

Tranquility & Insight Through Jhāna

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We often hear that the Buddha taught two types of meditation techniques: *samatha*, or tranquility techniques, and *vipassanā*, or insight techniques. But if you look through the Pāli Canon, you're not going to find them. There's no place where the Buddha says, "Go, do *samatha*," or, "Go, do *vipassanā*," but he does say, "Go, do *jhāna*."

It's in the practice of right concentration that you develop both tranquility and insight. You need some tranquility and some insight in order to get into *jhāna*, and then, as the *jhāna* deepens—as you get more skilled at it—the tranquility gets more intense, and the opportunities for insight also get advanced.

After all, what is tranquility? It's learning how to settle in, be established, be steady. Think about the term for *jhāna*: It's related to the verb *jhāyati*, which means the burning of a steady flame.

As for insight, the Buddha defines it as looking into certain questions about fabrication: "How should fabrications be seen? How should they be investigated?" and, "How should they be penetrated through insight?"

When we look at the practice of *jhāna*, we can see why it fosters both tranquility and insight.

The tranquility is obvious: When the mind settles down with a full-body awareness, things are really still. Think of those images of the lotuses in the pool of water that are perfectly still, saturated with water from their roots to their tips; or the person with a white cloth surrounding his body, lying very still.

But, as you practice concentration, you also learn a lot about fabrication. It's a hands-on kind of experience. You don't sit there watching fabrications passively; you use fabrications to get the mind to settle in.

Think of the three kinds of fabrication. There's the breath—that's bodily fabrication. Okay, you're focused on the breath. Then there's verbal fabrication—directed thought and evaluation—that's how you talk to yourself. They're two of the factors of the first *jhāna*. Then there's mental fabrication—feelings and perceptions. States of right concentration all the way up through the dimension of nothingness are called perception attainments, and the different levels of *jhāna* are defined by the feeling tone—pleasure and rapture in the first *jhāna*, more pleasure and rapture in the second, just pleasure in the third, and equanimity in the fourth.

So you're dealing directly with these three fabrications. You get some hands-on experience with them. Once you see how you can create a state of

concentration out of these different kinds of fabrication, and you understand what you're doing in those terms—the Buddha encourages that—then you can apply the same lessons to other things that are coming up, and particularly those questions around insight.

The Buddha teaches a five-step program for dealing with anything that is a problem or a disturbance for the mind. You start out with things that are obvious problems and you work your way up to the more subtle ones until finally there's nothing left but the path itself—states of concentration, the activity of discernment—and you apply the same five-step program to the path as well. That's when you're really free.

So, when you start with something obvious—say lust comes into the mind—you want to see how it originates. And the origination is not to be found *out there*, in the sensory experience; it's to be found *in here*, in the mind. What is it about the mind that goes for these things?

Then you see how it passes away when the origination passes away, and it comes back again when the origination comes back.

What you're really interested in is the next two steps: seeing the allure and seeing the drawbacks. Again, the allure is not to be found out there necessarily; it's expressed in those three fabrications as well.

As certain things come up, there's a feeling tone in the body that goes along with them—a breath-energy feeling—and sometimes a certain thought is appealing just because of that.

Other times, the allure is in how you talk to yourself about it—directed thought and evaluation—the stories you can tell yourself, say, around a particular object of lust. You begin to realize that the allure is not so much in the object; it's in the stories.

Or it can be composed of mental fabrication: the images, the perceptions that go around it, the feelings that go around it. You're really more interested in *those* than you are, again, with the object.

Advertisers realize this when they sell something. Often, you look at the advertisement and there's very little of the actual object that they're selling. There's an awful lot in the atmosphere, the images, perceptions, associations that they want us to make with the object to make it desirable. That's the psychology of the allure.

Many times, you're going to be embarrassed about what you see about how you fabricate the allure—because you *are* fabricating it. You think about food: You could think about food in certain ways and it's pretty disgusting, but, in order to get yourself to want to eat it—to fix it and everything—you have to think

about it in ways that make it really attractive. A lot of the pleasure in eating comes in the anticipation, and then in the way we think about it afterwards—“what a great meal that was”—as a way of setting us up for the next meal. So it’s all in the directed thought and evaluation and the perceptions.

