

The Jedi Mind Training of Concentration: Buddhist Geeks Talk 160

Episode Description:

In this episode we wrap up our discussion with meditation teachers Tina Rasmussen and Stephen Snyder, two of the only lay Western teachers authorized to teach the jhana system of Pa Auk Sayadaw. They share the deeper purpose of concentration practice, which isn't to attain any particular states, but rather is to serve as a purification of the mind stream, what they describe as the "thinning of the me."

They describe the 8 jhanas as states that progressively reach toward the unconditioned, with the 8th jhana, neither perception nor non-perception, as a realm that is as close as you can get to the unconditioned without being itself unconditioned. From there emerges no-thingness, then consciousness, space, and finally form itself. They tell their students that orienting toward the unconditioned, or "the force", is a type of jedi mind training. And we thought we were geeks!

We complete the discussion by exploring the vipassana technique of Pa Auk Sayadaw, which is a powerful way of exploring materiality, mentality, and dependent origination, using the jhana states as a super-powered basis for that investigation. Tina and Stephen share their understanding of this practice, and how it leads to liberating insight and awakening.

This is part 2 of a two-part series. Listen to part 1, [Mastering the Jhanas](#).

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: Following on some of the traditional benefits, I was wondering if you've noticed any benefits in your own practice that maybe weren't so clear when you read the traditional texts, or from your teacher for instance, like if there are things that were really of benefit that you maybe didn't expect.

Tina: Yeah, actually one of the things that we're hoping to contribute to the conversation about this practice is what we're calling the "thinning of the me." And we talked a little bit about how when a full Jhana absorption arises, it's not like "I went into Jhana." That would be an incorrect statement. Awareness is experiencing Jhana, but the idea that there

is a me who's in there saying "oh I went into Jhana," that is not how it happens. That is not the experience of it.

So just for a full Jhana experience to arise, there has to be a certain amount of loosening of the aggregates—just for it to happen. So this where, what you were talking about, if you look at, what you were talking about, "Jhana lite," or lighter forms of the Jhanas. We're not sure that that's really cultivating the thinning of the me because it may not be full absorption. We don't know because we haven't done those practices so it's a little hard to say. But one of the main benefits we've found personally and that we also are really seeing with other people that is surprising to them and really much more profound in some ways is this thinning of the me.

So what's happening when, if you really look at the progression up to the eighth Jhana, you got the material Jhanas, which are all based on objects that are in materiality, so like the breath. And, even within those four Jhanas, there's more and more thinning of the me. So you start with say the Jhana factors where joy may be more predominant and then that drops. And happiness is more predominant in the third Jhana, well that's much more subtle. Then in the fourth Jhana, really the only two factors are one-pointedness and equanimity. So if we have a lot of attachments, those are gonna have to be purified out of our attachment base, or also out of our fear as you progress through those four Jhanas. Then, going into the upper Jhanas, the way that the Buddha framed them, he talked about them as realms. And that is really how we experience them. That they aren't the same as the lower Jhanas, they are a whole different category. And they're actually realms of being that, if you think about it in reverse order, mirror the progression from the unconditioned down through more and more density down through materiality.

So just to give you an example of that, if you start with the unconditioned, the eighth Jhana, which is the closest to that is neither perception nor non-perception. I mean what does that even mean? It means non-duality. It means that the mind can't hold it. So for the eighth Jhana to arise, there can't be any thinking even in access concentration. So this is the most subtle, most refined possible experience of awareness without being actually aware of the unconditioned. It's like, right next to it. Then you have nothingness. Or what we call it No-thing-ness. So now you've got the void, basically, from which everything manifests. Then after the void, you've got consciousness. So you go from the unconditioned through a non-dual kind of frame into nothing, into the void. From the void comes the consciousness that creates everything. From that creates the space that holds all of materiality. And then, right next to that is the form Jhanas, where things actually start manifesting down to form. And here I am, meditating on my breath, with every breath orienting my consciousness towards the unconditioned. So you see the power of that?

I mean, here doing this practice, we're turning our awareness towards the unconditioned, whether we get all the way up to the eighth Jhana or not, whether we even get in to the first Jhana or not, we're orienting. And that is the purification that's happening that really we can see in working people that there is a thinning of the me that is happening just by

doing that. I'm loosening the aggregates. Or better said, the aggregates are loosening as a result of that endeavor.

Stephen: And people are seeing this as they move back into their life and swear the normal things that snag them, the normal way that they take themselves to be, has been loosened because they have turned away towards that, what we're calling the unconditioned, they're turning away from the condition, the normal, the patterning...

Tina: The me that I know.

Stephen: ...towards the mystery.

Tina: Yeah.

