

Mastering the Jhanas: Buddhist Geeks Talk 159

Episode Description:

This week we speak with Theravada meditation teachers Tina Rasmussen and Stephen Snyder. In 2005, while on a 2-month retreat, they were the first Western lay practitioners (i.e. non-monks) to complete the traditional concentration practices of Pa Auk Sayadaw—a well-regarded Burmese jhana master. The Sayadaw encouraged them to teach what they've learned, and they have, as a result, starting leading retreats and have written a book entitled, *Practicing the Jhanas*.

In this episode they share the progressive practice that they did with Pa Auk Sayadaw, which includes all sorts of traditional practices from the Pali Canon. They also make many traditional distinctions, including the distinction between 3 different types of concentration—momentary, access, and absorption—and the way that they distinguish between these types of concentration. They also share some of the traditional benefits that come from concentration practice, and frame the jhanas not as much as something to attain, but rather as a by-product that arises from purifying the mind.

This is part 1 of a two-part series. Listen to part 2 (airing next week).

Episode Links:

- [Jhanas Advice](#)
 - [*Practicing the Jhanas: Traditional Concentration Meditation as Presented by the Venerable Pa Auk Sayadaw*](#)
 - [Knowing and Seeing](#), by Pa Auk Sayadaw [pdf]
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Transcript:

Vince: Hello Buddhist Geeks, this is Vince Horn and I'm joined today over Skype with two jhana teachers, Tina Rasmussen and Stephen Snyder. Thank you guys so much for taking the time to be with me this morning. I really appreciate it.

Stephen: Thanks, Vince.

Tina: You're welcome.

Vince: Yeah, and today, since you teach the jhanas, that's gonna be the topic that we want to explore with you. Just to share a little background with the listeners out there, you guys have been meditating for quite a long time, a few decades a piece at least, but recently, in 2005 you went on a two month retreat with Venerable Pa Auk Sayadaw, who's a very kind of well known and well regarded teacher in the Burmese tradition.

He teaches this kind of traditional Visuddhimagga jhana practice. So you went with him and from my understanding, correct me if I'm wrong please, you were two of the first Western lay yogis meaning you weren't monks, who were able to complete his training to kind of the satisfaction, or the specifications I guess, if you will, of the high standards that he has for that training. Then he asked you to begin teaching and since you're already partners, you're teaching together.

Tina: Right.

Vince: Yeah, so you've started leading, recently leading retreats at Cloud Mountain Retreat Center, a two-week retreat at the end of the year, and you're teaching I guess the same system that you were taught.

Stephen: Right.

Tina: Right, mm-hmm.

Vince: And you also wrote a book that just came out through Shambhala on the jhana system that Pa Auk teaches, kind of a presentation for Westerners. I know he has written a couple of books and I looked at one of them, *Knowing and Seeing*, and it was like such a behemoth, really technical and hard hitting, but it was really tough to read too. It seems like this book that you presented is maybe more accessible for Westerners, a good place to start. It's called *Practicing the Jhanas: Traditional Concentration Meditation As Presented By the Venerable Pa Auk Sayadaw*.

So, I just wanted to ask you guys some questions around your experience practicing the jhanas and what you've learned teaching them; and just about the jhanas in general. I guess maybe a good place to start would just be to ask for a little bit of an overview of the training you actually went through with Pa Auk on that two month retreat.

And since in the book you really write also from your first person experience, like how you were actually experiencing these states and the training leading up to them, it'd be cool to hear both some of that first person subjective report, and also what kind of technique you were doing and that sort of from the outside as well.

Tina: Mm-hmm, sure. Well, probably the easiest way to give you a sense of the practices that we did in the two month retreat that we spent with the Sayadaw would be to just give you a brief overview of the progression of the samatha practice. Would that be helpful?

Vince: Yeah, that's great. Let's do it.

Tina: So this is from the chart that's at the back of our book, and I'll just go through this really briefly. Basically, our whole book outlines each of these practices. So, Pa Auk Sayadaw uses the Anapanasati, the mindfulness of breathing as the main object that you start the samatha practice with. So you start with mindfulness of breathing, what we call the Anapana Spot. It's kind of a territory that's in between the upper lip and the nostril.

