

Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond

A Meditator's Handbook

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The Jhānas I:

Bliss

IN THE ORIGINAL Buddhist scriptures there is only one word for “meditation” and that is *jhāna*. According to the fully enlightened Ven. Ānanda in the *Gopaka-Moggallāna Sutta* (MN 108,27) the only kind of meditation that the Buddha recommended was *jhāna*. Thus *jhāna* designates Buddhist meditation proper, where the meditator’s mind is stilled of all thought, secluded from all five-sense activity, and is radiant with otherworldly bliss. Put bluntly, if it isn’t *jhāna* then it isn’t true Buddhist meditation! Perhaps this is why the culminating factor of the Buddha’s noble eightfold path, the one that defines *right* meditation, is nothing less than the four *jhānas*.

The Buddha’s Discovery

The ancient Buddhist texts state that the Buddha discovered *jhāna* (SN 2,7; AN IX,42). Not once in the original texts does it say that the Buddha discovered *vipassanā*. These authoritative texts also state that the four *jhānas* only arise with the appearance of a *buddha* (SN 45,14–17). The fact that the Buddha discovered *jhāna* should not be overlooked, for the discovery was a central act in the drama of enlightenment.

When it is said by no less an authority than the arahant Ānanda that the Buddha discovered *jhāna*, it is not to be understood that no one had ever experienced *jhāna* before. For instance, in the era of the previous *buddha*, Kassapa, countless men and women achieved *jhāna* and subsequently realized enlightenment. But in the India of twenty-six centuries ago, all knowledge of *jhāna* had disappeared. For example, the famous

leader of the Jains and contemporary of the Buddha. Mahāvīra, publicly dismissed jhānas as an impossibility after hearing them described (SN 41,8). Either the most prominent (according to many scholars) religious leader of that time was unbelievably ignorant of common spiritual practices, or else jhāna was indeed an original discovery of the Buddha. The latter is far more plausible, and it is further supported by the observation that there is no mention at all of jhāna in any religious text before the time of the Buddha.

Some might raise the objection that the Buddha's earlier teachers, Alāra Kālāma and Udaaka Rāmaputta, taught jhāna because the texts say that they instructed the Bodhisatta (the Buddha-to-be) in the attainment of the state of nothingness and in the attainment of the state of neither perception nor nonperception (MN 26). Although these two attainments are never called jhāna in the early texts (the term *arūpa-jhāna* first appears in the much later commentarial literature), it is implicit that they can only be accessed by first proceeding through each of the four jhānas step by step. So did these two early leaders know the four jhānas and teach them to the Bodhisatta?

If they did, then why did the Buddha state that their methods did not lead to nibbāna (MN 26,16) but that jhāna did lead to nibbāna (MN 36,31; 52,4-7; 64,9-12)? And why, when the Bodhisatta abandoned asceticism and asked, "Could there be another path to enlightenment?" (MN 36,30), did he recall the more distant memory of first jhāna as a boy under the rose-apple tree instead of a more recent and intense experience of jhāna under his two early teachers? These questions need to be satisfactorily answered by anyone who still maintains that Alāra Kālāma and Udaaka Rāmaputta taught jhāna.

An answer to the question of what these two early teachers taught, one that maintains the Buddha's consistency in rejecting the efficacy of their teachings while praising the efficacy of jhāna (MN 108,27), is that Udaaka Rāmaputta and Alāra Kālāma never taught jhāna, and that the two formless attainments that they espoused were not the real thing, most likely diluted versions of the original from the time of the previous Buddha Kassapa. Just as today some teachers present a level of meditation and

call it "jhāna" when it is clearly less than the real thing, or some colleges will, for a fee, send a university degree by return mail when the degree is not the real thing, so the attainments taught by Alāra Kālāma and Udaaka Rāmaputta could not have been the real thing. The "real thing," the attainment of the sphere of nothingness, *doce*s lead to enlightenment (MN 52,14), but the different experience of the same name taught by Alāra Kālāma did not.

Another reason why jhāna was unknown before the arising of the Buddha was that the cause of jhāna, the practice of the Middle Way, was also unknown then. Ancient texts such as the *Dharmacakka-ppavattana Sutta* (the first sermon, SN 56,11) state that the Buddha discovered the Middle Way and that the Middle Way is synonymous with the noble eightfold path. Another sutta states that the Buddha discovered the noble eightfold path, like a long-lost path to an ancient city (SN 12,65). It should also be noted that the noble eightfold path, the Middle Way, is a gradual path that culminates in jhāna (AN X,103). Thus if one accepts that the Buddha discovered the Middle Way, the noble eightfold path, one must also accept that the Buddha discovered the final stage of the way, the end portion of the path, which is jhāna.

