

Journey to Jhana
with Beth Upton

Video 8
How Do I Know If It's the First Jhana?

How Do I Use the Nimitta to Enter Jhana?

All you need to do with your nimitta is maintain a balanced, contented attention on it. The same as you were doing with the subtle breath, but the object is more refined. Just stay there, keep your attention on it, nice and content, nice and balanced for a long time. You're doing the same thing in the same way.

Is There a Line Where This Crosses into Jhana?

It's a real common misconception of meditators that there should be some fanfare in the mind—that you've now crossed into jhana. In most cases, the meditator will find the shift from a deep access concentration with the nimitta into the first jhana as being an imperceptible change.

The difference between access concentration and jhana is a technical one. We can think of the mind as very many moments that are arising and passing away, one after the other, very quickly. Each moment knows an object and then passes away—knows an object, passes away, knows an object, passes away... But just one moment isn't enough to fully know an object.

If you were going to see these flowers [behind me], for example, you couldn't do that in just one moment. You need a chain of moments in order to know the flowers, and we call that chain of moments a mental process. A mental process could be 8, 10, or 14 moments long, for example. What we have usually happening in the mind is this mental process, a short gap, another mental process, a short gap, another mental process, a short gap... These gaps are what we call *bhavanga* consciousness, which is a Pali word, and it's essentially a resting consciousness. It's the type of consciousness that arises when we are in a dreamless sleep, if we pass out, or something. It's those times when we feel like we were just blank, we didn't know anything, we were resting. Actually, in those moments, you do know something, but the object is very, very subtle. So it feels like you didn't know anything.

Our normal mind is a mental process, a few moments of this resting *bhavanga*. A mental process, resting, *bhavanga*. When we are in deep access concentration, that's what's happening. But every single mental process is taking the nimitta as the object. So we have nimitta, rest, nimitta, rest, nimitta, rest. To the meditator, that feels like the only possibility. It's the only way that they've known things can be.

When we move into jhana, what happens is we have one long unbroken mental process. Every single moment knows the nimitta without being interrupted by these resting moments, by these bhavanga moments.

Now because the mind is so so quick and these bhavanga moments might just be two mind moments, it's less than a split split second, from the point of view of the meditator, they probably don't realize that a change has happened. There's a slight, almost-imperceptible improvement in the quality of the attention.

For most meditators as well when they are moving into the first jhana, they don't shift into this jhana mental process, this unbroken mental process, and just immediately stay there for an hour.

They might have this jhana mental process for 10 seconds, which is already a very long time, and then they might go back to this access concentration mental processes. Then they might have a jhana mental process for a minute, and then they might be back in access concentration. So they'll be in and out between these two different types of mental processes for a long time.

It takes usually weeks or months of practice before we can be stable in that jhana mental process, unbroken for a long time.

From the point of view of the meditator, they will struggle to tell the difference, because it's a very subtle shift.

As soon as we move into a deep access concentration, even with the subtle breath, we can go for a long time without perceiving the body. But when we are with the nimitta in access concentration, we could go for a long time without perceiving the body.

I Feel a Sudden Rush of Joy. Is This Jhana?

A very common misconception among meditators is that when we're with the nimitta, and we're nice and stable, nice and subtle, nice and refined, with the nimitta, when something sudden or big happens, that must be our crossing into the first jhana. That's almost 100 percent of the time a mistake.

If we're still having big unstable movements of the mind—the nimitta suddenly becomes more bright, joy suddenly floods its way through the body—that's actually a sign that our practice is a little more coarse. It's a sign that we're a little earlier on in the access concentration. We haven't yet developed quite enough refinement and stability and contentment of mind to do the same thing in the same way for a long time.

What we want is no big changes.

If joy does flood the body, obviously let it happen. We don't want to enter into a battle with that or any kind of control. We want to be nice and surrendered. But gradually, over time, we want these big changes and big movements to stabilize and refine into something that is subtle and stable and the same for a long time.

What If I'm Still Not Experiencing Much Stability?

It's like we said when we were speaking about access concentration. There are a few big renunciations along the way of our practice deepening, where we put down something coarse, and it allows us to move into something more subtle. We put down thinking and it allows us to move into something more subtle. We put down the body and it allows us to move into something more subtle.