So you're not actually following the breath into the body or out of the body, you're knowing it somewhere in that vicinity.

Then that object is used... there's a whole, we've actually added a whole new chapter to our Shamabhala version of our book on the territory from the time you first sit down, first sit to first jhana. And, there's a lot of sort of technical details in that region. That's where really most of the people spend the majority of time is in that territory. So we won't go into all the detail of that, but eventually at some point if the practice progresses, the first jhana will arise. Then you use the mindfulness of breathing to go first, second, third, fourth jhana.

Stephen: One thing also, Vince, is as we're presenting this we're really trying to reframe it rather than people get jhana as a kind of attainment, we're framing it as when jhana arises. Because it technically more true how that works...

Tina: Yeah.

Stephen: And it takes it out of the personal in terms of I went on retreat and either I got it or I didn't get it, you see? And if it's written with purification of mind then as part of the purification of mind, "Did jhana arise or not arise?" is certainly a valid question, but it doesn't invalidate the process and what's gone on in purification of mind for the person.

Tina: Right. There's a way we really looked at it, and this is very helpful for yogis as a ripening where as the purification of mind is happening, at some point there's the potential for the ripening. It's like with an avocado, you can't put it in the oven and expect it to ripen. It's got to ripen in its own time. So that's really more how the actual process of the purification of mind works and then if a jhana arises, as a result of that, it's more of a byproduct than went to the practice.

Vince: I see.

Tina: Ok so then we have the first four jhanas, then in this progression as you know the Buddha had about forty meditation objects so there's many many objects that are part of the samatha practice. So the way the Sayadaw teaches the progression you then go to the thirty two body parts practice, and we won't go into a lot of detail but this is a practice in which you take different body parts as the object and then, then, focus on the main groups and one of the thirty two body parts is the skeleton. So then after you've done the thirty two body parts then you use the skeleton as the object, really working towards focusing on the back of the skull as the object which bears a strong resemblance to the white kasina, and that becomes a stepping stone to doing the kasinas.

A kasina is really a mind-produced image of a disc-shaped object that's either a color or an element or light or space, so there's ten kasinas, I'll just read them off: White, nela which is kind of a blue-black-brown color, yellow, red, earth, water, fire, wind, light and space. So then you shift from the anapanasati and you use each of those kasinas as an

object to go through the four jhanas. So you can imagine that it gets pretty intense spending that amount of hours with a new object, building the concentration.

Then the earth kasina is used as a starting point to access the immaterial jhanas and then the progression of the practice goes through the four immaterial jhanas, the base of boundless space, the base of boundless consciousness, the base of nothingness, and the base of neither perception nor non-perception. And then the practice goes on to using all of the kasina's as the object to go through the upper jhanas as well. And then once all of that is done, then the practices switch over to the 'sublime abiding' as we know in the west, and the west as Brahmaviharas, and it's done very similarly to what we've practiced here. And then the last of those is the 'protective meditations' and these are really important going into vipassana practice as a kind of a refuge for the practice and those are the recollections of the Buddha, the recollection of death, the mental practice. Yeah, so those are the protective meditations and then you go onto four elements which is the ending of the samatha practice and the beginning of the vipassana. We can talk more about that when we talk about the vipassana practice.

Vince: Yeah, yeah, sure. Maybe it'd be helpful just to give a sense... when you describe it this way it sounds like it's this very quick thing and yet I know reading, reading your descriptions, that you're spending, for instance, three hours in a particular kind of state, and I was wondering maybe if you could say a little bit about the actual state, if you can talk about it and how you're kind of defining or describing jhana.

Tina: Well there's three levels of concentration, and this is where what we found was yogi's coming to us some of whom have maybe done other practices is that there's a lot of confusion about the levels of concentration, momentary access, and absorption, because the jhana factors of joy, happiness, one-pointedness and applied and sustained attention arise even in momentary concentration.

