

THE JHANAS IN THERAVADA BUDDHIST MEDITATION

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Before he became the Buddha, at the beginning of his spiritual quest, Siddhartha Gautama studied with two teachers. The first teacher taught him the first Seven Jhanas; the other teacher taught him the Eighth Jhana. Both teachers told him they had taught him all there was to learn. But Siddhartha still didn't know why there was suffering, so he left each of these teachers and wound up doing six years of austerity practises. These too did not provide the answer to his question and he abandoned these for what has come to be known as the Middle Way. The suttas indicate that on the night of his Enlightenment, he sat down under the Bodhi Tree and began his meditation by practising the Jhanas (for example, see the Mahasaccaka Sutta - Majjhima Nikaya #36). When his mind was "concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady and attained to imperturbability" he direct it to the "true knowledges" that gave rise to his incredible breakthrough in consciousness known in the sutras as Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi. So we see that the Jhanas are not only at the heart of his teaching, but also were at the heart of his own practise.

All of us are familiar with [The Eightfold Path](#) -- the [Gautama Buddha's](#) prescription for attaining Enlightenment. We have some idea what is meant by right speech, right action, right livelihood and so forth. And we know that these are very important. However, the one step in the path that is often short-changed is the eighth step: "Right Concentration" or dhyana (Jhana in Pali). This paper will seek to explain what right concentration is, how to practice it, and the role it plays in the road to Enlightenment.

Right Concentration, (Samma Samadhi) is explicitly defined in the Mahasatipatthana Sutta (Digha Nikaya #22) and in other suttas (for example, Saccavibhanga Sutta - Majjhima Nikaya #141) as Jhanic meditation:

And what is Right Concentration? Here a monk -- secluded from sense desires, secluded from unwholesome states of mind -- enters and remains in the First Jhana which is filled with rapture and joy born of seclusion accompanied by initial and sustained attention. With the stilling of initial and sustained attention, by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, he enters and remains in the Second Jhana which is without initial and sustained attention; born of concentration, and is filled with rapture and joy. With the fading away of rapture, remaining imperturbable, mindful, and clearly aware, he enters and remains in the Third Jhana, and of him the Noble Ones declare, "Equanimous and mindful, he has a pleasurable abiding." With the the abandoning of pleasure and pain -- as with the earlier disappearance of elation and distress -- he enters and remains in the Fourth Jhana: which is beyond pleasure and pain; and purified by equanimity and [mindfulness](#). This is called Right Concentration.

Thus the Jhanas are at the very heart of the Buddha's teaching as presented in this important sutta.

What are the Jhanas

The Pali word Jhana is best translated as "meditative absorption state." It is the same as the Sanskrit Dhyana, which derives from Dhayati, meaning to think or meditate. You know what an "absorption state" is -- it's when you get so involved in a TV show or video game or mystery novel that you are surprised when the phone rings and brings you back to reality. The Jhanas are eight altered states of consciousness which can arise during periods of strong concentration. The Jhanas are naturally occurring states of mind, but learning how to enter them at will and how to stay in them takes practice.

From the Vishudhi maga (or Visuddhimagga):

1. "Detached from sensual objects, o monks, detached from unwholesome consciousness, attached with thought-conception (vitakka) and discursive thinking, born of detachment (vivekaja) and filled with rapture and joy (sukha) he enters the first absorption.
2. "After the subsiding of thought-conception and discursive thinking, and by gaining inner tranquility and oneness of mind, he enters into a state free from thought-conception and discursive thinking, the second absorption, which is born of concentration, and filled with rapture and joy (sukha).
3. "After the fading away of rapture he dwells in equanimity, mindful, clearly conscious; and he experiences in his person that feeling of which the Noble Ones say, 'Happy lives the man of equanimity and attentive mind'; thus he enters the 3rd absorption.
4. "After having given up pleasure and pain, and through the disappearance of previous joy and grief, he enters into a state beyond pleasure and pain, into the 4th absorption, which is purified by equanimity and mindfulness.

