciousness—in spite of the fact that it belongs to the sensual sphere—capable of reviewing what had happened during JACE upon emerging from it. Furthermore, the mental factors (including *sañña*—the faculty of registering an object of consciousness so that it can be recalled to memory) present in the appana consciousness, as well as its object (e.g., reflex image of kasina), have been deliberately developed to an enormous extent. These factors contribute to the ease and clarity of the act of reviewing.



For more details on the practical/experiential aspects of upacara and appana samadhi, I would like to recommend you to listen to the excellent talk: "Access and Fixed Concentration in Tranquillity Meditation" given by Venerable Sujivo Liew in 1993. JACE can only be attained by samatha yogis concentrating on one single object of meditation. It is definitely beyond the reach of pure vipassana yogis. Samatha yogis with little learning may be deluded into thinking that their JACE is a Nibbanic experience.

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### *Magga Apparent Cessation Experience (MACE)*

Whether or not he has first established himself in samatha meditation, i.e., developed upacara or appana samadhi, the yogi practising vipassana meditation makes use of *khaṇika-samādhī* (momentary concentration) to observe mental and material phenomena (*nāma* and *rūpa*) occurring at the six sense doors. As he gains proficiency in doing this, he goes through the various stages of purification<sup>7</sup> by attaining progressively deeper levels of Vipassana Insights until he is able to observe all phenomena arising and passing away with equanimity and balance. At this stage of Vipassana Insight called *saṅkhārupekkha-ñāṇa*, whatever objects arise—whether good or bad, painful or pleasurable, loathsome or desirable—can be observed impartially as bare nama-rupa arising and passing away, and exhibiting the three

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<sup>7</sup> The "Nyanzin" discourse is about the unfolding of the different levels of purity and insight—since an English version called "The Progress of Insight" by Mahasi Sayadaw is already available, I shall not go into details on the subject here.



characteristics of existence. Usually, the yogi can then sit for many hours without changing posture or shifting any part of his body because it is light, supple and free from painful sensations, and his mind remains calm, balanced and alert in spite of long hours of sitting without getting up.

It is during this state of affairs that, if circumstances are conducive,<sup>8</sup> his noting of objects suddenly speeds up at a very alarming rate, and is abruptly cut off for a split second before a thought arises as to what had happened. To give a simile—it is as if one is walking calmly and steadily on a smooth, even path when suddenly, without any warning at all, one falls over a five feet terrace and lands on even ground again wondering what on earth had happened! Just so, the yogi reflects on what had happened, and can vividly recall the sequence of events that led to this MACE:

1. There was an alarming speed up of noting.
2. The noting mind was cut off.
3. The mind was then conscious, for a split second, of an object that was not nama or rupa but very subtle, yet clear, peaceful, incomparable and unconditioned.
4. When the noting mind came back it resumed observing phenomena at a rather slower pace and grosser level i.e., the noting mind as well as the noted objects were not as fine or subtle as they had been before the apparent loss of consciousness.

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<sup>8</sup> Conducive circumstances are maturity of Paramis and Faculties (Faith, Insight, Effort, Concentration and Mindfulness) and the seven Suitabilities viz. a) dwelling, b) alms resort or the place where one's food is taken, c) proper Dhamma discussion, d) teacher, e) climate, f) food and g) posture for meditation.

Some yogis experience an alarming speed up of the noting process without the noting mind being cut off. Some experience the mind going "unconscious" for a split second without noticing anything special before and after the event. Others just go "unconscious" for many minutes or a few hours. These are not MACE's. To think that they are is very regrettable because it is a delusion that will undermine one's personal practice, good behaviour and state of mind, not to mention the danger of misleading other people if one were to teach meditation.

A yogi who has really achieved MACE as described above for the first time is considered a Stream Enterer (*Sotāpanna*),<sup>9</sup> a Noble One who has attained the first stage of enlightenment. After that experience, PACE will occur frequently when the yogi is meditating. The yogi's meditation teacher will then instruct the yogi to train his mind to enter PACE at will and to maintain its duration for successively longer periods. This is called "practising to gain skill in Fruition Attainment (*phala-samāpatti*)". When the meditation teacher is satisfied with the skill of the yogi in getting PACE, he may ask him to make a resolution to relinquish the highest Dhamma he has attained, and to strive for the Dhamma he has not yet attained.

