

Get Attached to Jhana

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There are some mindfulness meditation traditions that tell you, when they first talk about jhana: “Watch out. It’s dangerous. You’re going to get attached.” This is their rationale for telling you not to develop jhana, not to get into strong concentration. But they’re missing an important point.

The main point, of course, is that jhana is part of the path. The Buddha didn’t teach an optional eighth factor to the path. It’s right there in every version of the path. In fact, the Buddha said it’s the heart of the path. And you do want to get attached to it—not forever, but you want to develop a sense of feeling at home with jhana. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, “You have to be crazy about the meditation in order to do it well.” And part of what he meant was that you want to get really interested in the breath and really learn how to savor the breath, learn how to find a real pleasure there and hold onto it, because you’re going to need to use that pleasure in order to overcome your attachment to sensual pleasures and sensuality in general: in other words, sensual thinking.

So as you work with the breath, ask yourself, “What here is something that would be really worth appreciating?” It often helps to slow down—not necessarily to slow down the breath, but to slow down your mind. There’s a part of the mind that says, “Let’s get through this and then we’ll go on to the next step, and then the next.” You don’t really pay attention to what you’re doing while you’re doing it. You’ve got your eye down at the end of the path, or at least the next step. So learn to settle back a bit and say, “How about *this* breath? How can I squeeze the most pleasure out of *this* breath?”

This involves having an appreciative state of mind, thinking, “It really does feel good to be breathing.” If you’re not sure about that, hold your breath for a while until it starts getting uncomfortable and then with that first breath that comes in, you say, “Ah, yes, that’s what a comfortable breath feels like.” It’s simply because it’s been coming in and going out for so long and so often that we take it for granted and our attention moves off to something else.

So those mindfulness methods that have you appreciate, say, the taste of a raisin, the taste of a cup of tea, are right in one sense: Appreciate the little things you’ve got. They’re wrong in the sense that you don’t want to be appreciating sensual pleasures. You want to be learning how to appreciate the sense of pleasure that comes from simply inhabiting your body as you sense the body from within. It’s called the pleasure of form. It differs from sensual pleasures.

Sensual pleasures have to do with your thoughts about sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations—in other words, the things that come and touch the body—whereas this is different. This is the body in and of itself as you feel it from within, what they call “proprioception.” Learn how to get your center of gravity in here instead of pointing out or pointing up ahead. You could think of focusing a camera, and that somehow you could take the focal length of the lens and move it inside the lens itself. That’s the kind of focus you want, right here in the midst of the body as you allow yourself to be surrounded by the breath, bathed by the breath, surrounded by the sensation of breathing.

Think of the breath as a whole-body process and explore aspects of the breath. When Ajaan Lee talks about the different kinds of breathing, the fascinating part about his instructions are the points he makes about dealing with the breath energies in the different parts of the body, which often causes us to overlook the fact that he spends a long time talking about how the breathing can be long in, long out; short in, short out, but there’s also long in, short out; and short in, long out. So learn how to become a connoisseur of the length of your breathing, or a connoisseur of its depth.

Take some time. Here we’ve got a whole hour. And there’s the part of the mind that says, “Well, let’s get through the whole hour and then we’ll go on to something else.” Don’t listen to that part of the mind. Say, “Let’s inhabit this hour. Let’s inhabit this moment,” and allow our awareness to settle back into the body and get a sense of what’s the right amount of pressure, the right amount of space to give to these sensations, allowing yourself to savor them. The more you can appreciate the breath, the easier it’s going to be to say No to sensual thinking, easier to say No to anger, lust, greed, jealousy, fear.

So this is a skillful pleasure to get attached to. And don’t be afraid of getting attached. Don’t be afraid of this pleasure. Think of the Buddha after he had spent all those years in self-torture, trying to run away from pleasure, and then realizing that he was going to die without having achieved the state of deathless happiness he wanted. So his question was, could there be another path? And he thought about the time when he had spontaneously, as a child, entered into the first jhana. So he asked himself, “Could that be the path?” And something inside him said Yes. But then the next question was, “Why am I afraid of that pleasure? It’s blameless.” So he had to convince himself not to be afraid of it.

