Journey to Jhana
with Beth Upton

Video 7
Practicing with the Nimtta

When Should I Switch Attention to the Nimitta?

This is a really delicate stage of practice and it's where a lot of meditators get excited, afraid, or a little confused.

To make this stage of practice as smooth as possible, usually what we suggest is that a meditator will spend at least a few sittings—let's say three or four sittings—focusing on the subtle breath and ignoring the light, even though the light is stable. This is an important skill and mastery of mind to have. “I'm going to stay with my subtle breath, even though that light is stable and right there in the same place.”

The next stage is, “I'm going to be with them both.” Again, we want the meditator to repeat this for at least three or four sittings. We want them to be able to have a very stable concentration for almost the entire sitting, where it's, “OK, I will be aware of both my breath and the nimitta, and the light, in the same place, and we will hold both of these objects together for three or four sittings until we feel very, very comfortable and confident with this stage.”

If you're practicing in a busy daily life, you might want to do each stage for longer—a couple of weeks, let's say—because there's inherently more instability in life and in the mind.

When we've got this stage down, when we know them both, we can start experimenting with shifting the predominance of our attention. A little more predominance on the breath and the light is just there. Or a little more predominance on the light and the breath is just there.

Our attention, crucially, is not moving at this time. Our attention is the same place where it's been now for a long time, where the subtle breath is. Light is in the same place. We're knowing them both, and we’re shifting our attention a little bit more with the breath, a little bit more with the light, a little bit more with the breath, a little bit more with the light.

Here what we're doing is really training the delicacy of our faculties to play around with these fine degrees of subtlety. The nimitta is a little bit more subtle with the breath. So we learn this very, very fine balancing.

You could think of it like learning to walk on a tightrope, and these tiny, tiny little movements that the mind can make, what they do to the stability of the practice.

So focusing just on the breath, ignoring the light, even though it's there, please have the patience to do that step. Then focusing on both of those two objects for a few sittings, in the same place, attention doesn't move. Then shifting the predominance of our attention from one to the other.

When we've got that skill set down, then we can practice letting go of the breath from our awareness and just being with the nimitta.

Now, when we let go of the breath from our awareness, obviously we don't want any aversion toward that breath. We're just letting it fade into the background in the same way that we ignore wondering thoughts. It's just an inattention on the breath and the nimitta, the light, starts to capture an increasing amount of our attention; it’s where our interest goes.

That's how we shift attention away from the breath and toward the nimitta.

I've already said this, but I'm going to repeat it because it's very very important: Our attention should not move. If we find ourselves focused on the breath and moving our attention to a nimitta that is in a different place, our practice is going to be unstable in the long run. So our attention stays in the same place. If you have the experience that your breath is here and your nimitta is there, you need to focus on your breath and ignore the light until the light is together with your breath in the same place.

Is It Hard to Let Go of the Breath?

By this stage of practice the mind's general inclination towards subtlety should be well established. We've already got a felt sense of inclining the mind toward the next most subtle object is preferable and better and nicer. So the mind will be wanting to do that by itself.

Sometimes the analogy I give is if ever you've practiced the counting method with the breath—so you've been “in, out one,” “in, out two,” “in, out three…” If you've done that for a while, there is a way in which the numbers are in your habit. But as the mind calms down, usually there's a stage when it feels more natural, more comfortable, to just let the numbers fade away. They might still come in from time to time as habit, but we're not really interested in them anymore. We don't need them anymore.

Another analogy I give is the stabilizing wheels on a bicycle. It’s always the case when we're moving from more coarse to more subtle: the more coarse object is a bit like those stabilizing wheels. It's holding our attention steady whilst we learn to do something more refined. In this case, that subtle breath is like the stabilizing wheels. Our nimitta is like just riding the bicycle.

After a while, we realize we're not really using those stabilizing wheels anymore, and it's intuitive to just take them off and go.

Why Does the Nimitta Quickly Disappear for Me?

It's a very deep instinct in meditators to imagine that when they shift their attention to the nimitta they need to do something special or different with their attention. It's a very deep instinct that it's difficult to get at just with logic or intellect.

Almost all meditators, even when they're doing these training stages that I just described, when they remove the breath and they just have the nimitta there, they do something. Sometimes we need to do many, many repetitions of that before we can just let go of the breath and keep the attention just the same.

But if we are doing something different—we're bracing, we're holding, we're excited—then probably the nimitta is going to either become unstable or it's going to disappear. If you notice that happening—that you let go of the breath, you go to the nimitta, and the nimitta becomes unstable or disappears—we need to repeat this earlier step more. It means we need to be with both the breath and the nimitta together for a few sittings, and then we need to play around with the predominance of mostly the attention on the nimitta and the breath is there a bit, then mostly the attention on the breath and the nimitta is there a bit.

