

Metta Dharma Foundation
Jhana Practice and Study Group

Notes for Session 1

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“I considered . . . could jhana be the path to enlightenment? Then came the realization: ‘That is the path to enlightenment.’”

The Buddha
Mahasaccaka Sutta

“There are five detrimental things that lead to the decay and disappearance of the true Dhamma. What are the five? Here the bhikkhus [monks], the bhikkhunis [nuns], the male lay followers, and the female lay followers dwell without reverence and deference towards the Teacher . . . towards the Dhamma . . . towards the Sangha . . . towards the training . . . without reverence and deference towards samadhi. These are the five detrimental things that lead to the decay and disappearance of the true Dhamma.”

The Buddha
Kassapasamyutta (SN16.13)

Goals for the Group:

- 1) Deepen concentration and insight in our meditation practice.
- 2) Receive in-depth, detailed meditation instructions for concentration, jhana and insight.
- 3) Explore the teachings of contemporary teachers on samadhi and jhana.
- 3) Understand the range of teachings on samadhi and jhana in the Pali source texts.
- 4) Understand the relationship between jhana and insight meditation.
- 5) Understand the nature of jhana.
- 6) Understand the main controversies and disagreements about jhana and its place in insight meditation practice.
- 7) Be introduced to a style of meditation that incorporates mindfulness, concentration, jhana and insight into a single unified practice.

Introduction

There is a range of teachings on vipassana or insight meditation.

- some de-emphasize samadhi. Only need to be mindful.
- some stress that jhana is essential.
- some say you should give a lot of emphasis on the breath, or some other primary object.
- Others say you don't give special emphasis to anything, but just be mindful of whatever is predominant in your experience.

In the American/Western Vipassana scene, concentration and insight meditation are different.

Mindfulness is typically associated with insight, and concentration is a separate practice. We can do concentration or insight practice, but they are separate.

How does concentration fit into insight meditation? How does jhana fit into insight meditation?

We will cover a range of views and approaches.

My goal for the group is for us to understand the range of teachings and views on jhana to inform our own practice. All of the study is intended to inform and support our practice. Practice is most important.

There is not a right or wrong.

It seems that people have become deeply awakened through all the various practices and approaches, so there is not a right or wrong.

The important thing is to find what fits us best, what works for us best. That will vary for each of us since we have different temperaments, propensities and needs.

It is not about trying to find a "right", "true" or "correct" teaching.

Historical Background

Within a few centuries after the Buddha died, eighteen schools evolved. Only Theravada, School of the Elders, has survived.

Theravada is practiced in Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Laos and Cambodia.

Theravada scriptures are preserved in the Pali language as the Tipitika (three baskets) or Pali Canon

Evolution of the Pali Canon from first council into three sections: Vinaya, Sutta and Abhidhamma.

Pali Commentaries: Interpretation of suttas as understood around first century C.E. The commentaries may not reflect how teachings were understood around the time of the Buddha.

Visuddhimagga written around 5th century C.E. Extremely important in Theravada Buddhism.

Some view the entire path of practice through the Visuddhimagga, and others think Buddhaghosa, who wrote the Visuddhimagga, got it wrong.

Most of what is taught in the IMS/Spirit Rock tradition is from the Visuddhimagga understanding, because of the Burmese influence on Jack, Sharon and Joseph.

Important: The Visuddhimagga presents a path of meditation and the states within it that is new and distinct from the Pali suttas.

Visuddhimagga is extremely influential in Burma and Sri Lanka. Less so in Thailand.

When Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield and others began teaching in the early – mid 1970's, they taught is a style heavily influenced by Mahasi Sayadaw, a great Burmese teacher.

That style has evolved into the modern insight meditation movement, but it is only one perspective from a very wide range of views, teachings and practices.

In Theravada Buddhism, there are many other styles of meditation, each blending concentration, mindfulness, jhana and insight in various ways.

Outline For The Jhana Practice and Study Group

We are going to explore the range of teachings and views on samadhi and jhana in Buddhist meditation.

We are going to look at what is in the Pali suttas, without paying any attention to the commentaries.

Then we are going to look at the later commentarial tradition, in particular the Visuddhimagga, without paying any attention to the suttas.

Then we will look at some of the main areas of disagreements and varying views:

- 1) What is jhana?
- 2) Are samadhi/jhana and Insight two separate paths of practice or one?
- 3) Is jhana necessary for liberating insight?

We will also have several practice periods each day.

I will teach a style of breath meditation, and will discuss how and where it fits into this overall map of teachings and practices.

In the suttas there is no such thing as insight meditation. There is only meditation, which is defined as Right Samadhi practice.

Insight meditation comes from The Visuddhimagga.

The Visuddhimagga divides meditation into two paths – samatha and vipassana. The Pali Suttas do not divide meditation into two paths. There is only path of meditation which integrates concentration, mindfulness, jhana and insight into a single path of practice.

Samdhi in the Pali Suttas

Samadhi is usually translated as ‘concentration’.

‘Samadhi’ more accurately means ‘undistracted’.

The term “concentration” can have the connotation of being concentrated on an object, at a point. Samadhi can mean this, but also means “still”, “unmoving” without necessarily being concentrated on a single point.

Very Important: Two ways samadhi is understood:

1) One-pointed on a single object. Ultimately, if samadhi is strengthened all the way to jhana, the experience of changing phenomena is lost because there is only awareness of a single point. “Exclusive”.

In this style of practice you cannot do insight meditation unless you come out of jhana to a lower level of samadhi, because the experience of change is lost while in jhana.

2) Mind becomes unmoving, but not fixed on a single object. The mind stops but not awareness of changing phenomena. Aware of a broad range of experience. “Inclusive”.

