**JHANA CULTIVATION**

**IS IT REALLY NECESSARY?**

Why is it important to concentrate the mind? When reading the commentary about concentration, there seems to be a significant amount of contradictory opinion about the topic. The word jhana (jah-nah) is considered to be a highly developed level of samadhi (sah-mah-dee), undistractedness, with an exclusive focus of attention on a primary object, a wholesome and altered state of mind. The word *samadhi* is derived from two other terms: the prefix *sam,* “together, coherently organized” and a root word, *dha,* “to put or place”. There are three characteristics of samadhi as described in the Visuddhimagga:

1. Momentary concentration, which is a mental stabilization cultivated during samadhi practice.
2. Preliminary concentration, which arises out of the meditator's initial attempts to focus on an exclusive meditation object.
3. Access concentration, which arises when the [five hindrances](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_hindrances) are dispelled, supporting the cultivation of either jhana or vipassana (vih-pah-sah-nah), the investigation of how self-creation occurs, with the goal of liberating the mind from self-identity.
4. Absorption concentration, which is the total immersion of the mind on an exclusive meditation object.

Currently, what is being debated focuses on two different views: “sutta jhana” (soo-tah jah-nah), contrasted with “Visuddhimagga jhana” (vih-soo-dee-mah-gah jah-nah). Sutta jhanas are described states of mind found in the earliest teachings of Theravada Buddhism. The Visuddhimagga jhana is described in greater and more exclusive detail, which will be described below. Even in those general commentaries, there are different views of what jhana experience is like and how to attain it. There are conflicting views of the value or even the necessity of jhana practice relative to vipassana practice.

Access concentration can lead to jhana states, described below. alternatively, access concentration provides a stabilized quality of attention suitable for the practice of vipassana, which, in a preliminary form, is a key skill for setting aside the hindrances preliminary to the emergence of access concentration. Mindfulness, investigation of mental phenomena and Right Effort note emerging self-states, determining whether they are wholesome or unwholesome, and responding accordingly. I call this stage of the spiritual path “warding off the demons”. Once the hindrances are not presently activated and the mind’s focus is stable, persistent, and unperturbed, the next level of practice begins, which I call “feeding the angels”, that is, jhana practice and the cultivation of the seven factors of Awakening.

A marker for the development of concentration is called the nimitta (nih-mih-tah), which is translated as a sign or seed moment of perception. In her book, “Wisdom, Wide and Deep”, Shaila Catherine provides a description of the appearance of the nimitta, on page 68:

“As you are engaged in the process of directing and sustaining your attention with the breath, at some point a bright light, luminous field, or subtle image associated with the breath might appear. This can be the beginning of a significant transformation in the meditative perception of the breath. With the arising of such a subtle or luminous perception, the coarse perception of breathing is becoming a refined mental sign of the breath *(nimitta).* The Buddhist tradition recognizes that a nimitta can appear in a variety of ways for different people. It may resemble the light touch of soft cotton, silk cloth, or a draft; it may appear as light, color, sparkling gems, geometric forms, blossoming flowers, a mist, a star, or a pearly illumination; it might be an impression of steadiness or stability which traditional commentaries compare to the firmness of a peg made of heartwood. Many meditators first perceive a motley field or smoky gray that gradually brightens into a stable, bright, whitish light, like the hue of cotton or wool. Students may describe it as a sparkling field that gradually becomes vividly luminous, or as a radiant gemstone that at first sparkles and then clarifies, or as a vibrational field that gradually becomes remarkably silky, smooth, and still, or as simply a light that gradually becomes clearer and brighter. The nimitta is not based on imagination. It is, rather, a subtle meditative perception of the breath, and so it arises in the area where the breath enters and exits the body. The *Visuddhimagga* emphasizes that one must “look for the in-breaths and out-breaths nowhere else than the place normally touched by them.”

Further, on page 69, she describes the way this quality of exclusive attention merges the “breath nimitta” preparatory for entry into the first jhana:

“When you maintain a consistently balanced observation of the breath, mental energies will eventually cohere with the meditation object. As this occurs, the nimitta will automatically become clear, vivid, robust, and stable, and when the mental faculties are mature, the nimitta will magnetically merge with the breath. Just as a good host offers guests whatever they need without disturbing their privacy, a skillful meditator will nourish the development of the nimitta with spacious, equanimous, and continuous ease, and without being intrusive or demanding.”

