

INTRODUCTION

From Focused Concentration to Fearless Awakening

RESTING UNDER THE SHADE of a rose apple tree, the young Siddhartha Gotama (whom we would later come to know as the Buddha) spontaneously entered a state of deep concentration, satisfaction, and ease.¹ Much later, after he had studied intensively with two meditation masters and practiced extreme asceticism, he recalled that quiet moment in his youth and decided to cultivate those naturally pleasant states as the means to awakening. In so doing, he harnessed the potency of the unified mind and transformed a conventional practice of concentration into a catalyst for awakening, for enlightenment. Austere practices of self-mortification understandably lost favor as he taught his disciples to unlock the power of a happy mind.²

The development of intense concentration that leads to sublime states of mental absorption, known as *jhāna*, predated the Buddha—but because he was able to use it as a foundation for his enlightenment, it became a critical feature of his teachings. The practice of using *jhāna* as a basis for insight has been preserved to this day. In the discourses of the Pāli Canon, an early record of the Buddha's teaching, "concentration" appears repeatedly and is taught as a pivotal method for inner transformation.

In Pāli, *jhāna* literally means “to think” or “to meditate.” Consequently, the term is open to a wide variety of uses and interpretations and there has been much debate about its precise meaning. In this book, *jhāna* practice refers to a traditional sequence of specific states of absorption in which the mind is secluded from sensory impingement and deeply unified with a chosen object. Attention is neither distracted by stray thoughts nor affected by the flutter of moods. Even physical sensations and sounds eventually fade as the mind becomes entirely immersed in a single coherent focus.

Jhānas are states of happiness that can radically transform the heart, reshape the mind, imbue consciousness with enduring joy and ease, and provide an inner resource of tranquility that surpasses any conceivable sensory pleasure. Jhānas are states of deep rest, healing rejuvenation, and profound comfort that create a stable platform for transformative insight. In this approach to *jhāna*, we use the calming aspects of concentration to support the investigative aspects of insight meditation. The fruit of concentration is freedom of heart and mind.

This book will teach you about and guide you through the traditional sequence of eight levels of meditative absorption that constitute *jhāna* practice—though it will focus in detail on only four. While *jhāna* is a powerful practice not intended for the diletante, diligent beginners will benefit from the stability and strength afforded by deep concentration, and seasoned meditators will find in *jhāna* practice a potent method for intensifying insight.

Although the notion of mastering sequential stages of deep concentration may appear daunting at first, the *jhāna* system is easy to follow and surprisingly simple. Traditionally this practice was not reserved for special people, nor was it restricted to the monastic order. In the Buddha’s time, lay disciples and busy merchants would, from time to time, enjoy the benefits and joys of abiding in *jhāna*.³ These eight levels of concentration remain accessible to contemporary practitioners who can dedicate sufficient time for retreat,

remain ethically clear, and apply balanced effort. Although I've included many teachings useful to beginners, a working knowledge of one's own mind and some facility with mindfulness practices are assumed as prerequisites to the serious undertaking of jhāna practice. Nonetheless, I will review mindfulness practice and how it is used to avoid common pitfalls in jhāna practice.

This book emerged from my experiences during a ten-month silent retreat focused on the cultivation of jhāna as the basis for insight. Although I had more than twenty years of meditation experience, until this retreat I had not systematically used these refined levels of consciousness to develop insight. The methodical techniques of establishing access to jhāna, strengthening and sustaining each level of absorption, and then applying the concentrated mind for insight had a powerful effect on my consciousness: it opened me to an experience of unremitting happiness, dramatically reduced the lure of sensual pleasures, and strengthened confidence and equanimity. When I emerged from retreat and shared some of my experiences with friends, I realized that the attainments and insights gleaned from this retreat described a clear path of concentration and wisdom. I want to offer serious practitioners this method for developing the mind and attaining unwavering clarity.

Through reading this book, some seasoned meditators will discover that they have already experienced some jhāna factors (rapture, happiness, and equanimity, for instance) while engaged in other meditation practices. Indeed, states of extreme happiness characteristic of jhāna naturally arise during many intensive meditation experiences. However, cultivating and harnessing them as the basis for insight is a technique unto itself, quite beyond the random "slipping into jhāna" that long-term meditators often describe. *The Jhānas* can serve as a manual for contemporary practitioners who are prepared to cultivate jhāna as an expression of the stable mind and use that concentration to deepen insight.

When the Buddha was asked, “Why are some people liberated and others not?” he did not say that the most concentrated meditators attain liberation. He replied, “Whosoever clings to the objects perceived by the senses cannot gain liberation. Whosoever stops clinging will be liberated.”⁴ Liberation through non-clinging is the core of the Buddha’s teaching. The human propensity to cling is the problem; meditation is designed to solve it. Working in tandem, the twin practices of concentration and insight create conditions remarkably conducive to awakening.