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<sup>9</sup> Some yogis encounter the MACE as described above but they are not impeccable in the five precepts and do not exhibit other qualities of a Noble One (Ariya) as mentioned in the Scriptures (see section on "The Notion of Enlightenment"). So what can we make out of that? Frankly, I would like to humbly confess that I do not know, and that I am still in the process of making research into this matter. But my attitude, at this moment, is to view possibilities of the First and Second MACE as ambiguous because one can deceive oneself into thinking that one is enlightened; and so it is better to strive on until the Third MACE (Anagāminimaggā) because at that stage, sensual desire and aversion (unpleasant states of mind and heart e.g. anger, sadness, disappointment, impatience, frustration, etc.) are supposed to be uprooted, and on that point, one cannot possibly deceive oneself (See also page 23).

The yogi notices that his practice has undergone significant changes: When he first started meditating, it was difficult to concentrate the mind to see nama and rupa arising and passing away. Then after the MACE,<sup>10</sup> as soon as the mind was concentrated, all forms and concepts disappeared, and every object observed was reduced to nama and rupa. Sometimes small minute particles arising and passing away at fantastic speed could be noticed. When he was practising to gain skill in getting PACE, he would get into Sankharupekkha Ñana not long after he had concentrated the mind. But now that he has made this new resolution (to relinquish the highest Dhamma etc.) he does not get to Sankharupekkha immediately, even when his mind has become concentrated. To his surprise, he finds that he has to go through the various stages of Insight starting from *udayabbaya-ñāṇa* (Insight into the Rise and Fall of Phenomena), and deal with many painful sensations and experiences again, this time worse than before (when first practising for MACE). With much effort and time,<sup>11</sup> he finally arrives<sup>12</sup> at Sankharupekkha again. Then, if circumstances are favourable,<sup>13</sup> he encounters for the second time MACE as described above. If the experience is genuine, the yogi is now a Sakadagami.

This whole process of practising for PACE and higher MACE is repeated<sup>14</sup> until the highest goal, Arahantship is attained. There

<sup>10</sup> Not immediately after, but after resuming normal practice.

<sup>11</sup> I am making a general statement here for it differs according to individual effort, paramis, etc.

<sup>12</sup> After getting to Sankharupekkha Ñana he may still get PACE in spite of his resolution to relinquish it. This is because he has not fully cut off longing for or delight in it. When this happens, he must firmly resolve to relinquish it again and again.

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 8.

can only be one MACE for each of the four stages of enlightenment, not more. This means that throughout a sentient being's samsaric existence, genuine MACE's can occur for a maximum of four times only. PACE, however, can occur for indefinite times and duration (up to seven days at a stretch) for the corresponding Ariya.

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### *Phala Apparent Cessation Experience (PACE)*

In the Scriptures this experience is called Fruition Attainment (*phala-samāpatti*). It can only be encountered after a yogi has had a genuine MACE as described above. Its occurrence can be deliberate (due to an *adhiṭṭhāna*—resolution—made for it to happen), or involuntary, where it just happens by itself without the yogi's intention. Usually, after the yogi has had a genuine MACE, it occurs frequently as little sudden gaps in the process of noting i.e., sudden, abrupt stoppings of the noting mind which may also appear to be sudden short moments of apparent unconsciousness. The state of mind before its occurrence is sharp, alert, balanced mindfulness of all *namas* and *rupas* arising and falling away at any of the six sense doors because the yogi is in *Sankharupekkha Ñāna* at that time. There is no sudden acceleration of the rate of noting (as in MACE) but just a gap in the noting process. After the gap has occurred the yogi may, or may not, review what had happened. Most yogis do not and they just go on noting objects as usual. Those who do reflect should be

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<sup>14</sup> Repeated twice—once for Anagami MACE and again for Arahatta MACE.

able to recall that after the noting mind had stopped, they were conscious of an object that was not nama or rupa, but was subtle, yet clear, peaceful, incomparable and unconditioned. Then the mind came out of the state and resumed noting objects as usual.

When the meditation teacher notices, by listening to the yogi's report, that he is getting PACE's after a genuine MACE, he may instruct him to make a series of resolutions as mentioned in the previous section (pages 19, 20). The duration and frequency of PACE are indefinite as mentioned at the end of the last section (page 21).