5. "Through the total overcoming of the perceptions of matter, however, and through the vanishing of sense-reactions and the non-attention to the perceptions of variety, with the idea, 'Boundless is space', he reaches the sphere of boundless space and abides therein.
6. "Through the total overcoming of the sphere of boundless space, and with the idea 'Boundless is consciousness', he reaches the sphere of boundless consciousness and abides therein.
7. "Through the total overcoming of the sphere of boundless consciousness, and with the idea 'Nothing is there', he reaches the sphere of nothingness and abides therein.
8. "Through the total overcoming of the sphere of nothingness he reaches the sphere of neither-perception- nor- non-perception and abides therein."

Part 2: HOW TO ENTER THE JHANAS

There is very little actual instruction on how to "do" Jhana practice in the sutras. One probable reason for this is that the Jhanas were a well-known practice among serious spiritual seekers 2500 years ago. Just like today, when giving someone directions to your house, you don't include information on how to start the car, shift gears, etc., so it wasn't considered necessary to explain how to do the Jhanas. Another probable reason is that the Jhanas are best learned in a one-on-one setting with a teacher -- they do not lend themselves to what we call today "book learning." Let us examine each Jhana and how one goes about "doing" them.

You must have a certain amount of concentration for the first Jhana to arise. This is called Access Concentration. Access concentration has [Sila \(morality\)](#) as a prerequisite. The description of the First Jhana starts "Secluded from sense desires, secluded from unwholesome states of mind...". If you are not leading a morally upright life, you cannot expect to sit down on a little pillow and find yourself "secluded from sense desires, secluded from unwholesome states of mind." If there is not sufficient Sila, there is too much to desire, too much to hate or fear, too much to worry about, etc. We can also deduce that access concentration requires that you be in a physical posture that is both comfortable and alert; otherwise, you will be in a painful posture which will lead to aversion or you will be too sleepy to meditate.

Access Concentration can be induced in a number of different ways. There are forty different methods of meditation mentioned in the sutras and thirty of these are suitable for gaining entry to the First Jhana (as examples see Laya and Khanika Samadhi below). The First Jhana has five factors and the first two are Vittaka and Vichara. These two words often get translated as something like "thinking and pondering." They do have these meanings in some contexts, but not in the context of the Jhanas. Here they are best translated as "initial and sustained attention to the meditation subject." You put your attention on the meditation subject and you leave it there until access concentration is established. For example, if you have chosen Anapanasati (mindfulness of breathing) as the meditation method, you put your attention on the breath and you keep your attention on the breath until access concentration is established. How do you know access concentration has been established? It varies for each method. For mindfulness of breathing, the breath becomes very fine, almost undetectable when you have established access concentration.

Just prior to the threshold of Tranquility, and sometimes in an overlap of early stages and sometimes indistinguishable is a preliminary or early stage called Laya. Laya is a mental state of quietude easily slipped into that occurs usually in the course of spiritual practice. The experience is temporary as the arrest of thoughts return the moment the pressure is released. The stillness comes and goes. The experience is pleasant and can be sought about by 'deep concentration' and/or breath regulation. It happens, therefore, with one's own volition. It can be repeated by the practitioner and it can also equally be dropped if it is considered unnecessary or obstructive to further progress. 'Entering into Laya' can be a clear sign of one's progress --- the danger lies in mistaking it for the final goal of spiritual practice and being thus deceived. See also Gedo.

Another approach, albeit at the other end of the meditation ladder than Laya, thus considered somewhat more difficult for the novice, is momentary concentration, or Khanika Samadhi (sequential momentary deep concentration). It occurs only at the moment of noting and, in the case of Vipassana, not on a fixed object as Samatha-Jhana meditation but on changing objects or phenomena that occur in the mind and body. But when the Vipassana Meditator develops strength and skill in noting, his Khanika concentration occurs uninterruptedly in a series without a break. This concentration, when it occurs from moment to moment without a break, becomes so powerful that it can overcome The Five Hindrances, thus bringing about purification of mind (citta visuddhi) which can enable a meditator to attain all the insight knowledges up to the level of Arahat.

JHANA OR DHYANA WITH FORM (rupa jhana):

Absorption in supporting content (similar to Patanjali's samprajnata samadhi):

APAYA ABODES: The Nine Abodes of Living Beings:

The realms of the heavenly beings, the human realm, and the realms of destitution (apaya) are classed as the sensual realm, the abode of living beings who indulge in sensuality. Taken together, they count as one. The Realms of Form, the abodes of living beings who have attained rupa jhana count as four. The Realms of Formlessness, the abodes of living beings who have attained arupa jhana, are also four. So altogether there are nine abodes for living beings. Arahats -- who are wise to the Nine Abodes -- leave them and don't have to live in any of them.

