

Insight From Jhana

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We meditate so that we can put an end to the sufferings in our lives, and particularly to the unnecessary sufferings that the mind imposes on itself. And, as it turns out, those are the sufferings that weigh down the mind. Without those sufferings, there's no problem.

So how does the meditation do this? We make the mind quiet so that we can see the mind in action. First, we develop a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, a sense of feeling at home in the present moment. This allows us to become more and more sensitive to what the mind is doing in the present moment. In fact, the process of getting the mind to settle down is like peeling away the layers of an onion. First you deal with the really blatant distractions – the blatant things that are irritating the mind: thoughts about your work, thoughts about home, thoughts what other people have said and done. All the different hindrances - you want to clear those away.

Once they're gone, the mind gets into concentration, but even then it's not fully settled down. You still need to use some directed thought and evaluation to, on the one hand, fend off any distractions, and on the other, to massage the object of your concentration so it becomes more and more amenable. We think about the breath. We evaluate the breath. We want to figure out which ways of breathing are really comfortable right here and now, and which ones are not. Then you maintain any ways of breathing that are comfortable, and you evaluate how you can expand that sense of comfort so that it fills the whole body.

This way you become more and more sensitive of the different ways the breath energy flows in the body. You learn how to distinguish between the flow of the blood and the flow of the breath. These are two different things, but they're very closely associated. When the breath flows well, the blood flows well, too. But sometimes you'll find that an energy flow goes into part of the body and instead of feeling better, all of a sudden it creates a lot of pressure. That's blood. It's a liquid. It's running up against the solidity of the blood vessels and so there's pressure.

The breath, though, doesn't exert pressure. It can flow anywhere. It can flow through atoms. After all, it's an energy. When you make that

distinction, you find that it's easier to spread the breath around. Then it gets into more and more refined areas of the body, all the little nooks and crannies, all the way out to every pore. There'll be a sense of rapture that goes along with this. The rapture is the sense of the movement of the energy, and it feels refreshing. But then after a while you decide that rapture isn't all that calming. You want something even more still, more silent. So you tune in to a deeper level.

You keep on going inward in this way. As the concentration gets more settled and refined, you begin to discern things that you didn't see before – subtle levels of stress you didn't detect at first. This is one of the reasons why the perception of inconstancy is one of the themes that assists not only with insight, but also with your concentration.

The Buddha taught Rahula the theme of inconstancy even before he taught him breath meditation. The purpose of this is so that you can be on the look-out for the little ups and downs in the body and mind. When the stress level goes up in the mind, what did you just do? When it goes down, what did you just do? You want to see what causes led to the ups and downs in the stress. The next question is, are those causes mental activities? That's what you're really looking for: the actions of the mind.

It's very important that, when you get the mind still, you don't try to interpret it as tapping into some ground of being or your true self or cosmic oneness or primordial emptiness or anything else of that sort. Those big titles, those abstractions, tend to blind you to what's actually going on. You want to see what you're doing and what you're experiencing as the result of your actions. There are movements in the mind – perceptions, thought constructs, acts of fabrication – that get you to those states and can keep you there. But there'll be a slight inconstancy in those movements. The more settled the concentration, of course, the more subtle the inconstancy, but it's still there. You have to learn how to see it.

As you go from one level of concentration to another, sometimes it takes a while to adjust before you can sense this inconstancy. It's like adjusting your eyes when you go from a dark room to a very bright room – then from the bright room to an even a brighter room. You have to stay with these levels long enough so that you can begin to detect: Where are you doing something to keep this going? At this point, we're far away from the hindrances and the only real disturbances, the only

real stress, is what the mind is doing right here, right now, to maintain its concentration. When you see an unnecessary action that creates unnecessary stress, you can let it go.

Now, why does this have an impact that goes all the way through the mind and affects even your strong greed, aversion, and delusion? Because there's a common pattern to all our suffering. It's analogous to eating. Just as the body needs to feed, the mind needs to feed, and it's in the act of feeding that we suffer. But this is so basic to us. This is how we identify ourselves. We identify ourselves around the way we feed on physical food, mental food, emotional food.