Top of Form

There are three stages to the Visuddhimagga practice: The *preliminary sign,* which, for mindfulness of breathing practice, is the steadily developed investigation of the breath sensation, around the rim of the nostrils; the *acquired sign,* which is described as a point of light that is not seen externally, but emerges in imagination; and the *counterpart sign,* which is the stable, ongoing awareness of the acquired sign. The acquired sign and the counterpart sign, when practicing mindfulness of breathing, can also be experienced as a continuous touch sensation where the breath sensation was noted, that seems to be like a cool draft, or a soft string contacting the tissue of the nostrils. These aren’t physical phenomena; the sign is called a *nimitta,* and concentrating on the nimitta causes a profound shift in how the mind processes experience, that is, more purely mental functioning, with less and less interest or engagement in external stimuli.

When the counterpart sign is sustained for long enough, focused awareness becomes absorbed into the nimitta, releasing awareness into the states of awareness called *Visuddhimagga jhanas.* The stages that are achieved use the same descriptions as the sutta jhanas. The main difference is the degree of sensory isolation that qualifies the jhana. It is assumed that the experience of the first jhana excludes any external interest or awareness, while in the sutta jhana, the first jhana allows for external reference. The Visuddhimagga commentary states that the yogi is so absorbed into the jhana that the only way to understand what happens in the jhana is to reflect upon its characteristics after exiting the jhana, into the state called *upacara samadhi,* access concentration.

**JHANA FACTORS--**There are several conditioning functions or qualities that are cultivated in the practice of jhana:

**FIRST JHANA**

* **Vitakka-intentional focus**
* **Vicara- sustained, investigative focus**
* **Piti-enthusiastic interest/joyful engagement**
* **Sukha-happiness/satisfaction**
* **Ekagatta-non-distracted, unified, focused attention**

**“Born of seclusion” from the five hindrances**

**“Born of concentration”**

**“Noble Silence”**

**SECOND JHANA**

* **Piti-enthusiastic interest/joyful engagement**
* **Sukha-happiness/satisfaction**
* **Ekagatta-non-distracted, unified, focused attention**

**“Peaceful abiding”**

**THIRD JHANA**

* **Sukha-happiness/satisfaction**
* **Ekagatta-non-distracted, unified, focused attention**
* **Tatramajjhatata-balance/equanimity**
* **Sati-sampajanna-mindful, clear discernment**

**“Purity of mind”**

**FOURTH JHANA**

* **Adukkhamasukkha-neutral feeling tone/equanimity**
* **Ekagatta-non-distracted, unified, focused attention**

**FIRST JHANA:**

“Quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a monk enters and abides in the first jhana [which is characterized by] rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, and accompanied by thought and examination.” *The Experience of Samadhi”, pg. 38*

**SECOND JHANA:**

**“**With the stilling of thought and examination, he enters and abides in the second jhana [which is characterized by] rapture and pleasure born of concentration, and accompanied by inner composure

and singleness of mind, without thought and examination.” *The Experience of Samadhi”, pg. 43*

**THIRD JHANA:**

“With the fading away of rapture, he abides in equanimity, mindful and clearly aware, feeling pleasure with the body, he enters and abides in the third jhana, of which the noble ones declare: "Equanimous and mindful he abides in pleasure.” *The Experience of Samadhi”, pg. 46-47*

**FOURTH JHANA:**

“With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, he enters and abides in the fourth jhana, [which has] neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness and equanimity.” *The Experience of Samadhi”, pg. 48*

The Visuddhimagga jhana model also advises mastery of the jhanas, in this manner: one enters the first jhana for a predetermined amount of time to “stabilize” the experience. The first jhana is hard to attain and sustain. After experiencing the first jhana, one transitions focus back to access concentration, then first jhana, back and forth several times. Then, observing the characteristics of the first jhana closely, particularly the experience of piti, more focus is placed on the primary object of the first jhana so closely that the characteristics of the jhana spread over the entire body. The next step is to “absorb into” the components of the first jhana, looking for more subtle characteristics. At this point, awareness of the second jhana emerges, and one enters, abides in, then drops from the second jhana to the first, then to access concentration, then first and second jhanas repeatedly, until one can confidently make those transitions of focus. Then this procedure is repeated for the third, then the fourth jhana, that is, to enter, remain for a predetermined period of time repeatedly and reliably in each jhana. This is called “mastery of the jhanas” and it’s suggested that the practice of vipassana is significantly empowered by this process.

