

Go, Do Jhana

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There are many passages in the Canon where the Buddha – after explaining the path of practice, or talking about the urgency of following the path – sends the monks back to meditate. “Look,” he says. “Over there are roots of trees, over there are empty dwellings. Meditate. Don’t regret later that you didn’t meditate, that you didn’t practice.” The word he uses for going to meditate is “to go do jhana” – *jhayati* is the verb in Pali. It’s a homonym with a verb for burning, as when a flame burns steadily. They have lots of different words for burning in Pali – words for raging fires, words for smoldering fires – but the verb for a steady burn, as in the flame of an oil lamp, is *jhayati*. And the same verb is used for doing jhana. As you practice concentration, you try to make the mind burn steadily, with a clean, clear flame. Flames that flicker up and down are hard to read by, but a steady flame is one you can read by clearly. That’s the quality you’re trying to develop so that you can read the mind.

How do you create that steady flame? Two qualities of mind are basic. One is directed thought; the other is evaluation. You direct your thoughts to a particular topic like the breath. Keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath. Then you evaluate it. How is the breath going? Where do you feel the breath? When the breath comes in, what are the sensations that let you know it’s coming in? When it goes out, what sensations let you know it’s going out? Are those sensations comfortable? If they are, let them be. If they’re not, you can change them. What this means is you can focus anywhere in the body where it’s clearly telling you, “Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out.” And notice how you’re maintaining that focus. Is it a comfortable place to stay focused? Are the sensations themselves comfortable sensations? What can you do with the breath to change them if they’re not? If they’re comfortable can you make them even more comfortable? This is all part of evaluation. This is how you get started on jhana practice.

Some people classify this as a *samatha* or tranquility practice, but the Buddha himself said that you need two qualities to do jhana properly. One is *samatha*, or tranquility. The other is *vipassana*, or insight. In other words, tranquility and insight together form the two sides of the practice we’re doing, and the Buddha recommends that you get them balanced. So it’s not the case that you just do tranquility practice and then you drop it to do insight practice. A lot of people think that way, though, and so the question often comes up, “How much tranquility do you need before you can do insight?” That’s a question never addressed in the Canon because they didn’t see things in those terms. They saw

tranquility and insight as two sides of one practice. Both sides are essential. Sometimes you find that one side comes up before the other, sometimes they arise together, but ideally they foster each other. If you have one without the other, you have to strengthen the one that's lacking, so that you can bring things into balance.

The samatha side is closely related to directed thought. How do you steady your directed thought? How do you steady the mind? How do you get it to settle down, to gain confidence in its object? That's largely a question of making it comfortable, yet at the same time maintaining enough alertness and awareness so that you don't blur out. To make it comfortable you've got to get sensitive to what's going on right now. This is really important. When you're with the breath, try to be as directly *with* the sensations as you can and notice how good they feel. Is this something you can settle into? Once you've settled in, how do you stay there? What do you do to maintain it?

This is evaluation – and it's where the beginning of insight comes in, for if you don't have any insight you start drifting off. Concentration is not simply a matter of will power, of forcing yourself to stay in place. There has to be some understanding as well. You develop it by evaluating the breath, evaluating your focus, to see what needs to be adjusted so that the mind can settle down and stay there, stay there, stay there consistently, without wandering off.

As the mind gets steadier, you can then drop the evaluation and simply let the mind be one with the object. That's how it enters the higher levels of jhana. But that doesn't mean you're totally done with evaluation, simply that it gets more refined. You're still going to have to deal with disturbances as you try to make your concentration more solid and continuous, as you try to keep the mind centered at all times. You get the mind into a good solid state of concentration and then, when it's firmly there, step back to evaluate it in terms of the subtle disturbances still present within it. This is where your powers of evaluation take on the deeper questions of insight: How should fabrications – these disturbances that come and go – be regarded? How should they be investigated? How should they be seen with insight? How should they be regarded as stressful? When a thought comes into the mind, can you look at it simply as an instance of stress, rather than getting involved in the content of the thought?

