

# **The Jhanas**

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## **The Jhanas**

### Preface

As Buddhist meditation becomes ever more popular in our modern world, it is vital that clear and accurate guidance is available. For many years, there has been an unfortunate lack of thorough instruction in simple English on the deeper states of meditation called Jhana. Even though the Jhanas are, perhaps, the theme most repeated by the Buddha in the Suttas, and in spite of the fact that the old teachers of the Thai forest tradition encouraged, preached and taught Jhanas, a description of their development is hard to come by.

The booklet, then, serves to remedy this lack of practical information regarding Jhana. It continues where I left off in my earlier booklet, the Basic Method of Meditation. It aims to describe the path into Jhana, the characteristics of Jhana, and the relevance of Jhana to insight and Enlightenment.

Without any appreciation of Jhana, one's understanding of Buddhism is incomplete.

Mettacittena  
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Bodhinyana Monastery, May 2546 AB

## **The Jhanas**

### **PART ONE**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

In the original Buddhist scriptures, there is only one word for any level of meditation. Jhana designates meditation proper, where the meditator's mind is stilled from all thought, secluded from all five-sense activity and is radiant with other-worldly bliss. Put bluntly, it is isn't Jhana then it isn't true Buddhist meditation! Perhaps this is why the culminating factor of the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path, the one that deals with right meditation, is nothing less than the Jhanas.

#### **The Buddha's Rediscovery**

In the ancient Buddhist texts, the Buddha is said to have discovered Jhana (SN 2,7). This claim is repeated with full explanation by Venerable Ananda in another Sutta (AN 9,42). The fact that the Buddha rediscovered Jhana should not be overlooked, for the rediscovery was a central act in the dram of the Enlightenment.

When it is said that the Buddha discovered Jhana, it is not to be understood that no one had ever experienced Jhana before. For instance, in the era of the previous Buddha Kassapa, countless men and women achieved Jhana and subsequently realized Enlightenment. But in the India of twenty six centuries ago, all knowledge of Jhana had disappeared. This was one reason that there is no mention at all of Jhana in any religious text before the time of the Buddha.

Some might raise an objection that the teachers Alara Kalama and Udaka Ramaputta preached on Jhana, because the texts state that they taught the Bodhisatta (the Buddha-to-be) the attainment of the state of nothingness and the attainment of the state of neither perception nor non-perception. However, those two attainments could not have been connected to Jhana, because the Bodhisatta recalled, just prior to sitting under the Bodhi Tree, that the only time in his life that he had experienced any Jhana was as a young boy, while sitting under a Rose Apple Tree as his father conducted the first-ploughing ceremony (MN 36). That spontaneous early experience of Jhana had been untaught, unplanned and since forgotten. If that was the only Jhana experienced by the Bodhisatta prior to his experience under the Bodhi Tree, then the two teachers Alara Kalama and Udaka Ramaputta could not have taught Jhana at all.

Indeed, in the Mahasaccaka Sutta (MN 36), the Bodhisatta is shown as rejecting the experiences under those two teachers as not leading to Enlightenment, and then exhausting just about every form of ascetic practice before concluding that that too did not lead to Enlightenment.

Remembering the early experience of Jhana as a boy, the Bodhisatta thought, "Perhaps this Jhana is the way to Enlightenment (Bodhi)." Thus the Bodhisatta realized the jhanas under the Bodhi Tree and proceeded from there to Full Enlightenment and the attainment of Buddhahood.

One of the reasons why Jhana was not practiced before the Buddha's Enlightenment was because people then either indulged in seeking pleasure and comfort of the body or else following a religion of tormenting the body. Both were caught up with the body and its five senses and knew no release from the five senses. Neither produced the sustained tranquility of the body necessary as the foundation for Jhana. When the Bodhisatta began the easy practices leading to such tranquility of body, his first five disciples abandoned him in disgust. Such a practice was not regarded as valid. Therefore it was not practiced, and so Jhana never occurred.

After the Buddha's Enlightenment, the very first teaching that he gave, even before the famous Four Noble Truths, was the exposition on the Middle Way, a way which had not existed before (except long ago in the eras of previous Buddhas), a way which leads automatically to Jhana and then to Enlightenment.

It was as if, the Buddha said, that He had discovered a long but lost path leading to an ancient city (SN 12,65). The ancient city was Nibbana (Enlightenment) and the long lost path was the Eightfold Path culminating in Jhana. Since the Buddha rediscovered this path, it can be said that the Buddha rediscovered Jhana.

### **Can One be Attached to Jhana?**

When the Bodhisatta had the insight that Jhana was the way to Enlightenment, he then thought, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure which has nothing to do with the five senses nor with unwholesome things? I will not be afraid of that pleasure (of Jhana)!" (MN 36). Even today, some meditators mistakenly believe that something as intensely pleasurable as Jhana cannot be conducive to the end of all suffering. They remain afraid of Jhana. However, in the Suttas the Buddha repeatedly stated that the pleasure of the Jhana "is to be followed, is to be developed and is to be made much of. It is not to be feared" (MN 66).

In spite of this clear advice from the Buddha Himself, some students of meditation are misled by those who discover Jhana on the grounds that one can become attached to Jhana and so never become enlightened. It should be pointed out that the Buddha's word for attachment, upadana, only refers to attachment to the comfort and pleasure of the five-senses or world or to attachment to various forms of wrong view (such as a view of self). It never means attachment to wholesome things, like Jhana<sup>1</sup>.

**Simply put**, *Jhana states are stages of letting go*. **One cannot** be attached to letting go. Just as one cannot be imprisoned by freedom.

One can indulge in jhana, in the bliss of letting go, and this is what some people mislead into fearing. But in the Pasadika Sutta (DN 29,25), the Buddha said that one who indulges in the pleasures of Jhana may expect only one of four consequences: Stream-Winning, Once-returner, Non-returner, or Full Enlightenment! In other words, indulging in Jhana leads only to the four stages of Enlightenment. This in the words of the Buddha “One should not fear Jhana” (MN 66).

### **For Those a Long Way from Jhana**

For some meditators, the Jhanas may seem to be such a long distance away that they are seen as irrelevant. This is not so. Discussing such sublime states can create inspiration, as well as map out the territory ahead so that one can know the right direction. More crucially, it gives one the information about what to do when one gets close to any of these profound states of freedom. Finally, it gives a deeper understanding of the Dhamma, especially into the Third Noble Truth that is the cessation of all suffering—Nibbana. This is because, the rapture and bliss of jhana is directly related to the amount of Samsara which is, albeit temporary, let go of. Thus, discussing the Jhanas is well worthwhile, even if they may seem so far away from you.

### **For Those a Little Closer to Jhana**

Some readers may have already gotten close enough to be able to understand this discussion from their own experience, and it may help them make the last leap into the jhanas. Furthermore, when a meditator has actually experienced a profound state of meditation, they want to find out exactly what it was, to recognize the state in terms of the Buddha’s accurate descriptions. So it is important to be able to correctly identify the levels of depth in meditation.

It is also important to generate some inspiration in one’s achievement. Such a positive emotion will only encourage further letting go. It is my aspiration to show you how wonderful and profound these states of Jhana are, and to illustrate how crucial their experience is to the event of Enlightenment.

Eventually, the seeds that are planted in you through reading a discussion on Jhana like this will one day bear fruit. When one realizes how the mental factor of intention actually occurs, one understands how important it is to get information and inspiration like this on the Jhanas from outside of oneself. Then at the right time, the mind will know automatically what it must do.

For example, when nimittas arise the mind will spontaneously know how to respond. Sometimes you might reflect on this later, “Where did that intention come from?” The answer is that that movement of the mind

came from reading discussions such as this. Sometimes it comes from things learned in a past life!

These are the things that generate the subtle guidance of the mind in the still states of meditation. They do not come from you. If you get involved and try to do something, the meditation is disturbed and the peace falls apart.

Sp please do not think that just because you are not at this stage yet, that this discussion is of no use to you. In fact, it will be very useful to you. But you will only realize its usefulness after you have achieved one of the Jhanas and reflected back to see that such instruction as given here, which you thought were forgotten, manifest at the tight time to lead the mind into jhana.

### **The Beautiful Breath: The Beginning of the Journey into Jhanas**

So far I have discovered the Jhanas from a historical and theoretical point of view. Now it is time to explain the Jhanas in terms of their practice. It is best to begin the description of the journey into Jhana from the starting point of the “beautiful breath.” Before this stage is accomplished, the mind has insufficient contentment, awareness and stability to launch itself into the higher states of consciousness. But when one is able to maintain an effortless awareness on the breath without break for a long period of time, when the mind has settled into such a rich awareness that the breath appears delightful. Then one is ready to set off on the journey into jhana.

#### **Do Not Be Afraid of Delight**

**I want to stress that one should be cautious not to be afraid of delight in meditation.** Too many meditators dismiss happiness thinking it unimportant or, even worse, thinking that they don't deserve such delight. Happiness in meditation is important! Moreover, you deserve this bliss out! Blissing our on the breath is an essential part of the path. So when delight does arise alongside the breath, one should cherish it like a valuable treasure, and guard it accordingly.

#### **The Beautiful Breath and No Effort**

The delight that arises at the stage of the beautiful breath is the “glue” that holds the mind's attention on the breath. It results in the mindfulness staying with the breath without effort. One stays with full attention on the breath because the mind wants to stay with the breath. The mind, at this stage, enjoys watching the breath so much that it doesn't want to go anywhere else. It just remains with the breath, automatically. It is so content being with the delightful, beautiful breath that all wandering ceases. One remains fully aware of the breath without any need to control the mind. Mindfulness of the breath, here, becomes effortless.



Without the experience of delight, there will be some discontent. And discontent is the source of the wandering mind. Before one reaches the stage of the beautiful breath, discontent pushes mindfulness away from the breath. There, the only way to keep mindfulness upon the breath is through and effort of will, through control. But when the stage of the beautiful breath is achieved, when delight generates long lasting contentment, then the mind will not wander. Then control can be relaxed, effort relieved, and the mind remains motionless, naturally.

Just as petrol/gas is the fuel moving the car, so discontent is the fuel that moves the mind. When a car runs out of gas, it gently comes to a stop. One doesn't need to use the brakes. It comes to a state of stillness, naturally. In the same way, when the mind runs out of discontent, through the arising of the beautiful breath, it gently comes to a stop. One doesn't need to use the brakes of the will power. The mind comes to a state of stillness, naturally.

### **Pitisukha—Joy and Happiness**

In Pali, the compound word pitisukha means the combination of joy and happiness. One can use those words for all sorts of experiences, even for worldly experiences. But in meditation, pitisukha refers only to that joy and happiness that is generated through letting go.

Just as various types of fire may be distinguished by their fuel—such as a wood fire, oil fire or brushfire—so the various types of happiness can be distinguished by their cause. The joy and happiness that arises with the beautiful breath is fueled by the letting go of burdens such as past and future, internal commentary and diversity of consciousness. Because it is a delight born of letting go, it cannot produce attachment. One cannot be attached and letting go at the same time. The delight that arises with the beautiful breath is, in fact, a clear sign that some detachment has taken place.