The majority of consciousness during a MACE<sup>15</sup> are highly developed wholesome cittas while all (with the exception of the first mind-advertance resultant citta<sup>16</sup>) of that during a PACE are resultants, though supramundane, produced by the Path Consciousness of the previous MACE. As such, phala citta, (together with its mental factors, especially sañña, the faculty of registering its object so that it can be recalled to memory) is not as powerful as magga citta. This may be a plausible reason why reflection on a PACE after its occurrence may not be as clear as that on a MACE.<sup>17</sup>

MACE and PACE described here are according to the view of meditation teachers of the Mahasi tradition. Abhidhammic expla-

<sup>15</sup> The Abhidhamma analyses the MACE as such: Bhavanga, bhavanga, 1. Mind-advertance, 2. Preliminary-work, 3. Access, 4. Conformity, 5. Change-of-lineage, 6. Path, 7. Fruition, 8. Fruition, bhavanga, bhavanga,... Of them, no. 2-5 are highly developed wholesome consciousness of the sensual sphere (*kāmāvacara*) but only no. 5 has Nibbana as object. No. 6 is a supramundane wholesome consciousness (*lokuttara-kusala-citta*) while no. 7 and 8 are supramundane resultants (*lokuttara-vipāka-citta*). No. 6-8 have Nibbana as object.

<sup>16</sup> And the three or four successive units of conforming consciousness belonging to the sensual sphere. These do not take Nibbana as object but observe nama and rupa.

<sup>17</sup> Yogis who get genuine PACE's can tell the difference between that and BACE, but yogis who just get BACE's do not know what a real PACE is like; so they cannot tell the difference. Not only that, but they even think that their BACE is PACE, and they suffer as a result of that delusion.

nations of some of their features are mine. I am well aware that there are serious discrepancies in the notion of attainment described above because some yogis who are supposed to be "enlightened" do not seem to exhibit the behaviour expected of a Noble One as mentioned in the Scriptures. For that reason, I am continuing further research into this matter by more personal practice, study, and interviews with other yogis and meditation teachers of the Mahasi and other traditions as well (see also footnote 9).

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### *Real Cessation Experience (RCE)*

As mentioned at the beginning of this work, RCE is called Cessation Attainment (*nirodha-samāpatti*) in the Scriptures, and to qualify for it the yogi must first be an Anagami or Arahant. This means that on three separate occasions, genuine MACE's must have occurred for a yogi to attain anagamihood, and on four separate occasions,<sup>18</sup> in the case of arahantship. In addition to that, the yogi must have also mastered the eight Mundane Attainments, i.e., getting and maintaining the duration of JACE at will for each of the four rupa jhanas and four arupa jhanas. After that, he has got to practise getting into the first rupa jhana, emerging from it, and observing the mental factors of the consciousness that had occurred during JACE in terms of anicca,

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<sup>18</sup> During the Buddha's time when people had extraordinary paramis, it was possible to get four MACE's in one sitting and thus become an arahant. Nowadays, one has to work very hard to get just one MACE, not to mention three or four!



dukkha and anatta. Then he goes into the next higher jhana, emerges from it, and repeats the vipassana observation. This process is repeated for each successive jhana (first rupa jhana to fourth rupa jhana, first arupa jhana to second arupa jhana). After entering into the third arupa jhana and emerging from it, he must do four preliminary duties:

1. resolve that his personal belongings not in direct contact with his body during RCE may not be destroyed by fire, etc. or be stolen;
2. resolve that he would automatically get up from RCE should the Sangha expect him to turn up for some community affair;
3. resolve that he would automatically get up from RCE should the Master (Buddha) expect him to come for some discourse, instruction, etc.; and
4. determine to see that his life span does not end before the expiry of the RCE duration he is expecting to maintain.<sup>19</sup>

After doing this fourfold preliminary duty, he enters into the fourth arupa jhana for a split second, and then his mind, together with all mental factors and matter produced by the mind, really ceases. This actual stopping of consciousness can last for a maximum duration of seven days non-stop, depending on circumstances (see footnote 8 on page 18).

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<sup>19</sup> Only a brief description is given here so that the reader can have a rough idea of what it takes to practise for RCE (*nirodha-samāpatti*).

By now, it should be abundantly clear that RCE (*nirodha-samāpatti*) is definitely out of the province of pure-vipassana yogis who do not do samatha, or even samatha-vipassana yogis who have yet to attain genuine MACE and JACE.

For a comparative summary of the corresponding features of the different types of CE's, see chart on page 8.

