

## *Do Jhana*

*August 14, 2018*

When the Buddha told people to go meditate, he didn't say, "Go do samatha or tranquility" or "Go do vipassana, insight." He said, "Do jhana." And he used a verb, *jhayati*, which is also the verb for burning with a steady flame. You probably know the image of the flames of passion, aversion, and delusion. That image uses a different verb. Those are the flames that leap up, the flames you can't read by because they're so erratic, whereas *jhayati* is the verb they use for the flame of an oil lamp, burning steadily enough that you can read by it and see things clearly.

So basically what you're doing as you meditate is adjusting the flames of your mind so that they're steady and still.

Now in the Canon, when the Buddha talks about jhana, he describes the different levels you can get into. He's not telling you what to do. He's simply describing the results. His actual instructions for how you get into jhana are in his instructions for right mindfulness: The establishing of mindfulness is how you get the mind into right concentration. It involves two things. On the one hand, you keep track of one object. And, on the other hand, you let go of all your concerns about the world. This is why his meditation instructions are not just about how to get focused, say, on the breath, but also how to think about your distractions so that you don't get entangled with them.

There's a sutta where Rahula, the Buddha's son, comes to ask him how to do breath meditation. The Buddha doesn't start right in with his instructions about breath meditation. He first talks about different things to contemplate beforehand. His first instruction is "Try to make your mind like earth. People throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn't react. Make your mind like wind. Wind blows trash around, but it's not disgusted by the trash. Make your mind like water. Water is used to wash dirty things, but the water's not disgusted by the dirt. Make your mind like fire. Fire burns trash, but it's not disgusted by the trash." In other words, have the attitude that you want to be non-reactive. Not that being non-reactive is a goal, though: It serves a purpose. It's what enables you to see what's going on in your mind. If you react to the slightest little thing, then you won't be able to see what happens next after that slightest little thing, and then what happens next after that. What you see is going to be colored by your likes and your dislikes. You've got to get them out of the way as much as you can.

The Buddha also gives recommendations for how to develop the brahmaviharas, like we chanted just now: attitudes of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. Sometimes, when you're sitting and meditating, the face of somebody you know may appear: somebody you like, somebody you don't like, somebody from your past, somebody you don't recognize at all. Your first reaction should always be goodwill for that person, to cut through any of the narratives that might come in and entangle the mind.

The Buddha also taught Rahula to contemplate the unattractiveness of the body. If you start getting overcome with attachment to your body or lust for someone else's body, you have to stop and think: What are bodies made of? We had the list just now. There are 32 parts in the list, and there are actually more parts than are on the list. I've always thought of eyes as being a particularly weird thing in your body. The only reason we can look at eyes is because we have eyelids. Otherwise, we'd be freaked out by everyone else's eyeballs.

Some people complain that this contemplation teaches you a negative body image. Now, it is true that there are many of us in this society who are suffering from a negative body image. But that's an unhealthy negative body image. Society is teaching you that your body's ugly while certain people's bodies are beautiful. But this contemplation reminds you that everybody's body are made up of the same things. It's a great equalizer.

And so you ask yourself, "What is there of any real value there?" There are things there you can use, but in and of themselves, there's nothing particularly attractive about them; nothing particularly worthy of grasping hold of. People often think that this is a contemplation just for monks and nuns. But it's for everybody, because when you die, you're going to have to let go of the body. And there are a lot of people who can't. They just hover around their bodies afterwards, and it's a miserable state to be in. So get used to thinking of your body as something that you use. It's a tool that you want to use to a good purpose: that's a healthy positive body image. But then when the time comes, you'll have to put the tool aside. So prepare yourself by seeing that there's nothing on inherent value there. That helps to cut through a lot of unskillful thinking, a lot of unskillful emotions around the body.