So a lot of times people will think that just because they're feeling piti it's jhana. In the Pa Auk tradition there's very distinct stages between momentary access and full absorption that are very different and also there are the jhana masteries which in the detailed version, which we learned, and it's our understanding that we're the only Western light people who have been taught the detailed version.

Stephen: of the samatha with the Saydaw.

Tina: Right, so there's five jhana masteries and one of those, especially with the first jhana, is to be in the full absorption for three hours

Stephen: Uninterrupted for three hours.

Tina: Yeah

Vince: What is that like from the inside? Like what's it like to be interrupted or, or to be uninterrupted?

Tina: People get confused sometimes about what jhana is, and there is awareness obviously in that condition, in that state of the object, and of the jhana factors. So it's very... you know I mean this is a tranquility and concentration practice so there's a lot of serenity and there's a lot of one-pointedness on the object. When the concentration gets strong enough, the awareness really locks onto the object in a way that is very stable. The Sayadaw talked to us about what he called slight imperfection of jhana, where you might kind of pop out into a high level of access and then go back in; and if that's not happening too much then that's considered to be full absorption, but if there's thought arising, that is not jhana.

Stephen: In this tradition, that's one of the characteristics of jhana is that there is no thinking.

Tina: Right, so you know, this is where a lot of people get confused about access concentration versus full absorption, because even with the retreat we just did, there were yogis who had really high access concentration, the jhana factors were all present, but there's a whole progression with the nimitta, which is a visual light effect that is a byproduct of the mind unifying. And, that becomes an integral part of actually the full jhana absorption arising.

So people could have access concentration and jhana factors without ever having a full absorption. If you've never experienced the full absorption, it's easy to think that that is a jhana; and in this tradition, those are some of the distinctions.

Vince: Ok.

Stephen: Well, one of the distinctions is in this tradition, we never take a jhana factor as the object. In some of the presentations that are available in the West, that is part of the practice.

Vince: Right.

Tina: So, in this practice, and it really makes sense if you think about it logically, the Buddha was trying to help people be free from suffering, from attachments that were either from desire, or aversion, or delusion. It's pretty pleasant when those jhana factors start arising. So, to shift your whole awareness over to a jhana factor really cultivates a lot of desire; and when you're using instead something neutral like the breath, there's a way that the practice can progress in such a way that you're actually purifying the mind stream because you have a neutral object. So, as the first, second, third, fourth jhana progress, in the second jhana, piti—which is joy or rapture—after the second Jhana and moving onto the third, that drops.

So, if you have a lot of attachment to the jhana factors in a way you're cultivating desire. So, when you're using a neutral object like the breath, it's easier to first of all build the concentration because your object isn't changing all the time; and secondly, you can

really experience the purification of the mind in such a way that actually supports the practice more fully.

Stephen: And it's important to make the distinction that the Jhana factor is the result of concentration. So, if piti is arising, that's different from actually feeling emotional joy because the piti is being produced based upon the level of concentration. So, if one then moves to that as an object, one is no longer concentrating on the breath, so sooner or later that concentration begins to wane and the piti produced by concentration is going to fade. But if you're actually just finding joy in your body and in your heart and you're thinking of a loved one, listening in your heart to the music that's beautiful, or seeing something in nature that's beautiful, that's not piti because it's not produced based on the concentration if you follow.

Vince: Ok, interesting. You guys already sort of hinted at this, talking about the purification of the mind stream, and I wondered if you could maybe share a little bit about what the benefits are—because you know, we're such a benefit oriented, utilitarian culture. What the benefits are of the kind of training in jhana and the mastery of jhana, traditionally?

Stephen: Sure. Well, one of the best places to start is to look at it as a daily practice. The concentration practice as a daily practice, it's the very same practice. It's bringing the awareness to the breath as it crosses the Anapana Spot, which is that territory Tina referred to between the nostrils and the upper lip, which is also not the skin. So, I want to make that distinction.

As a daily practice, one can do concentration meditation which then both develops the concentration ability to focus and turn away from distractions that are taking one off. Because clearly, for example right now, if we were to try to focus our awareness on our breath, various things would pull us off of that. So we can see not only what our patterning is around distraction, hindrances; we can also see how to bring it back. Each time we bring it back to the object, we're in effect strengthening that muscle if you will of concentration, and also cultivating a disinterest in what's distracting or pulling us away.