There are several steps here. First of all, see that the thought is inconstant. It comes and it goes. It's a disturbance. Second, see that this disturbance is stressful. Keep your analysis just at that level: stress arising, stress passing away. Don't get involved in what the thought is about. Just say, "Here comes some stress. Do I want to get involved in that? Well, no, it's stress." That makes it easier to stay away from it, easier to keep the mind focused, easier to keep you from getting involved. When you see that it's not self, you don't have to get involved in it. You don't have to identify with it. You don't have to take it on – which also means you don't have to push it away. If it's there, let it be in the background. The more quickly you catch sight of it simply as an instance of stress, the more

easily you can tell yourself, “I don’t have to go there.” As you get more skilled at this, you hardly even give it time to form into a coherent thought.

We have a tendency that, once a thought arises, we want to peer into it: “What’s this about?” And if it doesn’t seem to make sense, “Well, how can we make sense out of this?” We get more and more involved in taking it on, making it an intelligible thought, an intelligent thought, making it a thought worth thinking. But if you see it simply as an instance of stress and catch it more and more quickly, you allow it to be a stupid thought and let it go. The next time around you allow it to be just a half-formed thought and you let it go. You allow yourself not to have to peer into and straighten out everything that comes into the mind. This makes it easier to stay focused.

As for the question of how to investigate these fabrications, investigate them as skillful or unskillful. It’s not the case that all thoughts are useless. Some are useful, very useful, but they have their time and place. Thoughts related to the breath are useful for your purposes right now. Thoughts related to other things – what you did yesterday, what you’re going to do tomorrow – are useless. They’re unskillful at the moment. Because we’re so used to thinking, so adept at thinking, it’s skillful right now to focus on learning how to be adept at *not* thinking about anything except the breath. So think about the breath. After all, the breath itself is a fabrication, a fabrication you want to hold on to.

So it’s not the case that when you see how things are stressful and inconstant, you let go of all of them right off the bat. You first have to focus on maintaining the ones that are skillful, and letting go of the unskillful ones. If you have trouble getting away from a particular type of unskillful thinking, you can learn to analyze it to see how it leads where you don’t really want to go.

Like that chant we had on the body just now. That’s useful for lust. When you find yourself focused on lust, remind yourself: What exactly is this object that you’re getting so worked up about? What’s in there? Is it something you really want? Do you really want to go where the lust will lead you? If you apply the perspective of that chant just now, you’re more inclined to say, “Well, not really.” And the lust subsides. So that kind of thinking is useful. When it has done its task, you can put it aside. Get back to the breath.

So the questions that give rise to insight are questions, one, dealing with ways of not identifying with your thoughts, and then, two, since you don’t have to identify with them, what *do* you do with them? You see when they’re useful and when they’re not. They can lead you in directions you want to go or in directions you don’t. You’re learning to look at thoughts not as sources of content but as parts of a causal chain. They’re important not so much for what they say as for what they do.

This way you understand that even though you may not want to identify with any fabrications, still there are the fabrications that form the path. Those are the ones you want to encourage, because they’re skillful. Ultimately, they take you beyond fabrication. This is a part of insight. The fabrications that keep the

mind still and steady, that keep the mind engaged in the pursuit of what's skillful, are the ones you want to encourage.

So this practice of steadying the mind, maintaining that still, steady flame, requires both tranquility and insight. And, of course, once the mind settles down, the insight gets more refined. The tranquility gets stronger.

In this way the practice of jhana depends both on tranquility and on insight, and it creates the conditions for more refined tranquility and more refined insight, step by step. They all go together. Understand them as different tendencies or qualities of mind, but do your best not to see them as radically separate. You don't have to worry about, "When do I do insight? When do I do concentration?" They all come together. The question then becomes: If you begin to notice an imbalance in the mind, how do you bring it back into balance? If you're thinking too much and it's snuffing out your concentration, drop the thinking for a while. If your concentration is getting too dull, learn to probe it with a few questions. And in trying to find that balance, you develop sensitivity to the mind – the basis for discernment.

This is the whole purpose of jhana practice. It's not a matter of showing off: "Well, I've got the third jhana; you've only got the second." Or, "I jumped through all eight jhana hoops in eight days. How about you?" That's not the purpose. The purpose is to get the mind steady enough, long enough, so it can see. When it sees, it can let go. When it lets go, it's free. That's what this practice is all about. That's what the Buddha meant when he said, "Go, do jhana." It encompasses all of the aspects of developing the mind.