

Lessons from Jhana

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A lot of what we experience in life—our sense of ourselves, our sense of the world around us—comes from our own construction, the things we put together. You might say that the present moment is a construction site. We're cobbling things together. And they fall apart. We cobble them together again. When we're engaged in this activity we really feel secure because it's so familiar to us, but part of us knows that it's pretty rickety. It can change at any time, which is why we're constantly at it.

When we come to concentration, we're going to take some of that apart. For instance, our fabrication around sensuality. All our thoughts and plans and everything, when we sit down with the breath, have to go by the wayside. And for a lot of us, that's a lot of our identity—that and the pleasure we take in those things. So we feel a little bit out of our element.

But if you can stick with the breath long enough—and have a sense of well-being with the breath—you begin to see that this is actually very pleasant. The pleasures you got from sensuality don't seem so important anymore. At least for the time being, they don't seem necessary.

Some people find it easier to drop them than others. This is something that happens through all the different stages of concentration. Some people slip very easily from one level to the next, while others find that it's pretty wrenching and threatening, because there's some aspect of the way they construct things that they are very attached to.

You see this as you move from the first jhana—where you're talking to yourself basically about the breath, about how things are going—into the second, where you stop talking. Some people have a very strong sense that that's who they are: the speaker in the mind, commenting on things. And just being with the perception, just the one word—instead of speaking in sentences and questions, you're just saying that one word over and over, breath, breath, breath and focusing on one sensation—can seem a little threatening, a little difficult.

But if you can convince yourself that this is what the mind can do and it will have a good effect, that's when you get that quality the Buddha calls internal assurance. You're okay with just that one perception. It's as if you've been walking along a street and all of a sudden you find yourself on a tightrope. It's just that one perception, that one little line carrying you through. And you need some self-assurance to stay with it.

Now, it does help that while holding that one line you do create a sense of well-being in the body. Sometimes you actually have the sensation described in the analogies for the second jhana, which is that there's an upwelling of energy in the torso. The blood is flowing freely. It feels good. And you don't have to do anything.

In the image of the first jhana, there's the bathman who's working the water through the soap-dough, mixing everything just right. That corresponds to the activity of directed thought and evaluation where you're getting the breath comfortable, and you're allowing that sense of comfortable breath to permeate the body—working it through the different breath channels, working it through the blockages in the different parts of the body. You're actively doing something there. But as you move into the next level of jhana, you're not doing anything. It's happening on its own. All the channels are opened up and you feel refreshed.

Another issue of moving from the first to the second jhana is simply the question of when the mind is ready to do this. Sometimes you work and work and work with the breath energies, and they just don't seem to be working well. There seem to be some blockages that you just can't get past. Tell yourself, "Well, live with them." Settle down. See if you can hold onto this one perception. Sometimes this act of moving into this one perception opens up some of the blockages. Things were kept tight and tense because you were talking to yourself. But if you can move to that sense of, instead of talking in sentences, just repeating that one word or that one perception *breath*, holding to one image, say, of breath, see what that does. Maybe it opens things up.

Another issue some people have is with the feeling of rapture. Sometimes a sense of energy moving through the body gets overwhelming. And here again, some people find it very easy and enjoyable, and other people really don't like it. It's a matter of what you're used to and what you identify with. When it starts

moving, sometimes it gets stuck here or there. This can happen especially with people who are used to having to suppress their emotions, trying to keep them under control. All this excess energy suddenly seems threatening. Or if they have certain blockages and suddenly there's pressure that builds up against the blockage, it gets uncomfortable.

This is why Ajaan Lee has you work through the whole body from the very beginning of the meditation, opening up all the different channels so that when there's a release of energy it doesn't get blocked. It flows through the body. It feels okay.

As for people who have had an experience of almost drowning, sometimes this sensation of fullness in the body feels threatening because it reminds them of the time they almost died. In that case, they have to hold in mind the perception that they're surrounded by air, surrounded by space. There's no water pressing in on them. The fullness is purely an internal sensation. They're not being oppressed; they're not being stifled.

But again, it's a matter of what ways of fabricating your experience of the present moment you really hold on to, which ones you identify with very strongly and which ones you don't. If it's something you identify with strongly, it's going to be hard to let go of. It takes a while to develop the confidence to tell yourself, yes, I can let this go and I'll be okay.

Similarly, as you move to the third jhana, there comes a point when that excess energy just gets really too much. You have to be confident that you don't have to rein it in. You can simply let it evaporate. All you have to do is move your attention to a subtler level of energy in the body. And it's there. It's like tuning your radio to a different radio station. You'd been listening to heavy metal and now you move to something soothing that's also been broadcasting all along, just that you weren't previously tuned to it. It gives you a sense of ease, very light, very peaceful. The movement of rapture is gone and there's just a very subtle breath.

The move to the next jhana can also seem threatening when you actually stop breathing. You might be in a state like this for a while and suddenly realize, "Wait a minute, there's no breath." And you can panic. You can think, "Whoops, I'm going to die." You're holding onto the perception that you've got to keep pumping the breath in, pumping the breath in. Here again, you have to train

yourself: It is possible to be here, once the breath energy fills the body and all the breath channels feel connected, and not have to breathe.

How this is explained in terms of physiology, I can't really say. Some people say that there's oxygen exchange at the skin. Other people say that there's none. But it is possible to sit here and not have to breathe in and out. That's what you know when you're here. When the breath energy fills the body, you don't feel any need to breathe. The only felt need is the mind's preconception about what's got to be done. If the body does need to breathe, it'll breathe on its own. You don't have to worry.