Some people are afraid of the pleasure, or afraid of appreciating the pleasure of the breath for fear of doing something wrong. Sometimes people even say, “I don’t deserve this kind of pleasure.” Or they’re afraid that if they get attached to it, then it’s going to get taken away from them, as has happened with so many other

pleasures in life. So you've got to learn how to counteract that thinking. Here it is: It's your breath. You have every right to breathe and enjoy it as much as you want. It's not like the pleasures outside, where people can take them away. You're not borrowing it from anybody else.

Remember the image the Buddha had of sensual pleasure as being like borrowed goods. Well, this is not borrowed. This is your sense of the body, your sense of *your* body. So you have every right to enjoy it. You're not being selfish—and you're not being unresponsive to other people when you enjoy this pleasure. In fact, the more you can enjoy this pleasure, the less you'll be leaning on other people. So it's a pleasure with few drawbacks. I mean, it is inconstant. It requires work and it has to be maintained, but it's maintained for a purpose, providing you with a lever to pry yourself from your fascination with sensual thinking and to prepare the mind for deeper discernment. The more you can appreciate it, the more you can indulge in it, to borrow the Buddha's term, then the more it's going to be able to perform its function. So take some time.

Remember that an important part of the path is learning to be fully present to the path as you follow it. This is one of the drawbacks of the image of a path, thinking of it as someplace you're going to have to go, so you've got to have to do the next step and then the next step if you're ever going to get to the end. But Dogen, the Zen master, once had a good teaching. He said that the two duties with regard to the cessation of suffering and with regard to the path—in other words, realizing the cessation and developing the path—are one. This is a good strategic way of thinking. In other words, in the act of developing the path, you're going to realize the cessation of suffering, so you don't have to look anywhere else.

Instead of having one eye on the breath and one eye down the road, you focus both eyes right here because the goal, when it's found, is also going to be found right here. It's no place else. It's not thirty, forty yards down the way. It's right here. The issue is simply learning how to pay careful attention right here. That's how you're going to be able to detect it.

And so what does careful attention mean? You learn how to savor things, savor the pleasure that comes from having a mind that can settle down and be steadily with the breath. So take your time to give full attention right here, and that way you get to see things you haven't seen before. And in the meantime, you'll be able to experience a pleasure that you haven't experienced before. It is fabricated, it's put together, but then the whole path is put together.

When the Buddha talks about the highest dhammas, he says there's the highest unfabricated dhamma and the highest fabricated dhamma. The highest of the fabricated dhammas is the path; the unfabricated dhamma, which is the

highest of all dhammas, is dispassion. But the path is the best thing you can put together. So even though it's put together, don't look down on it. Learn how to put it together well and then savor it.

The more you can appreciate what you've done, then the better the job you're going to do. It's like learning how to play a musical instrument. If you don't know how to listen to yourself as you play, it's going to be mechanical. But if you listen to it and learn how to enjoy it as you play, other people will find that your music is enjoyable, too. You'll develop greater and greater skill. This one of the reasons why we chant together as a group. If you chant just with your mouth, it doesn't sound particularly good. If you chant with your mouth and your ears—in other words, listening to the group and trying to fit in—the chanting becomes more enjoyable. You get better at it. And then you transfer that lesson to the breath.

Learn to listen to the breath and savor the breath as you're focusing on it. Allow the different tight parts of the body to open up to the potential of pleasure for the breath, and that way you become more fully present. Your attention will become more appropriate. Your sensitivity will become more sensitive. And it's through developing your sensitivity that your discernment grows.

So this is a pleasure with a purpose and it requires that you appreciate it so it can serve that purpose well. Don't be afraid of getting attached to it. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, "That kind of attachment is easy to peel away." His fear, when he was working with his students, was that they wouldn't learn to how to get attached to it to begin with, which would mean, of course, that they'd just go slipping back to their old ways of being attached to sensuality.

So don't be afraid of jhana, don't be afraid of appreciating it, don't be afraid of being attached to it. That attachment is an essential part of the path.