

Journey to Jhana with Beth Upton

Video 9 Practicing Mastery

How Do I Identify the First Jhana?

If we notice when we emerge from our adhitthana that reflecting back on the time that just passed, we didn't know anything apart from the nimitta—that's all we knew, we've got no memory of having heard a sound or felt the body, or gone off on a wandering thought—then there's a good chance that a big chunk of that time we were in the first jhana.

Again, the differences between deep access concentration and the first jhana can be very, very slight. So we might have still been in access concentration some of the time. But if we're repeatedly having the experience of an unbroken absorption on the nimitta, then there's a good chance that we were in the first jhana.

At that time, we want to practice mastery. So we don't want this state to be sometimes, occasionally, on a good day. We want it to be something that is a stable, solid foundation of the rest of our practice.

When Should I Progress to the Second Jhana?

We want to make this stage, this first jhana stage, as stable and resilient as possible. In order to do that, there are different types of mastery that we practice.

The first mastery that we can speak about, because it's a really important one, is being able to enter that state at will, whenever you want.

Up until now, it might be that we've only really been entering that state when things are nice and quiet and comfortable. When we're sitting with our eyes closed and we've got an hour for practice, let's say. We want to really start improving that by practicing entering this jhana state at will, whenever we want. What this means is that we need to really increase the continuity of our practice throughout the day.

When we're practicing at this level, we've probably already got a good habit to be with the subtle breath throughout the day and to come back to that periodically. So the first step is to replace that with a continuity of awareness on the nimitta throughout the day.

That should mean that we're taking very frequent breaks to close our eyes for a moment. The nimitta will be there, we stay with it for a couple of minutes. In activities that we do throughout the day that don't require much thought, we can also have our eyes partially closed and be with the nimitta.

As we start to train more and we can have our eyes open fully, although our eyes are seeing the people and the cars and things go past, our mind is doing most of the work and our mind is aware of the nimitta.

So a big chunk of our mastery here will be improving the continuity of our attention on the nimitta throughout the day.

Oftentimes people with busy working lives will tell me it's impossible.

It's definitely possible. It's what lots of people are doing. When you go out there into your day and you try it, you start to realize, oh no, it is possible. If we've got a good quality of attention on our nimitta throughout the day, then what we should find is in short breaks, like let's say you need to take a toilet break, you've been coming back to your nimitta throughout the day enough that when you go and take that quick toilet break, you can close your eyes for a couple of minutes and there's your nimitta. There's your absorption.

That's what we want when we speak about this first mastery of being able to enter the jhana at will—that we've got enough momentum and continuity with that nimitta. As soon as we get a minute to close our eyes and surrender, bam, we're in.

Does This Skillset Have a Big Impact on Daily Life?

I think at this stage of practice, we should already have a lovely continuity of practice throughout the day, so there will be an improvement, but it will be marginal. If you've already been aware of your subtle breath throughout the day, you're already maintaining wholesome states throughout the day, you're already cleaning up any defilements that come up throughout the day, then again, what we're doing, is just one step into more refined as we maintain awareness on the nimitta throughout the day.

Are There Other Aspects to the Mastery?

The first mastery is this one: to be able to enter the jhana at will. At this stage of practice, that is the mastery that tends to require the most work and repetition from the meditator because we tend to have learned to enter the jhana in a very safe and samey context and we're now broadening that context.

The other important masteries are to be able to come out of the jhana on time and to know quickly which jhana you are in.

To come out on time is what we've already been gently training with this adhitthana exercise. So we tell ourselves, "May I enter for half an hour," and then we ignore the time and then we come out and we check the time and we see whether or not it's half an hour or not. Through many, many repetitions of this exercise, that mechanism is going to start to become more and more accurate and that is how we practice this mastery of exiting on time. The more accurate this mastery, the deeper we tend to absorb.

Again, it's this analogy of the alarm clock. If you're not sure if your alarm clock is going to go off on time or 10 minutes late, or half an hour late, you're not going to sleep so deeply. But if you trust, it's definitely going to wake me up, it's going to wake me up bang on time, you fall asleep deeply. You surrender deeply. In the same way, when we trust that our adhitthana is going to bring us out of the practice on time, we tend to surrender and absorb more deeply into the jhana.