### **Three Major Types of Pitisukha**

One might propose three major types of pitisukha, (joy and happiness): that generated by sensual excitement, that caused by personal achievement, and that born of letting go. Not only are these types of happiness differentiated by their cause, but they are also very different in their natures. The happiness generated by sensual excitement is hot and stimulating but also agitating and consequently tiring. It lessens in intensity on repetition. The happiness caused by personal achievement is warm and fulfilling but also fades quickly, leaving a sense of a vacant hole in need of filling. But the happiness born of letting go is cool and very long lasting. It is associated with the sense of real freedom.

Moreover, the happiness generated by sensual excitement produces ever-stronger desire, like an addict needing an ever stronger dose, making the happiness unstable and tyrannical. The happiness caused by personal

achievement produces more investment in being the control freak, encouraging the illusion of personal power. The controller then kills any happiness. The happiness born of letting go inspires more letting go and less interference. Because it encourages one to leave things alone, it is the most stable and effortlessly long lasting. It is the most independent of causes. It is closest to the unconditioned, the uncaused.

It is important for success in meditation to recognize these different types of happiness. If the happiness that arises with awareness of the breath is of the sensual excitement type, for example like waves of physical pleasure coursing through your body, then it will soon disappear when effort is relaxed, leaving one heavy and tired. It is of little use here. If the happiness is associated with the sense of achievement, for instance thinking "Wow! At last I'm getting somewhere in my meditation," then it will often be followed by the achievement disintegrating, destroyed by the controller suddenly being aroused, ruined by the interfering ego. But if the happiness that arises with the beautiful breath is that born of letting go, then one feels that one doesn't need to say anything, or do anything. It becomes the happiness whose brother is freedom and whose sister is peace. It will grow all by itself in magnificent intensity, blossoming like a flower in the garden of Jhana.

### **Beautiful Breath, Beautiful Metta, Beautiful Skull!**

There are many other objects of meditation as well as the breath. One can take loving kindness (Metta), parts of the body (Kayagatasati), simple visualizations (Kasina) and other things as the focus of one's mindfulness. However, in all meditation that develops into jhana, there must come a stage where the pitisukha born of letting go arises. For example, loving kindness meditation opens into being such a wonderful, gorgeous, unconditional love for the whole cosmos, filling the meditator with delicious joy. Pitisukha born of letting go has arisen and one is at the stage of "beautiful Metta." Another example: some meditators focus on parts of the human of the human body, often on a skull. As the meditation deepens, as mindfulness rests on the inner image of a skull, an amazing process unfolds. The image of the skull in one's mind starts to whiten, then deepen in colour, until it appears to glow with intense luminosity as the "beautiful skull!" Again, pitisukha born of letting go has appeared filling the whole experience with joy and happiness. Even some monks who practice Asubha (loathsomeness) meditation, on a decaying corpse say, can experience the initially repugnant cadaver suddenly changing into one of the most beautiful images of all. Letting go has aroused so much happiness that it overwhelms the natural disgust and floods the image with pitisukha. One has realized the stage of the "beautiful corpse!"

IN breath meditation (Anapanasati), the Lord Buddha taught the arousing of pitisukha along with the experience of one's breath as the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> steps of the 16 step Anapanasati method (see MN 118). It is such

a crucial stage in meditation that I have dealt with it in *The Basic Method of Meditation*<sup>2</sup>.

### **What if Pitisukha Hasn't Appeared?**

When pitisukha doesn't arise, it must be because there is not enough contentment, this is, one is still trying too much. One should reflect on the first two of the five hindrances. The first hindrance, sensory desire, draws the attention towards the object of desire and thus away from the breath. The second hindrance, ill will, finds fault with the experience of breath, and the dissatisfaction repels the attention away from the breath. Contentment is the "middle way" between desire and ill will. It keeps one's mindfulness with the breath long enough for the pitisukha to arise.

Sometimes meditators wonder about the role of effort in meditation. At the stage of meditation just before the beautiful breath, one's effort should be directed only into the knowing, and kept away from the doing mind. When effort is channeled into doing the meditation, that is, controlling everything, then the energized "doer" moves into restlessness, another of the hindrances. But when the effort is removed from the "doer" and is given fully to the knowing, then not only does restlessness disappear, but so does sloth and torpor. Sloth and torpor is another of the Five Hindrances. It arises because the knowing is without energy. Often this is because all one's energy has gone into doing, into the active function of the mind, into controlling. So much so that the knowing, the passive function of mind, is starved into the feebleness of sloth and torpor. But when all one's effort is invested in the knowing, into mindfulness, then sloth and torpor become replaced by bright and energized knowing.

Putting all one's effort into the knowing is another way of generating pitisukha along with the breath. **For the energy of the mind is equivalent to happiness.** So if pitisukha hasn't appeared yet, it might be that one is not directing effort away from the doer and into the knowing.

### **The Way Into Silence**

Stillness means lack of movement. What causes the mind to move? "Will" causes the mind to move! This is why if one wants to experience stillness, then one must remove all will, all doing, all control.

One can firmly hold a leaf on a plant but, however hard you try, you will never be able to hold it still. There will always be some vibration caused by slight tremors in one's muscles. However, if one protected the leaf from any wind, then the leaf becomes still, eventually, all by itself. By removing the causes of the movement, the wind, then the leaf comes to a natural state of stillness.

In exactly the same way, one cannot achieve stillness by holding the mind in the grip of one's will. But if one removes the cause of movement

in the mind, the will, then the mind soon comes to a natural state of stillness.

**Thus one cannot will the mind to be still!** The way into stillness is though the pitisukha born of letting go. Once the delight that comes with the beautiful breath appears, then will becomes redundant. It becomes unnecessary since mindfulness stays with the breath all by itself, effortlessly. Mindfulness enjoys being with the beautiful breath, and so does not need to be forced. It is through the arising pitisukha at the stage of the beautiful breath that will becomes calmed, effort is relieved, and stillness begins to manifest.

When stillness appears it enriches the pitisukha. The deepening of pitisukha, in turn, creates even less opportunity for effort, and so stillness grows stronger. A self-reinforcing, feedback process ensues. Stillness deepens pitisukha. Pitisukha increases the stillness. This process continues, when not interrupted, all the way into Jhana where stillness is profound and pitisukha ecstatic.

### **When the Breath Disappears**

If the breath disappears before the stage of the beautiful breath, then this is a case of sloth and torpor, of weak attention. One should go back to basics, strengthen present moment awareness and silence, and put more energy into awareness.

But when one is on the stage of the beautiful breath, when it feels so delightful and effortless to be mindful of the breath for long periods of time, then as the mind grows in stillness, the perception of the breath grows more subtle. Soon one is not aware of an in-breath, or of a beginning or middle or end of a breath. One is simply aware of a seemingly unchanging perception of breath, a single experience that hardly alters from moment to moment. What is happening is that some of the external features of breath, such as in and out, beginning and end, have been transcended. All one sees is the heart of the breath experience, beyond these labels.

Because of the extreme simplicity of the meditation object, the breath, stillness and pitisukha can grow even stronger. Let them grow stronger. Don't fall onto the trap of doubt, wondering whether this very subtle bare breath experience is what one should be watching. Don't worry that perceptions of in and out, beginning and end, have disappeared. This is how it should be. Don't disturb the process. As the stillness and pitisukha grow ever stronger, the breath disappears.

When in the stage of the beautiful breath, the breath disappears, only the beauty remains. One is aware not of nothing, but of beauty, the pitisukha without any perception of breath. This is another important stage in one's meditation. It is a step closer to jhana.

## **The Calming of the Senses**

Buddhism has always described experience in terms of six, not five, senses. They are sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and also the mind. In breath meditation, one calms the first four senses into disappearance by focusing only on the breath. The breath is then experienced through the senses of touch and mind.

As the meditation progresses, the sense of touch is gradually calmed and the sense of mind becomes more dominant. In the stages of the beautiful breath, the breath is experienced only partly by the sense of touch and mostly by the mind sense. The sense of touch gives one the perception of breath. The mind sense gives one the perception of beauty. When the “breath” disappears, it means that one has succeeded in calming the sense of touch into disappearance. The external five senses have at last been transcended. Only the mind sense remains. And the mind sense experiences the breath as beauty.

In fact, one is still breathing at this stage, albeit ever so softly. It is just that one is now experiencing the breath through the mind sense, and not through the sense of touch. Because the familiar experience of breath is not longer present, one might conclude that one’s breath has stopped! But it hasn’t. Don’t worry. One will not die at this stage of meditation! One is just experiencing the breath in a new and wonderful way. One is experiencing the breath only through the mind sense, and perceiving it as bliss.

It is like viewing a rare, sparkling diamond. At first one is aware of the shape, size and its many facets. But, maybe, after a while one doesn’t perceive the size and shape any more. Even the concept of facets disappears. All one notices, all that one is left with, is the “sparkle,” the beauty. The diamond is still there only one perceives it in a new and wonderful way.

Or it is like the simile that I like to use of the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland, by Lewis Carol<sup>3</sup>. First, the smiling face of a Cheshire Cat appears in the blue sky. As Alice and the Red Queen observe the image, the Cat’s head gradually disappears. Soon, only a mouth is left with an endearing smile. Then the mouth disappears, but the smile still remains! The body has gone, but the beauty remains.

This is how it appears when the five external senses completely disappear and only the mind sense remains. When one is not used to pure mental objects, with no link to anything in the physical world, then one may easily become confused. Faith or confidence (Saddha) is helpful here. If wisdom born of experience is yet too weak, then use confidence to know that when, in the stage of the beautiful breath, then breath disappears leaving only a feeling of beauty or delight, then that is a pure mental object that one is experiencing. Stay there with confidence. Be careful not to allow the hindrance of doubt to disturb the delightful

peace. One may figure out what the experience means at the end of the meditation period, not now. As mentioned many times already, one should wait to the final few minutes of the meditation period to review any meaningful experiences.

### **Summary**

This chapter has been an introduction to the Jhanas. I have given a brief history of the Jhanas and have explored some of the issues often raised about this exalted topic. I have returned yet one more time to the “beautiful breath,” for it is the beginning of the journey into Jhanas. I have prefaced the beautiful breath with the important exhortation not to be afraid of delight in meditation, for delight is the “glue” that holds the mind’s attention on the breath.

The next part takes us further down the road to the deep absorptions. Let us turn now to a discussion of the nimitta, the “home stretch” into Jhanas.

<sup>1</sup> See upadana in Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines, Venerable Nyantiloka (Fourth Revised Edition), Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> The Basic Method of Meditation by Ajahn Brahmavamso, available from the Buddhist Society of Western Australia.

<sup>3</sup> The annotated Alice: Alice’s Adventure in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, Harmondsworth, U.K. Penguin, 1965.

## **THE JHANAS**

### **PART TWO**

#### **THE NIMITTA: THE “HOME STRETCH” INTO JHANAS**

When the breath disappears and delight fills the mind, the nimitta usually appears.

Nimitta, in the context used here, refers to the beautiful “lights” that appear in the mind. I would point out, though, that the nimittas are not visual objects, in that they are not seen through the sense of sight. At this stage of the meditation, the sense of sight is not operating. The nimittas are pure mental objects, known by the mind sense. However, they are commonly perceived as lights.