Stephen: And so, really, that creates more freedom and again, we saw this in the retreat and as they returned to their life, we did a feedback form, and they commented that they really were seeing a difference going back into their life. It just creates choices. Where before there was a patterning, if this happened, this was my reaction, this is who I am, and now it's like, Well, is this who I am? Is this the choice I want to make, or do I want to choose something different in relation to this kind of situation, where, as Tina said, the driving, somebody cuts you off driving. There becomes a choice: Do I want to get angry, do I want to feel like they are invading my space, or do I not?

Tina: Well, and it breaks, it's starting to break down that habit pattern.

Stephen: And the cycle of suffering.

Tina: Yeah. So there's, to us, this whole orienting ourselves towards the mystery, and the thinning of the me that has to happen for a full jhana absorption to arise, is essential before doing vipassana, because in vipassana, you're really seeing everything we take to be how reality works, as the matrix, you know? It's not like the matrix-

Stephen: The movie.

Tina: It is the matrix. Yeah.

Stephen: Right.

Tina: And this is extremely different way of perceiving reality. So, without this thinning of the me that's happening during the purification of the mind, how can we really expect the vipassana to do its full job? This is why the Buddha really encouraged people to undertake the samatha first. Now, if they aren't a person who that can be possible for, then you go straight to vipassana, but to just skip over it without even trying was not what the Buddha recommended. He thought you should at least give it a try for all of these benefits that we've just been talking about.

Vince: Right. Yeah, I know, traditionally, in the Pali Canon, he talks about those that wake up using jhana, and those that do more of the dry vipassana...

Stephen: Right.

Vince: ...path. And that's one thing I wanted to hear maybe a little more on, is just what have you found now working with other people, and of course you know many other people who've done these practices. I mean, obviously, of the people on that two-month retreat, you were probably the only two to complete the training there, so it seems pretty clear that there is a pretty high bar in terms of completing this training. And also, it seems like it can be a training that takes quite a long time, and maybe, either people don't have the time, or they may not have the proclivity or capacity to develop concentration to that degree. I'm wondering what you think about that.

Stephen: Sure. Well, again, this gets back to the initial distinction between getting the jhana in purification of mind, because in the retreat we just led with 30 people, everybody, I would say, without exception, reported that they had some level of purification of mind. They had some concentration develop, they had some cultivation of disinterest in their own patterning and their own thought cycles, etc.

So, right away, there was benefit. So, these people went home with benefit. And, for some people, jhana did arise. So, it is going to happen. It's really a question, a couple of questions, about, really, how much purification is necessary. There's also some people that really need to do a little bit of metta before they start this practice to feel very seeded before they begin. Because there is a sense, sometimes, that this is, it's a big deal. You know, you are turning away from who you understand yourself to be, and turning toward the mystery. And part of the reason it's called the mystery is because we don't know. We don't know what it's going to be like. And what we are trying to communicate to people is, the you that you know yourself as, you are not taking this trip. The awareness is taking the trip, is moving through the progression of practice. So that sounds conceptual right now, but when you are actually doing it, there is something real that begins to happen that feels very personal to people. So, some of that is the comfort they have with doing that. We think there are people that definitely have...they are able to, to just sort of sit down and, and begin pretty quickly and other people there's a little more time to develop for the purification, for that ripening.

You know, if you buy a bag of green apples at the store, which apples are going to ripen quicker? We don't know. It's based on a lot of circumstances that are outside our control. And yet, not one apple is better than another. They just ripen when they ripen. In the same way, purification of mind happens when it happens, to the point, it's almost like, it isn't quite like this, but it feels this way: we almost have to get to a certain vibration level in our energy and when it matches first jhana, first jhana will arise.

Tina: Yeah, for us, what we've seen, this practice is relatively new, not only in the West, but in Asia. And, as it's migrated over here, there's been, in our view of things, a lot of confusion about what it is, about even what is a full jhana absorption versus access

concentration versus momentary. And also, what is the point of the practice? And, in true American fashion, or Western fashion, maybe, we look right at the end point and think, “Oh, I either got jhana or I didn’t get jhana.” And it’s not really the most mature way of looking at the practice in terms of what the practice is actually designed to do. And that’s where the purification of mind, which is what is actually called, becomes a much more sophisticated way of looking at what you’re doing when you’re actually doing the practice.

What we found, it was really amazing working with so many yogis and seeing how it worked with people other than us and it’s like an enhanced system built into our consciousness when we do this practice, which is probably why people have been doing it, for you know, like three to five thousand years. Where when you go and you sit down and you try to focus on one object, the breath in this case, to the exclusion of everything else, and you start to be able to do it then it’s like there is a reinforcement loop of the jhana factors, because it’s pleasant. It’s actually pleasant to sit. We had a woman in our retreat who had a broken spinal cord, and who have been in pain for ten years and wasn’t in pain for the first time. So there’s a lot of rewards that come right from our own consciousness and doing this practice and then when we find that the minute that people started clinging, when having desire, wanting attainment or wondering, grasping at the next stage of the practice – their practice would erode.