Now, if this were all we had in possibilities for happiness, we’d say, “Well, who cares about the drawbacks? I want to go for this.” But the Buddha reminds us, “There is a greater pleasure to be found by developing dispassion for these things.” This is why we always have to think about the Buddha’s teachings in the context of the four noble truths, because they set out the options that are available to us, and one of them is total freedom from suffering, based on dispassion.

This is what gets you to look at the drawbacks of the things that have you hooked. And, just as the allure is built largely out of directed thought and evaluation, looking at the drawbacks, you have to talk to yourself, and you have to bring other images in mind, other perceptions in mind. This is why the three perceptions play such a huge role—they and the other perceptions that are derived from them. Seeing things as alien, as a disease, as an arrow, as a dissolution: These are all variations on perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self.

Or you can talk to yourself about things. You can remember some of the things that the Buddha said about how many tears you’ve shed going from one life to the next, to the next, based on the allure of sensuality or the allure of whatever you’re looking for. And it’s all pretty empty. You create the allure out of mental images, like mirages, and then you go running for it.

It’s like that story of the sculptor who sculpted a beautiful woman and then fell in love with her, even though he knew that she was totally a creation of his. That’s the way we are.

So, you can think of that story about all of the tears we’ve shed—more than the water in the oceans; all the blood we’ve shed going for sensual pleasures in ways that are dishonest, against the law, and we get caught, and they cut off our heads. The blood that’s flowed from our necks and our heads is more than all the waters in the ocean. A sobering thought. But the whole purpose of that is to provide new ways of imaging in the mind around issues of whatever the defilement is.

The Buddha has those long series of similes for the drawbacks of sensuality: It’s like a dog gnawing on a bone. In Ajaan Lee’s explanation of the image, the dog can find no flavor in the bone except for the flavor of its own saliva. Again, we’re the ones providing the allure. We paint our allure on things by drooling all over them and then we fall for the drool.

Sensuality is also like a hawk that's got a little piece of meat, and other hawks come and try to tear the meat away from it. If it doesn't let go, it's going to die.

Sensuality is like a bead of honey on the blade of a knife: a little bit of sweetness and a lot of danger.

Those are some of the images, the perceptions, that the Buddha wants you to use. That's the kind of verbal fabrication and mental fabrication he wants you to use to counteract the verbal fabrication and the mental fabrication that go into the allure. And, when you're devoted to seeing the drawbacks as much as possible—because you know there's something better on the other side—there will come a point where the drawbacks seem so great and the allure seems so futile. Because, after all, it's nothing—it's a total creation.

Oftentimes we're lying to ourselves about these things and yet we suffer for them. Do you want to keep on lying? Do you want to keep on suffering for your lies? That's the basic question.

That's how dispassion can be developed, and it's through dispassion that we have our escape. That's *vipassanā*—that's insight: digging around in fabrications like this to develop dispassion and to overcome our ignorance of what we're doing to ourselves.

This depends on the practice of concentration to set us up—to get us sensitive to the processes of fabrication, and at the same time, to put us in a good state of mind. After all, we're talking about pleasure, rapture, equanimity, which are good feeling tones to be coming from when you're doing this kind of analysis.

Otherwise, the mind is just too hungry for the pleasure, and so it's too hungry for the allure to admit to itself what the allure is, or to allow the drawbacks really to seep in. But, when you've softened up the mind a bit with comfortable breathing, with comfortable thoughts, then you're ready for insight—the kind of insight that really does make a difference.

So, that's how the practice of *jhāna* develops both *samatha* and *vipassanā*—both tranquility and insight. So, “Go, do *jhāna*.” That's how the Buddha ended many of his talks. And he continued by saying, “Take advantage of the time while you have it. Don't let there be any regrets later on.”