The Buddha also recommends that, as a tool to cut aside all your entanglement with the world, the contemplation of inconstancy: The things of the world are totally inconstant, changing all the time. And that they're not self. There's nothing in the world of the senses that you can really lay claim to. There are things that are yours for a while, for the time being. But, all too often, you get pushed out of them. And, as the Buddha saw in his reflection on the world before he left

home, everything is laid claim to. Sometimes, there are lots of overlapping claims. If you're going to stake your claim for happiness in the world outside, you've got to fight somebody else off.

So these are reflections for cutting through the distractions that come up as you're trying to get the mind to stay with the breath, or whatever topic you've chosen for your concentration, because getting the mind into concentration requires, as I've said, these two activities. One is keeping track of one perception or one sensation, such as the breath or an activity of the body. And the second is putting aside greed and distress with reference the world. In other words, all your emotions around the world; concerning the world: You want to be able to put them aside, at least for the time being. You want to give the mind some space just to be with one object.

One of the qualities of concentration is *cittass'ek'aggata*, which means singleness of mind. Sometimes it's translated as one-pointedness. But the word *agga* in that compound doesn't necessarily mean "point." It can also mean "gathering place": one gathering place for the mind. You gather your thoughts and awareness around one object. And then you take that one object and let it fill your awareness. As with the breath: The breath energy is something that's present throughout the body, which is one of the reasons why it's the number-one topic of concentration. We've got the in-and-out breath. But also we've got the breath energies moving in the nerves, the breath energy moving down the muscles and through the blood vessels. Every part of the body that you can sense: It's because there's breath in that part of the body that you can sense it. So focus on the areas where the breath energy is clearest. And try to maintain that steady flame of a focal point. Then, as things begin to settle down and there's a sense of well-being, you let that sense of ease spread throughout the body as a whole.

The Buddha's image is of a bathman or a bathman's apprentice. Back in those days, they didn't have soap. The bathman's apprentice had to take a soap powder, mix it with water, and make a dough-like lump that you would then rub all over your body. It's like when you're making bread: You mix the water with the flour so that there's no water dripping out and there's no flour that hasn't been moistened. Everything is mixed together just right. In the same way, you try to let your sense of pleasure saturate your body and then you try to maintain that.

The purpose of all this is so that you get to see the mind clearly. We're doing this not so much for the breath or for the pleasure, but for the fact that when the breath and the pleasure are working together like this, with everything co-extensive, there can be a sense of awareness filling the body, the sense of pleasure

filling the body. It's all co-extensive. This is a good place for the mind to rest, to gain strength, and also to see itself clearly.

That steady flame allows you to see clearly when something comes up. A thought that's not related to the breath: You can see it coming. And if you don't want to get involved with it, you just see it go. Or if you want, you can zap it. In other words, you sense that when a thought's coming up, there's first a little stirring, a tightening, or a little knot of something appearing in some part of the body. And before you're really clear as to whether it's a thought or a physical sensation, it'll be right there on the edge between what's physical and what's mental in your awareness.

You'll notice that the mind will then slap a perception on it, either saying that it's a physical event and that's all, or that it's something mental. It's a thought. Then you look into it: "What is this thought about?"

And there's always that question: Is it really about anything until you *make* it be about something? All too often, we approach everything in our life with certain ideas in mind. This is the main message of the Buddha's analysis of suffering. He says that what we sense through the six senses is our old karma. But even before we sense that sensory input, there's a whole string of conditions—in terms of how we breathe, how we're talking to ourselves, what intentions we have, what we're paying attention to. And these come prior to your experience of the senses in the present moment. So with a thought, it's not necessarily that a particular thought comes bubbling up full-blown; there's a prior excuse for turning a little stirring into thought. You slap a few perceptions on it. You stitch a few fabrications on it and then you go. The contemplations the Buddha gave to Rahula are to remind you, "No, I don't want to do this. I want to step back from these things."