The movement from that state into the dimension of space can also be threatening or difficult for some people. They realize that, yes, the body is here, but they're going to ignore all the perceptions, all the sensations that tell them where the skin is, where the line is between your body and what's outside the body. They feel a little unstable holding onto that perception of space permeating the body, permeating everything outside. Here again, some people really like that; other people feel unstable at first. So you have to look into it: where are you holding on?

Some of these states require a very precise focus on exactly what perception you're going to hold onto and which perceptions you're going to let go. There is a part of the mind that realizes. "Okay, I could leave this perception at any time, and hold onto other perceptions." So it seems rather arbitrary. Why stay here? Well, the answer is that if you stay here, you learn something interesting about the mind that you wouldn't learn otherwise. If you flit from perception to perception randomly, there's not that much that's learned. But when you hold onto one perception—whether it's simply the perception of the breath, the perception of the body not having to breathe, the perception of the boundary between the body and the space outside dissolving away—these are useful perceptions because they give you a chance to look at the way you fabricate your experience.

And you're letting go of different aggregates. You're letting go of fabrication, stage by stage. You're letting go of certain perceptions. You're letting go of certain feelings. And you're letting go of the sense of the body. You can even work up to where you let go of your sense of the oneness of your consciousness. That happens when you move from the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness to the

dimension of nothingness. The sense of the oneness of the knower: You drop it. Now, that sense of oneness is what's been holding you together in concentration all along. So letting it go is going to be threatening. But if you have an explorer's attitude—that you're trying to figure out how you put things together and which of those activities you can put aside—it can be fascinating.

An aspect that's really pleasant about this is that you've been engaging in lots of different activities, and it takes a lot of energy. And here you can learn how to let some of the things go and yet not just wander around. You can stay still. But you have to let go of your fabrications very systematically. It's like playing pick-up sticks. You pull out this stick and you pull out that stick, careful to pull just the right stick, hoping that you're not going to collapse the whole thing. And you find that you can gain a sense of great stability even without all that extra activities. This is one of the ways in which the practice of right concentration really opens up things in your mind.

You begin to see, "Oh, I've been doing this, doing that, all along, and now I have the choice to do it or not. I don't have to identify with it, telling myself that without it I won't be able to live, that I won't be able to survive without this perception or that way of fabricating things." It helps to lighten the burdens of the mind. At the same time, you gain some understanding as to how all this is put together, realizing that the lessons you learn also help to explain a question that often comes up when we read the life story of the Buddha.

He studied with two teachers who taught him the dimension of nothingness and the dimension of neither perception nor non perception, and he realized that neither of those counted as the goal. So he left, subjecting himself to self-torture for six years. Then he realized that that wasn't the path. So he cast his mind around and asked, "Could there be another path?"

He thought of a time when he was a child and had entered spontaneously into the first jhana. Well, the question often arises: Wasn't he doing the first jhana under those two teachers? And don't some passages in the Canon say that you can gain awakening based on the dimension of nothingness or the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception? So why couldn't he just go there, back to those old attainments, and gain awakening from there?

And the answer, I think, lies in the fact that you can get into those very refined states in different ways. There is one sutta where the Buddha identifies three ways you can get to the dimension of nothingness and a way you can get to the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. And of those three ways only one involves the insights that come from putting the mind through this step-by-step practice of going through the first through the fourth jhanas, and then going through the dimension of space and the dimension of consciousness. The fact that you've arrived at the dimension of nothingness having gone through those stages, taking them apart, primes you to see things in terms of the different kinds of fabrication: the aggregates or the types of fabrication listed in dependent co-arising.

Whereas the two other ways that you can get into the dimension of nothingness are simply by repeating a mantra. The two mantras the Buddha gives basically comes down to, "There is no self, there's nothing of me, nothing of mine." By holding that perception in mind, you can get into the state of nothingness without passing through the other levels of jhana. And you haven't gained insight into the different ways of fabrication.

Similarly with the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception: You can tell yourself, "Nothing will occur to me; I'll think of nothing at all, either inside or out." And you can get yourself into that dimension. But then you hold onto it. That's what prevents it from being awakening—there's still the possibility of clinging in there. You're clinging to the feeling of equanimity that comes up. Again, you cling because you haven't really learned how to take your mind apart, or taken fabrications apart. You've just badgered it into that state.

So it's good, when you're getting the mind into concentration, that you realize that there is right concentration that can help you understand the mind. And there are other kinds of concentration that don't teach those lessons.

So remember: We're here to learn about fabrication, the way we put things together. And it's possible to feel threatened by the different ways of dropping some of those fabrications. Well, very carefully coax yourself and remind yourself that it's okay. And prepare yourself properly.

Ajaan Lee's instructions for breath are really good that way. You open up the breath energy channels so that if any excess energy comes along, you can release it.

It's not all bottled up. And you begin to get a sense that all the activities that you're doing to put things together and then see them fall apart, so you put them together again and see them fall apart: You can begin to drop those activities. You can have your choice as to when to engage in them and when not. You become more a master of your own mind.

This way, you can go through life with a lot more lightness. Otherwise, we burden ourselves immensely by the things we hold onto. We think that by holding onto them, they're going to save us. But instead, they pull us down.

So if you learn how to let go in the right way and get a sense of confidence that, yes, the mind can be perfectly fine not engaging, say, in all the sensual fantasies it used to do or dropping a lot of its internal chatter or even getting to the point where you can stop breathing, it increases your sense of what's possible. It gives rise to a lot more understanding. And lifts a lot of burdens off your back.