In this style of practice insight can occur even within jhana because in this kind of jhana the mind itself stops but you still are aware of changing experiences.

Both of these jhanas are equally deep and strong, but they are different types of samadhi.

Importance of Samadhi

Samadhi and jhana are mentioned very often in the suttas.

Suttas are explicit that you cannot attain the highest degree of realization without a high degree of samadhi:

“Without the peace of concentration in high degree, without attaining to calm, without winning singleness of mind, it cannot be that one shall enter and abide in mind-emancipation, insight emancipation, free from the asavas.” AN6.70

The Buddha said that many of his disciples had attained enlightenment with jhana.

Without jhana:

“If there is no right concentration (right concentration is always defined as jhana), then the basis for knowledge and vision of things as they really is destroyed for one who lacks right concentration. If there is no knowledge and vision of things as they really are, then the basis for disenchantment and dispassion is destroyed for one who lacks such knowledge and vision. If there is no disenchantment and dispassion, then the basis for the knowledge and vision of liberation is destroyed for one who lacks disenchantment and dispassion.” AN6.50

The rapture, pleasure and happiness of jhana act as powerful antidotes to addiction to sense pleasure:

“Even though a noble disciple has seen clearly as it actually is with proper wisdom how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them, as long as he still does not attain to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, he may still be attracted to sensual pleasures.” MN14.4

Warnings on the Dangers and Misuse of Samadhi

The Buddha stressed the importance of samadhi, but also that attainment of samadhi for its own sake is not the goal:

“This holy life does not have gain, honor, and renown for its benefit, or the attainment of virtue . . . or the attainment of concentration for its benefit . . . But it is this unshakeable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood, and its end.” MN30.23

Right Effort:

Right amount of effort but also effort directed in the right way.

Right effort balances effort with ease.

Not over striving.

Some teachers discourage samadhi and jhana because you can get attached to the pleasure of jhana, but the Buddha encouraged and stressed developing samadhi and jhana.

The Buddha said that the pleasure of jhana should not be feared or avoided, but pursued.

Developing Concentration

To attain any degree of Samadhi, steadiness and clarity, you must diminish, and then remove the hindrances to Samadhi.

The first step is sila, moral virtue.

“For one who is virtuous, non-remorse arises. From non-remorse, gladness naturally arises, leading naturally to joy . . . to serenity . . . naturally to happiness . . . naturally to a concentrated mind . . . to seeing things as they really are . . . leading naturally to revulsion and dispassion . . . leading naturally to knowledge and vision of liberation. Thus, the preceding qualities flow into the succeeding qualities; the succeeding qualities bring the preceding qualities to perfection, for going from the near shore to the far shore (Nibbana).” AN10.2

Guarding the Sense Doors:

If we are constantly bombarded by sensory input, it is harder for the mind to settle down.

Guarding the sense doors means finding the supportive conditions when we meditate – quite, etc.

Once concentration is strong we are much less liable to distractions.

Setting Aside the Hindrances:

Hindrances are overcome through both abandoning and suppressing.

Concentration suppresses the hindrances and suppressing the hindrances helps deepen concentration.

Abandon them if we can let go of them.

Otherwise, need to diminish them enough through any skillful means in order to practice.

Right Samadhi

The suttas say explicitly that samadhi is a condition for seeing directly and clearly into the true nature of things:

“Bhikkhus, develop concentration. A bhikkhu who is concentrated understands things as they really are. And what does he understand as they really are? He understands as it really is [all formations] are impermanent.’ Bhikkhus, develop concentration. A bhikkhu who is concentrated understands things as they really are.” SN35.99

How should we understand this?

This seems to be a contradiction with the many teachings that say insight, not meditative states of concentration, lead to the deepest understanding.

The suttas are not interested in any type of concentration, but a special type of concentration: Right Concentration.

Right Samadhi is the eighth element of the Eightfold Path.

Right Samadhi incorporates many factors, including mindfulness.

Although unification of mind is a principal facet of right concentration, it is not the sole defining feature.

It is Right Concentration that is essential for the deeper attainments in meditation and that, in and of itself, is a cause and condition for liberating insight:

“. . . the knowledge and vision of things as they really are, too, has a proximate cause; it does not lack a proximate cause. And what is the proximate cause for knowledge and vision of things as they really are? It should be said: concentration.” SN12.23

Right Samadhi is always defined in the suttas explicitly as the four jhanas.

Jhana Definition:

“Quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a monk enters and abides in the first jhana [which is characterized by] rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, and accompanied by thought and examination.

With the stilling of thought and examination, he enters and abides in the second jhana [which is characterized by] rapture and pleasure born of concentration, and accompanied by inner composure and singleness of mind, without thought and examination.

With the fading away of rapture, he abides in equanimity, mindful and clearly aware, feeling pleasure with the body, he enters and abides in the third jhana, of which the noble ones declare: ‘Equanimous and mindful he abides in pleasure.’

With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, he enters and abides in the fourth jhana, [which has] neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness and equanimity.”

The Pali Suttas say that Right Samadhi is the four jhanas, but it should be more properly thought of as *culminating* in the four jhanas. We can have Right Samadhi at any stage of practice, even if we are beginners, if it is accompanied by right view, right understanding, right effort, etc.

Right concentration integrates and synthesizes a range of numerous qualities, which support and strengthen each other.

“What is noble right concentration with its supports and its requisites, that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness? Unification of mind equipped with these seven factors is called noble right concentration with its supports and its requisites.” MN117.3 and other suttas

This means that jhana is a state of unification of mind accompanied by the other seven elements of the eightfold path.

We’ll examine all the factors associated with Right Samadhi and jhana in detail when looking at jhana.