Shaila Catherine is an internationally acknowledged teacher 0f jhana, and her book “Focused and Fearless” is an excellent resource. Here is a URL for the site created by Leigh Brasington, who has established himself as a teacher of jhana attainment: <http://www.leighb.com/jhanas.htm> I find the articles to be quite useful in enhancing my understanding of jhana practices. Additionally, here is a video URL presented by Richard Shankman on the jhanas: <http://jhana.mettadharma.org/?page_id=13> He is also the author of the book “The Experience Of Samadhi”, and that book can be downloaded free at: <http://ahandfulofleaves.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/experience-of-samadhi_shankman.pdf>

**WHAT IS THE VALUE OF JHANA PRACTICE?**

The characteristics of the first jhana include skillful application of *vitakka* (vee-tah-kah)and *vicara* (vee-chah-rah)*.* Vitakka is the function that brings attention to a mental phenomenon, and vicara is the ability to attend to it without distraction. These functions mature into *Dhamma Vicaya*, (dah-mah vih-chah-yah, *Investigation of Mental Phenomena*, one of the seven Awakening Factors. As proficiency in jhana increases, these functions stabilize and blend into one-pointed concentration. Two other characteristics of jhana are *piti* (pee-tee)and *sukha* (soo-kah)*.* Piti is usually translated as rapture; I regard it more as a sense of exhilaration and enthusiasm. Sukha is translated as happiness; I regard it more a satisfaction and contentment. As jhana practice develops, these functions evolve into tranquility.

The value of jhana practice primarily is the significantly increasing ability to investigate what arises in awareness with a sense of heightened interest. This relates to the Seven Factors of Awakening: mindfulness, investigation of mental phenomena, energy/effort, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

According to many commenters on the dhamma, it isn’t really necessary to cultivate jhana; in fact, the attachment to the belief that jhana is necessary becomes an impediment. In order to achieve access concentration, the hindrances must be set aside. The resultant experiential flow is minimally and marginally affected by the hindrances, and this quality of awareness is called *upacara Samadhi, access concentration.*  I like to call it *samadhi-passadhi,* the combination of mental stability of focus (samadhi), cooperating with the quality of non-agitation, (passadhi).

There is some ongoing debate as to whether the seven Awakening Factors function to cultivate access to jhana, or whether jhana practice functions to amplify the effects of the seven Awakening Factors. Since I regard the entire process of awakening to be co-occurring and mutually influential, making the distinction as to which is more important or which precedes the other is not worth speculating about.

It’s also interesting to consider that the Theravadin tradition is the only Buddhist school that emphasizes jhana mastery. This, in spite of the original derivation of the term *zen,* which is the Japanese way to pronounce *chan,* the Chinese way to pronounce dhyana, the Sanskrit word associated with the Theravadin jhana!

The commentaries divide the practice of vipassana into two categories: *samatha vipassana yana* and *sukka vipassana yana.* The first category or method requires mastery of the jhanas, preferably up to the 4th jhana, but some commentaries suggest entering the 1st jhana is sufficient. The second is commonly called *dry vipassana*  or *dry insight,* which can be developed from the beginning of practice, recommending achieving upacara samadhias a stable flow of experience with which to notice the arising and passing away of conditioned mental phenomena.

A useful analogy is that of sitting by a still body of water (to paraphrase an image developed by Achaan Chah, a well-respected Thai meditation master). Watching the breath diligently cultivates samadhi/passadhi, and that is like waiting until the wind dies down and the surface of the water is smoothly reflective, like a mirror. Achieving access concentration or the jhanas produces this effect. The practice of vipassana is like waiting for “strange and wonderful creatures to come and drink there.” The strange and wonderful creatures are the concoctions of the mind-their characteristics create “ripples” in consciousness, and watching how thoughts and moods arise and pass away is like watching how ripples form, spread, interacting with other ripples, then dying down so that the mirror surface appears again.

Another description that I like is comparing the energy of life experience to the energy we call light. In its basic form, light is randomly radiating, and the disorganized energy is not very efficient used. When channeled through a device we call a laser, that energy is organized into a very stable, coherent beam of light, and very little energy is lost in the process. Concentrating the mind, either through access concentration or jhana practice is like the form of light energy as it emerges from the laser-very coherent, stable and unwaveringly powerful. Vipassana practice is like putting a mirror (mindfulness and investigation of phenomena) in front of the beam, reflecting it back over the laser device to reveal any inefficiencies or distortions in the process that changes the light energy into the laser beam. Skillful effort then adjusts the laser process to keep the beam coherent and powerful. The inefficiencies and distortions represent the arising of the five hindrances and the distress and confusion that emerges from craving and clinging.