First Jhana

Once Access Concentration has been established, you now induce the next factor of the First Jhana. This third factor is called Piti and is variously translated as delight, euphoria, rapture and ecstasy. By shifting your attention from the meditation subject to a pleasant sensation, particularly a pleasant physical sensation, and doing nothing more than not becoming distracted from the pleasant sensation, you will "automatically" enter the First Jhana. The experience is that the pleasant sensation grows in intensity until it explodes into an unmistakable state of ecstasy. This is Piti, which is primarily a physical experience. Physical pleasure this intense is accompanied by emotional pleasure, and this emotional pleasure is Sukha (joy) which is the fourth factor of the First Jhana. The last factor of the first Jhana is Ekaggata (one-pointedness of mind). Like Sukha, this factor arises without you doing anything, and as long as you remain totally focused on the physical and emotional pleasure, you will remain in the first Jhana.

As far as I have been able to determine, based on my own experience, the entry into the first Jhana from a physiological perspective proceeds something like this:

1. You quiet your mind with the initial and sustained attention to the meditation subject. I suspect that brain wave activity shows a noticeable decrease during Access Concentration.
2. By shifting your attention to a pleasant sensation, you set up a positive reinforcement feedback loop within your quiet mind. For example, one of the most useful pleasant sensations to focus on is a smile. The act of smiling generates endorphins, which make you feel good, which makes you smile more, which generates more endorphins, etc.
3. The final and most difficult part of entering the First Jhana is to not do anything but observe the pleasure. Any attempt to increase the pleasure, even any thoughts of wanting to increase the pleasure, interrupt the feedback loop and drop you into a less quiet state of mind. But by doing nothing but focusing intently on the pleasure, you are propelled into an unmistakably altered state of consciousness.

Second Jhana

The second Jhana has three factors which are the same as the last three factors of the First Jhana. The initial and sustained attention to the meditation subject are no longer part of the process. You shift from the first to the Second Jhana by shifting your attention from the physical pleasure to the emotional pleasure -- from the Piti to the Sukha. This has the effect of pushing the physical pleasure into the background and also of greatly calming the mind. The First Jhana is a very intense, agitated state, the Second Jhana is much more soothing. The last factor of the Second Jhana is once again one-pointedness of mind, as it is for all the Jhanas.

Third Jhana

The Third Jhana has two factors. You shift from the second to the third by letting go of the physical pleasure and changing the emotional pleasure from joy to contentment, almost like turning down the volume control on your emotional pleasure. The Second Jhana has an upwelling quality to it as the joy seems to flow through you; the Third Jhana is much more of a motionless, quiet contentment. The one-pointedness of mind remains as the other factor.

Fourth Jhana

The transition to the Fourth Jhana from the third takes a bit more effort and bit more letting go than any of the previous transitions. The contentment of the Third Jhana is still a positive state of mind. This contentment is refined into a very equanimous, quiet, stillness. There is no positive or negative feeling in either mind or body. There is just an all pervading,

deep peacefulness, with of course, one-pointedness.

The first four Jhanas are called the Fine Material Jhanas. Intense pleasure, joy, contentment and stillness are all states we are familiar with in our normal, everyday lives. But the quality and intensity of these factors as experienced in the Jhanas is more sublime than we normally experience, thus they are called the Fine Material Jhanas. The next four Jhanas are called the Immaterial Jhanas because they are not like anything we normally experience. Each of these Jhanas has two factors -- the first factor serves as the name of the Jhana, the second factor is one-pointedness.