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### CHAPTER THREE

✽

## *The Notion of Enlightenment*

*"—for what is the point of being enlightened  
if the defilements are not uprooted?"*

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**I**n Theravada Buddhism, the notion of Enlightenment is directly connected to the eradication of defilements,<sup>20</sup> and subsequently to liberation from the suffering of samsaric existence. Let me elaborate: Ignorance makes beings blind to the true nature of existence (which is really nothing more than nama and rupa exhibiting the three characteristics of anicca, dukkha and anatta), and deludes them into thinking that there can be real, lasting happiness or comfort in the world. Due to defilements rooted in ignorance, beings pursue this ephemeral and illusive happiness, and in the process generate good and bad kamma, which is the cause for perpetuating samsaric existence.

Vipassana meditation helps to peel off layer after layer of ignorance so that the yogi can gain personal insight into the true nature of reality. When this happens, he is no longer deluded

<sup>20</sup> In the Scriptures, negative, unwholesome states of mind are classified and called by various names, viz. fetters, clinging, pollution, floods, tendencies, etc. Here, to make things simple, I shall just use the general term "defilement" to refer to any of such negative, unwholesome states.

into thinking that there can be any sort of lasting happiness in phenomena which arise and pass away all the time without stop. As such, defilements such as greed, hatred and delusion do not arise in the course of his practice of continuous mindfulness, particularly at the deeper levels of Purification and Insight. Nevertheless, this inhibition or suspension of defilements is only temporary; for if he stops practice, or is negligent in being mindful, they will crop up again, sometimes even more intensified than before.

When the yogi has a genuine MACE for the very first time, however, certain defilements are uprooted for good, and there is a striking change in his character because he has become a Sotapanna: a Noble One who has attained the first stage of enlightenment. As he continues further practice to attain higher stages of enlightenment (see pages 19-21), he will eradicate successively finer defilements corresponding to the respective stages until he becomes an arahant—when there will be no more defilements left to be uprooted—although certain character traits (see pages 37-39) may still manifest because of inattentiveness. Below, I shall list the types of defilements eradicated at the corresponding stage of enlightenment, as well as general virtues common to all Ariyas, so that the honest, sincere yogi can check for himself whether or not he has really become a Noble One according to the standards set down by the Scriptures—for what is the point of being enlightened if the defilements are not uprooted? I think that would only defeat the very purpose of vipassana meditation.

In fact, the uprooting of defilements is instrumental in shortening samsaric suffering because, as I mentioned at the beginning of this section, defilements are the motivating force behind kamma, and kamma is the energy that perpetuates samsaric existence. Thus, having eradicated certain defilements corresponding to the respective stages of enlightenment,

- the Sotapanna has a maximum of only seven more lives to live in the sensual realm
- the Sakadagami has only one more life in the sensual realm
- the Anagami, without coming back to the sensual realm, will be reborn in the Brahma world
- the Arahant will live until the end of his present existence before being totally liberated from samsaric suffering.

Moreover, the uprooting of defilements is also responsible for reducing and eventually eliminating mental stress and suffering in the minds of Ariyas. As long as one has the five Aggregates to take care of, no one, not even the Buddha, can escape from physical suffering like bodily discomfort, pain, illness, old age and death. Unenlightened worldlings, especially non-meditators, have to struggle with multiple suffering—physical and mental—but Noble Ones, because they have eradicated certain defilements, can reduce and, in the case of Anagamis and Arahants, absolutely eliminate mental stress and tension even in the face of bodily pain and suffering.

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So if you think that you have had a couple of genuine MACE's or PACE's you might be interested in checking to see whether the relevant defilements have really been eradicated or not. The list given below does not claim to be totally exhaustive, and I am quite sure I shall have to add more as I continue further research; but for the time being I think it is quite comprehensive as most of it is extracted from the Visuddhimagga.

\*

*Defilements Eradicated by the Sotapattimagga  
(First MACE)*

1. Wrong view that there is an unchanging, everlasting entity called soul, self, etc. in the five Aggregates.
2. Doubts regarding the authenticity of:
  - the Buddha—the Omniscient One who discovered the way of practice to eradicate the defilements and thus be liberated from samsaric suffering.
  - the Dhamma—the way of practice taught by the Buddha, Path (MACE), Fruition (PACE) and Nibbana.
  - the Sangha—the community of Noble Ones who followed the teachings of the Buddha and attained the various stages of enlightenment.
3. Clinging to the belief that by merely following certain practices which do not include the Eightfold Noble Path (i.e., vipassana meditation), one can uproot defilements and thus reach Nibbana, total liberation from samsaric suffering.

- 4. Sensual desire
  - 5. Aversion
  - 6. Other defilements
- } — that will cause rebirth  
in the lower worlds.