Some readers may find variances in method and emphasis from teachings received from other teachers. Many approaches have developed over the centuries, each based on an individual teacher’s understanding of the ancient texts and how those understandings manifest through his or her own meditation practice. If you would like to authentically experience jhāna, you will probably need time in silent retreat under the guidance of teachers. A book can provide a map of the terrain, describe the required skills, and indicate signposts along the path, but there is no substitute for diligent practice and the guidance of skilled teachers.

This book is an introductory guide, not a definitive or exhaustive study. Many exercises and reflections are interspersed throughout. Please try them, even if they slow the pace of your reading. Merely reading exercises will neither develop meditation skills nor produce the profound experience of concentration. I encourage you to, at times, set the book down, close your eyes, and collect the mind in silence. If you do, these practices will contribute to a living ease and an undistracted presence—with or without the attainment of jhāna levels of absorption. But do bear in mind that the cultivation of serenity and wisdom can’t be rushed. Please give it the time to work. Don’t grow impatient if you don’t understand it completely at first. Certain principles are repeated throughout the book and are refined as the practice progresses.

This book systematically explores the framework of eight classical states of unified consciousness: the four primary jhānas and the four formless realms. It gives instruction on accessing these states, discerning their qualities, and using each as the basis for wisdom. While its thrust is cultivating the deep concentration of jhāna, the development of right concentration in the Buddhist tradition must always be intertwined with wisdom. Undertaking jhāna practice without the framework of wisdom would be pointless at best—and also contains the danger of reinforcing attachment to the pleasures of jhāna. Accordingly, I have included wisdom teachings on developing mindfulness, practicing non-clinging, applying skillful effort, setting intentions, overcoming habitual thoughts, recognizing emotions, learning to let go, and understanding the aim of the spiritual life. These wisdom teachings will anchor the reader's cultivation of concentration to a liberating path.

Additionally, practitioners should be aware that ethical conduct is a necessary condition for developing right concentration. Although this book does not explore in detail the cultivation of morality and right action, practitioners who aspire to attain jhāna should first develop a high degree of purity in ordinary activities.

Mental stability is essential for this training. The use of mind-altering drugs, including legal plant-based hallucinogenic substances, is antithetical to the development of jhāna. A healthy mind is a rare and precious thing in this world—do not take casual risks with the stability of your mind. If you are serious about undertaking the practice of jhāna, it is critical to cease the use of mind-altering substances and develop skills in renunciation, right effort, right intention, and right concentration that will support the refinement of the higher mind.

Some people are attracted to jhāna practice as a route to dramatic blissful spiritual experiences, and wrongly confuse meditative attainments with drug experiences. They do not know what an

actual jhāna state is and therefore conflate meditative altered states of consciousness with drug induced psychedelic trips, out-of-body experiences produced by extreme physical or breath exercises, or unity experiences that occur through orgasmic sexual encounters. Please understand that physical and drug-induced activities do not lead to jhāna. Inducing altered-state experiences through the use of chemical or organic substances, intense physical exercises, or ritual ceremonies is incompatible with this path of meditative training.

If you are still enchanted with the possibility that drugs might open the door to spiritual experiences more quickly than traditional practices, please be aware of some characteristics of jhāna that would strongly distinguish it from psychedelic states:

1. profound inner calmness and the absence of craving for tantalizing experiences;
2. continuous mindfulness of one's meditation object;
3. balanced effort, discipline, and an inclination toward renunciation;
4. clear attention that is maintained without mental wandering or associative mental activity;
5. fitness and flexibility of mind that responds to intention and sustains focus without being influenced by sounds, distracting thoughts, or sensual stimuli;
6. sustained absence of unwholesome states such as fear, anger, remorse, sensual desire, stories of self, memories, images, thoughts, narratives, dullness, agitation, restlessness, and all hindrances and unwholesome states;
7. conscious control over the meditative perception that remains stable throughout the absorption; and
8. the ability and skill to enter and exit the states of jhāna at will.

These abilities and experiences develop naturally with the practices of concentration that are taught in this book and will serve the meditator long after the meditative session has ended.



This book contains five sections. The first, “The Joy of the Focused Mind,” positions the practice of *jhāna* as training in relinquishment and an exploration of happiness. The second, “Preparing the Mind for Absorption,” addresses themes necessary for preparing the mind to enter *jhāna*. The third, “How to Establish Meditative Absorption,” contains instructions for the four primary levels of *jhāna*. The fourth, “Doing the Work of Insight,” explores the wisdom that arises when using *jhāna* as the basis for insight. The fifth, “Experiencing the Formless Dimensions,” examines the four formless realms as an experiential investigation of emptiness. The Epilogue discusses the significant role *jhāna* can play in living a fearless, awakened life.

May readers discover deep peace within their hearts
and bring lasting peace into our world.
May this book contribute
to the liberation of all beings.