

The Susīma-sutta and the Wisdom-Liberated Arahant

The Susīma-sutta, a short discourse of the Saṃyutta-nikāya, uses a dramatic plot to shine a spotlight on a doctrinal topic that must have been of vital interest to the ancient Saṅgha as it classified persons with respect to their meditative expertise and paths of attainment.¹ The topic is the nature of the *paññāvimutta arahant*, the person who attains liberation through the special efficacy of wisdom without reaching extraordinary distinction in the sphere of *samādhi* or concentration. The Susīma-sutta merits special consideration because the Pāli version has three parallels preserved in Chinese translation, and thus a comparison of the Pāli discourse with its Chinese counterparts permits us to see how, even in an early stage of textual transmission, the Buddhist schools were already in subtle ways contemplating different solutions to the doctrinal problem raised by the *sutta*. For ease of reference, I will designate the Pāli version S 12:70. Among the Chinese versions, one is found in the Vinaya of the Mahāsāṅghika school, which I will refer to as M-Vin.² Another version is *sutta* no. 347 in the Saṃyukta-āgama, commonly understood to be the Sarvāstivāda (or perhaps Mūla-sarvāstivāda) counterpart to the Saṃyutta-nikāya.³ I will call this version SĀ 347. The other is an incomplete citation in the Abhidharma-

¹S 12:70; II 119–28.

²T22, 362b25–363b26. In my discussion, when I translate terms used in the Chinese texts into their Indic equivalents, for the sake of consistency I will generally use the Pāli counterparts, even though these texts may have been translated from Sanskrit or Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit originals. For the same reason, I will refer to all versions of the basic text as a *sutta* rather than use *sutta* for the Pāli version and *sūtra* for non-Pāli versions

³SĀ 347; T2, 96b25–98a12. Richard Gombrich (*How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teaching* (London: Athlone, 1996), pp. 123–27) discusses the relations between S 12:70 and SĀ 347. My interpretation of both versions differs considerably from Gombrich's.

vibhāṣā-śāstra.⁴ This citation terminates before we reach the end of the *sutta*, but it covers most of the points relevant to our study. This version will be referred to as Vibhāṣā.

In this paper I will use S 12:70 as the primary basis for my discussion and bring in the others later for purposes of comparison. I will first present a summary of the “plot”. Then I will explore the theme of the “*arahant* liberated by wisdom” based on the primary text, followed by a discussion of its treatment in the several Chinese versions of the *sutta*. At some later time, I hope to write a sequel to this paper to explore the different versions of the second part of the discourse, which deals with the two knowledges contributing to the status of one liberated by wisdom.

I. The Plot

The *sutta* opens with the Buddha dwelling in the Bamboo Grove at Rājagaha. At the time, he is respected and honored by the laity and amply provided with all the requisites, as is the Bhikkhu Saṅgha. Because of the Buddha’s rise to fame, the fortunes of the “wanderers of other sects” have steeply declined. The wanderers resident at Rājagaha therefore decide to assign a crucial mission to one of their members named Susīma. He is to go forth under “the Ascetic Gotama”, master his doctrine, and then return and teach it to his own community. They assume that the Buddha’s doctrine is the key to his success, and so, they suppose, once they have learned his Dhamma and can teach it to the lay folk, they will regain the support that they have lost to the Sakyan sage.

Susīma agrees and heads off towards the Bamboo Grove. At the

⁴There are actually two parallel treatises that cite this version, with slight differences between them. The one I mostly draw upon is Abhidharma-vibhāṣā-śāstra (no. 1546), which cites it at T28, 407c26–408b11. The larger version of this treatise, Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā-śāstra (no. 1545), cites it at T27, 572b16–572c27. It is an open question whether this version is actually a *sutta* with canonical or quasi-canonical status; it may be, rather, merely the treatise’s paraphrase of a *sutta*. For the sake of convenience, however, I will refer to it as if it were another version of the *sutta*.

entrance he meets the monk Ānanda and tells him he wants to lead the spiritual life under the Buddha.⁵ Ānanda brings Susīma to the Buddha, who tells Ānanda to ordain him. Shortly thereafter, in the Buddha's presence, a number of monks declare final knowledge (*aññā*), that is, arahantship, announcing, "We understand: Birth is finished, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming back to any state of being."⁶ Susīma hears about this and approaches the monks to ask whether this report is true. When they confirm it, he asks them whether they have attained the five mundane types of super-knowledge: the modes of spiritual power, the divine ear, the ability to read the minds of others, the recollection of past lives, and the divine eye which sees how beings pass away and take rebirth in accordance with their *kamma*.⁷ In each case, the monks deny possessing these super-knowledges. Then Susīma asks them whether they dwell in the "peaceful emancipations, transcending forms, formless, having contacted them with the body".⁸ Again, they answer no. Now Susīma is puzzled. He tells the monks that he cannot understand how they could declare arahantship yet deny that they attain these superhuman states. They reply, "We are liberated by wisdom, friend Susīma."⁹

This answer does not satisfy Susīma, but when he asks them to elucidate they only repeat the same words, "Whether or not you understand, we are liberated by wisdom." So Susīma goes to the Buddha in

⁵In all three Chinese versions, it is not Ānanda that he meets but a group of monks. In SĀ 347 and Vibhāṣā, the monks bring him to the Buddha, who tells them to ordain him. In M-Vin, the monks tell Susīma that, as a convert from another sect, he must live on probation for four months, and then, if the Saṅgha approves, they will give him the ordination.

⁶S II 120,30–32: *khīṇā jāti vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ kataṃ karaṇīyaṃ nāparaṃ itthattāyāti pajānāma*.

⁷S II 121–23. Briefly, in Pāli: (1) *iddhividha*, (2) *dibbasotadhātu*, (3) *cetopariyañāṇa*, (4) *pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa*, (5) *yathākamma cutūpapātāñāṇa*.

⁸S II 123,15–16: *ye te santā vimokkhā atikkamma rūpe āruppā te kāyena phusitvā viharatha*.