What is happening here is that perception struggles to interpret such a pure mental phenomena. Perception is that function of mind that interprets experience in terms one can understand. Perception relies crucially on comparison, interpreting experience as in the same category as some similar previous experience. However, pure mental phenomena are rare so rarely visited that perception has great difficulty finding anything at all comparable to these new experiences. This is why nimittas appear strange, like nothing one has ever experienced before. However, the phenomena in the catalogue of one’s past experiences which usually come closest to these nimitta are simple visual lights, such as a car headlight or a flashlight in the dark or the full moon in the night sky. So perception adopts this closest, but imperfect, comparison and interprets the nimitta as lights. Thus, one usually experiences nimitta as a light, a light seen in the mind.

It was a fascinating discovery to realize that everyone who experiences these nimittas, experience exactly the same thing! It is only that meditators interpret one and the same experience in different ways. Some see in their mind the nimitta as a pure white light, others see it as a golden, some as a deep blue. Some see it as a circle, some as oblong in shape, some as sharp edged, some as fuzzy edged. There is indeed no end to the features of nimitta, which meditators describe. The important thing to know is that color, shape and so on are irrelevant. Because it is one’s perception that colors the nimitta and gives it shape, just so one can make sense of it.

#### **When Nimitta Come Up Early**

Sometimes, a “light” can appear in the mind at a very early stage of meditation. However, for all except accomplished meditators, one will find that such “brazen intruders” are highly unstable. If one focuses one’s attention on them, one will not get anywhere. It is not the right

time for nimitta. It is better to regard them as distractions and go back to the main task of the early stage.

**Ignore the Nimitta at First.** It is more uncertain what to do when a nimitta appears at the stage of the beautiful breath, when the breath has yet to be calmed to disappearance. Again, the nimitta appears intrusive, It interferes with the main task of sustaining one's awareness on the beautiful breath. If one deliberately turns away from the breath and on to the nimitta, it usually doesn't remain long. The mind is not refined enough yet to hold a subtle nimitta. One needs to practice on the breath more. So the best thing to do is to ignore the nimitta and let all one's attention train on the beautiful breath.

Often having followed this advice, the nimitta comes back, stronger and brighter. Ignore it again. When It returns a third time, even more powerfully and radiant, go back to the breath. Practicing this way, eventually a hugely powerful and brilliant nimitta will break into your awareness. You can go with that one. Actually, it is almost impossible to ignore. That one usually takes you into jhana.

The above can be compared to a visitor knocking on your door. It could be an unimportant salesman so you ignore them and go on with your business. Often that's the end of the matter. Sometimes, though, they knock again, louder and longer. You ignore them a second time and continue with your task. They bang ever louder, ever more vigorously. This proves that it must be your best friend, so then you open the door, let them in, and have a great time together.

**Incorporating the Nimitta into the Middle of the Breath.** Another method of dealing with an early nimitta that arises at the stage of the beautiful breath is to incorporate the nimitta into the middle of the breath. One trains to visualize the situation as similar to a jewel being held in the center of lotus petals. The shimmering jewel is the nimitta, the lotus petals the beautiful breath. If the mind isn't quite ready to stay with the nimitta, it still has the breath to anchor it.

Sometimes, the mind is so unready that the breath appears to close in on the nimitta, and the nimitta disappears leaving only the beautiful breath. But this step backward does not disturb the meditation. At other times, the mind is well prepared for the nimitta, and the nimitta strengthens and expands pushing out the breath, which disappears beyond the edges of one's awareness, leaving only the nimitta. This method is skillful because it doesn't involve moving the mind from one thing to another. Such movement is coarse and disturbs the meditation significantly. Instead, one just passively observes the transition from the beautiful breath to the nimitta, and maybe back again, allowing the process to develop or recede according to nature, not according to one's desire.



**For Accomplished Meditators Only.** Although the following advice is for accomplished meditators only, by which I mean those with plentiful experience of Jhana already, it is included here for the sake of completeness. When one is skillful in the way into Jhana and one has experienced a Jhana recently, the mind is so still and powerful even before one begins to meditate that one may skip many stages. So much so that one may arouse the nimitta almost immediately after starting. The mind being so used to nimitta, and so favorably disposed to towards them, literally leaps into the nimitta and the nimitta stays. Soon Jhana is reached. For such accomplished meditators, the earlier the nimitta arises, the better.

### **When the Nimitta Doesn't Appear**

For some, when the breath disappears, the nimitta doesn't happen. No lights appear in their mind. Instead, they are only left with a deep feeling of peace, of emptiness, of nothing. This can be a very beneficial state and should not be belittled, but it is not Jhana. Moreover, it lacks the power to proceed any further. It is a cul-de-sac, and a refined one at that, but it is incapable of being developed further. There are a number of methods to bypass this state, generate the causes for nimitta, and go deeper into the jhanas.

**Cultivate Sufficient Joy and Happiness (Pitisukha).** The state above arises because one did not cultivate sufficient pitisukha along with the breath. There was not enough delight when the breath disappeared, so mindfulness had no clear mental object of beauty to latch on to. Understanding this, one needs to put more value on developing delight when one is watching the breath, and cultivating that delight into a strong sense of beauty. For example, one may regard the breath as the messenger bringing you oxygen as a life support gift from the flowers and trees. The breath unites you vitally with all of the plant world, supporting one another with the pulse of the air. Whatever skillful means one employs, by paying careful attention to the beauty alongside the breath, the beauty will blossom. What one pays attention to usually grows.

In the previous chapter, one was cautioned not to be afraid of delight in meditation. I regard this exhortation as so important that I am going to repeat it again almost word for word.

**Do not be afraid of delight in meditation.** Too many meditators dismiss happiness thinking it unimportant or, even worse, thinking that they don't deserve such delight. Happiness in meditation is important! Moreover, you deserve to bliss out! Blissing out on the meditation object is an essential part of the path. So when delight does arise alongside the breath, one should cherish it like a valuable treasure, and guard it accordingly.

**Putting Energy into Knowing.** Another reason for the nimitta not arising is that one hasn't put enough energy into the knowing. As explained in the previous chapter, in the section entitled "What if pitisukha hasn't appeared," **delight is generated by putting lots of energy into the knowing.** Usually, most of our mental energy gets lost in the doing, that is, in planning and remembering, controlling and thinking. If one would only take away one's energy completely from the doing, and give it all totally to the knowing, to attentiveness, then one would experience one's mind becoming brightened and energized with delight. When there is lots of delight, strong pitisukha, then when the breath disappears, the nimitta appears. So, maybe the reason why a nimitta doesn't appear is that one wasted too much energy on controlling, and didn't devote enough energy into knowing.

**Watching Out for Discontent.** However, if the breath has disappeared but no nimitta arises, then one must be careful not to fall into discontent. Discontent will wither any pitisukha already there and will urge the mind into restlessness. This discontent will make the arising of a nimitta even more unlikely. So one must be patient and seek the remedy in becoming aware of contentment and letting it consolidate. Just through paying attention to contentment, it usually deepens. As contentment grows stronger, delight will arise. As delight grows in power, the nimitta appears.

**Focus More Sharply in the Present Moment.** Another useful method to arouse the nimitta when the breath disappears is to focus more sharply on the present moment! Present moment awareness is the very first stage of this method of meditation. But, in practice, as the meditation progresses and one pays attention to other things, the present moment awareness can become a little sloppy. It may be that one's mindfulness has become "smeared" around the present moment, instead of being precisely focused. By noticing this as a problem, it is very easy to adjust the focusing of mindfulness to be knife-edged in the center of now. Like adjusting the camera, the slightly blurred image becomes very sharp. When the attention is sharply focused in the present moment, it experiences more power. Pitisukha comes with the sharpening of focus, and the nimitta soon follows as well.

### **Suitable Nimitta and Useless Nimitta**

It is very helpful to cultivate nimitta of the sort perceived as a light. These "light nimittas" are the best vehicle for transporting the meditator into the Jhanas. However, it is just possible, but rarely done, to enter a Jhana by using "feeling nimittas" instead. By this I mean that one sees no lights in the mind, instead one experiences a feeling of bliss in the mind. It is important to note that the sense of touch has been transcended and such a "feeling" of bliss is experienced completely by the mind sense. It is a pure mental object again, but perceived as relating closely to a physical feeling of bliss. This is a bona-fide nimitta. But it is much more difficult to work with such as a nimitta to gain access to

Jhana, though it is not impossible. For these reasons, it is recommended to cultivate the light nimitta if one aspires for the jhana.

There are some visual nimittas that are of no use on the path into Jhana. It is helpful to know these “useless” nimitta so that one will waste no time with them.

**Visions.** Sometimes whole scenes can appear clearly in the mind. There might be landscapes, buildings and people. They may appear familiar or strange. It might be fascinating to watch such visions, but they are of little use. Moreover, they are meaningless and one should certainly not take them as some revelation of truth! Experience shows that visions arising at this stage are notoriously deceptive and completely untrustworthy. If one likes to waste time, one can linger on them a while. But the recommended thing to do is to remove all interest and go back to the beautiful breath. **Such complex nimitta are merely a reflection of an over-complicated mind.** The mind should have been calmed into simplicity much more effectively before letting go of the breath. When one sustains the attention on the beautiful breath, uninterrupted for long periods of time, then one is training in simplicity. Then when the breath disappears, a simple unified nimitta arises, one that is suitable for progress.

**The Firework Nimitta.** A less elaborate nimitta, which is still over-complicated, can be called the “firework nimitta.” As the name suggests, this consists of many bursts of light coming and going, never lasting long and exhibiting much movement. There may be several bursts of light at the same time, even of different colors. Again, this firework nimitta is a sign that the mind is still too complicated and very unstable. If one wants, one can enjoy the sideshow for a short time, but one should not waste too much time there. One should ignore all the razzel-dazzel of the firework nimitta, return to the breath, and develop more one-pointedness and calm.

**The Shy Nimitta.** The next type of nimitta can be called the “shy nimitta,” a single pure light that flashes up quickly and then disappears. After a few moments, it flashes up again. Each time, it lasts only a second or two. Such a nimitta is much more encouraging. Its simplicity shows that the mind is one-pointed. Its power is a sign that pītisukha is strong. But its inability to remain after breaking through into consciousness shows that the level of calm is not quite enough. In such a situation, one need not return to the beautiful breath yet. Instead, one patiently waits, developing more calm, allowing the mind to become more receptive to the very shy nimitta. As will be explained at greater length later, this nimitta disappears because the mind overreacts to its arrival, usually with excitement or fear. By establishing more solid calm and having the confidence to not react at all, the shy nimitta returns and stays longer each time. Soon, such a nimitta loses its shyness and, feeling accepted within the mind’s calmness, remains a long time. One

should attempt this approach first. But if the nimitta continues being “shy,” with no indication that it is remaining longer, then one should return to the beautiful breath and ignore the shy nimitta. When one has built more tranquility of mind with the beautiful breath, then one can return to the shy nimitta to see if it will establish itself this time.