Stephen: And they began to notice this and report this.

Tina: Right.

Stephen: So you see it’s self-reinforcing. They get the fact that because the jhana factors are there and they want them more. For this meditation, I had two cups of coffee and I had a light breakfast so I’ll try and repeat that again because clearly those are the pattern, and then next time guess what? It doesn’t go that why cause you’re going in with a certain level of desire rather than letting it unfold.

Tina: Yeah, it’s changing all the time. We can see the impermanence in action. So people could see that as their practice progress, their own consciousness was doing all the work. It’s an amazing mystery to actually watch it happen, and the fact that when you do something that isn’t that wholesome, the practice starts declining and when there’s a wholesome orientation towards actually the purification of mind rather than grasping at attainments, then there’s a whole world possible in terms of what’s actually happening to the mind stream. And on the retreat that we lead for two weeks, there were people for whom jhana arose.

Vince: Wow.

Tina: We didn’t know, and we have not and are not going to lower the standards that were taught to us by the venerable Pa Auk Sayadaw because we think the sangha is ready for an intense, rigorous practice, and that’s what we want to teach and we had “tell them the Jedi warrior”.

Stephen: At the very end we had a closing circle and one person said, they felt like they were just completing two weeks of Jedi warrior training and that's part of how we frame this. It's that each person's individual practice, and really what we're doing is working some with providing content but more of some with trekking guides. We're trying to help them but they're the ones who have to do the trekking. We don't do it for them. There is no switch we can flip to give them jhana. They have to begin the process because it's their own orientation that they've got to learn to turn away from, and people saw a lot of freedom in that.

Tina: It's really amazing and because this whole mystery is built out into our own consciousness and that's what we're hoping that with this framework for the practice that people can really see why the Buddha talked about it so much. It wasn't just about bliss states or attainments. It's really about purification of mind.

Vince: So you really know how to speak to the geeks out there with the whole Jedi thing, so....

Tina: Well we loved that because that's what we felt like. That's what we want to cultivate and we had two people in there who were 21 and 22 years old, college students, they made this heroic effort to get there from Kansas and they've done one seven day retreat before and they were right there with everybody, really giving a wholehearted effort and so you know you don't have to have 30 years of meditation experience to be able to engage in the practice.

Stephen: But it was nice for those people as well. Because those people would spend years and decades doing retreats. This really allowed them, as they would talk about it to go very deep and to see their own pattern and then move away from that so that's why it feels so powerful to do this.

Tina: Yeah, there is really a real intensity with this that's more so than you would have on a normal vipassana retreat. So that's something just to know in choosing to do the practice. That's why we're offering three day retreats as well so people can get a taste of it and see if it's for them or not.

Stephen: And the great thing too is of course each person is doing their own Jedi training here. There is a way of course it does parallel because we are turning towards the mystery the unconditioned. We are turning towards "the force" and letting that operate more and turning away from our own decision-making and our own pattern as you see.

Tina: Right.

Stephen: Again, it comes back to our freedom that we have to be willing to turn away from our own issues.

Tina: Yeah and that comes right back down, there every time that you're sitting there, trying to stay with your object, building that muscle. It's real simple and it really comes down to it.

Vince: Well, thank you for sharing, that's really interesting and it's cool to hear the experience of the people that have been practicing with you. One thing I know, in your book, *Practicing the Jhanas* you share your own experience, up to the point that you had trained with Pa Auk, which is up through, you have mentioned, the five elements and then going a little further. Kind of in that transitional phase between the samatha and vipassana. And I know he teaches also, you go into vipassana with the strength of the jhanas, like you mentioned. And so I'm wondering, I know at the time of the writing, you haven't gone on to do that formal training with him. Is that something that you plan on doing and if so, why?

Tina: Yeah, we do want to do it and we thought about it, extensively, because for one thing for me, I've done the vipassana practice as it's taught, mostly in the tradition of Mahasi Sayadaw, and the Thai Forest Masters. That was how I came to meditation, really. And we thought at one point, that the Sayadaw might not offer another retreat. We thought we wouldn't have a chance. And since he is doing this, probably his last retreat in the United States, next year. We have decided to try and rearrange our lives so we can do it. We're actually going to be trying to sell our house to do it. So, it's a pretty big commitment and it was really when we heard him talking. He was here for 4 months on his own personal retreat and we had the wonderful opportunity to meet with him several times, and then he gave a series of talks. And when he really went through the vipassana practice at one of these talks, we could see the magnitude of it, and the power of it. And we're so really awestruck by the depth of it that we decided, we wanted to go and try, and try and do it and see what would happen. And really, I think the thing that strikes us the most about the way he teaches the vipassana. In his progression, there's the same eight stages of insight that are there in the Mahasi Sayadaw version.

