First Jhana

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How do we do it? And one of his most important insights was the division of the factors of the first jhana into two types, the causes and the effects. The causes are directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of pre-emotion. The effects are pleasure and rapture. It falls in line with the principle of karma. There are things you do, and then there are feelings that come about as a result of what you do. And it’s through the actions that you get the results. Sometimes you hear the recipe for a first jhana as you find some directed thought. And then you add some evaluation, and then you add some singleness of preoccupation, and then you add some pleasure, and you add some rapture. But the question is, where are you going to get the pleasure and rapture? They’re not on the shelf. You can’t go down to the store. Of course, the Jhana Lees answer is that you look very carefully at how you direct your thoughts to the breath and how you evaluate the breath so that you really do get what you want with the breath. And you learn how to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness and rapture. So you pay attention to the causes and you try to do them very carefully. Directed thought means that you keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath. Keep thinking about the breath. Don’t let your thoughts go wandering off someplace else. If they do wander off, bring them back right away. Try to be as quick as possible in dropping any other thoughts and getting right back to the breath. As for the evaluation, on the one hand, you evaluate how well the breath is going. How does it feel? What kind of breathing feels best for you right now? How much breath energy do you feel in the different parts of the body? But you also want to evaluate your mind. Where in the body do you find it most natural to stay focused, where it seems that the mind can settle down and be at its ease? And if you’ve been wandering off, how do you bring the mind back in such a way that it’s willing to stay? If you grab it by the scruff of the neck and force it. Then as soon as your mindfulness lapses, or as soon as your alertness lapses, it’s gone. How do you make it happy to come back? You’ve got to be gentle but firm. One good way is to reward the mind when it comes back, breathing in a way that feels really, really good. So you can remind yourself that this is where you really want to be. But you have to stay on the alert that the mind is like a committee, and some members of the committee are not willing to settle down. They’ve got other agendas, other things they want to think about, other places they want to go. So you have to be on the lookout because they’ll try to slip off again. And don’t be surprised and don’t be upset when they do. Just very matter-of-factly notice it. Drop whatever concern they have and come back to the breath. And don’t give in to the impulse that you’ve got to complete the thought before you drop it. Just let there be a lot of loose ends. Learn how to live with the loose ends. You don’t need to follow them through and tie them all up together. Just let them go and come back to the breath. This is what you want to continue weaving right here, the concentration on the breath. And you don’t have to look anywhere else for the pleasure of the rapture. Where you are right now, how can you adjust the pressure of your concentration so that it feels just right? How do you adjust the range of your focus? Some people find they can start with the whole body and then work into one focal spot. And other people find they have to start with the one focal spot and then from there let their awareness spread out to fill the whole body. So that’s something else you want to evaluate. How is your mind most likely to settle down? What is it like? Because this is an important part of concentration. You have to like what you’re doing. You have to enjoy the object of your concentration. And you have to enjoy the challenge of learning how to train the mind. Even though it may be obstreperous, even though it may be somewhat disobedient, there is a way to figure out how to get it to settle down. What you’re doing here is you’re using normal processes of the mind, directed thought, and evaluation of things we do all the time. As the Buddha said, this underlies the simple fact that we can talk to ourselves. When your mind is chattering away to itself, it’s directing its thought in a particular direction and then it’s evaluating something. Is this good? Is this bad? Do you like it? Do you not like it? It’s a process we’re doing all the time already. The Buddha is simply asking us to focus it on one spot so we can develop this singleness of preoccupation and to focus it in such a way and use our thinking in such a way that we can allow the breath to become comfortable. That word “allow” is important. You can’t force the breath to be comfortable, because the element of force is going to create tension. So think of opening things up inside you. Whatever breath channels that may have gotten closed off, think of them opening in all directions. Forward, back, up, down, left, right, catacornered. Any direction you can imagine that the breath can come in, the breath can go out. Different ways it can flow in the body. That’s all part of evaluation. Some descriptions of jhana in which they say the director thought and evaluation are an unfortunate part of the first jhana. It’s just a simple matter of the fact that the mind hasn’t settled down yet properly. You want to get through that as quickly as possible. That’s not the case. The director thought and evaluation are really important work. This is the beginning of discernment. This is how you learn how to understand your own mind. This is what we’re trying to develop. A concentration that has both calm and insight working together. Now eventually you will get to the point where you can put the director thought and evaluation aside. That’s when the breath feels really good, the mind really feels ready to settle down, and all that thinking and evaluating seems excessive. You’re ready to drop it and just focus right in. Let your awareness become one with the breath. But in the meantime, you’ve learned some important lessons. How to use your thinking in a positive way, in a way that allows the breath to become comfortable, so you can create a sense of refreshment just by the way you breathe. And you’ll learn that it’s not a matter of trying to stop the mind from thinking. Use your thinking in a useful way. There are no other tricks. Sometimes we like to think that maybe there’s some hidden teaching that, if only we knew that one hidden teaching, then everything would work out. The Buddha is very, as he said, open-handed toward the end of his life. He commented that he didn’t have the closed fist of a teacher who kept back some important teachings until the very end. So the practice is simply a matter of doing what the basic message is, but really doing it carefully, really doing it with a lot of attention, with a lot of care. So when you’re directing your thoughts to the breath, really direct them to the breath. Keep them there. When you’re evaluating the breath, try to be very sensitive. Any other issue comes up, you can let it drop, let it drop. Some people wonder how you’re going to gain insight this way. Well, in the fact that you’re dropping your thoughts as quickly as possible, you begin to see the process of how thoughts gather, how they begin to fabricate. And the more quickly you can do this, the more subtle the stages you’ll see. You’ll see the back and forth between thought fabrication and perception, the perception of the labels you put on things, and the little dialogue that goes on in the mind as to, “Do you want to follow this thought? Sure, let’s go.” Well, you say no. What happens when you say no? As the Buddha said, you don’t really understand your craving until you’ve really let it go. A lot of people say, “Well, we have to understand craving by following our craving.” That doesn’t give any understanding at all. That’s just the way of the world. You learn about your craving, you learn about your thoughts by cutting them off. Not denying that they’re there, but just trying to catch them as quickly as possible. And the more quickly you can catch them, the more you realize there’s a lot of subtle stuff going on inside the mind. So again, it’s not a matter that there are any secret teachings. It’s just that you do very carefully. So, the actions that the Buddha recommends. Direct your thought to the breath. Evaluate the breath. Try to stay with the breath as the one object of your awareness. One in the sense that it’s the only thing you’re thinking about, and one also in the sense that it’s filling the whole range of your body. Think of the breath coming in from all directions, mingling in the body in whatever way seems most comfortable. Notice where you’re blocking the breath. Notice how you might open up those blocked areas. That’s all the work of direct thought and evaluation, aiming towards a sense of ease, a sense of refreshment in the breathing. If you put the causes together well, then the effects are going to come. At the very least, as the Buddha says, there’s a sense of ease that comes from the fact that you’re isolating your thoughts, isolating your awareness from other issues. You’re right here, just with this one issue. And all the cares of the world, all the worries you may have, all the issues you may have, responsibilities, you can put them aside for right now. And simply putting them aside gives a sense of ease and lightness. The ability to stay right here, not having to go anywhere else, that gives a sense of fullness. You can spread out a bit here in the present moment. You don’t have to tense up so that you’re ready to jump to the next issue, or the next thought, or the next responsibility. For the time being, you have no other responsibilities. There’s nowhere else you have to go, nothing else you have to do. Just do this one thing. With sensitivity, with your full attention. And the results are sure to come.

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