

Instructions for Entering Jhana by Leigh Brasington

<http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma7/enterjhana.html>

Some people will experience some of the jhanas on this retreat; some people will not. The likelihood of you experiencing a jhana is inversely proportional to the amount of desire that you have for it. After all, the instructions given by the Buddha in the early texts for practicing jhana begin with “Secluded from sense desire, secluded from unwholesome states of mind, one approaches and abides in the first jhana.” In order to experience a jhana, it is necessary to temporarily abandon the five hindrances [sense desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, doubt]. However, if you are craving a jhana, you’ve got sense desire and an unwholesome state of mind. You have to set those aside to be able to enter the jhana.

The method for entering jhana begins with generating access concentration. You begin by sitting in a comfortable, upright position. It needs to be comfortable, because if there is too much pain, aversion will naturally develop in the mind. You may be able to sit in a way that looks really good, but if your knees are killing you there will be pain and you will not experience any jhanas. So you need to find some way to sit that is comfortable. But it also needs to be upright and alert, because that tends to get your energy going in a beneficial way that keeps you awake. If you are too comfortable you will be overcome with sloth and torpor, which is an unwholesome state of mind that is totally useless for entering the jhanas.

So the first prerequisite for entering the jhanas is to put the body in a position that you can just leave it in for the length of the sitting without having to move. If you have back problems or some other obstacle that prevents you from sitting upright, then you need to find some other alert position that you can maintain comfortably.

Now this is not to say that you cannot move. It may be that you have taken a position and you discover that “My knee is killing me; I have to move because there is too much aversion.” If you have to move, you have to move. Okay, be mindful of moving. The intention to move will be there before the movement. Notice that intention, then move very mindfully, and then re-settle yourself into the new position, and notice how long it takes for the mind to get back to that place of calm that it had before you moved. It is very important that you not move unmindfully.

This process encourages you to find a position where you don’t have to move, because you’ll notice the amount of disturbance that even a slight movement

generates. And in order to get concentrated enough to have the jhanas manifest, you need a very calm mind.

Generating access concentration can be done in a number of ways. Today I will mostly talk about generating it using the breath, a practice known as anapana-sati. The first word, anapana, means “in-breath and out-breath,” while the word sati means “mindfulness.” The practice is therefore “mindfulness of breathing.” When practicing anapana-sati, you put your attention on the breath. It is probably better if you can observe the physical sensations of the breath at the nostrils or on the upper lip, rather than at the abdomen or elsewhere. It is better because it is more difficult to do; therefore you have to concentrate more. Since we are trying to generate access concentration we take something that is do-able, though not terribly easy to do—and then we do it. When watching the breath at the nose, you have to pay attention very carefully.

In doing so you will watch the sensations, and then your mind will wander off. Then you’ll bring it back and it will wander off, then you’ll bring it back and it will wander off. Eventually though—maybe not in the next sitting, maybe not even in the next day—but eventually, you’ll find that the mind sort of locks into the breath. You’ve been going first to one side and then the other, and finally you’re there, and you know that you’re there. You’re really with the breath and the mind is not wandering off. Any thoughts that you have are wispy and in the background. The thoughts might be something like “Wow, I’m really with the breath now,” as opposed to, “When I get to Hawaii, the first thing I’m going to do is...”

When the thoughts are just slight, and they’re not really pulling you away, you’re with the sensations of the breath. This is the sign that you’ve gotten to access concentration. Whatever method you use to generate access concentration, the sign that you’ve gotten to access concentration is that you are fully present with the object of meditation. So if you are doing metta [loving-kindness meditation], you’re just fully there with the feelings of metta; you’re not getting distracted. If you’re doing the body sweeping practice, you’re fully there with the sensations in the body as you sweep your attention through the body. You’re not thinking extraneous thoughts, you’re not planning, you’re not worrying, you’re not angry, you’re not wanting something. You are just fully there with whatever the object is.

If your practice is anapana-sati, there are additional signs to indicate you have arrived at access concentration. You may discover that the breath becomes very subtle; instead of a normal breath, you notice you are breathing very shallow. It may even seem that you’ve stopped breathing altogether. These are signs that you’ve arrived at access concentration. If the breath gets very shallow, and particularly if it feels like you’ve stopped breathing, the natural thing to do is to take a nice, deep breath and get it going again. Wrong! This will tend to weaken your concentration. By taking that nice deep breath, you drop down the level of

concentration. Just stay with that shallow breathing. It's okay. You don't need a lot of oxygen, because you are very quiet.

If the breath gets very, very subtle, or if it disappears entirely, instead of taking a deep breath, shift your attention away from the breath to a pleasant sensation. This is the key thing. You watch the breath until you arrive at access concentration, and then you let go of the breath and shift your attention to a pleasant sensation. There is not much point in watching the breath that has gotten extremely subtle or has disappeared completely. There's nothing left to watch. Shift your attention to a pleasant sensation, preferably a pleasant physical sensation. You will need a good bit of concentration to watch a pleasant physical sensation, because a mildly pleasant feeling somewhere in your body is not nearly as exciting as the breath coming in and the breath going out. You've got this mildly pleasant sensation that's just sitting there; you need to be well-concentrated to stay with it.