**The Point Nimitta.** Another type of nimitta is the “point nimitta,” a simple and powerful light, but ever so small, which persists many seconds. This nimitta can be very useful. It shows that one-pointedness is excellent, calm is sufficient, but *pitisukha* is still a bit lacking. However, all one needs to do is gently look deeper into the point nimitta, letting mindfulness zero in, then it appears as if one’s awareness comes closer to this nimitta and its size starts to increase. As it expands a little, one should keep one’s focus on the center, not on the edges, nor beyond the edges. By maintaining the mind’s focus sharply on the center of the point nimitta, it increases power, it grows in *pitisukha*. Soon the nimitta unfolds into the best nimitta of all.

**The Best Nimitta.** The best nimitta of all, that which is the most suitable for Jhanas, begins as being similar to the full moon at midnight in a sky free of clouds. It rises unhurried when the beautiful breath softly disappears. It takes three or four seconds to establish its presence and settle down, remaining still and very beautiful before the mind’s eye. As it remains without remains without effort it grows brighter, more luminous. Soon it appears brighter than the sun at midday, radiating bliss. It becomes, by far, the most beautiful thing one has ever seen. Its beauty and power will often feel more than one can bear. One wonders whether one can take so much bliss of such extreme power. But one can. **There’s no limit to the bliss one can feel.** The nimitta explodes, drowning one in even more bliss, or one dives into the center of the radiating ecstasy. If one remains there, it is jhana.

### **Shining up the Nimitta**

It is a far-reaching insight to realize that this nimitta is actually an image of one’s mind. Just like one sees an image of one’s face when one looks in a mirror, one sees an image of one’s mind in the profound stillness of this meditation stage. The nimitta is a reflective image of one’s mind.

**The Importance of Virtue.** So when the nimitta appears dull, or even dirty, it means that one’s mind is dull, even dirty! Usually, this is because one has been lacking in virtue recently, possibly angry, or maybe self centered. At this stage of meditation, one is looking directly at one’s mind and there is no opportunity for deceit. One always sees the mind as it truly is. So, if one’s nimitta appears dull and strained, then one should clean up one’s act in daily life. One should undertake moral precepts, speak only kindly, and be selfless in service. **This stage of meditation when nimittas appear makes it abundantly clear that virtue is an essential ingredient for success in meditation.**

Having taught many meditation retreats over the years, I have noticed that the meditators who have the easiest progress and most sensational results, are those who are joyously generous, whose nature would never allow them to harm another being, who are soft spoken, gentle and very happy. Their beautiful lifestyle gives them a beautiful mind. And their beautiful mind supports their virtuous lifestyle. Then when they reach this stage of the meditation and their mind is revealed in the image of the nimitta, it is so brilliant and pure that it leads them easily to jhana. It demonstrates that one cannot lead a heedless life and self-indulgent lifestyle and have easy success in one's meditation. On the other hand, purifying one's conduct and developing compassion, at the same time prepares the mind for meditation.

The best remedy, then, for shining up a dull or dirty nimitta, is to purify one's conduct outside the meditation.

**Focusing On the Beautiful Center.** The above being said, if one's conduct in daily life isn't too outrageous, one can shine up the dirty nimitta in the meditation itself. This is achieved by focusing the attention on the center of the nimitta. Most areas of the nimitta may appear dull, but the very center of the nimitta is always the brightest and purest part. It is the soft center of an otherwise stiff and unworkable nimitta. As one focuses on the center, it expands like a balloon to produce a second nimitta, purer and brighter. One looks into the very center of this second nimitta, the spot where it is the brightest of all and that balloons up into a third nimitta even purer, even brighter. Gazing into the center effectively shines up the nimitta. One continues in this way until the nimitta is beautifully brilliant.

When, in life, one has developed a strong faultfinding mind, obsessively picking out what's wrong in this and that, then one will find it almost impossible to pick out the beautiful center of a dull nimitta and focus attention thereon. One has become so conditioned to pick out the blemishes in things that it goes against the grain to ignore all the dull and dirty areas of a nimitta to focus exclusively on the beautiful center. This demonstrates once again how unskillful attitudes in life can stop success in deep meditation. When one develops a more forgiving attitude to life, becoming more embracing of the duality of good and bad—not being a negative obsessive nor a positive excessive but balanced “acceptive”—then not only can one see the beauty in mistakes, but one can also see the beautiful center in a dull and dirty nimitta.

It is essential to have a bright and luminous nimitta to take one through to Jhana. A dull and dirty one is like an old, beat up car that will break down on the journey. The dull nimitta, when not made to shine, usually vanishes after some time. **So, if one is unable to shine up the nimitta, then go back to the beautiful breath and build up more energy on that part called the “beautiful!”** Generate greater pitisukha, huge happiness and joy, along with the breath. Then next time the breath

disappears and a nimitta arises, it will not be a dull one but something more beautiful and luminous. In effect, one has shined up the nimitta in the stage of the beautiful breath.

### **Stabilizing the Nimitta**

When the nimitta is very bright, it is also very beautiful. It usually appears unearthly in the depth of its beauty and more wonderful than anything one has ever experienced before. Whatever the color of the nimitta, that color is a thousand times richer than anything that can be seen with one's eyes. Such awesome beauty will captivate one's attention, making the nimitta remain. The more beautiful the nimitta, the more likely is the nimitta to become stable and not jump about.

**Thus one of the best methods to stabilize the nimitta, so that it persists a long time, is to shine the nimitta into brilliance,** as just explained above.

However, some brilliant nimittas still don't last long. They burst into the mental field of awareness with strong *ptisukha*, but they persist not much longer than a glorious shooting star in a clear night sky. These nimittas have power but lack sufficient stability. In order to stabilize such nimitta, it is important to know that the two enemies that disperse the nimitta are fear and excitement.

**Fear.** Of the two enemies, fear is more common. These nimittas appear so immense in their sheer power and beauty, that one often becomes very afraid. Fear is a natural response to the recognition of something much more powerful than oneself. Moreover, the experience is so unfamiliar that one's personal security looks seriously threatened. It seems as if one might lose all control overwhelmed by supra-mundane bliss, and, in consequence, much of what one took to be one's self would vanish leaving a real sense of freedom. It is the fear of losing one's ego that is the root cause of alarm when a powerful nimitta appears.

Those who have understood something of the Buddha's teaching of *Anatta*, that there is no self, will have an easier time of transcending this fear and accepting the nimitta. They realize that they have nothing to protect and so can let go of control, trust in the emptiness, and selflessly enjoy the beauty and power. Thus the nimitta settles. Even an intellectual understanding that there is no one in here will help overcome the terror of letting go of the innermost controller. However, those who have no appreciation at all of the truth of no self, may overcome this fear by substituting it with the more powerful perception of bliss, as in the simile of the child and the swimming pool.

When a child, who has just learned to feel confident upright on dry land, sees for the first time a swimming pool of water, they are likely to be scared. The unfamiliar environment threatens their security, and they are deeply concerned how their little bodies can manage on such an unsolid material. They are afraid of losing control. So they put one toe

into the water and quickly pull it out. That felt all right. So they place three toes into the water, just a little bit longer. That was okay too. Next they dip a whole foot in. Then a whole leg. As the confidence increases and the swimming pool begins to promise much fun, the anticipation of joy becomes stronger than the fear. The child jumps into the water and immerse itself fully. Then they have such a great time that even their parents can hardly get them to leave!

Similarly, when fear arises with the powerful nimitta, it is all one can do to just stay there for an instant. This is like the child dipping one toe in the water, and drawing it out in an instant. One then reflects how that felt. To say it felt wonderful is an understatement! So, next time, one is encouraged by their previous experience to stay longer. This is like putting three toes in the water, then a whole foot. Later, one will find oneself staying even longer with the strong nimitta, like putting the whole leg in the water, and it feels even better. By this gradual method, confidence soon becomes strong and the expectation of joy so dominant, that when the awesome nimitta arises one jumps right in and immerses oneself fully. Moreover, one has such a great time that it is only with great difficulty that anyone can make you come out.

Another skillful means for overcoming fear at this stage, especially when fear is not strong, is to perform a little mental ceremony of handing over trust. It is as if one has been the driver of one's meditation up until now, and now is the moment to hand over the control completely to the nimitta. One may imagine handing over a bunch of keys to the powerful nimitta, like getting a trusted friend to take over driving one's car. With the imaginary gesture of passing the keys, one passes over control. One then lets go of all driving and controlling, and puts full trust in the nimitta. Such a transfer of faith from oneself to the nimitta usually leads to stability of the nimitta and its subsequent deepening.

**Indeed, one is placing faith in the knowing and taking it away from the doing. This is the theme underlying the whole of the meditation path.** One trains from the very beginning in passive awareness, that is, the ability to be clearly aware without interfering at all with the object of awareness. Energy, with faith, goes into the mindfulness and away from activity. When one learns to watch with ease an ordinary object like the breath without meddling, then one's passive awareness will next be challenged with a more seductive object like the beautiful breath. If one passes this test, then the most challenging object of all, the nimitta, will be presented to you as the ultimate test of passive awareness. For if one gets involved with the nimitta with even the slightest of controlling, then one fails the final examination and gets sent back to the beautiful breath for remedial training. The more one meditates, the more one learns to be powerfully mindful while letting go of all doing. When this skill is fully perfected, it is easy to pass the final test and stabilize the nimitta with flawless passive awareness.

The simile of the mirror is applicable here. When one looks in a mirror at the reflection of one's face and the image moves back and forth, then it is futile to try to stabilize the image by holding the mirror still! In fact, if you try this, the reflection moves even more. The image in the mirror is moving because that which is watching is moving. The mirror doesn't move and so does not need to be held still. The fault is with the knower.

The nimitta is in reality a reflection of the mind, an image of that which is knowing. When this reflection, this nimitta, moves back and forth, then it is futile trying to stabilize the nimitta by holding the nimitta still! In fact, if you try this, the nimitta moves even more. The nimitta is moving because that which is watching the nimitta is moving. When this is understood, one gives up on doing any holding and, instead, focuses on that which knows, letting that come to stillness. Because when that which knows doesn't move, then neither does the nimitta. Like the reflection of one's face in the mirror, when the knower is still, then so is its reflection.

**Excitement.** I mentioned above that the other enemy of the nimitta's stability is excitement or exhilaration, what I sometimes call the "Wow!" response. It is understandable that when there is success in the meditation and amazing things happen, then the meditator can get very excited. This is especially so when a wonderful nimitta first appears, more radiant than the sun and more beautiful than the most exquisite flower! It is common, then, for the mind to say, "Wow!" Unfortunately, immediately after the "Wow" the nimitta disappears and may be reluctant to return for a very long time, **even months**. In order to avoid such a calamity, one should bear in mind Ajahn Chah's famous simile of the still forest pond.

In the late afternoon, forest monks, wandering in the jungle for solitude, would seek out a river or pool. They needed the water for drinking, bathe, and maybe wash a few robes. After drinking and washing, they would setup their forest monk's umbrella draped with mosquito netting away from the pool to spend the evening in meditation. Ajahn Chah said that sometimes he would sit in his mosquito net with his eyes open to watch the jungle animals come to the water at twilight, also to drink and bathe. But the animals would only come out to drink when he was very still. If he moved, they would sense his presence, run back into the jungle and not return for many days. Ajahn Chah knew how to sit very still, so that the jungle animals didn't know that he was there. He would enjoy watching them drinking and playing, sometimes squabbling, and he would delight in the antics of these wild children of nature.