The big renunciation that isn't spoken about a lot culturally in our western meditation culture is this big renunciation of diversity—to put down diversity of perception and be with the same thing in the same way for a long time.

But when we do make that move of mind, we put down the diversity of perception and do the same thing in the same way for a long time, we realize that we've gifted ourselves a much more beautiful, more refined deep state.

If I've Surrendered and Absorbed into the Nimitta, Is This the First Jhana?

It may or may not be the first jhana as we deepen in meditation. Certainly our felt sense of surrender will increase because we're doing less, we're manipulating less, we're controlling less. So surrender is a good thing in the practice. But surrender in and of itself doesn't necessarily mean that you're in the first jhana. We can be in a surrendered relationship with the nimitta, in access concentration as well. What we want, again, is the ability to do the same thing in the same way for a long time. So nice and surrendered with that nimitta and stable and being with it in the same way for a long time.

How Often Should I Be Evaluating My Practice?

If you think of the first jhana, as we just said, as an unbroken attention on the nimitta, when literally every single mind moment is knowing the nimitta, then it should be obvious that in order to attain that state, we can't be doing any investigation whatsoever. The mind doesn't advert to any single other object—not a sound, not the body, not a thought, but also not investigation.

We can think of investigation like a relay chariot. The Buddha loved this simile. It's something which carries us a certain distance and then it can't carry us any further.

When we're coming into an access concentration with the nimitta, and we're learning to let go of the breath and just be with the nimitta, we might still need to be investigating a little bit because we're learning.

At some point we get to a confidence with the nimitta where we think, "Do you know what? I can be with this nimitta pretty nice and stable for most of the sitting." When we get to that level of confidence, it's the right time to start using a tool that we call *adhitthana*.

Adhitthana: Decision or Determination

Adhitthana usually is translated as decision or determination. We don't want to misunderstand that word. We're not talking about force. What we're talking about is a decisiveness that says, "Go this way." It's like setting our ship sailing in a certain direction, and if the winds aren't blowing, if it's nice and calm waters and you set your ship going in this direction, you don't have to do anything else and the ship will go in that direction. If it's a windy day and you set your ship going in this direction and then it's very windy, you say go in this direction, and your ship's like, or this direction and it doesn't really follow your instruction, which is why we only use these adithtana tools when the mind is already very calm and there's very few defilements arising in the mind. Otherwise we end up in a type of a battle where we make this adhitthana, we say to the mind, "Go this way," and the defilements say, "Or this way," we don't get the result we want, we're like, "Hey, I said go this way," and we start battling. We imbalance the mind.

So we don't use adhitthana early on in the practice. We use it when the quality of attention is already very well-established.

When you have a very good quality of attention on the nimitta. You're confident it's stable for a long time and we make this adhitthana and what we essentially say is, "Ok, I am going to be with only this nimitta for the next however long feels easy, let's say 20 minutes. "All I'm going to do is know this nimitta for the next 20 minutes." We set our adhitthana and we bring our attention to the nimitta and we forget everything else. We don't need to care about the quality of our meditation, we don't need to care about how deep we are. You don't need to care about if you heard a sound or felt your body, or what is the time, is it 20 minutes yet? You don't investigate anything. Then, at some point, your little adhitthana mind alarm will go off and it will be like, "I think it's about time now," and at that time, we can come out and we can reflect on this period that has just passed.

The analogy I like to give is an alarm clock. If you know that you've got a really important meeting tomorrow morning at 7 a.m. and you don't set an alarm, then probably sometime around 5 a.m., all of a sudden you can't quite sleep so deep because you're worried: "I've got to get up soon." So you're all the time checking and you can't fully surrender to the experience because you've got something to worry about.

In the same way, when we make this addithana, we can think of it like, we've set our alarm. We've given the instructions, there's nothing to do. We can just enjoy the nimitta. We don't need to check anything.

Then, when we come out, what we want to do is first of all, mentally review the quality. What was the quality of that 20 minutes or however long it was? Was there any distraction? Was there any imbalance? Were any other objects coming into my awareness?

We then want to get in the habit of briefly checking the jhana factors, which we can speak about in a moment. Then we can check the time. Was it 20 minutes or was I actually doing it for 10 minutes? Was I actually doing it for half an hour, for example? As we do repetitions of this exercise, our absorption starts to deepen. We start to gain trust with the state and we start to notice these subtle imperfections of too much investigation, too much checking, start to fall away.