The first question that may arise when I say "Shift your attention to a pleasant sensation" is "What pleasant sensation?" Well, it turns out that when you get to access concentration, the odds are quite strong that some place in your physical being there will be a pleasant sensation. Look at this statue of the Buddha: he has a smile on his face. That is not just for artistic purposes; it is there as a teaching mechanism. Smile when you meditate, because when you reach access concentration, you only have to shift your attention one inch to find the pleasant sensation.

Now when I tell you "Smile when you meditate," your reaction is probably "I don't feel like smiling when I meditate." I know this because when they told me to smile when I meditated, my reaction was "I don't feel like smiling." OK, so you don't feel like smiling. Nonetheless if you put a fake smile on your face when you start meditating, by the time you arrive at access concentration, the smile will feel genuine.

If you can smile when you meditate, it works very well for generating a pleasant sensation to focus upon when you arrive at access concentration; but actually, smiling seems to only work for about a quarter of my students. Too many people in this culture have been told "Smile whether you feel like it or not." And so now when I tell you "Smile whether you feel like it or not," your reaction is "No, I'm not gonna do that." OK. So you don't smile when you meditate. You'll have to find some other pleasant sensation.

Pleasant sensations can occur pretty much anywhere. The most common place people that find pleasant sensations when they get to access concentration is in the hands. What you want to do with your hands when you meditate is put them in a nice position in which you can just leave them. The traditional posture is one hand holding the other, with the thumbs lightly touching. This is a quite excellent

posture because it has the tendency of moving the shoulders back and lining up your spine nicely. When the hands are held like this, many people find that eventually there is a nice, tingly, pleasant sensation that appears in the hands. You can also put your hands in all sorts of other positions – just place them however appeals to you. When you get to access concentration, if you notice that there's a nice pleasant feeling in the hands, drop the attention on the breath and focus entirely on the pleasantness of that sensation.

Another common place that people find a pleasant sensation is in the heart center, particularly if you're using metta as the access method. Just shift your attention to the pleasantness of that sensation. Other places people find pleasant sensations include the third eye, the top of the head, the shoulders—actually, you name a body part and I've had some student find a pleasant sensation there that they were able to focus upon long enough for the first jhana to arise. It does not matter where the pleasant sensation manifests; what matters is that there is a pleasant sensation and you're able to put your attention on it and—now here comes the really hard part—do nothing else.

You find the pleasant sensation, and shift your attention to the pleasant sensation. You observe the pleasantness of the pleasant sensation, and do nothing else. If you can do that, the pleasant sensation will begin to grow in intensity, it will become stronger. This will not happen in a linear way. It'll sort of grow a little bit, and then grow a little bit more and then hang out, and grow a little bit more...and then eventually it will suddenly take off and take you into what is obviously an altered state of consciousness.

In this altered state of consciousness, you will be overcome with Rapture ... Euphoria ... Ecstasy ... Delight. These are all English words that are used to translate the Pali word piti. Piti is this physical sensation that literally takes you over and takes you into an altered state. It will be accompanied by an emotional sensation of joy and happiness. The Pali word is sukha, the opposite of dukkha [pain, suffering]. And, if you remain one-pointed on this experience of piti and sukha—that is the first jhana.

So to summarize the method for entering the first jhana: You sit in a nice comfortable upright position, and generate access concentration by putting and maintaining your attention on a single meditation object. When access concentration arises, then you shift your attention from the breath (or whatever your method is) to a pleasant sensation, preferably a pleasant physical sensation. You put your attention on that sensation, and maintain your attention on that sensation, and do nothing else.

The hard part is the do nothing else part. You put your attention on the pleasant sensation, and nothing happens, so you might think to yourself, "He said something was supposed to happen." No, I did not say to make comments about

watching the pleasant sensation. Or, you might put your attention on the pleasant sensation and it starts to increase, so you think, “Oh! Oh! Something’s happening!” No. Or it comes up just a little bit and then it stops, and you sort of try and help it. No. None of this works.

You are to simply observe the pleasant sensation. You become totally immersed in the pleasantness of the pleasant sensation. And I mean by this just what I say: the pleasantness of the pleasant sensation. I don’t mean the location of the pleasant sensation; nor its intensity; nor its duration. I don’t mean whether the pleasant sensation is increasing or decreasing or staying the same. Just focus entirely upon the pleasant aspect of the pleasant sensation, and the jhana will arise on its own.

All you can do is set up the conditions for the jhana to arise, by cultivating a calm and quiet mind focused on pleasantness. And then just let go—be that calm quiet mind focused on pleasantness—and the jhana will appear. Any attempt to do anything more does not work. You actually have to become a human being, as opposed to a human doing. You have to become a being that is simply focused on the pleasant sensation which is existing, and then the jhana comes all on its own.

So now I have given you the instructions for the first jhana. It’s a little bit foolish for me to be giving it on the first day of the retreat, because you’re not likely to get there any time soon. You’re going to sit down and start rearranging the contents of your refrigerator, or something equally absurd. That’s normal. Since I don’t know when you’re actually going to get to that state of access concentration, I give out the instructions on the first day so you have heard them. And when you realize you’ve arrived at access concentration, you will know what to do: shift your attention to a pleasant sensation and do nothing else.

But don’t expect the necessary concentration to show up any time soon. In fact, don’t go expecting anything. Expectations are the absolute worst things you can bring on a retreat. Simply do the meditation method. And when access concentration arises, recognize it, and shift your attention to a pleasant sensation. Don’t try to do the jhanas. You can’t. All you can do is pay attention to the object of meditation, and recognize when it’s time to pay attention to another object.