⁹S II 123,26: *paññāvimuttā kho mayaṃ, āvuso Susīma*.

quest of clarification and reports to him the entire conversation he had with the monks. The Buddha too replies with an enigmatic one-sentence answer, “First, Susīma, there is knowledge of the persistence of principles; afterwards, knowledge of nibbāna.”¹⁰

Susīma asks the Buddha to explain this concise statement in detail, but the Buddha first responds simply by repeating his reply, “Whether or not you understand, Susīma, first there is knowledge of the persistence of principles; afterwards, knowledge of nibbāna.” However, he then tries to guide Susīma to an understanding of his words. He first leads him through the catechism on the three characteristics — impermanence, suffering, and non-self — in relation to the five aggregates, exactly as we find it in the second “argument” of the well-known Anattalakkhaṇa-sutta, the Discourse on the Characteristic of Non-Self (S 22:59).¹¹ This culminates in the noble disciple becoming disenchanted with the five aggregates; through disenchantment, he becomes dispassionate; and through dispassion, his mind is liberated. With liberation comes the knowledge of liberation and he understands: “Birth is finished ... there is no more coming back to any state of being.”

The Buddha next takes Susīma through a catechism on dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), first with respect to arising: beginning with “aging-and-death have birth as condition” and ending with “volitional activities have ignorance as condition”; and then with respect to cessation, starting from “aging-and-death cease with the cessation of birth” and ending with “volitional activities cease with the cessation of ignorance”. At this point the Buddha asks Susīma whether “knowing and seeing thus” (*evaṃ jānanto evaṃ passanto*), he exercises the five super-knowledges or attains the peaceful formless emancipations. When Susīma says no, the Buddha asks him how he could answer as he did while being unable to attain these states. The Buddha’s use of the word “answer” (*veyyākaraṇa*) apparently refers back to his agreeing

¹⁰S II 124,10–11: *pubbe kho Susīma dhammaṭṭhitiñāṇaṃ, pacchā nibbāne ñāṇaṃ.*

¹¹S III 67,22–68,25.

that he “knows and sees” each of the points the Buddha asked him about in the chain of dependent origination.

Susīma does not reply to the Buddha’s question. Instead, he prostrates himself at the Buddha’s feet, confesses that he entered the Buddhist order with thievish intent, and asks the Blessed One to pardon him for this offence. The Buddha then tells him that he was indeed foolish to have contemplated such a dangerous course of action. To underscore the danger he relates a simile about a criminal who is arrested by the king and beheaded to the south of the city. The consequences of “going forth as a thief in the well-expounded Dhamma and Discipline”, the Buddha says, are far graver than the punishment suffered by the criminal; but since Susīma sees his transgression for what it is, he pardons him for the sake of his future restraint.

2. The One Liberated by Wisdom

In S 12:70, as we have just seen, when Susīma questions the monks about their attainments, he asks about the five mundane super-knowledges and the peaceful formless emancipations, and it is these that the monks deny possessing. It is intriguing that Susīma’s questions do not pry into any attainments that the monks might possess *below* the level of the formless emancipations. I assume that, whatever might have been the historical basis for the origination of this *sutta*, the actual dialogue, particularly in the first part, is partly the work of the compilers of the texts. Once this assumption is granted, we may infer that the compilers of the *sutta* had compelling doctrinal reasons for drawing the cut-off point at the formless emancipations. For them to permit Susīma to ask the monks whether or not they had attained the *jhānas*, and then to have the monks give negative answers to these questions, would have been to directly contradict time-hallowed discourses and doctrinal formulæ. It seems to me that the compilers of this *sutta* wish to insinuate that the monks were actually *not* attainers of the *jhānas*, that they subtly want to introduce into the canon the idea of the *arahant* who lacks these distinguished states of concentration. At the same time,

however, they did not want to force an ambiguity that was hovering over the notion of the “wisdom-liberated *arahant*” to become resolved too starkly in black-and-white terms. Hence they allowed the ambiguity to linger in the canonical text while they resolved the issue in its commentary, which in the earliest period must have been a teacher’s oral explanation accompanying the *sutta*.

The Nikāyas distinguish among different classes of *arahants*, using as the basis for the distinctions the attainments they possess ancillary to their attainment of arahantship. In descending order, some *arahants* possess the six “direct knowledges” (*chalaḥhiñña*); some have the three “higher knowledges” (*tevijja*); some are “liberated in both ways” (*ubhatobhāgavimutta*); and some are “liberated by wisdom” (*paññāvimutta*).¹² The main distinction that the Nikāyas draw is between those *arahants* “liberated in both ways” and those “liberated by wisdom”. In the Kīṭāgiri-sutta (M 70), the *arahant* liberated in both ways is defined as one who “contacts with the body and dwells in those peaceful emancipations, transcending forms, that are formless, and whose influxes are exhausted by his seeing with wisdom”.¹³ The *arahant* liberated by wisdom, in contrast, is one who “does not contact with the body and dwell in those peaceful emancipations, transcending forms, that are formless, but whose influxes are exhausted by his seeing with wisdom”.¹⁴ Questions can be raised about the exact meaning and extension of these definitions: for example, to what degree must an *arahant* possess the formless emancipations to qualify as “both-ways-

¹²See S I 191 (S 8:7). The six direct knowledges are the five mundane super-knowledges enumerated above (see pp. 52–53) plus the knowledge of the exhaustion of the influxes (*āsavakkhayañāṇa*). The three higher knowledges are the knowledge of the recollection of past lives, the knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings, and the knowledge of the exhaustion of the influxes.

¹³M I 477,26–28: *ekacco puggalo ye te santā vimokkhā atikkamma rūpe āruppā te kāyena phusitvā viharatī paññāya c’ assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā hontī.*

¹⁴M I 477,33–36: *ekacco puggalo ye te santā vimokkhā atikkamma rūpe āruppā te na kāyena phusitvā viharatī paññāya c’ assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā hontī.*

liberated”? The Puggalapaññatti Commentary maintains that those who attain the formless attainments but do not gain the attainment of cessation (*nirodhasamāpatti*) are called “liberated in both ways” only in a figurative sense (*pariyāyena*), while those who gain the eight attainments (the four *jhānas* and the four formless attainments) as well as the attainment of cessation are called “the best of those liberated in both ways in the literal sense”.¹⁵ This same commentary, however, then concedes that an *arahant* who attains just one among the formless-sphere *jhānas* can still be called “liberated in both ways”.¹⁶