The *Arana-vibhanga Sutta* (MN 139) equates the Middle Way with the pursuit of jhāna. The sutta explains in detail that one should not pursue asceticism nor pleasure of the five senses, but instead one should pursue the Middle Way. If one does not pursue suffering in any of the six senses (asceticism) and one does not pursue pleasure in the five senses (*kāma-sukha*), then the only pursuit remaining is for the happiness of the sixth sense (mind), and this must be the Middle Way. This sutta continues with the Buddha encouraging the pursuit of internal happiness, obviously the Middle Way, only here he defines it as the pursuit of the four jhānas. Conclusion: the Middle Way is the pursuit of jhāna.

In the story of the Buddha's awakening, once the Bodhisatta realized that jhāna was the way to enlightenment (MN 36,31), he immediately recognized that it was impractical to attain jhāna with an emaciated body and so began eating well. Seeing this, his first five disciples left him in disgust, thinking he had given up striving (MN 36,32). This indicates that

the gentle practices that lead to tranquility of the body and then on to jhāna were not recognized before the arising of the Buddha as a valid path by learned seekers such as these five disciples. When the path to jhāna was not widely recognized as worthwhile, it is no wonder that the path was not pursued and jhāna was not achieved. It should also now be clear why the first part of the first sermon of the newly awakened Buddha was the teaching of the Middle Way, the noble eightfold path, that opens the way to jhāna and the enlightenment beyond.

I have written at length on this point, citing many original texts, because it is a new idea to the West. What is groundbreaking is bound to be controversial. I ask all sincere readers to put aside their existing views for a while, since the Buddha said that attachment to views can be an obstacle to insight, and fairly consider the evidence presented here. After all, the *Panicātando Sutta* (SN 2,7) is certainly an original sutta, because it is referred to elsewhere in the canon (AN IX,42) and was thus confirmed as authentic Dhamma by the five hundred arahants at the First Council—and it states that the Buddha discovered jhāna.

Can One Be Attached to Jhāna?

When the Bodhisatta had the insight that jhāna was the way to enlightenment, he then thought, “Why am I afraid of that pleasure which has nothing to do with the five senses nor with unwholesome things? I will not be afraid of that pleasure [of jhāna]” (MN 36,3,2). Even today, some meditators mistakenly believe that something as intensely pleasurable as jhāna cannot be conducive to the end of all suffering, and they remain afraid of jhāna. However, in the suttas the Buddha repeatedly stated that the pleasure of the jhāna “is to be followed, is to be developed, and is to be encouraged. It is not to be feared” (MN 66,2,1).

In spite of this clear advice from the Buddha himself, some students of meditation are misled by those who discourage jhāna on the grounds that one can become so attached to jhāna that one never becomes enlightened. It should be pointed out that the Buddha’s word for attachment, *upādāna*, refers only to attachment to the comfort and pleasure of

the five-sense world or to attachment to various forms of wrong view (such as a view of a self). It never means attachment to wholesome things like jhāna.⁶

Simply put, jhāna states are stages of letting go. One cannot be attached to letting go, just as one cannot be imprisoned by freedom. One can indulge in jhāna, in the bliss of letting go, and this is what some people are misled into fearing. But in the *Pāsādika Sutta* (DN 29,2,5), the Buddha said that one who indulges in the pleasure of jhāna may expect only one of four consequences: stream winning, once-returning, non-returning, or full enlightenment! In other words, indulging in jhāna leads only to the four stages of enlightenment. Thus, in the words of the Buddha, “One should not fear jhāna.”

For some meditators, the jhānas seem far from their experience and thus irrelevant. This is not so. Discussing such sublime states can create inspiration, as well as map out the territory ahead. More crucially, discussion informs one about what to do when one draws close to any of these profound states of freedom. Finally, it gives a deeper understanding of the Dhamma, especially into the third noble truth, the cessation of all suffering. This is because the rapture and bliss of jhāna is directly related to the amount of saṃsāra that is abandoned, albeit temporarily. Thus, discussing the jhānas is well worthwhile, even if they may seem distant.

Some readers may have already gotten close enough to be able to understand this discussion from their own experience, and it may help them make that last leap into the jhānas. Furthermore, when meditators experience a profound state of meditation, they want to find out exactly what it was, to recognize the state in terms of the Buddha’s descriptions. So it is important to be able to correctly identify the levels of depth in meditation.

It is also important to generate some inspiration in one’s achievement. Such a positive emotion will encourage further letting go. It is my intention to show you how wonderful and profound these states of jhāna are, and to illustrate how crucial their experience is to the event of enlightenment.