On some occasions, Ajahn Chah would sit extremely still. Then, after the usual jungle animals had finished by the lake, some strange and wonderful animals would cautiously emerge from the undergrowth's darkness. These beings, if they were animals at all, were so beautiful and rare that no one had ever told him about their existence. Or if they



had, then he hadn't understood. He didn't know their names, As they came out from the jungle, their ears would scan the whole area and their noses would timidly sniff for any danger. If Ajahn Chah stirred, even slightly, or softly said, "Wow," these beings would pick up his presence instantaneously and flee back into the jungle, not re-emerging for months. They were the shyest of all beings who live in the jungle, and also the most rare and wondrously beautiful. They are hard to describe.

In this accurate simile, the forest pool represents the mind, and the forest monk sitting near its edge stand for the mindfulness. When mindfulness is still, then, "animals" like the beautiful breath and pitisukha come out from the "jungle" to "play" by the mind's edge. Mindfulness must remain still and not interfere otherwise the beautiful breath and pitisukha will nervously withdraw back into the jungle, not easily coming out again. But if the knower, mindfulness, remains extremely still, after the beautiful breath and pitisukha have finished their business in the mind, then the beautiful, shy nimitta will cautiously emerge to play in the mind. If the nimitta senses that mindfulness isn't so still, if it hears the knower thinking "Wow," then the bashful nimitta will immediately run back into the jungle, and it will not re-emerge for a very long time. Mindfulness blew the opportunity by moving.

So when the powerful and beautiful nimittas appear, one must remember this simile and watch with the stillness of an Ajahn Chah, sitting absolutely motionless by the remote forest lake. One must restrain all excitement. Then one will watch this strange and wonderful nimitta make merry in the mind for a very long time, until it is ready to take one into Jhana.

### **Disturbing the Stable Nimitta**

When the nimitta is stable and radiant, then one is at the entrance to Jhana. One must train to wait patiently here, maintaining the stillness through the lack of any doing, until the causes or conditions are ready for the transition into Jhana. However, at this stage some meditators make the mistake of disturbing the process by "peeking" at the edge of the nimitta.

Once the nimitta is stable and bright, one might become interested in its shape, or size. Is it circular or oblong? Are the edges precise or ill defined? Is it small or is it big? When one looks at the edge, mindfulness loses its one-pointedness. The edge is the place of duality, of inside and outside. And duality is the opposite of one-pointedness. If one looks at the edge, the nimitta will become unstable, and may even disappear. One should keep mindfulness on the very center of the nimitta, away from the edge, until any perception of edge vanishes into the non-duality of one-pointedness. Similarly, if one attempts to expand or contract the nimitta, then one will also be sacrificing the essential one-pointedness. Expansion and contraction involve the perception of size, and that involves awareness of the edge of the nimitta and the space

that lies beyond. Again one is falling back into the trap of duality and losing one-pointedness, through this unprofitable expanding and contracting.

So when the nimitta is stable and bright, just be patient. Don't move. One is building up the Jhana factors of pitisukha and one-pointedness. When they are built to sufficient power, **they will unfold into Jhana by themselves.**

### **A Note on the Luminous (or Radiant) Mind**

There is an oft-quoted passage from the Suttas that is relevant here, but which is often misunderstood. The passage is from the Anguttara Nikaya<sup>1</sup>.

This mind O monks, is luminous, but it is defiled by adventitious defilements. The uninstructed worldling does not understand this as it really is; therefore for him there is no mental development.

This mind, O monks, is luminous, and it is freed from adventitious defilements. The instructed noble disciple understands this as it really is; therefore for him there is mental development (AN 1,1-2).

At the stage of the beautiful and stable nimitta, **it is the nimitta that is radiant and incredibly luminous.** And the nimitta, as already explained, is an image of the mind. When one experiences such a nimitta, one recognizes it as the luminous the luminous (or radiant) mind of the Anguttara passage above. This nimitta is radiant because the mind has been freed of the Five Hindrances—is the doorway into Jhana, and then one truly understands what is meant by “mental development.”

### **Entering Jhana**

When the nimitta is radiant and stable, then its energy builds up moment by moment. It is like adding peace upon peace upon peace, until the peace becomes huge! As the peace becomes huge, the pitisukha becomes huge and the nimitta grows luminosity. If one can maintain the one-pointedness here by keeping one's focus on the very center of the nimitta, the power will reach a critical level. One will feel as if the knower is being drawn into the nimitta, that one is falling into the most glorious bliss. Alternatively, one may feel that the nimitta approaches until it envelops the knower, swallowing one up in cosmic ecstasy. **One is entering Jhana.**

**Yo-yo Jhanas and Snakes and Ladders.** It sometimes happens that when an inexperienced meditator falls into the nimitta, they immediately bounce back to where they began. I call this “Yo-yo Jhanas,” after the children's toy that goes up and down on the end of a string. It isn't real

jhana, because it doesn't last long enough, but it is so close that I give it this label. It is that enemy "excitement," which I explained above, that caused the mindfulness to bounce right back from jhana. Such a reaction is quite understandable since the bliss that one experiences when falling into the nimitta is so much more joy than one can ever imagine. If one thought that the best sexual orgasm was something nice, then one now discovers that it is nothing, trivial, compared to the bliss of these jhanas. These jhanas are powerful, they blow one away, **they are real bliss**. Even after a Yo-yo jhana, one often bursts into tears with happiness, crying at the most wonderful experience, by far, of one's whole life. So it is understandable that novice meditators experience the Yo-yo jhanas first. After all, it takes a lot of training to be able to handle such immensely strong bliss. And it takes a lot of wisdom to let go of excitement when one of the great prizes of spiritual life is theirs for the taking.

For those who are old enough to remember the game snakes and ladders, the simple children's board game played with dice, they will remember the most dangerous square to land on was the square just before the goal. The ninety-ninth square held the head of the longest of snakes. If you landed on the hundredth square you won. But if you landed on the ninety-ninth square, you fell down the snake ending right back at the beginning! A Yo-yo jhana is like landing on the ninety-ninth square of the game "snakes and ladders." One is so very close to "winning the game" and entering jhana, but one fell just a little short, landing on the snake-head of excitement, and slid, or rather bounced, right back to the start.

Even so, Yo-yo jhanas are so close to the real thing that they are not to be sneered at. One experiences incredible bliss, and transports of joy. It makes one as high as a weather balloon, for many hours up high in the sky without a care in the world, and with so much energy that one can hardly sleep. The experience will be the biggest in one's life. It will change you.

Through a little more training and wise reflection on one's experience, one will be able to fall into the nimitta, or be enveloped by it, without bouncing out. The one has entered the amazing world of jhana.

<sup>1</sup> I am using the translation here from the Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: An Anthology of Suttas from the Anguttara Nikaya, translated by Nynaponika Thera & Bhikkhu Bodhi, Oxford: Altamira Press, 1999, p 36.

## THE JHANAS

### PART THREE

#### The Landmarks of All Jhana

**No thought, no decision-making, no perception of time.** From the moment of entering a jhana, one will have no control. One will be unable to give orders as one normally does. The very idea of “what should I do next” cannot even come up. When the “will” that is controlling vanishes away, then the “I will” that fashions one’s concept of future also disappears. The concept of time ceases in Jhana. Within a Jhana, one cannot decide what to do next. One cannot even decide when to come out. It is this absolute absence of will and its offspring, time, that give the jhanas the feature of timeless stability and that lead to jhana states persisting, sometimes for many blissful hours.

**Non-Dual Consciousness.** Because of the perfect one-pointedness, because attention is so fixed, one loses the faculty of perspective within Jhana. Comprehension relies on the technique of comparison, relating this to that, here to there, now with then. In jhana, all that is perceived is non-dual bliss, unmoving, compelling, not giving any space for the arising of perspective. It is like that puzzle where one is shown a still photograph of a well-known object but from an unusual angle, and one has to guess what it is. It is very difficult to comprehend such an object when one is unable to turn to over, or move one’s head to look at it this way and that. When perspective is removed, so is comprehension. Thus in jhana, not only is there no sense of time, but also there is no comprehension of what is going on! At the time, one will not even know what jhana one is in. **All one knows is great bliss, unmoving, unchanging, for unknown lengths of time.**

**Awareness of Bliss that Doesn’t Move.** Even though there is no comprehension within any jhana, due to the lack of perspective, one is certainly not on a trance. One’s mindfulness is hugely increased to a level of sharpness that is truly incredible. One is immensely aware. Only mindfulness doesn’t move. It is frozen. And the stillness of the super, superpower mindfulness, the perfect one-pointedness of awareness, makes the jhana experience completely different to anything one has known before. This is not unconsciousness. It is non-dual consciousness. All it can know is one thing, and that is timeless bliss that doesn’t move.

Afterwards, when one has emerged from jhana, such consummate one-pointedness of consciousness falls apart. With the weakening of one-pointedness, perspective re-emerges and the mind has the agility to move again. The mind has regained the space needed to compare and comprehend. Ordinary consciousness has returned.

Having just emerged from a jhana, it is usual practice to look back at what has happened and review the jhana experience. The jhanas are such powerful events that they leave an indelible record in one's memory store. In fact, one will never forget them as long as one lives. Thus, they are easy to recall, with perfect retention of detail, after emerging. It is through such reviewing right after the event, that one comprehends the details of what happened in the jhana, and one knows which of the jhanas it was. Moreover, the data obtained from reviewing a jhana forms the basis of insight that is Enlightenment itself.

**The Five Senses are Fully Shut Off.** Another strange quality that distinguishes jhana from all other experiences is that within jhana all the five senses are totally shut down. One cannot see, one cannot hear, one cannot smell, taste nor feel touch. One cannot hear the sound of the birds, nor a person coughing. Even if there were a thunderclap nearby, it wouldn't be heard in a jhana. If someone tapped one on the shoulder, or picked one up and let one down, in jhana one cannot know this. The mind in jhana is so completely cut off from these five senses that they cannot break in.<sup>1</sup>

A lay disciple once told me how he had "fluked" a deep jhana while meditating at home. His wife thought he had died and sent for an ambulance. He was rushed to hospital in a wail of loud sirens. In the emergency room, there was no heartbeat registered on the E.C.G., nor brain activity to be seen by the E.E.G. So the doctor put defibrillators on his chest to re-activate his heart. Even though he was being bounced up and down on the hospital bed through the force of the electric shocks, he didn't feel a thing! When he emerged from the jhana in the emergency room, perfectly all right, he had no knowledge of how he had got there, nor of ambulances and sirens, nor of body-jerking defibrillators. All that long time that he was in jhana, he was fully aware, but only of bliss. This is an example of what is meant by the five senses shutting down within the experience of jhana.

### **Summary of the Landmarks of All Jhanas**

It is helpful to know, then, that within a jhana:

1. There is no possibility of thought;
2. No decision making process is available
3. There is no perception of time;
4. Consciousness is non-dual, making comprehension inaccessible;
5. Yes. One is very, very aware, but only of bliss that doesn't move;
6. The five senses are fully shut off, and only the sixth sense, mind, is in operation.

These are the features of jhana. So during a deep meditation, if one wonders whether it is jhana or not, one can be certain it is not! No such thinking can exist within the stillness of jhana. These features will only be recognized on emergence from a jhana, using reviewing mindfulness once the mind can move again.

