

Don't Focus on Jhana, Focus on the Breath

June 30, 2015

We're sitting here trying to practice right mindfulness and right concentration. Right concentration is jhana. So the question is: How do you get into jhana? And the first answer is that you don't think about jhana to get into jhana. Jhana is not your focal point. Your focal point is the breath. The descriptions of jhana talk about the mind as you might observe it after the fact so that you can have something to compare it to after you've been doing some meditation. But while you're doing the meditation, you don't keep those descriptions in mind. You put them aside and you focus on the breath.

You read that there are five factors in jhana. There's directed thought, there's evaluation, singleness of preoccupation, pleasure, rapture. The list makes it sound like there are five things you've got to find and put together. Actually, though, you're already doing directed thought and evaluation. Your mind is already talking to itself, and it's using directed thought and evaluation to do so. It's simply that you're not keeping them with one object. So you try to abandon any unskillful qualities that might come up in the mind and you direct your thoughts and evaluate just one thing that's skillful, that has nothing to do with sensuality; nothing to do with anger or any of the defilements. And you just keep at it.

The problem is, you might say, "Gee that's not very quiet yet."

It's going to take a while for things to settle down. The mind has its shadows. Our problem is we tend to run after the shadows and then we wonder, "Why is it the shadow is always running?" As long as you run, it's going to run. Try to make your thoughts one with the breath right here. Stay with the breath all the way in, all the way out. The next breath all the way in, all the way out. Try to stay right here as continuously as you can. And for the time being, don't worry about how quiet things are.

It takes a while for all the chatter in the mind to settle down. But you just stay with that one thing as much as you can. When the mind is one and still, then your shadow is going to be one and it's going to be still. But if you go checking, looking over your shoulder all the time to see how still the shadow is, you'll notice that the shadow is looking over its shoulder, too.

So just stay here with the breath. Make the breath the only thing you're thinking about. Put aside all thoughts of jhana, everything. Just be here with the breath. And then try to notice: Is the breath comfortable or not? If it's not, you can change.

One of Ajaan Lee's most important insights into concentration practice is that this is how evaluation starts out, paying attention to a simple question that's very closely related to the four noble truths. "Where is the stress? What can I do to alleviate the stress?" In this case, "Where is the discomfort in the breath?" How do you breathe in? What are the mechanics of the breathing process? Watch this for a while and think about it. Which part of the body is doing the pulling? Is it doing too much pulling? Is one part of the body being forced to do too much of the work? What kind of perception of the breath do you have? Think of it coming in from all directions and just hold that perception in mind. For the time being, you don't have to check to see whether it's automatically changing the way you breathe.

Again, some of these things take time. So be patient. The perception gets stronger if you just stick with it and don't keep running back and forth. The only back and forth you need is to just ask yourself, "Am I with the breath? Am I with the perception that I'm trying to use to hold onto the breath?" And try to make that sense of bringing things together as snug as you can—snug in a comfortable sense, not just forcing things together, because you can do that for a while, but it's not going to stay.

This is why we have evaluation at the beginning of right concentration: to try to get everything to fit together in a way that it feels good. The breath feels right for the mind. The mind feels right for the body. The body feels right for the breath. Everything is fitting together nicely. That takes some adjustment. As long as you're interested in this and paying attention to this, your thoughts of sensuality fall aside. And as the breath gets more comfortable, there you are. You've got the results of your directed thought and evaluation.

So again, it's not like you have to find directed thought someplace and find evaluation someplace else. Just take these activities that you're already doing and focus them in on one object and try to keep it there. The more you can get interested in the breath, the easier it will be to stay here and the more snug your concentration will become. It's not like you're forcing the mind to stay with something that it's not really interested in or doesn't really care about.

Your breath is your force of life. Care about that. It's free medicine. It's free nourishment, if you take advantage of it. But you've got to pay attention to it for it to give its full results. Because all you're doing as you get into this first level of right concentration is to put yourself apart from thoughts of sensuality. When you're with the breath, you're there. It's just a matter of making it continuous. That's when you start getting this quality of steadiness, which is why it's called jhana to begin with.

