

Journey to Jhana with Beth Upton

Video 6 Light and the Nimitta

What Is the Nimitta?

We spoke last time about access concentration and when we're in access concentration it's all about keeping our attention stable on our breath as it gets increasingly subtle over time. The direction of progress in meditation is from more coarse toward more subtle.

We said that first, we're starting to know the breath in a relatively coarse way. We're using our body a lot, and that gets more and more and more gentle until at some point we don't need physical sensation at all in order to know the breath. We're knowing that very subtle breath just directly with our mind.

But the breath can only get so subtle and keep on being the breath. There's an element to which the breath is inherently coarse because it's the air going in and out of our body. So however delicately we're breathing, the breath has got a limit to how subtle it can be before we're just not breathing anymore.

In order for our practice to deepen, at some point this subtle breath needs to be replaced by an even more subtle object that can thereby carry our practice deeper. That next most subtle object is the nimitta.

Nimitta: A Sign or Subtle Meditation Object

The nimitta will be a perception that the mind comes up with to replace that subtle breath.

Is the Nimitta Linked to the Breath?

All materiality, to get a little bit technical here, but every single physical thing that exists has light as an inherent characteristic of it. Some of that light we can see with our physical eyes, obviously, but a lot of that light we can't see with our physical eyes. The light in the air, for example, we don't see it. But the mind can directly perceive the light inherent in all physical things when the mind is refined.

The breath itself, the materiality, the air of the breath, has light inherent in it. When we focus on something for a long time and our mind is well concentrated, we start to perceive that light. So

we could think of the nimitta like we are so well focused on the breath. We're so in love with the breath, open-hearted with the breath and finally attained to the breath that we start to directly perceive the light inherent in the breath.

That light inherent in the breath that we are knowing with our mind is like the little seedling of a nimitta starting to form. But what happens is we take that light and our perception sort of makes a concept out of it, snapshots it, and uses it as a meditation object moving forward.

Is the Nimitta the Same for Everyone?

So the answer is no, because everybody's perceptive habits are conditioned so, so uniquely, everybody can perceive the nimitta in slightly different ways.

It will have some core same characteristics to it: always perceived as a type of light or mental image, in the same place as the breath, replacing the breath. But we have in the commentaries a long list of different ways that the nimitta can be perceived. The point they're clearly trying to make in the commentaries is you could perceive your nimitta in like an infinite number of different ways. They'll say you could perceive your nimitta like a cloud, like a sun, like a moon, like a flower, like a spider's web, like a mist... There's a list of about, I don't know, 25 or 30 things.

Students will come and they'll say, "But my nimitta isn't like a cloud or a sun or a moon or a spider's web or a cold web. It's a little bit more like a banana." And it's like, OK, banana's fine as well (laughs.)

There are some core characteristics of a nimitta. It needs to be stable. It needs to be in the same place as the breath, replacing the breath, perceived as a subtle mental image. But the details of it can be very different from one person to another.

Is the Nimitta Always the Same for Me?

What the word *nimitta* really means is meditation object.

Colloquially, and sort of culturally, we've come to use the word nimitta to mean a meditation object that is refined enough to carry you into the jhana. But what it really means is your meditation object.

For something to be our meditation object at this level of practice, it needs to be more stable and more subtle and more compelling than your pre-existing object that is your subtle breath.

If something is all the time changing—different within a sitting or different from sitting to sitting—it doesn't yet surpass your previous object because it's not more stable or more subtle. It's not going to carry you deeper. It's going to last a little time and then it's going to change.

For a nimitta to have the characteristics that we want to use it, that we want to take it as our meditation object, it needs to be more stable and more subtle more compelling than our subtle breath. So usually we wait until the nimitta is the same stable for the entire meditation sitting, and sitting after sitting after sitting. Then we're like, "All right, you are better than my subtle breath, I'll go with you."

Is the Nimitta Static?

We don't need to conceive of the nimitta as being like a rock or like a still photograph. But we are, again, wanting it to be more stable and more subtle than the pre-existing object, which is a subtle breath.