## THE FIRST JHANA

**The “Wobble” (Vitakka and Vicára).** All jhanas are states of unmoving bliss, almost. However, in the first jhana, there is some movement discernible. I call this movement the “wobble” of first jhana. One is aware of great bliss, so powerful it has subdued completely the part of the ego that wills and does. In jhana, one is on automatic pilot, as it were, with no sense of being in control. However, the bliss is so delicious that it can generate a small residue of attachment. The mind, not the doer, instinctively grasps at the bliss. Because the bliss of first jhana is fuelled by letting go, such involuntary grasping weakens the bliss. Seeing the bliss weaken, the mind automatically lets go of its grasping and the bliss increases in power again. The mind then grasps again, then lets go again. Such subtle involuntary movement gives rise to the wobble of first jhana.

This process can be perceived in another way. As the bliss weakens because of the involuntary grasping, it seems as if the mindfulness moves a small distance away from the bliss. Then the mindfulness gets pulled back into the bliss as the mind automatically lets go. This back and forth movement close to the bliss, is a second way of describing the same first jhana wobble.

This wobble is, in fact, the pair of first jhana factors called vitakka and vicára. Vicára is the involuntary grasping of bliss vitakka is the automatic movement back into bliss. Some commentators explain the pair, vitakka and vicára as “initial thought” and “sustained thought.” While in other contexts this pair can refer to thought, in jhana they certainly mean something else. **It is impossible that such a gross activity as thinking can exist in such a refined state as jhana.** In fact, thinking ceases a long time prior to jhana. In jhana, vitakka and vicára are both sub-verbal and so don't qualify as thought. Vitakka is the sub-verbal movement of the mind back into bliss. Vicára is the sub-verbal movement of mind that holds onto the bliss. Outside of jhana, such movements of mind will often generate thought, and sometimes even speech. But in jhana, vitakka and vicára are too subtle to create any thought. All they are capable of doing is moving mindfulness back onto bliss, and holding mindfulness there. This movement is the wobble of the first jhana, represented as the pair of first jhana factors vitakka and vicára.

**One-pointedness (Ekaggatha).** The third factor of jhana is one-pointedness, Ekaggatha. One-pointedness describes the mindfulness that is so sharply focused on a minute area of existence. It is one-pointed in space because it only sees the point source of bliss, together with a small area surrounding the bliss caused by the first jhana wobble. It is one-pointed in time because it only perceives the present moment, so exclusively and precisely that all notion of time completely disappears.

And it is one-pointed in phenomena because it only knows the mental object of pītisukha, and is totally oblivious to the world of the five senses and one's physical body.

Such one-pointedness in space produces the peculiar existence, only found in the jhāna, of non-dual consciousness, as explained in detail in the previous section. Non-dual consciousness describes the jhānic state where one is fully aware but only of one thing, and from one angle, for timeless periods. Consciousness is so focused on the one thing that the faculty of comprehension is suspended a while. Only after the one-pointedness has dissipated, and one has emerged from the jhāna, will one be able to recognize these features of first jhāna and comprehend them all.

The one-consciousness in time produces the extraordinary stability of the first jhāna, allowing it to last effortlessly for such a long period of time. The concept of time relies on measuring intervals: from past to present or from present to future or from past to future. When all that is perceived within the first jhāna is the precise moment of now, then there is no room for measuring time. All intervals have closed. It is replaced with the perception of timelessness, unmoving.

**One-pointedness of phenomena produces the exceptional occurrence of bliss upon bliss**, unchanging throughout the duration of the jhāna. This makes the first jhāna such a restful abode. One-pointedness of phenomena accounts for the great stillness in jhāna.

Thus, the one-pointedness of the first jhāna is experienced as non-duality of consciousness, timelessness and effortless stillness.

In academic terms, ekaggatā is a Pali compound meaning “one-peak-ness.” The middle term agga (Sanskrit Agra) refers to the peak of a mountain, the summit of an experience, or even the capital of a country (as in Agra, the old Mogul capital of India). Thus ekaggatā does not mean just “one-any old point-ness,” but it refers to a singleness of focus on something soaring and sublime. The single exalted summit that is the focus of ekaggatā in the first jhāna is the supreme bliss of pītisukha.

**Joy-happiness (pītisukha).** Indeed the last two factors of the first jhāna are pīti and sukha. Here, I will deal with them together since they are such a close-knit pair. In fact, they only separate out in the third jhāna, where pīti ceases leaving sukha widowed. Therefore, only after the third jhāna can one know from experience what sukha is and what pīti was. Here, it is sufficient to explain the pair as one thing.

The last two factors of first jhāna, called pītisukha, refer to the bliss that is the focus of attention, and which forms the central experience that is the first jhāna. Bliss is the dominant feature of the first jhāna, so much

so that it is the first thing that one recognizes when reviewing after the jhana. Indeed, mystic traditions other than Buddhism have been so overwhelmed by the sheer immensity, egoless-ness, stillness, ecstasy, ultimateness and pure out-of-this-worldliness, of the first jhana, that throughout history they have comprehended the experience, on reviewing, as “Union with God.”

However, the Buddha explained that this is but one form of supramundane bliss and there are other forms that are superior! In the Buddhist experience of the jhanas, one gets to know many levels of supramundane bliss. The first jhana is the first level. Even though after first jhana, one cannot conceive of an experience more blissful, there is much more!

These different levels of bliss each have a different “taste,” a different quality that sets them apart. These different qualities of bliss can be explained by the diverse causes of bliss. Just as heat generated by sunlight has a different quality to heat caused by a wood fire, which has a different “taste” to heat generated by a furnace, so bliss fuelled by different causes exhibits distinguishing features.

The distinguishing feature of the bliss of first jhana is that it is fueled by the complete absence of all five-sense activities. When the five senses shut down, including all echoes of the five senses manifesting as thought, then one has left the world of the body and material things (kamaloka) and entered the world of pure mind (rupaloka). It is as if a huge burden has dropped away. Or, as Ajahn Chah used to describe it, it is like one had been enduring a tight rope around one’s neck for as long as one can remember. So long, in fact, that one had become used to it and no longer recognized the pain. Then somehow the tension was suddenly released and the rope removed. The bliss one would feel would be the result of a huge burden disappearing! In much the same way, the bliss of the first jhana is caused by the complete fading away of the “tight rope,” meaning all that one took to be the world. **Such insight into the cause of the bliss of the first jhana is fundamental to understanding the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths about suffering.**

### **Summary of the First Jhana**

In summary then, the first jhana is distinguished by the five factors, here compressed into three:

- 1+2. Vitakka – Vicāra: experienced as the “wobble,” being the fine, subtle movement in and out of the bliss;
3. Ekaggata: experienced as non-duality, timelessness and stillness;
- 4 +5 Pīṭisukha experienced as a bliss surpassing anything in the material world, and fueled by the complete transcendence of that world to enter the world of pure mind.



## THE SECOND JHANA

Subsiding of the “Wobble.” It was explained in the description of the first jhana that vitakka and vicára is the involuntary grasping of bliss, causing the mindfulness to move away. Vitakka is the automatic movement of the mind back onto bliss.

As the first jhana deepens, the wobble gets less and the bliss consolidates. One comes to a state where vicára is still holding on to the bliss with the most subtle of grasping, but this is not enough to cause any instability in the bliss. The bliss doesn't decrease as a result of vicára, nor does mindfulness seem to move away from the source. The bliss is so strong that vicára cannot disturb it. Although vicára is still active, there is no longer any vitakka, no movement of mind back onto the source of bliss. The wobble has gone. This is a jhana state described in the suttas as without vitakka but with a small measure of vicára (e.g. DN 33.1.10.50, AN 8's.63). It is so much closer to the second jhana than the first, that it is usually included within the second jhana.

As the bliss strengthens into immutable stability, there is no purpose for vicára to hold on any more. At this point, the mind becomes fully confident enough to let go absolutely. With this final letting go, born of inner confidence in the stability of the bliss, vicára disappears and one enters the second jhana proper.

The first feature then of the second jhana described in the sutras is a-vitakka and a-vicára, meaning without vitakka and vicára. In experience, this means that there is no more wobble in the mind. The second feature is ajhattam sampasadana, meaning “internal confidence.” In experience, this describes the full confidence on the stability of the bliss, which is the cause for vicára to cease.

**Perfect One-Pointedness of Mind (cetaso ekadibbavam).** The third feature of the second jhana is ekadibbavam, meaning perfect one-pointedness of mind. **This absolutely perfect one-pointedness of mind is the salient feature in the experience of second jhana.** When there is no longer any wobble, then the mind is like an unwavering rock, more immovable than a mountain, and harder than a diamond. Such perfection in unyielding stillness is incredible. The mind stays in the bliss without the slightest vibration. This is later recognized as the perfection of the quality called samadhi.

Samadhi is the faculty of sustained attention, and in the second jhana, this attention is sustained on the object without any movement at all. There is not even the finest oscillation. One is fixed, frozen solid, stuck with “super-glue,” unable even to tremble. All stirrings of mind are gone. There is no greater stillness of mind than this. It is called perfect samadhi, and it remains as a feature not only of this second jhana, but in the higher jhanas as well.

**The bliss born of samadhi (samadhijam pitisukham).** It is this perfection of samadhi that gives the bliss of the second jhana its unique “flavor.” The burden that was present in the first jhana that has been abandoned in the second jhana is the affliction of movement. Everything stands perfectly still in the second jhana, even the knower. Such absolute stillness transcends the mental pain born of the mind moving, and it reveals the greater bliss fuelled by pure samadhi. In the suttas, the bliss of the second jhana is called the pitisukha born of samadhi (e.g. DN 9.11). Such bliss is even more pleasurable, hugely so, than the bliss resulting from transcending the world of the five senses! One could not anticipate such bliss. It is of a totally separate order. After experiencing the second jhana, having realized two rare “species” of supramundane bliss that are extreme, one begins to wonder what other levels of bliss may lie ahead. **One ponders where the end of bliss lies!**

**The end of all doing.** Another salient feature of the second jhana is that within the jhana all “doing” has totally ceased, even the involuntary “doing” that caused the wobble to appear has completely vanished. The “doer” as died. Only when one has experience of the second jhana can one fully appreciate what is meant by the term “water,” when water “dies” during the frog’s first experience on dry land. Within the second jhana, the “doer” has gone. It is no more. Absolute stillness remains. Moreover, it seems as if something that was so obvious to you as an essential part of one’s eternal identity, the doer, has now been deleted from existence. How often does what seem obvious now, later turns out to be a mirage, a delusion! After the second jhana it is possible to uncover the delusion that the self is the doer. One penetrates the illusion of free will, from the data of raw experience. The philosopher who concludes that “to be is to do,” could not have known the state of second jhana. In the second jhana, “being” is (through knowing), but “doing” is not. These jhanas are weird, They defy normal experience. But they are real, more real than the world. Moreover, the second jhana and the above unlock the meaning of non-self, anatta.