JHANA OR DHYANA WITHOUT FORM (arupa jhana)

Absorption without form, leading to increasing rarefaction or incorporeality

(similar to Patanjali's asamprajnata samadhi):

Fifth Jhana

The Fifth Jhana is called "The Base of Infinite Space". Please remember that these are just names for experiences the likes of which we are not familiar with. It just feels like infinite space -- it doesn't necessarily mean we are able to experience all the space in the universe. According to the sutras, you enter the Fifth Jhana by "not giving attention to diversity". This isn't much detail, but then there is very little "how to" detail about any of the Jhanas. Many people enter the Fifth Jhana by shifting their attention from the primary factor of the previous Jhana to the boundaries of their being. They then start to mentally push these boundaries outward. If you can continue to focus on imagining your boundaries growing ever larger so that you fill the room, the building, the neighborhood, the city, etc., you will eventually experience a sudden shift and find your self in a huge expanse of empty space. The first time entry into "The Base of Infinite Space" is often quite dramatic. You seem to be observing an incredibly large, empty expanse of space. It can feel like walking up to the edge of the Grand Canyon and looking over, but there is no other side and no bottom.

Sixth Jhana

The Sixth Jhana is called "The Base of Infinite Consciousness". It has been mistaken for achieving oneness with all consciousness. It can be entered from the Fifth Jhana by realizing that in order to "gaze" at an infinite spaceousness, you must have an infinite consciousness, and then shifting your attention to that consciousness. This is a fairly subtle shift, but like the transition from each of the Jhanas to the next higher Jhana, there is an increase in concentration.

Seventh Jhana

The Seventh Jhana is called "The Base of No-thingness". It has been mistaken for Sunyata (Emptiness). It can be entered from the Sixth Jhana by shifting your attention from the infinite consciousness to the content of that consciousness. It is not surprising that the content of infinite consciousness is empty since that infinite consciousness was entered from infinite space which has no perception of diversity.

Eighth Jhana

The Eighth Jhana is called "The Base of Neither Perception nor Non-perception". It is quite difficult to discuss because there is very little to discuss. Perception is a translation of the word Sanna which refers to the categorizing, naming function of the mind. Hence in this state there is very little recognition of what's happening, yet one is also not totally unaware of what's happening. It is a very peaceful, restful state and has the ability to recharge a tired mind. It is entered from the Seventh Jhana by letting go of all the outward, infinite expanse and coming to rest in what seems to be a very natural calm quiet place. The mind seems to know a lot more about how to find this space than can be verbalized.

Please compare the last five Jhanas above with the list of Five Degrees of Realization attributed to Tung-shan in the The Five Degrees of Tozan as well as the five "types" of Zen in The Five Varieties of Zen.

Again, all of these Jhanas are naturally occurring states of mind. It is simply necessary to set up the proper conditions for the Jhana to arise, then do nothing and the mind will find its own way into the heart of the Jhana. Each of these Jhanas requires more concentration to enter than its predecessor. Each of these Jhanas results in a more concentrated mind than its predecessor. This concentration is the main reason for the importance of the Jhanas. With a superbly concentrated mind, you can see much more deeply into the nature of things as they are. Because the ego has to become very quiet to "do" the Jhanas, after "doing" them, you see things from a much less egocentric perspective. This is why Jhana practice is sometimes referred to as "sharpening Manjushri's sword"; once the sword is sharp, once the mind is concentrated, it is

much easier to cut through the bonds of ignorance (Manjushri is the Tibetan Bodhisattva of Wisdom. He is usually pictured with a sword in his right hand which is used to cut through the bonds of ignorance).

From the above discussion, we can more fully understand the Buddha's teaching of Sila, Panna Samadhi, --morality, wisdom, concentration. You clean up your act so that when you sit down to meditate, you can fully concentrate. You use the Jhanas to concentrate your mind as strongly as you are able. You then begin wielding Manjushri's sword by doing an insight practice that enables you to gain wisdom by seeing things as they really are rather than by seeing things from your usual egocentric perspective.

Part 3: Controversy around the practicing of the Jhanas

Since the time of the Buddha, attitudes towards the Jhanas have varied greatly. There is strong evidence in the Suttas that quite early on there were at least two schools of thought.

One approach emphasized *insight practice* almost exclusively, feeling that since insight gives rise to the wisdom necessary for enlightenment, this was what was more important. An excellent example of a sutra reflecting this approach is the Sammaditthi Sutra (Majjhima Nikaya #9). Here Sariputta gives a beautiful discourse on Right View. He discussed 16 important topics and ends each topic by saying "When a noble disciple has thus understood [the topic], he uproots the underlying tendency to greed, hatred, the 'I am' conceit and ignorance, and arousing true knowledge he here and now makes an end of suffering." Here enlightenment is achieved solely through insights; the Jhanas are not even mentioned.