The *arahant* liberated by wisdom, it is clear, has the fourth *jhāna* as the upper limit of achievement on the scale of concentration; for some reason, not explained in the *suttas*, an *arahant* of this type does not proceed further to attain the formless emancipations. The more interesting question, however, concerns the minimal attainment in concentration possessed by an *arahant* liberated by wisdom. A number of standard texts define the concentration included in several groups among the thirty-seven “aids to enlightenment” (*bodhipakkhiyā dhammā*) as the four *jhānas*. In particular, we find the faculty of concentration (*samādhindriya*) among the five faculties and the right concentration factor (*sammā samādhi*) of the noble eightfold path both defined as the four *jhānas*.¹⁷ The four *jhānas* also enter into the standard description of the progressive training of the monk, preceding the attainment of the higher knowledges,¹⁸ and into the threefold higher training, where they serve as the training in the higher mind (*adhicittasikkhā*).¹⁹ If we rely upon these texts, taking them literally, it would follow that any monk liberated by wisdom must have attained *all four jhānas*.

¹⁵Pp-a 191. *nippariyāyena ubhatobhāgavimuttaseṭṭho*.

¹⁶Pp-a 191. *arūpāvacarajjhānesu pana ekasmiṃ sati ubhatobhāgavimutto yeva nāma hoti*.

¹⁷S V 196,18–19, 198,24–32 ; D II 313,12–25 ; S V 10,5–18..

¹⁸E.g., at D I 73–76 ; M I 181–82, 276–78, etc.

¹⁹At A I 235,21–23, 235,38–36,2..

Such a conclusion, however, would be extreme, for other texts equally authoritative recognize the possibility of attaining arahantship on the basis of any *jhāna*. For example, the Jhāna-sutta (A 9:36) explains that one can gain *any* one of the four *jhānas* or lower three formless attainments and then contemplate its constituents in eleven ways: as impermanent, suffering, illness, a boil, an arrow, misery, affliction, alien, disintegrating, empty, and non-self.²⁰ If one is firm in such insight, the text asserts, one will attain the exhaustion of the influxes, that is, arahantship; if one retains a subtle attachment to this experience, one will emerge as a non-returner. Again, in the Aṭṭhakanāgara-sutta (M 52), Ānanda explains how it is possible to attain the exhaustion of the influxes through any of eleven “doors to the deathless”.²¹ One enters *any* of the four *jhānas*, the four divine abodes, or the lower three formless attainments and contemplates it as conditioned and constructed by volition. One then sees that anything conditioned and constructed by volition is impermanent and subject to cessation. This would imply that the texts that define the faculty of concentration, the right concentration of the noble path, and the training in the higher mind as the four *jhānas* should not be taken literally as meaning that *all four jhānas* are needed to reach liberation; rather, they mean that to attain the final goal as a wisdom-liberated *arahant*, one should be able to gain at least one *jhāna* as a basis for insight.

We might, however, ask whether even this much is indispensable. In raising this question, we are pushing our line of inquiry further than Susīma dared to go in his conversation with the monks. Yet, in view of the direction meditation theory has taken in the mainstream Buddhist traditions, as we shall see, it is precisely this question that should pique our curiosity. Now, if we read certain *suttas* at their face value it would seem that the first *jhāna* is a minimum requirement for the attainment of even the third fruition, the stage of non-returner. A text that lends strong

²⁰A IV 422–26. The commentary explains that the fourth formless attainment is too subtle to be contemplated with insight.

²¹M I 349–52.

support to this claim is the *Mahāmālunkya-sutta* (M 64), where the Buddha declares, “There is, Ānanda, a path to the abandoning of the five lower fetters; that anyone, without relying on that path, shall know or see or abandon the five lower fetters, this is impossible.”²² As the *sutta* unfolds, the “path to the abandoning of the five lower fetters” is then shown to be the same course of practice described just above in the *Jhāna-sutta*. One enters any of the four *jhānas* or three lower formless attainments, and then contemplates its constituents from the same eleven angles. If one can remain firm in this contemplation, one exhausts the influxes and reaches arahantship; if there is still a remnant of attachment, one cuts off the five lower fetters and becomes a non-returner.

If the above words — “that anyone, without relying on that path, shall know or see or abandon the five lower fetters, *this is impossible*” — are taken as categorical, there is indeed no possibility at all that an *arahant* liberated by wisdom can be destitute of the first *jhāna*. It will not suffice, either, to appeal to the Abhidhamma distinction between form-sphere (*rūpāvacara*) and supramundane (*lokuttara*) *jhānas* and then hold that while some *arahants* liberated by wisdom might be destitute of mundane *jhānas*, they will still possess at least the first supramundane *jhāna*. This claim could not be accepted in a discussion based solely on the *suttas*, for the distinction between form-sphere and supramundane *jhānas* is never explicitly drawn in the *suttas* nor is it even discernible in them.²³ If our analysis is to apply to the understanding of meditative attainments characteristic of the *suttas*, it must use concepts intrinsic to the *suttas* themselves and not draw upon modes

²²M I 434.25–28: *yo, Ānanda, maggo yā paṭipadā pañcannaṃ orambhāgiyānaṃ saṃyojanānaṃ pahānāya taṃ maggaṃ taṃ paṭipadaṃ anāgamma pañcorambhāgiyāni saṃyojanāni ñassati vā dakkhati vā pajahissati vā ti n’ etaṃ thānaṃ vijjati.*

²³One possible exception to this is the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta* (M 117), which, however, in the form it has come down, seems to be the reworking of an archaic version under the influence of later ideas typical of the incipient Abhidhamma.

of analysis derived from a later phase of Theravāda Buddhist thought.