### **Summary of the Second Jhana**

Thus the second jhana is distinguished by another collection of features:

- 1+2.a-vitakka-a-vicāra , ajhattam sampasadanam” experience as the subsiding of the “wobble” from the first jhana due to internal confidence in the stability of the bliss;
3. Cetaso Ekodibbanam: perfect one-pointedness of mind due to full confidence in the bliss. This is usually experienced as rock-like stillness, the temporary “death” of the “doer,” or the perfection of samadhi;

4. Ssamadhijam pitisukham: being the focus of this jhana, the supramundane bliss generated by the end of all movement of the mind, and
5. The end of all doing: seen as the first that the “doer” has completely gone.

### **THE THIRD JHANA**

As the stillness of the knowing, samadhi, becomes longer established, then the stillness of the known grows ever more profound. It is to be remembered that in jhana, what is known is the image of the mind. Citta, and the mind is the knowing. In other words, the knowing knows an image of itself in the jhana. First the knowing becomes still, then its image, the known, gradually becomes still.

In the first two jhanas, this image of the mind is recognized as a bliss that up until now has been called pitisukha. In the third jhana, the image of the mind has gone to the next level of stillness, to a very different kind of bliss, the like of which one hasn't seen before.

**Piti has Vanished!** Prior to the third jhana, all bliss has something in common, as well as differing in its “flavors” due to the distinguishing causes. That something in common was the combination of piti plus sukha. Because they were always together, seemingly as inseparable as Siamese twins, it was not only pointless but even impossible to tell them apart. It was this combination that, up to now, gave all bliss a common quality. Now in the third jhana, piti has vanished leaving only sukha, producing a very different species of bliss altogether.

It is only after the experience of the third jhana that one can know what sukha is, and by inference what piti was. Piti appears as the more burdensome part of bliss, although the word “burdensome” in the context of the second jhana only just seems appropriate. Sukha is the more refined part. In the third jhana, the bliss that was known in the second jhana separates out leaving only the sukha.

**Great Mindfulness, Clear Knowing and Equanimity.** As with many jhanas, the experiences are next to impossible to describe. However, the higher the jhana, the more profound the experience and the more difficult it becomes to put into words. These states as their language are remote from the world. At a stretch, one may say that the bliss of the third jhana, the sukha, has a greater sense of ease, quieter and more serene. In the suttas, it is accompanied by the features of mindfulness (sati), clear knowing (sampojanna) and equanimity (upekkha), although these qualities are said in the Anupada Sutta (MN 111) to be present in all jhanas. Perhaps these features are emphasized in the sutta as qualities of the third jhana in order to point out that in these very deep jhanas, one is exceptionally mindful, very clear in the knowing, and so still that

one looks on without moving, which is the root meaning of equanimity (upekkha).

**The Same Rock-like Stillness and Absence of a Doer.** The third jhana retains the perfect samadhi, the rock-like stillness, the absence of a doer, and the inaccessibility from the world of the five senses. However, it is distinguished from the second jhana by nature of the bliss, which has soared up to another level and appeared as another species of bliss altogether. So much so that the suttas describe the third jhana as what the Enlightened Ones describe by “as one who abides in bliss (in the third jhana) mindful, just looking on” (e.g. DN 9.12).

### **Summary of the Third Jhana**

Thus the third jhana has the following features:

1. The bliss has separated, losing the coarse part that was piti;
2. The bliss that remains, sukha, exhibits the qualities of great mindfulness, clear knowing and the sense of just looking on;
3. The same absolute rock-like stillness and absence of a doer, as in the second jhana.

## **THE FOURTH JHANA**

Sukha has vanished! As the stillness of the knower calms that which is known, the bliss that was the central feature of the first three jhanas changes again when one enters the fourth jhana. Only this time it changes more radically. Sukha completely disappears. It vanishes. What one is left with is an absolute still knower seeing absolute stillness.

**The perfection of Peace.** From the perspective of the fourth jhana, the bliss of the previous jhanas is seen as a residual movement of the mental object, and an affliction obscuring something much greater. When the bliss subsides, all that is left is the profound peace that is the hallmark of the fourth jhana. Nothing moves in here, nothing glows. Nothing feels happiness or its opposite, discomfort. One feels perfect balance in the very center of the mind. Like being in the center of the cyclone, nothing stirs in the center of the mind’s eye. There is a sense of perfection in here, a perfection of stillness and a perfection of awareness. The Buddha described it as the purification of mindfulness, just looking on (upekkha sati parisuddhim) (e.g. DN 9.13).

The peace of the fourth jhana is like no other peace to be found in the world. It can only be known having passed through the experience of the previous three jhanas. That passage is the only way of later confirming that the unmoving peace that one felt, was indeed that of fourth jhana. Furthermore, the state of fourth jhana is so very still, that one remains on its plateau for many hours. It seems impossible that one could experience the fourth jhana for any less time.

Though piti and sukha have both ceased in the fourth jhana, and all that is left is the perfection of peace, such an experience is later recognized, on reviewing, as supremely delightful. Although all bliss has vanished, the perfect peace of the fourth jhana is seen as the best bliss so far. It is the bliss of no more bliss! And this is not playing with words, trying to sound clever and mystical. This is how it is.

### **Summary of the Fourth Jhana**

This the fourth jhana has the following features:

1. The disappearance of sukha
2. An extremely long lasting, and unchanging, perception of the perfection of peace, reached through the lower three jhanas;
3. The same absolute rock-like stillness, and absence of a doer, as in the second and third jhanas;
4. The complete inaccessibility from the world of the five senses and one's body.

### **THE BUDDHA'S SIMILE FOR THE FOUR JHANAS**

The Buddha would often describe the experience within the four jhanas using an evocative simile for each (MN 39.15-18, MN 77.25-28, etc.). Before explaining these similes, it is helpful to pause to clarify the meaning of a key word used in all the similes, kaya. Kaya has the same range of meanings as the English word "body." Just as "body" can mean things other than the body of a person, such as a "body of evidence" for example, so too the Pali word kaya can mean things other than a physical body, such as a body of mental factors, nama kaya. (DN 15.20). In the jhanas, the five senses aren't operating, meaning that there is no experience of a physical body. The body has been transcended. Therefore, when the Buddha states in these four similes "...so that there is no part of his whole kaya un-pervaded (by bliss etc.)," this can be taken to mean "...so that there is no part of his whole mental body of experience un-pervaded (by bliss etc.)" (MN 39.16). This point is too often misunderstood.

The Buddha's simile for the first jhana was a ball of clay (used as soap) with just the right amount of moisture, neither too dry nor leaking out. The ball of clay stands for the unified mind, wherein mindfulness has been restricted to the very small areas created by the "wobble." The moisture stands for the bliss caused by total seclusion from the world of the five senses. The moisture pervading the clay ball completely indicates the bliss thoroughly pervading the space and duration of the mental experience. This is later recognized as bliss followed by bliss, and then more bliss, without interruption. The moisture not leaking out describes the bliss always being contained in the space generated by the wobble, never leaking out of this area of mind space into the world of the five senses, as long as the jhana persists.

The second jhana is likened to a lake with no external entry for water, but with a spring within the lake itself replenishing the lake with cool

water. The lake represents the mind. The complete absence of any way that water from outside can enter the lake describes the inaccessibility of the mind in the second jhana from any influence outside. Not even the doer can enter such a mind. Such hermetic inaccessibility from all external influences is the cause of the rock-like stillness of the second jhana. The internal spring supplying the fount of cool water represents ajjhattam sampasadana, the internal confidence in the bliss of the second jhana. This internal confidence causes complete letting go, cooling the mind to stillness and freeing it from all movement. The coolness stands for the bliss itself, born of samadhi or stillness, and which pervades the whole mental experience, unchanging, throughout the duration of the jhanas.

The third jhana is described by the metaphor of a lotus flower that thrives immersed in the cool water of a lake. The lotus represents the mind in third jhana. Water can cool the petals and leaves of a lotus but can never penetrate the lotus, since all water rolls off a lotus. The coolness stands for sukha, the wetness stands for piti. So like the lotus immersed in water, the mind in the third jhana is cooled by sukha but is not penetrated by piti. The mind in the third jhana experiences only sukha. In the third jhana, the mind continues to experience a rock-like stillness, never moving outside, just as the lotus in the simile always remains immersed within the water. Just as the bliss the third jhana sustains the mind therein, so the cool water, which represents bliss, causes the lotus to thrive. Once again, the unique bliss of the third jhana pervades the whole mental experience from beginning to end, just as the cool waters in the simile pervade the lotus with coolness from its roots to its tips.

The fourth jhana is likened to a man draped from head to toe in a clean white cloth. The man represents the mind. The clean white cloth represents the perfect purity of both equanimity and mindfulness that is the hallmark of the fourth jhana. The mind in the fourth jhana is stainless, spotless as clean cloth, perfectly still and just looking on, purely and simply. Of course, this absolute purity of peacefulness pervades the whole body of the mental experience, from the start to the end just as the white cloth completely covers the man's body, from head to toe.

This is the meaning to the four similes for jhana, as I understand them.

### **MOVING FROM JHANA TO JHANA**

As I've indicated before, when one is in any jhana, one cannot make a move. One cannot formulate any decision to proceed from this jhana to that. One cannot even make a decision to come out. All such control has been abandoned within jhana. Furthermore, the ultra-stillness of mindfulness in jhana freezes the activity of mind called comprehension to the extent that, while in jhana, one can hardly make sense of one's

experience. The landmarks of jhana are only recognized later, after emerging and reviewing. This, within any jhana, not only one cannot move, but also one cannot know where one is nor where to move to! So how does movement from jhana to jhana occur?

**A Four-Roomed House.** Imagine a four-roomed house with only one entrance door. Going through that door, one enters the first room. One must go through the first room to enter the second room, go through the second room to enter the third room, and one must go through the third room to enter the fourth room. To go out from the fourth room one must leave via the third room, to go out from the third room one must leave via the second room, to go out from the second room one must leave via the first room, and to go out from the first room one must leave by the same door through which one came in. Now suppose that the floor surface in all the four rooms was so slippery that it is impossible to add to the momentum within the house. Thus, if one entered the house with only a little momentum, one will slide to a halt within the first room. With a great amount of entry momentum, one may come to a stop in the second, or even the third room. Then with yet more entry momentum, one may reach the fourth room.

Such a simile well describes how moving from jhana to jhana actually occurs. Within a jhana there is no control, like the very slippery floor inside the house that make adding to the momentum impossible. If one enters the doorway into jhanas with a little momentum, one stops in the first jhana. With greater momentum, one reaches the second or third jhana. And, with yet more entry momentum, one may reach the fourth jhana. The entry momentum can only be generated outside of jhana, when control is possible. **The type of “momentum” referred to here is the momentum of letting go.**

**Letting Go is Cultivated Before Entering Jhana.** Letting go is cultivated before entering jhana, to the point where it becomes an involuntary inclination of the mind, a strong natural tendency. If one enters the doorway into the jhanas with little more than adequate “letting go momentum,” one will stop in the first jhana. With a stronger automatic tendency to let go, one reaches the second jhana or third jhana. With a very strong inclination to letting go, one attains to the fourth jhana. However, one cannot increase the strength of letting go momentum while inside the jhanas. Whatever one enters with is all that one has.