Eventually, the seeds that are planted in you through reading a discussion

on *jhāna* will someday bear fruit. At the right time, the mind will know automatically what it must do. For example, when *nimittas* arise, the mind will spontaneously know how to respond. Then sometime later you might reflect, “Where did that response come from?” The answer is that it came from reading discussions such as this. Sometimes it comes from what one has learned in a past life!

So please do not think that just because you have not yet reached the *jhānas* this discussion is of no use to you. In fact it will be very useful. You will realize this when, having achieved one of the *jhānas*, you recognize that such instructions as given here came to your help just at the right time.

The Beautiful Breath: The Beginning of the Journey into *Jhānas*

Having discussed the *jhānas* from a historical and theoretical point of view, I will now explain the *jhānas* in terms of their practice. It is best to begin the description of the journey into *jhāna* from the starting point of the beautiful breath. Before this stage is accomplished, the mind has insufficient contentment, awareness, or stability to launch itself into the higher states of consciousness. But when you are able to maintain an effortless awareness on the breath without a break for long periods of time, when the mind has settled into such a rich awareness that the breath appears delightful, then you are ready to set off on the journey into *jhāna*.

Do not fear delight in meditation. Happiness in meditation is important! Moreover, you deserve to bliss out. Blissing out on the breath is an essential part of the path. So when delight does arise alongside the breath, cherish and guard it like a valuable treasure.

The delight that arises at the stage of the beautiful breath is the glue that holds the mind’s attention onto the breath. It results in the mindfulness staying with the breath without effort. One stays with full attention on the breath because the mind enjoys watching the breath and doesn’t want to go anywhere else. It remains with the breath automatically, and all wandering ceases.

Without the experience of delight, there will be some discontent.

And discontent is the source of the wandering mind. Before one reaches the stage of the beautiful breath, discontent pushes mindfulness away from the breath. Then the only way to keep mindfulness upon the breath is through an effort of will, through control. But when the stage of the beautiful breath is achieved, when delight generates long-lasting contentment, then the mind will not wander. Control can be relaxed, effort relieved, and the mind remains motionless, naturally.

Just as gasoline is the fuel that propels a car, so discontent is the fuel that moves the mind. When a car runs out of gas, it gently rolls to a stop. One doesn’t need to use the brake. In the same way, when the mind runs out of discontent, through the arising of the beautiful breath, it gently comes to a stop. One doesn’t need to use the brake of willpower. The mind comes to a state of stillness quite naturally.

Pīti-sukha—Joy and Happiness

In Pāli, the compound word *pīti-sukha* means the combination of joy with happiness. One can use those words for many kinds of experiences, even worldly ones. But in meditation, *pīti-sukha* refers only to that joy and happiness that is generated through letting go.

Just as various types of fire can be distinguished by their fuel, such as a wood fire, oil fire, or bushfire, so can the various types of happiness be differentiated by their cause. The joy and happiness that arises with the beautiful breath is fueled by the letting go of the burdens of past and future, internal commentary, and diversity of consciousness. Because it is a delight born of letting go, it cannot produce attachment. One cannot be attached and let go at the same time. The delight that arises with the beautiful breath is, in fact, a clear sign that some detachment has taken place.

Pīti-sukha may arise from sensual excitement, from personal achievement, or from letting go. These three types of happiness differ in their nature. The happiness generated by sensual excitement is hot and stimulating but also agitated and therefore tiring. Repetition makes it fade. The happiness caused by personal achievement is warm and fulfilling but

also fades quickly, leaving a vacant hole. But the happiness born of letting go is cool and long-lasting. It is associated with the sense of real freedom.

Moreover, the happiness generated by sensual excitement produces ever-stronger desires, making the happiness unstable and tyrannical. The happiness caused by personal achievement produces more investment in being a control freak and encourages the illusion of personal power. The controller then kills any happiness. The happiness born of letting go inspires more letting go and less interference. Because it encourages one to leave things alone, it is stable and effortless. It is the happiness most independent of causes and closest to the unconditioned, the uncaused.

It is important for success in meditation to recognize the different types of happiness. If the happiness that arises with awareness of the breath is of the sensual excitement type—for example, waves of physical pleasure coursing through your body—it will soon disappear when effort is relaxed, leaving you heavy and tired. If the happiness is associated with the sense of achievement—“Wow! At last I’m getting somewhere in my meditation”—it will often disintegrate, destroyed by the arousal of the controller, ruined by the interfering ego. But if the happiness that arises with the beautiful breath is that born of letting go, then you feel that you don’t need to say anything or do anything. It becomes the happiness whose brother is freedom and whose sister is peace. It will grow all by itself in magnificent intensity, blossoming like a flower in the garden of jhāna.