7. Defilements causing the five Precepts to be broken.

(This means that an Ariya does not have to “observe” the five Precepts because they are automatically established in him. The intention to break any of the five Precepts does not arise at all, not to mention the act of breaking it.)

8. Envy or Jealousy (of others more fortunate than oneself).

9. *Macchhariya* (stinginess, possessiveness and competitiveness combined)—it is the displeasure at and unwillingness to give away to or share with others one’s possessions (dwelling, benefactors, gain, knowledge) or virtue (fame).

10. Favouritism—the making of unjust decisions or judgments due to prejudice, anger, delusion or fear. [For monks this is mostly concerned with a) the distribution of requisites donated to the Sangha, b) the interpretation of the Scriptures (*Dhammavinaya*) ].

11. Intentionally committing a vinaya offence e.g., accepting money and using it to buy things, eating after noon, eating food that has not been offered, etc. (This is for monks and bhikkhuni nuns only.)

### *Virtues of a Sotapanna*

*(The Seven Great Reflections — discoursed by the Buddha himself)*

If a Sotapanna takes a temporary break from worldly responsibilities and retreats to a secluded place for meditation, he may, on reflection, make the following realisations:

1. He is not overcome by obsessive defilements that will prevent him from seeing things (nama and rupa) as they really are (i.e., their arising and falling away without stop).
2. His mind becomes concentrated and cooled of the defilements soon after he starts meditating. (This is in contrast to the situation when he first started to practise before getting his first genuine MACE, where it was rather difficult to keep the mind from wandering off to other objects and make it concentrate on the (primary) object of meditation.)
3. There cannot be any yogi outside of the Buddha Sasana who is enlightened as he is (because outside the Buddha Sasana there is no practice comprising the Eightfold Noble Path, no vipassana meditation).
4. Though he may commit a misdeed, he is incapable of concealing his fault from others, i.e., pretend that he is innocent. (For monks, this means that if he should find out that he had unintentionally committed a vinaya offence, he would immediately and openly confess it to a fellow monk and resolve to be extra careful in future

- so that he would not make the same mistake again.)
5. Though he may be willing to help fellow Dhamma Farers with their chores, his mind is sharply inclined towards the practice of Sila, Samadhi and (vipassana) Pañña.
  6. If someone is giving a talk on Dhamma or Vinaya in a language he understands, he is deeply interested, pays full attention, and listens carefully; and
  7. he comprehends the meaning and theme (or sequence) of the talk, and experiences rapture because of that.

*Note:*

Although these seven virtues were specifically attributed to a Sotapanna by the Buddha himself, it must be remembered that they should be even more intensified and well-established in the hearts of those Noble Ones who have attained higher stages of enlightenment viz. Sakadagami, Anagami and Arahant.

\*

*Defilements Eradicated by the Sakadagamimagga*  
(Second MACE)

- |                      |   |  |
|----------------------|---|--|
| 1. Sensual desire    | } | that would cause more than one rebirth in the sensual realm. |
| 2. Aversion          |   |  |
| 3. Other defilements |   |  |

\*



*Defilements Eradicated by the Anagamimagga*  
(Third MACE)

1. Sensual desire (i.e., desire for objects and experiences associated with the five sense doors).
2. Aversion (i.e., displeasure in the mind including anger, fear, sadness, disappointment, depression, frustration, sorrow, anguish, mental pain, heart-break).
3. Malicious talk meant to separate friendship and cause disunity.
4. Coarse or vulgar speech meant to hurt another.
5. Remorse (for wrong doing done and good deed undone).

\*

*Defilements Eradicated by the Arahattamagga*  
(Fourth MACE)

1. Desire for rebirth in the Rupa Brahma world.
2. Desire for rebirth in the Arupa Brahma world.
3. Conceit or pride (Superiority Complex, Inferiority Complex, Equality Complex and all egocentric thoughts).
4. Restlessness.
5. Ignorance (about the true nature of reality, especially the dukkha and anatta aspect).
6. Sloth and torpor (but an arahant can also be sleepy due to environmental (or climatic), bodily and medical conditions).

7. Lack of Moral Shame
8. Lack of Moral Dread
9. Frivolous gossip (talk which does not conduce to worldly benefit, jhana, magga, phala, nibbana).
10. Wrong effort.
11. Wrong mindfulness.
12. Wrong concentration.
13. Wrong freedom.
14. Wrong knowledge (meditative).
15. Covetousness.