If your nimitta is doing more change and dance than your subtle breath, it's not yet stable enough. If this is your subtle breath, it's going in and out, and your nimitta has got some little movement to it that is more stable and more subtle and more compelling and it's stable like that over time, then it could be an object that will carry your practice deeper.

Is the Perception of Generalized Light the Nimitta?

No, that's not the nimitta. That's what we call the light of wisdom and it's very, very easy at this stage of practice for meditators to get confused because usually we've been practicing for a long time and we've heard about light and we want to get excited about light that arises.

What actually happens is that almost every moment of mind is producing materiality throughout the body, and wholesome mind states produce lovely bright shiny materiality throughout the body. As our practice deepens, we're producing even more of that bright shiny materiality throughout the body. At the same time, our awareness is calming down to the level that we can start to perceive it. So when we perceive this generalized light, that's essentially just the light that is produced by the depth of our practice, by our kusala, by our beautiful mind.

If you're very skillful in jhana, then it's not impossible to snapshot some of this generalized light and do a little trick and make it be your nimitta. At that time, you're not practicing mindfulness of breathing jhana anymore, you're practicing the light kusala. But for beginners this is not the best way to practice. We can practice like that when our stability of mind is already very, very well developed. If you've just come out of the fourth jhana, you can pick up any unstable object and stabilize it and it will be your nimitta. But when we are learning, when we're training, we want to move step by step by step by step into more subtle states and that is why we wait for a stable *anapana* nimitta to arise.

Are There Other Kinds of Light That Appear?

Loads of kinds of light could appear at this stage of practice in an access concentration. We are doing a deep clean. You've taken all of the boxes and suitcases out of the basement, and now you're getting in there with a toothbrush, making sure that you clean behind all of the pipes.

There can be a lot of dirt to come out in the territories of deep access concentration. Oftentimes it's arising as unstable lights and images. That's the first type of light that can arise.

Sometimes some perception that is cleaning out isn't strong enough to give rise to a full memory or a full emotion, and we just perceive some unstable light as we clean out that little bit of the basement.

Also, we underestimate as we go throughout the day, just how much we are conditioning ourselves to instability as we look at this, we look at that, this light, that light, this thing, this thing. Our perceptive habit is still doing that as our mind calms down.

It's still doing that in the same way that we replay wandering thoughts—these habits of thoughts we've accumulated through the day—we also replay perceptive habits such as “difference,” “difference,” “difference,” “sense impression”. These kinds of flashy, unstable lights are very, very common in a deep access concentration.

We then have this generalized light of wisdom that can also arise, which can be bright and can be stable, but not related to our breath. It's not related to our meditation object, and therefore it's not our nimitta.

Does a Nimitta Arise Through Other Senses?

The brief answer is no. When we enter the jhana, it is separate from the five senses. It's freed from the body. The body isn't there. The five senses are not there. So if we are using our body or any of our five bodily senses to know the meditation object, it's a direct block to the jhana. You cannot enter the jhana then, right?

That's why, as we enter access concentration, we start to know the breath without needing the sense of touch, as we discussed in our previous video.

To enter the jhana, our meditation object needs to be a mind object. It means we're knowing it directly with the mind. We're not using the body to know it. Therefore, it will be perceived as a mental image.

Is There a Task That Will Help Me See the Nimitta?

The task is to keep your attention nice and stable, nice and patient, on your subtle breath. At this stage of practice, we need much, much contentment. We want to love the breath for its own sake, not as a means to an end.

If anything comes in that's like, “I'll focus on this breath so I can get that nimitta that I'd actually prefer,” you're going to block yourself. The nimitta arises because you're in love with your subtle

breath. You're so in love with your subtle breath, it starts to become shiny for you. You can think of it like that.

At this stage of practice, if you are starting to get some of these lights arise, if it does feel like you're starting to perceive the shiny in that breath, stay with your subtle breath, keep on loving your subtle breath, and just let that shiny be there

Next Time...

In the next session we'll speak about what to do when that light is nice and stable, the nimitta is nice and stable, and we want to start practicing with the nimitta instead of with the breath.