Another school of thought gave *considerable importance to the Jhanas*. Those using this approach practiced the Jhanas so deeply that they developed what is called in Sanskrit Siddhi, that is, supernatural powers. These Siddhis, such as the divine ear (telepathy), being in two places at once, (bi-location), remembering past lives, etc., may be seen as phenomena in which the person is tapping into the "collective unconscious." This approach to Enlightenment can be found in the Kevatta Sutra.

The Buddha first teaches morality and then the Jhanas. From the concentration resulting from the Jhanas, "one applies and directs the mind" to the attainment of these Siddhis. Enlightenment is attained in exactly the same way as the divine ear; there is no discussion of insights other than "knowing and seeing". This "formula" appears in each of these eleven suttas in almost exactly the same way -- something to be expected in an oral tradition -- but which means that we cannot be sure of what was originally in the sutra before the formula was inserted. Insight is barely mentioned in this method. Here Enlightenment is achieved through developing paranormal powers. We can assume that Enlightenment arises in one who has developed sufficient intimate contact with the collective unconscious that one can no longer conceive of himself as a separate entity.

The Culasaropama Sutra (Majjhima Nikaya #30) in addition to being an excellent teaching on the dangers of spiritual materialism, also refers to the Jhanas. However, it shows signs that suggest the text has been altered. Its beautiful mathematical harmony of the sutra suddenly breaks down in section 12 with a discussion of the Jhanas. The Jhanas are a concentration practice and concentration has already been stated in section 10 to be a lesser state than knowledge and vision. But when the Jhanas are introduced in section 12, they are said to be "higher and more sublime than knowledge and vision." The inclusion of the Jhanas here actually makes the sutta self-contradictory. It also contradicts other pro-Jhana sutras. The formulation of the eight Jhanas is the standard "short" one, (similar to what is found in the Mahasatipatthana Sutta) but with the addition of a last sentence in each of the paragraphs: "This [too] is a state higher and more sublime than knowledge and vision." This sentence directly contradicts the last sentence of section 84 of the Samannaphala Sutta (Digha Nikaya #2). In the previous paragraph of the Samannaphala Sutta, the recluse directs the concentrated, pure, bright mind resulting from the fourth Jhana towards knowledge and vision. The understanding gained "is a visible fruit of recluship more excellent and sublime than the previous ones". Many other suttas show signs of this type of tampering and we are left today with the task of puzzling out the original teaching.

CONCLUSION

The effects of this multi-millennium old debate still affect us today, not only in not knowing what the original suttas looked like, but also in understanding the role of the Jhanas.

The Jhanas are sometimes considered a dangerous practice because they are not an Insight Practice. The primary factor of the first Jhana is Piti and Piti is mentioned as a corruption of insight in the commentaries (see, for example, the Visuddhimagga). This has been taken to mean that Piti is bad, when all that is meant is that Piti should not be mistaken for a non-mundane state. Theravadan Buddhism in the West has primarily come down from the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition in

Burma and this tradition is a "dry insight" (non-Jhanic) tradition. Thus the Jhanas are seldom mentioned, let alone taught, in Western Theravadan Buddhist teaching.

The Jhanas are also difficult to teach. Not everyone has a temperament suited to concentration practice. Even for those who find concentration easy, the Jhanas require a long silent retreat setting for learning. Far from being "secluded from unwholesome states of mind," people who wish to learn the Jhanas are immediately thrust INTO the state of desiring something. Finally, as mentioned above, the Jhanas do not lend themselves to "book learning"; you really need one-on-one, immediate feedback from a teacher in order to aim your mind in the correct direction. The Jhanas are natural states on mind, but the lives we lead here at the close of the 20th century are so filled that it is difficult to find the quiet, natural mind.

The Jhanas are states of concentration. How to do them was common knowledge at the time of the Buddha. He practiced them, and it is clear from the suttas that they comprise right concentration. We are left with the task of fitting the Jhanas into our present spiritual practises. Perhaps between the extremes of ignoring them completely and practising them to excess, lies the middle way of using them as a tool to sharpen the mind for Insight Practise.

From the story out of the life of the Buddha it is clear that the Jhanas are merely a step (or eight steps) towards Enlightenment, indispensable, but also not enough.