\*

### *Character Traits*

Character traits are little habits or idiosyncrasies peculiar to each person, something that makes us differentiate between one individual and another, in spite of the fact that every being is made up of the same nama and rupa. Only the Sammasambuddha can uproot character traits but not other Arahant disciples, not even Pacceka Buddhas. Thus, although the Great Disciples of the Buddha had become Arahants they retained their respective character traits, e.g.,

- Venerable Sariputta had a very unmonkish habit of jumping over puddles of muddy water because he had been a monkey for many many lifetimes in the past.
- Venerable Pilindavaccha had the rude habit of calling

out "Hey you mean lout!" to monks and laymen alike because for the last five hundred existences he had been a snobbish Brahmin.

- Venerable Belatthasisa, the preceptor of Venerable Ananda, destroyed the stupa of a late bhikkhuni at the cemetery where he was staying because every evening other bhikkhunis (belonging to the Gang of Six) would come and lament over her death, thus disturbing his peace of mind.
- Venerable Kassapa was a very stern monk and he scolded Venerable Ananda after the Buddha's demise because many of Venerable Ananda's disciples had disrobed.

To a critical external observer, the speech and actions of the Noble Ones mentioned above would seem to be offensive and censurable and would, indeed, cast doubt over the authenticity of their attainments. The fact, however, is that they were Arahants whose behaviour was not motivated by defilements, though admittedly influenced by character traits. How do we draw the line between one and the other? An outspoken observer judges and criticises a Noble One by his outward conduct at the risk of committing *ariyāpavāda-kamma* (an act of wrongly rebuking a Noble One) which obstructs his own spiritual progress and rebirth in a happy realm. On the other hand, a yogi who overestimates his own practice may justify all his misdeeds by

attributing them to the influence of character traits rather than admit that the relevant defilements have not really been eradicated; and he does so at the risk of terminal self-deception. Obviously, the line is rather fuzzy, especially in the case of yogis who think they have had one or two MACE's.

Perhaps if we exercise more caution and discretion in judging others by their outward behaviour, and are more humble and honest with ourselves, we may be able to fare well in this matter. Whether or not others are really enlightened is not OUR problem but theirs. OUR problem is whether we are really enlightened or not. And to solve that we have to look inwards—not outwards—by checking to see whether or not the relevant defilements which are supposed to have been uprooted still arise and by persevering in meditation until the highest goal is reached.

In other words, each of us has to draw his own fine line between the potency of defilements yet to be uprooted and the influence of character traits by using the Straight Edge of Self-honesty and the Sharp Pencil of One-pointed Mindfulness.

\*

*The Disadvantages of  
Overestimating One's Practice*

1. One may not really be enlightened.
2. One stops practice to do missionary work.
3. One misleads others into walking the wrong path.
4. One becomes proud, haughty, overconfident.
5. One is liable to reject the authority of the Scriptures because one's defilements have not really been eradicated.
6. One may suffer from terminal self-deception and thus miss the chance of really becoming enlightened.
7. One cannot attain higher stages of enlightenment.
8. One does not obey the words of the Master who said: "Do not rest content with lesser attainments, but strive on till you reach the highest goal."

*The Benefits of  
Doubting One's Attainment*

1. One may in fact be enlightened.
2. One keeps on practising.
3. One does not mislead others.
4. One remains humble and patient.
5. One accepts the authority of the Scriptures and keeps on checking to see whether the defilements have really been uprooted or not.
6. If one has not got the real MACE yet, one may get it with continued practice.
7. One may attain higher stages of enlightenment.
8. One is a true disciple of the Buddha because the Master said, again and again, that one must not rest content (with the lower stages of enlightenment) until one reaches the highest goal i.e., Arahantship.

\*

### *Last Words of Advice*

Far greater are the benefits in doubting one's lower attainments than in giving oneself the benefit of the doubt.

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*May the merits accrued in writing this work conduce to the attainment of the highest goal in this very life or hereafter.*

WHEN A YOGI reports that he has had a cessation experience, he probably means that an apparent loss of consciousness had occurred during meditation for a split second, a few moments, a few minutes or even a few hours depending on circumstances. This apparent loss of consciousness could have occurred gradually as one's strength of awareness slackens, or abruptly when mindfulness is crystal clear. In the former case one wakes up feeling rather drowsy, but in the latter case rather refreshed and alert. On "regaining" consciousness one's sitting posture could still be as upright and stiff as ever in both cases, although in the former case it is likely to be stooped and limp. It is the latter case that we are interested in here for there is no doubt that the former is a case of unmindful drowsiness.



BUDDHIST WISDOM CENTRE  
*Petaling Jaya, Selangor*