When the Buddha talked about his ability to remember previous lifetimes, it was all pretty simple. He had this name. He had this appearance. He had this experience of pleasure and pain. He ate this food. And then he died. That's life. Life centers around eating, eating, eating. And again, it's not just on physical food. We feed on mental and emotional food as well. When the Buddha talked about our sense of self, it was in terms of the functions of the mind around the act of feeding. In Pali, they're called *khandhas*. In English, we call them aggregates. For a long time, I wondered why "aggregate" was chosen to translate the word *khandha*. It sounds like piles of gravel, and there is that image in the Pali, that *khandha* means heap or pile. But why "aggregate"? It turns out back in the 19th century, they made a distinction between organic unity, when you had an organism where everything functioned together, and collections that were just aggregates: things were piled together without any coherent interrelationship. So when they chose "aggregate" to translate the word *khandha*, it was to convey the sense that your sense of self is lots of little bits and pieces of things, but there's no real organic unity here.

So, what are these little bits and pieces? Well, there's the sense of form: your body as you feel it from inside. There are feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness, and these are related to how you eat. Each of these is actually an activity. Even form is something that you create through having the perception that there is a form here; there is a body here – and it keeps changing. Yet you maintain this belief that this one form goes through time. So you've got this form that keeps deteriorating and so needs to be maintained, needs to feed. At the same time, you've got the form of the food out there.

Then there are feelings. On the one hand, there is the feeling of hunger you feel when you're lacking something. This applies not only to the body but also the mind, as when you're hungry for companionship or hungry for praise. And then there's the feeling of fullness and satisfaction that comes when that hunger has been assuaged.

The next aggregate is perception – one, perceiving the type of hunger you're feeling; and two, perceiving what's actually food out there that you can feed on to assuage that hunger. This is basically how we get to know the world as little children. We crawl around and what do we do when we find something? We stick it in our mouths in the hopes that it might be food. And over time, we learn that marbles are not food. Little toys are not food. We have to hold in mind our perceptions as to what is and is not food that will or will not satisfy our hunger.

Then there's fabrication. When you've got some food, can you just take it as it is? No, you've got to work with it. You've got to figure out how to get it and then, once you've got it, what do you have to do with it so that you can eat it. Some foods you can just stick in your mouth as they are. Others you've got to fix: to peel away the peel, or cook something that can't be eaten raw. This point applies especially with our emotional food. We have to work at relationships so that they satisfy our hunger. That's fabrication.

Then finally, there's consciousness – the awareness of all these activities. That too is part of the feeding process.

So these are the things that go into feeding. They're also the things that make up our sense of who we are. Sometimes we identify with the feelings; sometimes with the perceptions; sometimes with different mixtures of these things. That's our sense of self. And where do we see this clearly and directly? We see it in the process of getting the mind into concentration.

We've got our laboratory right here. We've got our test case right here. To get the mind still, you've got the form, which is the breath coming in and out – which gives you your sense of the body. Without the movement of the breath energy in the body, we wouldn't have a sense of form. Try it sometime. Get the mind really, really still – so still that you don't need to breathe. You'll find that your sense of form begins to disintegrate, first into a little cloud of sensation dots, or sensation droplets, like a mist. Then the sense of boundary or edge around the form gets very vague, cloud-like. You realize that it was because of the

movement of the breath that you had a sense of the shape – where your arms were and where your legs were and everything. But when that breath movement grows still, there's nothing to confirm the perception of form—and so you can drop it. So you've got the breath as form.

Then you've got the feelings, of course, that come with the breath – either comfort or discomfort – and the perceptions that hold you with the breath and the various ways of perceiving the breath that allow you to get into deeper and deeper states of concentration. When you can drop the breath and go into formless stage, you've got perceptions of infinite space, infinite consciousness, or nothingness. Those perceptions are what hold you in those states.