Although the words of the Mahāmālunkya-sutta quoted above might seem to rule out the possibility that those destitute of *jhāna* can achieve arahantship, several texts scattered across the Nikāyas hint that this conclusion would be a bit stern. We should remember that, while the *suttas* are remarkably consistent with each other, they are not rigidly so, and one can often find in some texts exceptions made to principles apparently laid down as categorical in other texts. One discourse relevant to our present discussion, the Asubha-sutta (A 4:163), speaks about four modes of practice: two painful, with sluggish and quick realization, and two pleasant, again with sluggish and quick realization. The mode of practice that is painful, with sluggish realization, is described thus:

Here, a monk dwells contemplating the unattractiveness of the body, perceiving the repulsiveness of food, perceiving non-delight in the entire world, contemplating impermanence in all formations; and he has the perception of death well established internally. He dwells depending upon these five trainee powers: the powers of faith, moral shame, moral dread, energy, and wisdom. These five faculties are manifest in him as weak: the faculties of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. Because these five faculties are weak, he sluggishly attains the immediacy condition for the exhaustion of the influxes. This is called practice that is painful with sluggish realization.²⁴

What makes this meditator's mode of practice "painful" (*dukkha-paṭipadā*) is the use of meditation subjects that focus upon the repulsive, fearful aspects of human life, subjects that engender a mood of disenchantment rather than of blissful absorption. It is true that the definition ascribes to this practitioner the five faculties, among them the faculty of concentration, sometimes defined by the *jhāna* formula. It is likely, however, that this practitioner has merely a facile acquaintance with *jhāna* or even none at all; for the meditation subjects he uses are taken up, not so much because they are conducive to the *jhānas*, but

²⁴A II 150,32–51,5.

because they lead to disenchantment and detachment.²⁵ In contrast, the practitioner who takes the route described as “pleasant” (*sukha-paṭipadā*) is defined precisely as one who acquires the four *jhānas*. For the contrast to be meaningful, one would have to conclude either that the meditator on the “painful” path has no experience of *jhāna* or that he assigns *jhāna* to a subordinate place in his practice. It could even be that an alternative definition of the faculty of concentration found in the *Indriya-saṃyutta* is intended precisely for such kinds of practitioners. This alternative definition defines the faculty of concentration, not as the four *jhānas*, but as “the concentration or one-pointedness of mind that arises having made release the object”.²⁶

A similar contrast is drawn at A 4:169 between those persons who attain *nibbāna* through strenuous practice (*sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyī*) and those who attain it through non-strenuous practice (*asaṅkhāraparinibbāyī*).²⁷ The strenuous practice is explained by way of the five contemplations that constitute the painful path: the unattractiveness of the body, the repulsiveness of food, perceiving non-delight in the world, contemplating impermanence in all formations, and mindfulness of death. The non-strenuous practice, for those fortunate ones, is nothing other than the four *jhānas*. Again, a string of *suttas* in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* says of these five contemplations: (i) that they lead to complete disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, peace, direct knowledge, enlightenment, and *nibbāna*; (ii) that they lead to the exhaustion of the influxes; and (iii) that they have liberation of mind and liberation by

²⁵It is true that *Vism* 265–66 explains how the meditation on bodily foulness can give rise to the first *jhāna*, but the main emphasis of this meditation is on the removal of sensual lust, not on mental absorption.

²⁶S V 197,14–17, 198,23–24: *ariyasāvako vossaggārammaṇaṃ karitvā labhati samādhim labhati cittassa ekaggataṃ, idaṃ vuccati bhikkhave samādh'-indriyaṃ.*

²⁷A II 155–56.

wisdom as their fruit and benefit.²⁸

The Nikāyas never go so far as to say that those who choose such meditation subjects as their vehicle of practice lack attainment of *jhāna*; and accordingly, when questioning the monks who claim to be *arahants* liberated by wisdom, Susīma does not pursue his inquiry below the level of “the peaceful formless emancipations” and ask whether or not they attained the *jhānas*. The issue is left daintily alone, as though it were too sensitive to be touched upon. Perhaps the stock definition of the path factor of right concentration in terms of the four *jhānas*, and the role of the *jhānas* in the standard description of the gradual training of the monk, occupied niches too hallowed within the canonical collection for the Theravāda tradition to ever consider altering the received heritage of *suttas* in a way that might explicitly state such attainments are dispensable. Yet it is among those who use such subjects of meditation as the unattractiveness of the body, mindfulness of death, disenchantment with the world, and the impermanence of all formations as their preferred vehicle that one might expect to find *arahants* liberated by wisdom; and because practitioners of these meditations are contrasted with those who take the “pleasant” route of the four *jhānas*, it is among the former that one might expect to find, by implication, those who either attain *jhāna* with difficulty or opt instead for a mode of practice that draws its primary strength from wisdom built upon the minimum degree of serenity (*samatha*) needed to reach the destruction of the defilements.

3. The *Sukkhavipassaka Arahant* and the *Susīma-sutta*

In my reading of the *Susīma-sutta*, the redactors of the text want to suggest that the *paññāvimutta arahants* are in fact destitute of *jhāna* attainments, but they dare not say this directly. That is why the questions are not asked. The absence of the questions accomplishes two

²⁸A III 83–84 (A 5:69–71). What is referred to here is no doubt the influx-free liberation of mind and liberation by wisdom (*anāsavā cetovimutti paññāvimutti*) constituting arahantship.

things. It avoids the need to draw forth answers that would contradict orthodox doctrine, which upheld the secure place of *jhāna* in the structure of the Buddhist path; and it deftly hints that these monks did not have the *jhānas*. If the intention of the *sutta* were otherwise, *Susīma* could have asked about the *jhānas*, and the monks could have said, “Some of us attain one *jhāna*, some attain two, some attain three, and some attain all four.” But by passing over this issue in silence, they discreetly imply that they do not attain the *jhānas* at all.

Where the redactors of *suttas* fear to tread, commentators step in boldly. It is in the commentaries (including the *Visuddhimagga*) that we first find explicit mention of the *sukkhavipassaka* or “dry-insight” meditator, often in connection with passages that mention the *paññāvimutta* or “wisdom-liberated” *arahant*. The dry-insight meditator is defined as “one whose insight is dry, arid, because such insight is unmoistened by the moisture of the *jhānas*”.²⁹ Thus upon reaching arahantship, such a practitioner becomes, of necessity, a wisdom-liberated *arahant*. It must be borne in mind, however, that while the dry-insight *arahant* is closely linked to the old canonical concept of the wisdom-liberated *arahant*, a flat identity should not be drawn between the two. Rather, the dry-insight *arahant* is technically only one subclass within the broad class of wisdom-liberated *arahants*. The commentaries consistently state, “The *arahant* liberated by wisdom is *fivefold*: the dry-insight meditator together with those who attain arahantship after emerging from any one among the four *jhānas*.”³⁰ Thus the wisdom-liberated *arahants* can also be those who attain the four *jhānas*. The only attainments they do not achieve are the peaceful formless emancipations, experience of which defines an *arahant* as “one liberated in both ways”.