**Reviewing the Experience of Bliss.** One can cultivate this momentum of letting go outside of jhana by reviewing the experiences of bliss and by recognizing the obstacles called attachments. When the mind recognizes how superior is the happiness in states of letting go, the inclination to more letting go grows ever stronger. Sometimes I have taught my stubborn mind by thinking, “See mind! See! See how much more bliss is in the states of letting go! See mind! Don’t forget mind! Remember,

okay?" The mind then leans ever more strongly to letting go. Or the mind can recognize the obstacles to deeper bliss, being the various levels of attachment that block letting go, and these hinder more bliss. When the mind learns, through reviewing, to recognize the enemies to its own happiness—the attachments—then its inclination to letting go becomes empowered by wisdom. This is how one can cultivate the momentum of letting go outside of jhana, so that one may enter the jhana with great letting go and reach the deeper jhanas.

### **Each Jhana is Within the Other**

Another way to look at how one moves from jhana to jhana is with the simile of the thousand-petalled lotus. The petals on a thousand-petalled lotus open up in order, in strict succession, only after being warmed by the sun. The first jhana can be compared to the rare and delicate 993<sup>rd</sup> row of petals. Just as the 993<sup>rd</sup> row of petals, now being warmed by the sun, holds and conceals within the even more fragrant 994<sup>th</sup> row of petals, so to the rare and delicate first jhana, now being warmed by letting go, holds and conceals within it the even more blissful second jhana. When this 993<sup>rd</sup> row of petals eventually opens up, then the 994<sup>th</sup> row of petals appears in its center. In the same way, when first jhana eventually opens up, then the second jhana appears in its center. Thus the second jhana is actually within the First jhana, the third jhana within the second jhana, and the fourth jhana within the third jhana.

To put it another way, in the simile of the four-roomed house, the rooms are concentric. Thus one does not come out from the first jhana to go next to the second jhana. Instead, one goes deeper into the first jhana to into the second jhana, deeper into the second jhana to get to the third jhana, and deeper in to the third jhana to enter the fourth jhana. The next level of jhana always lies within the present jhana.

### **The Power of Aditthana**

When one has had much experience of jhana, one can move from jhana to jhana using the power of Aditthana. In this context, the Pali word Aditthana represents the Buddhist way of programming the mind. At the beginning of one's meditation, one can program the mind to enter a specified jhana for a pre-determined length of time. Of course, this only works for one who is very familiar with the destination and is well acquainted with the rout there. This is the method that every accomplished meditators use. It is like setting the automatic pilot shortly after takeoff. However, even for such accomplished meditators, the specified jhana is reached by traversing the same path. For example, if one programs the mind to enter the third jhana, then it must pass through the first jhana and then pass through the second jhana to enter the third jhana, although it may pass through these lower jhanas quickly.



## THE IMMATERIAL ATTAINMENTS

In the simile of the thousand petalled lotus cited above, the 993<sup>rd</sup> row of petals represents the first jhana, the 994<sup>th</sup> row the second jhana, the 995<sup>th</sup> and 996<sup>th</sup> rows of petals should represent the third and fourth jhanas. However, you may be wondering what do the 997<sup>th</sup>, 998<sup>th</sup>, 999<sup>th</sup> and 1,000<sup>th</sup> rows of petals represent?

Beyond the four jhanas lies the four immaterial attainments. It is noteworthy that the Buddha never called these attainments jhana in the suttas. Only the commentaries, compiled a thousand years later, call them jhana.

The Four Immaterial Attainments are:

1. The mind-base of unlimited space;
2. The mind-base of unlimited consciousness;
3. The mind-base of nothingness;
4. The mind-base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

Just as the fourth jhana lies within the third jhana, so the first immaterial attainment lies within the fourth jhana, the second immaterial attainment lies within the first immaterial attainment and so on like the rows of petals of the lotus. Thus, of necessity, all four immaterial attainments possess the following features carried over from the jhanas.

1. The mind remains inaccessible to the world of the five senses and all knowledge of the body;
2. The mind persists in rock-like stillness, incapable of forming any thought or making any plans, for long periods of time;
3. 3. Comprehension is so frozen that one can hardly make sense, at the time of one's experience. Comprehension is achieved after emerging; and
4. The pure equanimity and mindfulness of the fourth jhana remains as a foundation for each immaterial attainment.

Just as the first three jhanas take different forms of bliss as their object, and the fourth jhana takes a sublime state of pure peace as its object, so the immaterial attainments each take a pure mental object. The perceptions of these objects I call "mind-bases," since they are the mental platforms on which the immaterial attainments rest. These unmoving mind-bases get ever more refined, and empty, the higher the immaterial attainment.

Back in the fourth jhana, mindfulness is powerful, yet still, just looking on at the perfection of peace—way beyond the world of the five-senses and precisely one-pointed. In states of precise one-pointedness, ordinary concepts derive from the world are squeezed out, and other unworldly perceptions replace them.

For example, when a meditator in the early stages becomes perfectly focused in the present moment, one-pointed in time, ordinary concepts of time are squeezed out, and other unworldly perceptions of time replace them. When one is fully centered within the present moment, on the one hand it feels timeless and on the other hand it feels as if one has all the time in the world. Within the point of absolute now, time is without edges, undefined and immeasurable. It is infinite and nothing at the same time. It is unlimited (anatta). The experience of one-pointedness in time, seen early in the meditation, can be the key to understanding the simultaneous sense of infinity and emptiness in the more profound states of one-pointedness called the immaterial attainments.

From the fourth jhana, the mind can look into the perfect peace to perceive absolute one-pointedness in space. This is one of the features of the fourth jhana always available for inspection, as it were, and it is the doorway into the immaterial attainments. In this absolute one-pointedness, space is perceived as both infinite and empty, a sort of no-space. Because it is perceived as empty of that which usually limits space, material form (rupa), this attainment and those following are called immaterial (arupa) attainments.

#### **The Mind-Base of Unlimited Space**

The first immaterial attainment, then, is the mind-base of unlimited space, perceived as both infinite and empty, immeasurable and undefined. This is the perception that fills the mind thoroughly and persists without blinking for the long duration of the attainment. Mindfulness, powerful, still and purified, looks on at this perception with utter contentment.

#### **The Mind-Base of Unlimited Consciousness**

Within the perception of unlimited space lies the perception of no-space, of space losing its meaning. When the mind attends to this feature within the first immaterial attainment, space disappears and is replaced by perception of absolute one-pointedness of consciousness. As indicated above by the common experience of one-pointedness of time, in the state that perceives one-pointedness of consciousness, consciousness simultaneously feels infinite and empty, immeasurable and undefined. One has entered the second immaterial attainment of the mind-base of unlimited consciousness. This is the perception that fills the mind completely and persists without wavering for even longer periods of time.

#### **The Mind-Base of Nothingness**

Within the perception of unlimited consciousness lies the perception of no-consciousness, of consciousness now losing its meaning as well. When the mind focuses on this feature within the second immaterial attainment, all perception of consciousness disappears. Perceptions of material form and space have already disappeared, and so all that one is left with is the one-pointedness of nothingness. One has entered the

third immaterial attainment of the mind-base of nothingness. This is the concept that fills the mind totally, persisting unchanged for yet longer periods of time.

### **The Mind-Base of Neither-Perception-Nor-Non-Perception.**

Within the perception of nothingness lies the perception of not even nothing! If the mind is subtle enough to see this feature, then the perception of nothingness disappears and is replaced by the perception of neither perception nor no perception. All that one can say about this fourth immaterial attainment is that it is, in fact, a perception (AN 9s,42). In the simile of the thousand petalled lotus, this state is represented by the 1,000<sup>th</sup> layer of petals, still closed, with all the 999 other layers of petals fully open. The 1000<sup>th</sup> petal is almost a non-petal, being the most subtle and sublime of all. For it clasps within its gossamer fabric the famous **“Jewel in the heart of the lotus,” Nibbana.**

### **NIBBANA, THE END OF ALL PERCEPTION**

For within the perception of neither perception of neither perception nor non-perception lies the end of all perception, the cessation of all that is felt or perceived, Nibbana. If the mind attends to this, the mind stops. When the mind starts again one gains the attainment of Arahant or anagami, these are the only possibilities.

### **The Sequence of Gradual Cessation**

Another way of viewing the jhanas and the four immaterial attainments is by placing them in the sequence of gradual cessation. The process that leads into the first jhana is the cessation of the world of the five senses together with the body and all doing. The path from the first jhana to the fourth jhana is the cessation of that part of the mind that recognizes pleasure and displeasure. The road from the fourth jhana to the fourth immaterial attainment is the cessation, almost, of the remaining activity of the mind called “knowing.” And the last step is the cessation of the last vestige of knowing. Through jhanas and immaterial attainments, first one lets go of the body and the world, of the five senses. Then one lets go of the doer. Then one lets go of pleasure and displeasure. The one lets go of space and consciousness. Then one lets go all knowing. When one lets go of an object, the object disappears, ceases. It remains one hasn't let go. Through letting go of all knowing, knowing ceases. **This is the cessation of everything, including the mind.** This is the place where consciousness no longer manifests, where earth, water, fire and air find no footing, where name-and-form are wholly destroyed, (DN 11,85). Emptiness. Cessation. Nibbana . The “jewel” in the heart of the lotus.

## FINAL WORDS

In this part on the jhanas, I have led you on a journey from theory through to practice up to the high mountain ranges where lie the great summits that are the jhanas, and up higher to the rarefied peaks that are the immaterial attainments. Though the tour may seem way beyond you today, tomorrow you may find yourself well on the rout. So it is helpful even today to have this road map before you.

Moreover, these jhanas are like immensely rich gold mines, but carrying the most precious of insights rather than one of the most precious metals. They supply the raw materials, the unexpected data, which build those special insights that open one's eyes to Nibbana. The jhanas are jewels that adorn the face of Buddhism. **Moreover, not only are they essential to the experience of Enlightenment, they are possible today!**

I conclude this part with the words of the Lord Buddha:

Natthi Jhanam Apannassa	There is no jhana without wisdom
Panna Natthi Ajhayato	There is no wisdom without jhana
Yamhi Jhanan Ca Panna ca	But for one with both jhana and wisdom
Sa Ve Nibbana Santike	They are in the presence of Nibbana

Dhp 373

<sup>1</sup> Although sound can disturb the first jhana, the fact is that when one perceives the sound, one is no longer in jhana.

## Back piece

Ajahn Brahmavamso was born in London in 1951. He regarded himself a Buddhist at the age of 17 through his reading of Buddhist books while still at school. His interest in Buddhism and meditation flourished while studying theoretical physics at Cambridge University. After completing his degree and teaching for a year, he traveled to Thailand to become a monk.

He was ordained in Bangkok at the age of 23 by the Abbot at Wat Saket. He subsequently spent 9 years studying and training in the forest meditation tradition of the Venerable Ajahn Chah.

In 1983, he was asked to assist in the establishing of a forest monastery near Perth, Western Australia. Ajahn Brahm now is the Abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery and the Spiritual Director of the Buddhist Society of Western Australia.

He is also the Spiritual patron of the Buddhist Fellowship in Singapore.

## DEDICATION

Dedicated to the well being and peace of all beings

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May the sponsors be blessed and guided by the Triple Gem always,  
In this life and all future lives until Enlightenment is attained  
Sadhu! Sadhu! Sadhu!

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