Then there's fabrication. In the beginning, it's verbal fabrication – directed thought and evaluation. These activities allow you to settle down as they massage the breath into something you can find pleasure in, something you can feed on. Then the fabrication gets more and more refined. In the later stages of concentration, this kind of fabrication gets used again as you pull yourself slightly out of one particular state of concentration so that you can analyze it from within. It's like having your hand in a glove. Either it's fully in, or it's partially in. If you pull your hand out slightly, it can still be in the glove even though it's not snugly there. In the same way, if your mind is fully in the higher states of concentration, you can't analyze those states. But you can pull out a little bit from the concentration, and yet not destroy it. That's when you can analyze it.

Then, of course, there's the consciousness of all these activities.

So you've got all of the aggregates right here in a very pure form, very immediate form, so that you can observe right here, right now, as the mind is quiet so you can see the interactions among them—and how they create stress.

What you've got to learn how to do first is how to get the mind really enamored with this practice, so that you can use it to pry away your hunger for other things. You've got your jhana as food. The Buddha talks about this many times. When you're well fed with this kind of food, you're not so hungry for things outside. You're not so hungry for sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or for your thoughts and plans around the pleasures they can provide. That's when it's easier to see them, as the passage from the sutta we chanted just now said, as on fire. You realize that all the pleasure and pain you've got from them was

on fire. Seeing this makes you less interested in them and, as a result, your attachment to the concentration gets stronger.

Now there's healthy attachment to concentration and pathological attachment. Pathological is when you just want to hide away in the concentration and don't want to do your duties. You don't want to engage with the world. That's unhealthy. You have to realize that the problem is not with the world outside. It's with the irritability of the mind inside. You've got to learn how to use your concentration to strengthen your mind in your dealings with the world outside so that you're not weak in the face of unpleasant things. You can actually strengthen your mind to withstand these things better as you do your duties.

Healthy attachment is when you realize you really want to find your happiness here and you learn how to maintain a sense of a still center as you go through the world, doing your duties. Whenever there's a free moment, you come back to the breath. Get as much energy and as much refreshment as you can from the breath. That way you really familiarize yourself with these aggregates as they're present in the state of jhana.

And ultimately there comes a point when you begin to develop a sense of disenchantment even with the jhana. Again, the word disenchantment—*nibbida*—is related to the process of feeding. It refers to the sense of having had enough of a particular kind of food. You love cheesecake but then you see that it's having a bad effect on your blood vessels, to the point where finally you can look at it and realize that you can't stand cheesecake anymore. The effort that goes into eating it is no longer worth doing. From that comes dispassion.

Dispassion is important because our continued fabrication – and this applies to all the aggregates – is fed by passion. It's because we're feeding on these things, getting food out of them, that we keep engaging them. But when you realize that they themselves are not worth hanging on to, and the food they provide is not worth hanging on to – why bother? That's when the mind can let go. And because it has been letting go of other things, this act of letting go is special. If it's not, then you simply go into another level of concentration. But when it's really special, you do something that you've never done before. There's a moment of absolutely no intention, no fabrication at all. And that opens things up in the mind. That's how you find the deathless.

This is why jhana is so important for giving rise to insight - because it allows you to see precisely where you've been holding on and why you've been holding on. It's a test case for all the suffering that's created by this felt need to feed, feed, feed, eat, nibble, gobble, whatever, all the time. It's our most basic attachment. I've heard that people held in concentration camps or in prisoner of war camps, in the very beginning, talk about sex. But after a while, they lose their interest in sex. But they talk about food all the time because that's what the mind is most obsessed with.

Well, make jhana your food here as you're meditating. It gives us a test case for why is it that we like to feed, and it puts us in a position where we can begin to ask ourselves: Is there a possibility that we could find happiness without feeding? In the course of contemplating that, our sense of our identity around the act of feeding begins to resolve itself clearly into aggregates. Our solid sense of self begins to dissolve away. If you ask people at the beginning of the practice, "Would you like to find true happiness even though it would involve letting go of your sense of identity?" Most people would say, "No, it's not worth it." But as you approach the issue in this strategic way, first getting yourself attached to the jhana, and then seeing what happens when you begin to regard your sense of self simply as an activity around the feeding, you find that you're less attached to it. You see that it really wasn't worth feeding on after all. That's how we take this whole mass of suffering apart.

But the key element here is getting the mind to really settle down so that it's really solid in the present moment and can see these things clearly. That's a part of the path you can't do without.