Now, the tendency of meditators can be to try and train this mastery through control and so we make our adhitthana, "May I stay in this absorption for half an hour," and then we think, "I know I'll just secretly think about it every five minutes, that will make it more accurate," and it never works. The way to train this mastery is to surrender deeply and not investigate.

If we can surrender deeply and not investigate, then through doing many repetitions, the accuracy is going to improve by itself to the point where we can make an adhitthana like, "May I stay in this absorption for one hour, seven minutes, and 30 seconds," and come out on time. It can be extremely accurate, but never through control and manipulation. Always through surrender and repetition.

This is the next mastery that we want to train: We've got entering whenever we want, coming out on time, and the last really important mastery is that we know what jhana we were in.

To train this mastery, we need to be able to quickly, efficiently identify the five jhana factors. We spoke about this briefly in the last video: We identify the five jhana factors by bringing our attention to our heart area and we want to be able to check quickly and efficiently how many are there.

The Jhana Factors

In the first jhana, we will notice vitakka vicara, piti, sukha, ekaggata: Applied thought, sustained thought, joy, happiness, and one-pointedness.

Applied and sustained thought are problematic translations of the Pali words in that they don't involve any kind of thinking. It's better translated as applied attention and sustained attention, or the mind that is applying itself to the nimitta, sustaining attention on the nimitta, joy, happiness, one pointedness.

We want to check for those one by one and then all together so that we can quickly notice, "Yeah, one, two, three, four, five. They're all definitely there." That is the third really important mastery that we practice of the jhana so that when we emerge, we quickly and accurately know where we are.

What If There Are Fewer Than Five Jhana Factors?

It's definitely possible when you're doing many repetitions of the first jhana that some of the jhana factors start to fall away and you start to enter a more subtle state, or a higher jhana. At this stage of practice, that is not a good thing. Meditators often secretly think that it might be a good thing that they slide and slip into a higher jhana, but it's not. It's actually just a weakness of our mastery at this stage.

We could think of it like building a house on really shaky foundations. We don't want to be slipping and sliding into higher jhana.

If you start to notice that you emerge from your adhitthana and you can only notice two or three jhana factors, then when we make the adhitthana, we want to include in our adhitthana not only the time, not only, "May I be with this nimitta for half an hour," but, "May I be with this nimitta for half an hour with all five jhana factors."

If we include that in our adhitthana, like we said, the mind will follow. It's like we tell our ship, "Go this way," and it follows. But you need to mean it. If you make the adhitthana, "May I be with my nimitta for half an hour with these five jhana factors," unless some of them fall away, and then that's great too, then maybe they will fall away, and your mastery of the first jhana will be weak. So we need to remember we're just doing this step, and we're going to do it well. "All five jhana factors, please, for this long," and the mind will follow. Then when we emerge, we will notice that all five will be there.

Is It Really Possible to Enter the First Jhana Whenever I Want To?

With training it's possible and it forms part of our mastery. It's also possible that the mastery of the first jhana isn't all that strong and you can only do it on the cushion. That would be what we call a weakness in the mastery of your first jhana. It means you can still enter the jhana, but you're not really a master of it yet. It's much better for our long-term practice if we put in the time and the work to really improve our mastery.

At the same time, I don't think I know anybody whose mastery is perfect in that they could enter the first jhana with literally anything kicking off, like in the middle of a war zone they could enter the first jhana. I don't know anybody whose mastery is that strong. But we do want a mastery that is strong enough to accommodate for most of our typical daily life situations, like on the bus, on a toilet break, whilst you're waiting at traffic lights, or maybe not whilst you're waiting at traffic lights because you don't know when they're going to change color! But in little breaks throughout our typical day, we want our mastery to be plenty strong enough to accommodate for these situations.

Is It Enough to Master the First Jhana?

Meditators who can master the first jhana usually do not struggle to practice the higher jhanas.

They can practice the higher jhanas within a matter of a few more weeks or a few more months, depending on their pace of practice. But they do not struggle because once we have mastered the first jhana, there's already no defilements arising in the mind for a long time. The mind is wholesome and wieldy and open to instruction.