²⁹*Vism-mhṭ* II 446 (VRI ed.): *so hi jhānasinehena vipassanāya asiniddha-bhāvato sukkhā lūkhā vipassanā etassāti sukkhavipassako ti vuccati*.

³⁰*Sv* III 889: *so sukkhavipassako ca, catūhi jhānehi vuṭṭhāya arahattaṃ pattā cattāro cāti imesaṃ vasena pañcavidho va hoti*. See too *Ps* III 188; *Mp* IV 3; *Pp-a* I 191.

We might also note that even if the Nikāyas did envisage the possibility of an *arahant* liberated by wisdom who does not attain the *jhānas*, this would not mean that such a figure fulfilled the distinctive criteria of the commentarial *sukkhavipassaka arahant*. For, as the name suggests, the *sukkhavipassaka* is one who gives special emphasis to *vipassanā* or insight meditation; the commentaries and subcommentaries in fact often speak of this meditator, prior to attaining arahantship, as the *vipassanāyānika*, “one who makes insight the vehicle”, or even as the *suddhavipassanāyānika*, “one who makes *bare* insight the vehicle”.³¹ These designations imply that at some point in the evolution of Theravāda meditation theory, the practice of *vipassanā* came to be regarded virtually as an autonomous means to realization that could be undertaken quite independently of any supporting base of *samatha*. It is quite conceivable that if the Nikāyas did see, even tacitly, the possibility of wisdom-liberated *arahants* destitute of *jhāna*, they still would have assumed these *arahants* had a minimal foundation of *samatha*. For such *arahants*, it would just be the case that their practice of *samatha* did not reach the level of the first *jhāna*.

Now while the concept of the dry-insight *arahant* is first introduced in the commentaries, as often happens the commentators peer back into the *suttas* to seek substantiation for their hermeneutical innovations. And, sure enough, “seek and ye shall find”. Not to be left empty-handed, the commentators find evidence for the dry-insight *arahant* in several texts of the Nikāyas, and one of these that is given star billing is the Susīma-sutta. The Susīma-sutta itself, as we saw, does not specify where the monks liberated by wisdom stood in relation to the *jhānas*. For all we know, based on the text alone, they could have been adepts in all four *jhānas*. The commentary, however, apparently drawing upon ancient oral tradition, fills in the gaps in the information we can derive from the *sutta* itself with additional information apparently transmitted in the lineage of teachers. Thus in the *sutta*, in reply to Susīma’s

³¹See Vism-mhṭ II 351, 438, 474 (VRI ed.).

question, “Without the super-knowledges and formless attainments, how can you claim to be *arahants*?” the monks reply, “We are liberated by wisdom.” In glossing these words, the commentary tersely says, “*Liberated by wisdom*: ‘We are without *jhāna*, dry-insight meditators liberated simply by wisdom only.’”³² Later, when interpreting the Buddha’s exchange with *Susīma*, the commentary says in regard to a statement of the Buddha, “The purpose is to show the arising of knowledge thus, *even without concentration*. This is meant: ‘*Susīma*, the path or fruit is not the outcome, benefit, and product of concentration, but the outcome, benefit, and product of insight.’”³³ And the *īkā* or subcommentary to this passage, commenting on the words “even without concentration” says, “This is said referring to the meditator who makes insight the vehicle; it means even without previously achieved concentration that has reached the mark of serenity.”³⁴

4. The Chinese Parallels to the *Susīma-sutta*

At this point it will be illuminating to turn to the parallels to S 12:70 preserved in Chinese translation. In M-Vin, *Susīma* inquires from the monks, not about all five super-knowledges, but only about the divine eye that sees how beings pass away and take rebirth according to their *kamma*, and about the recollection of past lives — the last two of these super-knowledges, given here in inverse order from S 12:70 — as well as about the peaceful formless emancipations. As in S 12:70, the monks deny possessing these attainments. When *Susīma* asks them how they could declare final knowledge in the Buddha’s presence, they

³²Spk II 127: *paññāvimuttā kho mayaṃ, āvuso ti, āvuso, mayaṃ nijjhānakā sukkhavi-passakā paññāmatteṇ’ eva vimuttā ti dasseti.*

³³Spk II 127: *vinā pi samādhin’ evaṃ nānupattidassanattaṃ. idaṃ hi vuttaṃ hoti: Susīma, maggo vā phalaṃ vā na samādhinissando, na samādhī-ānisaṃso, na samādhissa nipphatti; vipassanāya paṇ’ eso nissando, vipassanāya ānisaṃso, vipassanāya nipphatti.*

³⁴Spk-pt II 107 (VRI ed.): *vinā pi samādhin’ ti samathalakkhaṇappattaṃ purimasiddhaṃ vinā pi samādhin’ ti vipassanāyānikam sandhāya vuttaṃ.*

reply, “We are wisdom-liberated ones.”³⁵ Thus M-Vin is fairly close to S 12:70. It is virtually impossible to judge which is likely to be more original, the five super-knowledges of S 12:70 or the two mentioned in M-Vin. The twofold scheme has the advantage of economy, and greater detail usually suggests lateness; but if the *sutta* originates from a real historical incident, it could well have been that the wanderers suspected the Buddhist monks to be adepts in the spiritual powers and mind-reading, the first and third super-knowledges, which ostentatious ascetics would be most likely to use to impress gullible lay devotees (particularly in a royal capital like Rājagaha).³⁶ This would then better explain Susīma’s skepticism that there could be wisdom-liberated *arahants* who lack such powers.

