

Journey to Jhana with Beth Upton

Video 1 What Is Jhana?

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Jhana is a Pali word that is usually translated as *absorption*. Jhana is synonymous with *samadhi*, which is a word that you can find in many spiritual traditions. The word absorption, I think, is actually quite a good translation, in that we can draw parallels to other things that we might become absorbed in.

A nice example is if you become really absorbed in a book that you're reading. You're reading this book, you're enjoying it, and at some point you're so absorbed in the story, you're so interested in it, it's got so much of your attention, that you forget about the room. You even kind of forget that you're reading words on the page.

You forget about your body. Maybe if you're hungry, you completely forgot about that. You can even ignore the fact that you want to go to the toilet because you're so absorbed in this story. It has captured your attention. Your attention is absorbed in it. We can think of jhana like a very refined version of that.

How is jhana different from being absorbed in a book, a movie, a conversation, or anything else that we get really absorbed in? Jhana is different in its refinement.

The object of our attention is something much more subtle, and therefore something that takes much more skill for us to absorb in. It's not something that is calling our attention in the same way that a book or movie or interesting person does. It requires work from our side to be able to maintain interest in this very, very subtle thing.

Because the object of our attention is so subtle, our attention on it is much, much more refined and delicate. So jhana technically arises when the absorption of our attention into this subtle object becomes literally unbroken. So if you're absorbed in a movie, it might have most of your attention, but not technically literally 100 percent of it.

You might still advert to other things. You might still hear somebody laughing in the corner, or your attention might go to other places. But when we're absorbed in jhana, it's got literally 100 percent of our attention. So there's not a single other thought that arises during the jhana. You don't hear a single noise. Your attention doesn't advert to your body at all, even for a split second. One hundred percent of your attention is with your meditation object. That's essentially what jhana is.

What Does the Experience of Jhana Feel Like?

Jhana is a very refined experience because the object of attention is incredibly subtle. In order for our attention to stay with this very subtle thing for a long time, our attention can't be doing other things. And so the experience of jhana is like an unburdening. All of this busyness and heavy work that the mind is usually doing is absent.

And we're in a refined, unburdened state of attention on this very subtle object. And because of that unburdening, it feels good. It feels lovely.

What Is the Purpose of Developing Jhana?

The main purpose of developing jhana is so that we have a very refined tool of mind. All advanced meditation—the whole territory of advanced meditation—involves us being able to hold our attention on something very subtle for a long time. This is a fundamental skill of mind that we need to practice advanced meditation. If we were able to liberate ourselves from all suffering by holding our attention on relatively coarse objects for a short amount of time, we'd all be fully enlightened already.

This core skill that we need in order to liberate ourselves is that we can hold our attention on something very, very subtle for a long time. Here's an example of what I mean by subtle: If you now try just with your mind—not using your hands, not touching anything—to bring your attention to the sensations in the root of one hair on your head, can you feel it directly with your mind?

Bring your attention there. Most of us can't. We might be able to feel that our hair is there in general, but not the root of one hair. But in advanced meditation, the level of subtlety that we are directly observing reality at is many thousands of times more subtle than that, directly observing with the mind. We need to be able to sustain our attention on things like the momentary perishing of our own consciousness, the momentary perishing of perception.

These things are incredibly subtle, and we need to be able to sustain our attention on those things for a long time. So we can think of jhana practice like a preparatory training to be able to sustain our attention on these subtle things for a long time. Then, as the jhana practice deepens, it becomes increasingly subtle, so that then we can engage with reality in a more refined way—in a way that will eventually liberate us.

Is More Subtle Attention Better?

The direction of progress in meditation is from more coarse toward more subtle, and eventually extremely subtle. That's the direction of progress. But it doesn't mean it's always better to be practicing at the very subtle end. We need to practice where we are, and we need to incline toward the subtle. So what we've got in our meditation world at the moment is a lot of relatively coarsened practices, which are great, because a lot of people are living busy lives where they need these tools.

But what we also see is a real lack of subtle tools available for the people who do want to go deeper in the practice in order to really liberate themselves. In order to attain nirvana, we need to be able to directly observe the things that we're really attached to, the things where we really hold identity, our own consciousness, our own perception, our own volition.

Those things are incredibly subtle. That's why we need this very refined attention in order to observe it. You could say it's a high bar. But I actually think it's very good news that it's still possible. It's still possible.

Are There Other Benefits to Jhana?

There are loads of benefits to jhana, but all of these other benefits—let's say benefit to our mood, emotional state, in terms of trauma, healing to our body—all of those benefits derive from the fact that jhana is an extended period of time in wholesome states. The benefit comes from wholesome states.

What do I mean by that? The mind is always on one of two tracks. It's either on the wholesome track, the beautiful track. In Pali, we call it *kusala*. Or it's on the unwholesome track—the track of the defilements. On this unwholesome track, there are many things that the mind can do that I think we will be familiar with. The mind could be prideful, angry, fearful, lustful or many other things that we're engaged with a lot of the time. But on the wholesome track, there's just one flavor. This one flavor is a collection of mental qualities we call the mental factors that always co-arise. You can think of it like a group of friends that are handcuffed together. When you invite one of them along to the party, they all come, whether you like them or not, whether you invited them or not. This collection of beautiful mental factors consists of things like our faith, mindfulness, generosity, renunciation, loving-kindness, morality, or tranquility. So we can lead with any of those and we'll get them all.

When this group of beautiful mental factors are there, we say that we are established in wise attention. The way that we are attending to our object of attention, or the way that we are in relationship to whatever has our attention, is wise and beautiful. That wise attention is responsible for almost 100 percent of our quality of life.

We like to think that our quality of life depends on the object of our attention. Now I'm in this situation with this type of person. It's easy, it's difficult, it's nice, it's not nice. But actually almost 100 percent of our quality of life depends on our quality of attention, not our object of attention. We could have a difficult object of attention, like physical pain, or a difficult person, or an ugly view. But if we pay wise attention to it, we feel good, right? That's the benefit of wise attention. It's responsible for almost 100 percent of our quality of life. It has us established in these beautiful mental factors. So without trying, when we're in wise attention, we're becoming more generous. We're becoming more ethical and more loving. We're going to improve the quality of our relationships. And we can think of jhana as like a power shot, like an intense time in those beautiful mental factors, in that wise attention.

We get all of the benefits of that time in jhana, but also that time in jhana is conditioning the mind to be there more. It's habit forming. So because we've taken that power shot of wise attention, we're more likely to come back to why is attention again after the jhana throughout the day? Because the mind is very strongly habit forming.

To get a sense of how this wise attention so strongly conditions our quality of life, we could right now choose any random object—any object in the room that you can see. Flowers, for example, or something on the wall in front of you, the carpet, a chair, the table, or anything you like. You can have a go at this now if you want. You take a look at that object and conjure up some hate for it, complain about it, notice all of the things about it that are a bit disappointing, a bit unsatisfactory.

Notice what it does. Notice what it does to your quality of experience. If we now take that same object and we cultivate gratitude toward it, if we imagine giving it as a gift to somebody, or if we are mindful and appreciative of the details of that object, we can immediately notice our quality of experience improve. That's a power of mind that we all have, and it forms a huge part of our dharma practice to gradually change the habit so that we are more and more paying wise attention to wherever our attention lands.

Jhana is very, very helpful in the doing of that.

Next time...

Next time we'll talk about how to get started—how to make it a possibility for you. Even in a busy householding life, it's possible.