In addition to the beautiful breath, there are many other objects of meditation: loving-kindness (*mettā*), parts of the body (*kāyagatāsati*), simple visualizations (*kaṣṭhā*), and others. However, in all meditation that develops into jhāna there must come a stage where the pīti-sukha born of letting go arises. For example, loving-kindness meditation opens into a wonderful, gorgeous, unconditional love for the whole cosmos, filling the meditator with delicious joy. Pīti-sukha born of letting go has arisen, and one is at the stage of “beautiful mettā.” Some meditators focus on parts of the human body, often a skull. As the meditation deepens, as mindfulness rests on the inner image of a skull, an amazing process

unfolds. The image of the skull in one’s mind starts to whiten, then deepen in color, until it appears to glow with intense luminosity as the “beautiful skull.” Again, pīti-sukha born of letting go has appeared, filling the whole experience with joy and happiness. Even some monks who practice *asubha* (loathsomeness) meditation, on a decaying corpse, for instance, can experience the initially repugnant cadaver suddenly changing into one of the most beautiful images of all. Letting go has aroused so much happiness that it overwhelms the natural disgust and floods the image with pīti-sukha. One has realized the stage of the “beautiful corpse.”

In meditation on the breath, the Lord Buddha taught the arousing of pīti-sukha along with the experience of one’s breath as the fifth and sixth steps of the sixteen-step ānāpānasati method. I dealt with this crucial stage of meditation at length above.⁷

When pīti-sukha doesn’t arise, it must be because there is not enough contentment, that is, *one is still trying too hard*. One should reflect on the first two of the five hindrances. The first hindrance, sensory desire, draws the attention toward the object of desire and thus away from the breath. The second hindrance, ill will, finds fault with the experience of breath, and the dissatisfaction repels the attention from the breath. Contentment is the “middle way” between desire and ill will. It keeps one’s mindfulness with the breath long enough for pīti-sukha to arise.

The Way into Stillness

Stillness means lack of movement. Since will causes the mind to move, to experience stillness one must remove all will, all doing, all control. If you grasp a leaf on a tree and try your hardest to hold it still, no matter how hard you try, you will never succeed. There will always be some vibration caused by slight tremors in your muscles. However, if you don’t touch the leaf and just protect it from the breeze, then the leaf comes to a natural state of stillness. In exactly the same way, you cannot achieve stillness by holding the mind in the grip of the will. But if you remove the cause of movement in the mind, the will, the mind soon becomes still.

Thus one cannot *will* the mind to be still. The way into stillness is through the *pīti-sukha* born of letting go. Once the delight that comes with the beautiful breath appears, then the will becomes redundant. It becomes unnecessary since mindfulness stays with the breath all by itself, effortlessly. Mindfulness enjoys being with the beautiful breath, and so does not need to be forced.

When stillness appears it enriches the *pīti-sukha*. The deepening of *pīti-sukha*, in turn, creates even less opportunity for effort, and so stillness grows stronger. A self-reinforcing feedback process ensues. Stillness deepens *pīti-sukha*, and *pīti-sukha* increases the stillness. This process continues, when not interrupted, all the way into *jhāna*, where stillness is profound and *pīti-sukha* ecstatic.

In this chapter I have explored some of the issues often raised about the *jhānas*. The next chapter, on the *nimitta*, takes us farther down the road to the deep absorptions.

The Jhānas II: Bliss upon Bliss



The Nimitta: The Home Stretch into Jhāna

WHEN THE BREATH DISAPPEARS and delight fills the mind, the *nimitta* usually appears. I briefly discussed *nimittas* and their characteristics in chapter 2; here I discuss them in greater depth. *Nimitta*, in this context, refers to beautiful “lights” that appear in the mind. I would point out, though, that the *nimittas* are not visual objects, in that they are not seen through the sense of sight. At this stage of the meditation, the sense of sight is not operating. The *nimittas* are pure mental objects, known by the mind sense. However, they are commonly perceived as lights.

What is happening here is that perception struggles to interpret such a pure mental phenomenon. Perception is that function of mind that interprets experience in terms we can understand. Perception relies crucially on comparison, interpreting new experience as similar to previous experience. However, pure mental phenomena are so rarely visited that perception has great difficulty finding anything at all comparable to these new experiences. This is why *nimittas* appear strange, like nothing one has ever experienced before. But the phenomena in the catalogue of one’s past experiences that come closest to these *nimittas* are simple visual lights, such as a car headlight, a flashlight in the dark, or a full moon in the night sky. Perception adopts this close but imperfect comparison and interprets the *nimittas* as lights.

It was for me a fascinating discovery to realize that everyone who experiences these *nimittas* experiences exactly the same thing! It is only that meditators interpret the experience in many different ways. Some see