It is with SĀ 347 and the Vibhāṣā version that the divergences from S 12:70 become significant, for these versions straight away transform the monks into Sarvāstivādin counterparts of the Pāli commentarial dry-insight *arahants*. Though these versions do not have a neat appellation for this figure, it is evident that the text here wants the expression “wisdom-liberated one” (慧解脫) to convey very much the same idea that the expression *paññāvimutta* as used in the Susīma-sutta conveys for the Saṃyutta Commentary: one liberated without *jhāna* (*nijjhānaka*), entirely through wisdom. As in S 12:70 and M-Vin, so here Susīma enters the Saṅgha for the purpose of “stealing” the Dhamma. He is ordained at the Enlightened One’s behest, but here it is stated that the Buddha already knew his intention in going forth. A fortnight after his ordination, one monk, at the head of a group of monks, tells him he should be aware that they have all won the goal. Susīma then asks him whether he has attained the first, second, third, or fourth *jhānas*, or the peaceful formless emancipations; and, he adds to each question, “by the

³⁵T22, 363a14: 我是慧解脫人。

³⁶See the Buddha’s explanation of the dangers in “the miracle of spiritual powers” (*iddhipāṭihāriya*) and “the miracle of thought-reading” (*ādesanā-pāṭihāriya*) at D I 212–14.

non-arising of any influxes is your mind well liberated?”³⁷ In each case, the monk answers no, the purport being that they have exhausted the influxes and gained full liberation of mind without relying on any *jhānas* or formless attainments. Finally *Susīma* exclaims, “How could this be? What you have said is inconsistent; your later [words] contradict your earlier [words]. How is it that you don’t attain *jhāna*, yet you make a declaration [of arahantship]?” The monk then says, “I am liberated by wisdom.”³⁸ Thereupon the whole group of monks depart. Realizing that he now needs clarification, *Susīma* decides to seek help from the Buddha.

The *Vibhāṣā* version of the *sutta* is evidently later than the others, at least in its final redaction, for it speaks of *Susīma*, after taking full ordination, as “having read and recited the *Tripiṭaka*”,³⁹ a phrase that refers anachronistically to the classification of the sacred scriptures into the “three baskets”, perhaps even in written form. In this version, *Susīma* asks the monks, “Was it on the basis of the first *jhāna* that you attained the exhaustion of the influxes?” They answer no. Then: “Was it on the basis of the second, third, or fourth *jhānas*, or the peaceful formless emancipations that you attained the exhaustion of the influxes?” They answer no. *Susīma* then says, “Then without depending on any *jhāna* you attained the exhaustion of the influxes! Who can believe that?” The monks then say, “We are liberated by wisdom.”⁴⁰

³⁷T2, 97a7–18: 不起諸漏。心善解脫耶。It must have been this phrase that led Gombrich to suppose that the head monk “cannot even claim that they are free of greed and hatred” and that the *sūtra* is “most uncomplimentary to a group of monks” (*How Buddhism Began*, p. 124). The sequel to this passage, however, leaves no doubt that the monks have terminated the *āsavas* and are well liberated in mind. The readings in the *Vibhāṣā* version, moreover, corroborate this interpretation.

³⁸T2, 97a19–21: 云何。尊者所說不同。前後相違。云何不得禪定而復記說比丘答言。我是慧解脫也。

³⁹T28, 408a20: 讀誦三藏

⁴⁰T28, 408a29–b3 答曰。不也。依第二第三第四禪及過色無色寂靜解脫得盡漏耶。答言不也。時蘇尸摩復作是言。汝等既不依禪定。而得盡漏。誰當信耶。時諸比丘皆作是言。我等是慧解脫。 In the version at

Then, as in the other versions, Susīma turns to the Buddha for help. The Buddha explains, “Those monks first exhausted the influxes based on the access to the *jhāna*, and afterwards aroused the basic *jhāna*.”⁴¹

Though SĀ 347 and Vibhāṣā differ in details, they are both regarded as affiliated in some way with the Sarvāstivāda, which must have been, not one unified entity, but an umbrella term for a range of schools with collections of texts that showed considerable variation, perhaps stemming from wide geographical distribution and long duration through time. Since the Sarvāstivāda and the Theravāda are widely recognized to be two branches of the old Sthaviravāda, and the first major schism in the archaic Saṅgha resulted in its bifurcation into the Sthaviravāda and the Mahāsāṅghika, when the readings in one Sthaviravāda version and a Mahāsāṅghika version of a text agree and the reading in another Sthaviravāda version diverges, it is likely that the latter results from a later alteration or transmutation in the text. Of course, we cannot always be absolutely certain that this is so, but the above stipulation is generally a safe guideline to follow, and in the case of SĀ 347 and Vibhāṣā, quite apart from the passages with doctrinal ramifications, a number of other “fingerprints” suggest that these versions are less archaic than S 12:70 and M-Vin. One example is a certain flair for detail in SĀ 347; another is the reference to the Tripiṭaka in Vibhāṣā.

T27, 572c16–17, Susīma asks the monks: “Was it on the basis of the first *jhāna* up to the base of nothingness that the venerable ones attained realization?” (仁等所證依何定耶。為初靜慮為乃至無所有處耶). And to this they answer no.

⁴¹T 28, 408b9–10: 彼諸比丘。先依未至禪盡漏。後起根本禪。The “access to the *jhāna*” (未至禪, lit. “not-yet reaching *jhāna*”) is presumably a state similar to *upacāra-samādhi*, the access concentration of the Pāli commentaries. This Vibhāṣā passage does not altogether deny that these *arahants* can possess *jhāna*, but the *jhāna* it allows them seems to correspond to the minimal first *lokuttara-jhāna* that the Pāli commentaries ascribe to the *sukkhavipassaka arahants*.

5. Assessment

SĀ 347 and Vibhāṣā thus present us with an interesting case where the Sarvāstivāda recensions of a *sutta* give utterance to an idea that is not found in the Theravāda version but was not unknown to the Theravāda tradition, namely, the idea of an *arahant* who has reached final liberation without attainment of the *jhānas*. In the Theravāda tradition, however, this idea came to open expression only in the commentaries, with the concept of the *sukkhavipassaka* or dry-insight *arahant*. This idea must have gained such prestige that it presented itself, either to the ancient anonymous authors of the lost Sinhala commentaries, or to Ācariya Buddhaghosa, the compiler of the present Pāli commentaries, as the key to understanding the *paññāvimutta arahants* of the *Susīma-sutta*. In this way, the *sukkhavipassaka arahant*, though hidden behind the text of the *Susīma-sutta* itself, found a secure lodging in its commentary.