So, one of the metaphors we use for this territory is the surf zone. Tina was a scuba diver at one point, and here in California you can see the scuba divers on the beach sometimes and they'll get all their gear on, and then begin to walk backwards into the ocean. Of course, they need to because of the flippers, otherwise they'll fall down.

There's a nice parallel to this practice because one is moving backwards as a way you can't see necessarily what way the waves are coming. And the waves can come and be a distraction. They can, sort of, knock you about and occasionally one can be big enough to knock you down, where you might lose, your mask might fall off, the breathing apparatus, the mouthpiece, might fall out. And then, of course, what do you do? You straighten your gear out, rinse out the sand, and you proceed.

So using that surf zone metaphor, when one first goes into this practice, the initial waves that one meets, or meet one, are the exterior distractions. So, for example, on retreat it can be things like someone near you is breathing too loudly, you can hear birds singing outside, someone is coming in or out of the meditation hall in a way that is distracting. It's all these external stimulants that can be distracting. And as those settle, and as the concentration deepens, then it's the internal distractions that will be coming up. Our habituated thinking. The various defilement, as Tina mentioned, the greed aversion and delusion patterning that people have and the hindrances that people have.

And the hindrances are classic in Buddhism, which are: sense desires, one; ill-will aversion, two; sloth and torpor is three; restlessness and remorse is four; and five is doubt. So those start coming up, where people will have a reaction to the practice of: this is difficult, or, everyone else is getting it, I'm not. All these kinds of things come up. And again, one keeps returning to the object, which is the breath crossing at the anapana spot, knowing the breath as it crosses. And so that's always our object.

The instruction here is very simple. The application is very challenging because of our own patterning and our own distractions. And every time we turn away, Vince, our connection to this patterning, our connection to our thinking, we start moving away from, kind of, how we see ourselves and who we are, and that lessens that attachment and allows the practice to begin developing in what, as we can refer to it, where the practice begins to do you.

Tina: Yeah. So there's... what the purification of mind... at it's most basic, Stephen talked about strengthening the muscle, so we're really cultivating the ability to turn away from things that cause us to suffer. That's the most basic benefit. And people can see this in daily practice, and even more so when they've done an intensive period.

Like driving a car. Somebody could cut me off in traffic and I could feel cranky about that for two minutes or five minutes. And who's suffering as a result of that? I am. Or, I could be disinterested and be able to turn away from it because there's a space that's been cultivated because, when I do this practice over and over again, that's what I'm building within my own capacity, is the ability to turn away from things that cause me to suffer. So what we see is that people can have habit patterns that can be reconditioned to some extent by doing this practice.

Stephen: And part of that loosening of the patterning is very helpful as one moves on in this practice. It's both that and also the concentration, the laser-like quality of the concentration that one then moves into the vipassana with, where vipassana, of course, is the purification of view. So it's really an examination and uprooting of our attachment. And in this tradition that has to do with an analysis, through this kind of concentration, of materiality, mentality and dependent origination along with some other practices.

Tina: Right. So the Buddha talked about the jhanas and the concentration practice all the time. I mean, if you really look at the suttas, he talked about it constantly. I think it's in about a third of the suttas. And he was doing this practice at the moment of his death. So

the idea that it's irrelevant and that it wasn't an integral part of the path really doesn't bear up if you read what he actually said.

Really, where does it fit in the place of the progression? You've got the sila, the wholesomeness, which we could talk about, but we probably won't, right now, too much. But we do emphasize it in our teaching. And then you've got the samatha, which is the purification of the mind stream. So, here, the work is being done internally in terms of your own mind stream being more and more free of hindrances for one thing, having a settling, which is the serenity. And then as Stephen was saying, developing this laser-like concentration that can then be turned towards other things, either in daily life or in spiritual practice in the vipassana. And then you've got the vipassana, where you're actually using that. So to go to the vipassana without that, it can be done, but wouldn't you rather have a laser-like awareness with which to do it? And this is why the Buddha thought it was so important.