Pali has lots of different words for burning. And jhana is related to one particular verb, *jhayati*, which is a verb they use for a flame of an oil lamp. It's a steady flame. It doesn't flicker a lot. It's not like a wood fire or a trash fire. It's steady, bright—so steady that you can read by it. If you want to read your mind, you want to get the mind to burn with a cool flame that's steady enough so that you can read by it.

So you're taking some activities that you're already doing and you apply them just in one thing. Just learn how to keep with that one thing with as much stability as you can. Again, this is why we have directed thought and evaluation, because you want to check for the stability.

So your ability to stick with the breath is what you should be thinking about. When you leave meditation, you can ask yourself, "Okay, what was the concentration like?" And *then* you can compare it to the descriptions.

In the meantime, as Ajaan Lee points out, when you stick with the breath, using directed thought and evaluation and singleness of preoccupation as your causal factors, you don't have to pull pleasure or rapture from anywhere else. If the causal factors are right, if you're adjusting things right, if you've got the breath comfortable and think of that comfort permeating the whole body, then the pleasure's going to come. The rapture's going to come. It may not be what you picture it as, but it's there. Learn how to appreciate that.

So be clear about what the causes are. The results will take care of themselves.

And once you're staying there with the breath, you don't have to think about, "Where do I go next?" It's like going through the day. You start out in the morning. You have to wear many layers of clothes because it may be a cold morning. But as the day passes on, it gets warmer, so you take off this layer. Then as it gets warmer still, you take off that layer. It's the same body, just that the layers get less and less and less. It's the same with the breath. Once the breath is there and you're continuously with it, you don't leave it for any other breath. You don't say, "Well, I'm going to leave this breath and go to a second-jhana breath, or a third-jhana breath." You stay with the same breath. It's just that your relationship to the breath begins to change.

First you realize, after a while, that you don't have to adjust things so much anymore. The simple fact of having to adjust becomes burdensome. So you just drop that. Then any uprising energy begins to get burdensome. So you drop that. You tune your mind into something that's more refined. After a while the simple fact that you feel you have to breathe in and out begins to get burdensome. This is when all the breath channels in the body are all connected.

Again, don't try to suppress the breath. In fact, you're not even thinking about suppressing the breath. You just want to get everything so well connected that the breathing becomes less and less and less and less of a burden. You find that once everything gets very well connected, then if there's any lack of breath energy in one part of the body, the energy in another part will just go right there, because the connection has been made.

It's like the roads in Thailand. It used to be that if you wanted to go anywhere, you had to leave where you were, go down to Bangkok, and then head back up the other direction, because those were the only roads they had. Now they've got roads all over the place. You don't have to go through Bangkok anymore. The same here. Everything in the body is connected. You don't have to think about, "Gee, I don't want to breathe anymore." It's just that it becomes less and less necessary.

So you sidle your way into jhana. In other words, you don't focus on jhana. You focus on the breath. You don't focus on saying, "I want to do this level or that level." You just keep focused on this question of, "How can I get the breath and the mind really snugly together? And how can I let go of anything that seems unnecessary so that it doesn't require so much effort all the time?" Because if you're going to stay here, you can't stay here by just really pushing and pushing and pushing and pushing.

Or you could try to figure out, "How can I stay here with less effort, with less input, but still get the same results?" That's a question of discernment. And you take that quality of evaluation and then you apply it to making your concentration more and more settled. When you get it really well settled, you stop asking those questions for a while and just allow the mind to rest when it has to.

The question will come up again, "Can I make this better?" Sometimes the answer is No. So you just stay right there. Other times, you see things beginning to separate out. You see the directed thought and evaluation as something separate from the breath. So you drop them. You begin to see the rapture as separate from the breath. So you drop that. And so on in.

Then if you want to ask yourself if it's jhana or not, you can come out at the end and reflect on things for a bit. That's when you can put some post-it notes on what's happened. The reason we say "post-it notes" is that the next time you do this, maybe you'll see something different: deeper concentration. Put a little post-it note on that until you've gotten to the point where you're familiar with all the different things the mind can do in concentration. Then you can move your post-it notes around so that they accurately reflect what your new perspective is.

So the descriptions of jhana are there for you after you've come out of concentration. While you're meditating, you don't focus on jhana. You focus on the breath. Focus on staying here with as much ease and well-being as you can. And as far as concentration is concerned, that'll take care of everything you need to know.