Several canonical texts, however, suggest that even prior to the commentarial period the archaic concept of the *paññāvimutta* was already being reinterpreted in the direction of the dry-insight *arahant*. We saw above that, according to the *Kiṭāgiri-sutta*, the “*arahant* liberated by wisdom” was distinguished from the “*arahant* liberated in both ways” with respect to their relationship to the peaceful formless emancipations. The latter can attain them; the former cannot.⁴² In the *Puggalapaññatti*, the fourth book of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, these definitions are subtly rephrased. The *arahant* liberated in both ways is now “a person who dwells having contacted *the eight emancipations* with the body, and having seen with wisdom, his influxes are exhausted”.⁴³ And, corresponding to this, the *arahant* liberated by

⁴²See above, p. 55.

⁴³Pp14: *idh' ekacco puggalo aṭṭha vimokkhe kāyena phusitvā viharati; paññāya c' assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti*. The eight emancipations are not identical with the four *jhānas* and the four formless attainments. The first three emancipations are equivalent to the four *jhānas*, but they deal with the state of *jhāna* in terms of its objects rather than in terms of its subjective

wisdom is “a person who does not dwell having contacted *the eight emancipations* with the body, but having seen with wisdom, his influxes are exhausted”.⁴⁴ The subtle change in wording between this definition and that in the Kīṭāgiri-sutta, an almost inconspicuous change from “peaceful emancipations, transcending form, that are formless “ (*santā vimokkhā atikkamma rūpe āruppā*) to “eight emancipations” (*aṭṭha vimokkhā*), makes a world of difference with regard to meaning. The new definition gracefully suggests that the *arahant* liberated by wisdom need not possess *any* of the eight emancipations, including the lower three, which comprise the four *jhānas*. Although the Puggalapaññatti Commentary glosses these two definitions in the same way that it does the older definitions, the new definition opens the door just a crack — but *does* indeed open it — for admitting the dry-insight *arahant* into the chamber of figures duly ordained by canonical authority.

Since the Puggalapaññatti is an Abhidhamma tract and thus of later provenance than the Nikāyas, it may not be altogether surprising to find a revised definition of the two types of *arahants* there. But it is a bit astonishing to find the above definitions actually incorporated into a *sutta*. A discourse in the Aṅguttara-nikāya called the Putta-sutta (A 4:87) distinguishes four types of ascetics, among them one known as a red-lotus ascetic and another known as a white-lotus ascetic. The red-lotus ascetic (*samaṇapaduma*) is defined as a monk who has realized by direct knowledge the taintless liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom, and dwells in it; and who also dwells having contacted with the body the eight emancipations. The white-lotus ascetic (*samaṇapuṇḍarīka*) is “a monk who, with the destruction of the taints, has realized for himself with direct knowledge, in this very life, the taintless liberation of mind,

experience. Thus all four *jhānas* can be based on each of the first three emancipations, since all four *jhānas* can experience their object in the way defined by each of these emancipations. Emancipations 4–7 are the four formless attainments, and the eighth emancipation is the cessation of perception and feeling (*saññāvedayitanirodha*).

⁴⁴Pp 14: *idh' ekacco puggalo na h' eva kho aṭṭha vimokkhe kāyena phusitvā viharati paññāya c' assa dīsvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti.*

liberation by wisdom; and having entered upon it, dwells in it; yet he does not dwell having contacted with the body the eight emancipations”.⁴⁵ The commentary identifies the red-lotus ascetic with the *ubhatobhāgavimutta*, the *arahant* liberated in both ways, since the *sutta* definition here matches the Puggalapaññatti’s definition of this type; but it *does not* simply identify the white-lotus ascetic point-blank with the *paññāvimutta*, the *arahant* liberated by wisdom. It says, rather, “By this he shows the dry-insight *arahant*.”⁴⁶

It seems to me that there are two ways to account for the definitions of the two types of lotus-ascetics in the *Putta-sutta*. Either the *sutta* itself is a later composition that was inserted into the *Āṅguttara-nikāya*, incorporating the new definitions of the *ubhatobhāgavimutta arahant* and the *paññāvimutta arahant* that were being framed during the period of scholastic elaboration that brought the Puggalapaññatti into being. Or, alternatively, the *sutta* itself is archaic, but an original version employing definitions of the two types of *arahants* matching those in the *Kīṭāgiri-sutta* had been “updated” to accommodate the new definitions that were canonized by the Puggalapaññatti. I would suggest, too, that “behind the scenes” the *mode of thought* that influenced the definitions of the two lotus-ascetics of the *Putta-sutta* was also exerting its influence on the interpretation of the *Susīma-sutta*. So, while the wording of the Pāli version of the *Susīma-sutta* was not altered and it could thus still be interpreted as simply denying that the monks declaring arahantship possessed the super-knowledges and the formless emancipations, among an influential body of early Pāli exegetes it was already being seen as a paradigmatic text for the figure of the dry-insight *arahant*.

Within the Theravāda school, this interpretation of the *sutta* first came to literary expression in its commentary. In contrast, among those

⁴⁵A II 87.7–11: *idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ diṭṭh’ eva dhamme sayamaṃ abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja viharati, no ca kho aṭṭha vimokkhe kāyena phusitvā viharati.*

⁴⁶Mp III 113: *iminā sukkhavipassakakhīṇāsavaṃ dasseti.*

in the broad Sarvāstivāda camp, a parallel commentarial stance towards the *sutta* had already become strong enough to “burst the bonds” of sacerdotal hesitancy and force its way into the primary text itself. In this camp, the *sutta* must have become altered in such a way as to grant canonical legitimacy to the figure of the *arahant* wholly bereft of the *jhānas*. Not only do the wisdom-liberated monks of SĀ 347 and the Vibhāṣā version deny that they possess the four *jhānas*, but the Sarvāstivāda commentaries even redefine the concept of the *paññāvimutta* in such a way that *any* possession of a *jhāna* by a *paññāvimutta arahant* “compromises” and “corrupts” the purity of his possession of *paññāvimutta* arahantship. We thus find that the Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā-śāstra, the great commentary of the Kashmiri Sarvāstivādins, distinguishes two kinds of *paññāvimutta arahant*, making specific reference to the Susīma-sutta:

Question: It is said here several times that one liberated by wisdom [can] arouse the knowledge of others’ minds. This necessarily depends on the basic *jhāna*. But if the wisdom-liberated one can arouse the basic *jhāna*, does this not contradict the Susīma-sutta? In that *sutta* it is said, “The wisdom-liberated one cannot arouse the basic *jhāna*.”