Will Environmental Conditions Be a Problem?

When we were at Pa-auk, the monastery in which I trained, they had built the meditation hall next to a metal workshop where they were welding and drilling metal all day long next to the meditation hall. We learned to train alongside jarring noise, so it definitely is possible and in the long run of your practice, it's good to integrate some level of challenge with your practice.

Again, it's very similar to sleep. Most of us would like to be able to sleep in an environment where maybe your house is next to a road, for example, and you'd like to be able to do that or fall asleep on an airplane even though people are chatting, for example. We want to be able to develop that skill of mind. At the same time, we don't want to make it unnecessarily very difficult for ourselves. So if your flatmates are playing loud music in the room next door, it's OK to go and say, "Hey, could you not for the next hour? I'm trying to meditate." That's OK. But we don't need to get very very precious about silence or we're creating a fragility in our meditation practice.

Should I Check for the Jhana Factors?

When we start doing this adhitthana practice, like I said, when we come out, we want to get in the habit of first of all reviewing the quality of the absorption. We then want to get in the habit of checking the jhana factors and then checking the time. Now, in the first jhana, the five jhana factors will definitely be there and they've been there for a long time. So in checking the jhana factors, we're not doing anything special. Their presence doesn't necessarily mean that we're in jhana. The five jhana factors are there in access concentration and they are there in jhana. But those five jhana factors are a diagnostic of which jhana we are in. The only jhana in which they're not a great diagnostic, ironically, is the first jhana, because, like I said, we've got five in access concentration and five in the first jhana. But as we go into higher jhanas, these jhana factors start to fall away. So we can use their presence or absence to diagnose which jhana we are in.

It forms part of a good habit to check the jhana factors even in the first jhana, even though we're sure it will be five. So what we do is we bring our attention to our heart area and we check for the jhana factors there. Sometimes meditators can find it a little challenging or confusing to bring our attention to our heart. It's actually because those mental factors are arising dependent on materiality in the heart. It's a different conversation that we could get into another time. At this stage of practice, the jhana factors, to be honest, are obvious. It's not difficult to know that applied thought is happening in general—that the mind is applying itself to the nimitta. This is an obvious thing that's definitely happening. So what we do as a meditator is we notice this thing happening in general and then we see if we can find that quality here in our heart area, where it will be happening, but more subtly. Likewise, it's obvious that attention is sustaining itself on the nimitta and we might know that quality in general and then we check for it here in the heart where it's more subtle. Likewise it's obvious that there's joy. We check for it here. It's obvious there's happiness. We check for it here. It's obvious that there's one pointedness. It means mind is only knowing one thing. We check for it here in the heart and we do this so that we can quickly identify those jhana factors.

When we move into the higher jhanas, we can quickly know whether or not they are present or absent.

Is There a Task at This Stage of Practice?

The task here would be if you're already feeling confident that your nimitta is stable for the majority of the sitting, then practice these adhitthanas. Sit down, be with your nimitta for a few minutes. When you feel like things are going well, then make an adhitthana: "OK, I am going to be with this nimitta for the next 20 minutes or half an hour," let's say. Set your intention and then forget everything. Don't investigate anything. Don't investigate the time. Don't investigate the jhana factors. Don't investigate the distractions or the depth of your practice. Just enjoy that nimitta. Just love that nimitta.

Then, at some point, you'll come out and you want to check, in order, first of all how was the quality of that meditation? Were there any imbalances or distractions? Just check and review. It's a bit like when you wake up in the morning, thinking, "How deeply did I sleep?" Check the quality.

Second, check the jhana factors. Bring your attention to the heart area and check for applied thoughts, sustained thought, joy, happiness, and one-pointedness in their subtle forms that you find here.

Third, open your eyes and check the time and see how you did. Were you wildly under time or were you bang on time? Then repeat this exercise. If you find it easy, 20 minutes, then do longer. Half an hour, 45 minutes, one hour, an hour and a half. Do many many repetitions of this exercise until you start to come out on time. First of all, when you review the quality, it seems like there were almost no imperfections, almost no distractions for the duration of that absorption. You can quickly and accurately notice those five jhana factors are there and you're coming out almost exactly on time. We do that through just repeating this exercise again and again.

Next Time...

In the next session, we will cover practicing mastery of the first jhana.