So we could think of it a bit like all of the hard work is in learning how to drive a car and manage the things and change the gears and all of that. But once you've learned to drive a car, would you rather drive from London to Edinburgh in first gear? Or would you rather drive from London to Edinburgh in, well, I drive a vintage van that's only got four gears... Would you rather drive in fourth gear or fifth gear? Right. We don't want to be setting out on a long journey, limiting ourselves to first gear when realistically it's not that much of a stretch to be able to drive in the fourth gear.

When Is Mastery of Jhana Attained?

As for being able to enter at will, like I said, I think we can say that we've achieved that mastery when we've accommodated for most of the typical situations that arise in our life—a normal level of chaos and distraction. When we get a little minute, we can enter the jhana relatively easily. As for how long to stay in the jhana, I'd say the minimum amount of time we want to be able to sustain a jhana is an hour. That doesn't mean we always enter for an hour. Certainly not if you've got a toilet break, you're not going to enter the jhana for an hour. That would be weird for others. But it means if we want to, we can sustain that absorption for at least an hour as the minimum that we want to be working with.

The accuracy of coming out on time we want to train within at least a minute or two either side. If we find ourselves frequently coming out more than a couple of minutes early or more than a couple of minutes late, there's room for improvement in that mastery. It can really get very accurate.

And quickly and efficiently identifying the jhana factors, we want to be able to confidently, quickly know that all five of those jhana factors are there within a split second. We want to be sure that they are all there, that we haven't secretly drifted into a higher state, but that we've got the discipline to maintain all five of those jhana factors for the duration of the absorption. We can identify those jhana factors within a split second of emerging.

What Should Daily Life Practice Involve?

When we talk about practicing throughout the day, we're basically speaking about you finding two or three minutes to close your eyes and be an unbroken awareness on the nimitta. When you do that, all five jhana factors will be there. But by this stage of practice, all five jhana factors will have been there every time you did the same thing with your subtle breath. Every time you took a little coffee

break and were like, OK, let's just take a minute. All five of those jhana factors were already there with your subtle breath. As you've trained to come back to the nimitta periodically throughout the day, all five of those jhana factors have been there every time that you've come back to the nimitta. And now we're doing that just in a more refined, higher quality way, where we've habituated the mind to be unbroken with the nimitta in the sittings that we've done. Now we're able to do that in these little short bursts. So we have our little coffee break. We close our eyes. The nimitta's there and the quality of attention is such that the mind will just drop everything else and be exclusively with that nimitta.

I think when we are practicing the first jhana on the cushion or off the cushion, it's inevitable that we don't quite know the difference between a very deep and stable access concentration with the nimitta and the first jhana. The meditator typically doesn't know the difference and isn't the best judge of whether it was a very stable access concentration with the nimitta or a first jhana on the cushion or off the cushion. But what we want is some confidence that the attention was very good quality and, to the best of our knowledge, unbroken.

There still will probably be little periods of time where it was actually access concentration, but at this stage of practice, that's not the most relevant thing. The most relevant thing is that we have a very good, to our best awareness, unbroken quality of attention on that nimitta. If that's what's happening at this stage of practice, it's good enough. Just on the balance of probability, it's probably the first jhana at least some of the time.

Is There a Task at This Stage of Practice?

At this stage of practice, you want to start increasing your awareness of the nimitta. Throughout the day, carrying it with you through more of the day, taking little pauses of closing your eyes and coming back to the nimitta. And also practicing being with the nimitta, even with your eyes open. For example, as you walk down a busy street, keeping your eyes open, but your mind's attention on the nimitta.

Then you want to start practicing that mastery of closing your eyes periodically throughout the day and having that unbroken attention on the nimitta for short bursts of time.

On the cushion, we want to be practicing the accuracy of our adhitthana, setting adhitthanas for longer and longer, until we're comfortable with a minimum of an hour and emerging as close to on time as possible within at least a few minutes either side, but preferably bang on time. Then quickly and efficiently identifying those jhana factors and making sure that all five of them really are there and we're not secretly sliding into a different state.

Next Time...

In the next session, we will briefly go over what some of the higher jhanas are and some different objects that we can use for jhana if, for whatever reason, you don't want to practice with mindfulness of breathing.