Reply: There are two kinds of wisdom-liberated ones, the partial and the complete. The one *partially* liberated by wisdom (少分慧解) is able to arouse one, two, or three among the four *jhānas*. The one *completely* liberated by wisdom (全分慧解脫) cannot arouse any of the four *jhānas*.... The Susīma-sutta speaks about the one completely liberated by wisdom, who cannot arouse any of the four *jhānas*.⁴⁷

The earliest version of the Susīma-sutta received by the archaic Sarvāstivāda school, we might suppose, was probably quite similar to S 12:70 and M-Vin regarding the qualities denied of the *paññāvimutta arahants*. During the historical evolution of the *sutta*, however, these came to be altered, transformed into a complete denial that they possess the *jhānas*. While it is possible that such alterations could have occurred by unconscious habit in the course of oral transmission, given that the

⁴⁷ T 27, 564b5–13.

Sarvāstivāda came to place such a strong emphasis upon the absence of *jhānas* in the ideal type of *paññāvimutta arahant*, we may suspect that the alteration was deliberate, done under pressure from the evolving Sarvāstivādin doctrinal system.

Unlike the Sarvāstivādin commentators, the Theravādins never went so far as to distinguish degrees among the *paññāvimutta arahants*. According to the Pāli commentaries, all five types — those *arahants* who attain any of the four *jhānas* and the dry-insight *arahant* — are equally entitled to be called “liberated by wisdom,” as long as they do not attain the peaceful formless emancipations. But despite this “official” breadth recognized in the term *paññāvimutta*, one can detect in certain texts a subtle shift taking place in its “weight” towards the dry-insight *arahant*. This is manifest in the definition of the white-lotus ascetic of the Putta-sutta as one without the eight emancipations, defined by the Aṅguttara Commentary as the dry-insight *arahant*; again, it appears in a similar definition of the “one liberated by wisdom” in the Puggalapaññatti; and it crops up still again in the commentarial gloss on the expression “liberated by wisdom” in the *Susīma-sutta* as “without *jhāna*, dry-insight meditators liberated simply by wisdom only”. Still another example is seen in the commentarial gloss on the word *paññāvimutto* occurring at A I 74. Here, the commentary succinctly says, “*Liberated by wisdom*: the dry-insight influx-destroyer [i.e., *arahant*].”⁴⁸ The *ṭīkā* to this passage does not state that this is said merely to exemplify the family of wisdom-liberated *arahants*, but reinforces the idea that the wisdom-liberated *arahant* lacks attainments in *samatha*: “*Liberated by wisdom*: liberated by the wisdom of the supreme path [of arahantship] without a support of serenity.”⁴⁹

We thus see that at the commentarial level, the Theravāda wound up with an interpretative concept that closely matched an idea that the Sarvāstivādins had already inserted into texts they regarded as *sūtras*

⁴⁸Mp II 147: *paññāvimutto ti paññāya vimutto sukkhavipassakakhīṇāsavo*.

⁴⁹Mp-ṭ II 38 (VRI ed.): *paññāya vimutto ti samathasannissayena vinā agga-maggapaññāya vimutto*.

coming directly from the Buddha's own mouth, namely, the idea of an *arahant* liberated without attainment of the *jhānas*. To what extent this idea is already intended by the Pāli *suttas* that speak about monks who attain arahantship via the "painful" or "strenuous" path of meditation on the unattractive nature of the body, the repulsiveness of food, the inevitability of death, and other topics "tending to disenchantment" is difficult to determine. What is certain, however, is that the Pāli *suttas* never explicitly admit the existence of *arahants* who altogether dispense with the *jhānas*. It might also be important to note that the Sarvāstivādins did not adopt the term *sukkhavipassaka* or any other term that quite matches it. While this may be just a matter of circumstance, simply because the term *sukkhavipassaka* arose in an exegetical camp geographically far removed from their own centers of activity, another more fundamental reason may also be involved. It is possible that the Sarvāstivādins did not speak of a "dry-insight *arahant*" because they never introduced the scission between *samatha* and *vipassanā* as sharply as the Theravādin commentarial tradition did but saw the path of any *paññāvimutta arahant* to involve an interplay of these two meditative factors. To qualify as a "full *paññāvimutta*" *arahant*, as one who is utterly bereft of *jhāna*, this practitioner must end the development of *samatha* at a level called *sāmantakadhyāna*, "threshold meditation", corresponding to access concentration (*upacārasamādhi*) of the Theravāda commentaries. But, it seems, they never conceived the idea of a meditator "who makes [bare] insight the vehicle" (*vipassanāyānika*, *suddhavipassanāyānika*), the distinctly Theravādin notion of the meditator who eventually reaches final fruition as a dry-insight *arahant*.

Nevertheless, despite these differences, both these major Sthaviravāda traditions, as well as the Mahāsāṅghikas, have preserved versions of the same story telling how an ascetic named Susīma infiltrated the Buddha's Saṅgha and entered into dialogue with the *paññāvimutta* monks and with the Tathāgata himself. In the two traditions that we know most about, the encounter became an important

canonical pillar for the belief that arahantship was possible without the *jhānas*. In one tradition this idea was stated explicitly in the *sutta* itself; in the other it rested upon the explication of the text by the commentary. But as I read it, even the older version of the *sutta*, S 12:70 and perhaps too M-Vin, originally intended to establish the possibility of arahantship without the *jhānas*. That is, I suspect that the questions Susīma posed to the *paññāvimutta* monks in this version, which confirm their lack of the super-knowledges and the formless attainments but stop short at the *jhānas*, were *also* intended to hint, by their very silence, that similar questions could have been asked about the *jhānas*, and that the same answer would have been given. If such is the case — and I must emphasize that this is largely intuition on my part — we could then understand that the compilers of the versions I have called SĀ 347 and Vibhāṣā did not so much add anything new as simply state explicitly what the redactors of the older version had wanted the *sutta* to convey from the start.

Though I say “this is largely intuition on my part”, I do have reasons for this intuition. Apart from those I have brought forth above, there is also the ensuing dialogue between Susīma and the Buddha, on the grounds for the possibility of *paññāvimutta* arahantship. This, however, is a major topic in itself, which I intend to treat in the sequel to the present paper.

Bhikkhu Bodhi