So if you find yourself entangled in something, remember one of those contemplations. You might want to remind yourself to make the mind like earth. Or if you find yourself getting entangled in thoughts of anger, use the contemplation of goodwill. Thoughts of lust? Use the contemplation of the body. Anything else—you may not know specifically what it is, but it's got you entangled—think about the fact that "This thing I'm entangled with is not going to last that long. It's not really under my control. Why do I want to go there?" Then try to get back to the breath. And you'll find that as you get quicker and quicker at recognizing this process by which a thought forms, you can see more clearly the stages by which you create and get entangled in a thought. With that knowledge, you can get more and more skillful at disbanding it.

That's what I mean by zapping it. As the energies get tangled in that spot, you can comb out the tangle, vaporize the tangle like a spider on a web. The spider sits

in one corner and senses something vibrating in the web. It goes to that spot, takes care of whatever has been caught in the web, and then goes back to its corner.

This way you use the breath to soothe and connect everything throughout the body. At the same time, you have your one spot where you rest. The spot is well connected to all the other energy channels in the body, so that by staying right there you can be sensitive to the first signs that a thought is about to develop.

These spots in the body where these little tangles of tension appear could be anywhere in the body. Sometimes a thought will be related to, say, a tangle of tension in an arm, or in the side of your head, or who knows where, which is why your attention has to be all around—another reason why you have to develop this state that's centered but broad. There's a steady flame, but the light of the flame fills the entire body. And then you protect it.

So in this way, when you're doing jhana, you're developing tranquility and you're gaining insight at the same time.

As the Buddha said, to get the mind into jhana, you have to use both tranquility and insight. Once the mind is in jhana, then it can develop your tranquility and insight even further. All these qualities go together and help to develop one another. In fact, for him, vipassana was not a name of a meditation technique. It was the name of a quality of the mind: a clear-seeing quality. Samatha was also a quality of the mind: calm, tranquil. Jhana is the activity. This is what we're trying to *do* as we meditate. This is the skill we're trying to develop. And it's perfectly fine to think of jhana as an intermediary goal that you do something to attain.

The qualities that the Buddha described as going into getting the mind into concentration include desire, effort, intentness, and your powers of judgment. It's somewhat ironic that in a lot of modern meditation instructions, desire, effort, and judgment are considered to be bad things. And even with intent, they just say to be intent on whatever arises: That's mindfulness. But that's not the Buddha's mindfulness.

His mindfulness is keeping something in mind—like keeping the breath in mind—and learning how to use these other qualities in a mature way: That's how the meditation actually becomes successful. It *is* something you can succeed at. You focus your desire on the causes. You try to fine tune your efforts so that they're just right. You're intent on what you're going—you're not just going through the motions. And you learn how to be judicious in figuring out, if the mind is getting entangled in something, how to untangle it. If the focus of the mind is too strong or too weak, how do you adjust it so that the flame is just right? You want to get it so that it doesn't leap around. It's steady. And you can really see

things clearly in the mind. You can see things clearly through the whole range of your body.

Ajaan Lee has a nice image. He says it's like the mantle of a Coleman lantern. If you've ever seen one, there's just a little bit of kerosene coming out of a small opening. And the mantle is a little sack of cloth, very coarsely woven. The kerosene comes out and, once it's lit, it flickers around all the threads of the cloth so that the whole mantle glows. Try to think of your body as that little sack of cloth. The breath runs around all it, through all the breath channels, and it just glows. And there's nothing else you have to do at that point except to tend to any slight imbalance. Getting the mind to be still requires some insight; some tranquility. Maintaining it means that you're satisfied to stay right there and you're happy to protect it.

And if the question comes up, what's next? This is what's next. Where are the insights going to come? They're going to come here, in the act of protecting. But in the meantime, regard this as a skill that you really want to master because it has so many uses and is so central to the path. Without it, the path is just a lot of ideas. With it, the other aspects of the path suddenly become very illuminated because you're seeing them with the light of that steady flame, that all-around flame. So learn how to adjust these things carefully. Getting your mind adjusted is a really worthwhile skill to master.