As we repeat this stage, we start to learn, “I don't need to do anything radically different with my attention when I'm just with the nimitta. It’s a matter of exquisitely fine-tuning to be with that slightly more subtle object. I certainly don't need to get excited or hold on or make any big movements of mind.

What Causes a Nimitta to Disappear?

It could be one of two things happening. The first thing that might be happening when our nimitta is nice and stable and we're with it, we're confident, and then it disappears, is we got a bit complacent. Maybe a wondering thought or some distraction came back and we didn't realize it was playing in the background, and essentially, we're just not well-concentrated enough to maintain the nimitta, and so it falls away. Our mind has become a little too coarse.

At that time, we need to pick up the subtle breath again and within a minute or two our nimitta is going to come back. Then we can repeat these stages of being with the breath and the nimitta together, and gradually shift the balance of our attention as we've just described. That's the first thing that can happen and it's relatively common.

The second thing that can happen is that our nimitta is refining.

As we've said, the direction of progress in meditation is from more course to more subtle, and we've noticed that the breath goes through many iterations of becoming more and more subtle as the practice deepens. That's also true of the nimitta.

The nimitta gets increasingly more refined as the practice deepens. We might have had experiences with the breath where usually, let's say, the mind is up here and the breath is a little bit more subtle, so when we focus on the breath we calm down and then it's easy. Breath calms down a bit more, it's difficult again, we focus on it, mind calms down. This is the usual way of practice.

But we might have had experiences with the breath where the breath is a lot more subtle than the mind, and, for a little while, we can't find it. It feels like we stop breathing. The gap between the subtlety of the object and the subtlety of the mind is a bit too big. It's a bit uncomfortable. The same thing also happens with the nimitta, where the nimitta is refining and our attention hasn't quite caught up yet. It's not quite refined enough yet.

At that time, what we want to do is calm our mind further. We call it the "wait and watch method."

We use this method also with the breath when we feel like the breath has disappeared. We still our mind, we wait, we put our attention in the place where we last knew the breath, and when our attention is still, the very subtle breath will become known in that stillness.

If we go on a hunt and our attention is very active, then our attention is too coarse to know this very subtle breath. But if our attention is still and we wait and we watch, then the very subtle breath becomes known.

We do the same thing with the nimitta. The nimitta is refining. Our attention is a little bit too coarse for it to be stable in our attention. So we still our attention. We wait and we watch in exactly the same place where we have been knowing the subtle breath, and then the nimitta, the subtle breath and the nimitta, or just the nimitta, same place: Wait and watch, be confident, keep our wise attention strong. If we do that, then within a short time, a more refined, more subtle nimitta will re-arise in that place.

Now, obviously the difficulty is to know which one is it: Did my concentration drop and I should pick up the breath and backstep myself a little bit? Or is my nimitta refining?

When we're starting out, we might not know which one of those two things is happening. When we've got a little bit more skill, we start to notice, "Oh yeah, I was having some wandering thoughts. That's what's going on." Or, "Oh, actually, I'm deepening here, that's what's going on." But at first, we need to play around with it a little bit and make some experiments.

When I Shift to the Nimitta, I Get a Headache.

If when you shift to the nimitta you're getting a headache, it's this same thing that we spoke about: there's a deep instinct to think that we need to do something special when the nimitta arises.

It's very common, for example, that when people let go of the breath and they're just with the nimitta, they try to hold the nimitta stable with their face. What it really is, is a lack of familiarity with this stage of practice, a lack of trust and safety with this stage of practice. So there's an instinct to control and manipulate. In most cases, that kind of control or manipulation, or tension, will fall away with repetition and practice and familiarity with the state, and also by repeating these earlier stages of being both with the breath and the nimitta together and shifting the predominance of the attention. When we do this, we start to train ourselves experientially: “I don't need a different quality of attention in order to be with the nimitta.”

We also train ourselves that the nimitta is going to stay there. “I don't need to make it stay there.”

These aren't things typically that we can get at with our intellect. They're things that we need to repeat experientially in order to become confident. As we repeat more and more, we start to feel confident, the surrender kicks in, the safety kicks in, and some of that control and tension will fall away.

Is There a Task for This Stage of Practice?

What we want to do at this stage of practice—if you notice that the light is stable, that your nimitta is stable, together with your breath—what you want to do is several repetitions of each of these stages of being with the subtle breath and just letting your nimitta be there and not getting excited about it. Not being in a hurry with it or jumping to it, just letting it be there and strengthening your contentment with the subtle breath. It's an important stage. Please don't skip over it.

If we don't do this stage, then we tend to be overvaluing the nimitta. It makes us excited and imbalanced around the nimitta. So being able to just ignore the nimitta and stay with the subtle breath is an important stage of practice.

Then we practice being with them both.

Then practice this shifting the balance of attention between the two.

This is what I would suggest that you do in practice.

Next Time…

In the next session, we'll be speaking about what happens when you are nice and stable with that nimitta and how to know when we have entered the first jhana.