Stephen: And the forest tradition of Ajahn Chah.

Tina: Yeah, but the practices actually mirror, if you were to read the Suttas and read how the Buddha described his own enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, and the stages, if you read the Pa Auk, I mean, he would say the Buddha's but his presentation of what the Buddha taught, it pretty much mirrors what the Buddha describes. In terms of analyzing mentality, analyzing materiality, the dependent origination and then the final stages. You can see the Buddha's own unfoldment in the practice you're doing.

Stephen: Now Vince, one thing that's important on talking about how vipassana is taught by the Sayadaw is that it starts with, again the four elements which is the last part of our book. And the four elements is earth, water, fire and air. And one does these in such a way that it breaks down the body into these four elements and the twelve characteristics that comprise these four elements. So, one really gets to see the workings of the body to the point access concentration arises, and one is able to experience their own body as the kalapas, which of course are subatomic particles. So, the commencement of this practice

and the conclusion of the samatha is seeing your own body as subatomic particles. So, as Tina said earlier, like the movie the Matrix, the green squiggly lines, they aren't green squiggly lines, but they look like fireflies lighting up and going out just in split seconds. Sort of a pile of these things.

Tina: Right. So, it's like you're seeing the arising and the passing of materiality.

Stephen: And so the practice begins by analyzing some of these kalapas for materiality. Seeing one's own body and then analyzing that to the point of seeing even the structure and the composition of the kalapas. And then that goes on to the analysis of mentality. Breaking down the mentality into all the different levels of consciousness, etc.

Tina: Yeah, say for example, where this gets really interesting to us, is that if I'm looking at something and that's going into my awareness as sight, this practice actually analyzes the kalapas of the mentality that produced my thoughts. So, you can imagine, if now you've seen basically, all of materiality not just your own body but everything around you as subatomic particles arising in passing, and then your own thoughts, you're really breaking down the aggregates here to a level that you don't perceive reality the same way you used to anymore.

Stephen: You can't because this is actually a visceral experience. This isn't conceptual.

Tina: Right.

Stephen: So, it can't help but change. I mean, Tina and I, both in the book we talk about, we both gone to the point of seeing the kalapas as experiencing our own body as kalapas. And even for a very short period of time, it's very impactful.

Tina: Yeah, I mean it's one thing to know through a microscope or through science, that this is true, and it's like "oh, big deal." So, you know, there are subatomic particles, who cares. But when you're actually perceiving things that way, it does actually become like the Matrix. I mean, this is part of the mystery, "what is it?" We don't know but something is manifesting everything, look around your room. We're looking at a desk, we've got chairs here, all of this is manifesting from something. And what is it? Well, we can't really know so much with the mind but when you experience it directly for yourself and know that in your gut, it's different. It's different. You can't take yourself to be what you thought you were before. So this is why the Vipassana, in the way that it's taught by Pa Auk Sayadaw is really a pretty dramatic direct experience of reality as different than what we take it to be.

Vince: Cool.

Tina: Yeah, I mean it is it's really cool but you can see there's a lot of attachment to me and my ideas and all these things, that's just not going to happen, or if it does happen, it could be fairly disturbing.

Vince: Yeah.

Tina: So this is why you would want to be doing the progression of practice in the sequence that is most desirable as it was laid out with the seal of the samatha and the vipassana.

Stephen: It's important to make the distinction also that with both the samatha and the vipassana practices, they can be done both detailed and brief.

Tina: Right.

Stephen: So there is that in all of Buddhism it's presented this way. And the detailed for the vipassana means coming in with some level of jhana experience.

Tina: Well we do know one person who did it without any jhanas.

Stephen: Right, but he had pretty developed access concentration so that was a little different but as a general rule, that's why it's useful, and that's why at least having first jhana arise up to fourth jhana arise is really important to that transfer over to the vipassana. If one can do of course the first because the level depth that one can go according to the Sayadaw is more.

Tina: Right. Yeah, the Sayadaw, he really suggests that if the practice can progress, at least the first jhana, then that brings a higher level of concentration than you're ever going to get in access doing the vipassana because it's just not possible with an object that's changing to have more than access concentration. If one can progress up to fourth jhana, that's even better and when I was about to go on to the vipassana at the end of the two month retreat, he wanted me to keep doing one sitting a day all the way up to the eighth jhana, because then that resource was available to turn towards the vipassana.

Vince: Hmm. So it's kind of like powering up before...

Tina: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, and we could feel it. You know, when we started going to different objects. This is part of what's good about as you complete the jhana masteries and then you have to go through all these different objects, it's like weight lifting. You know, we talk about strengthening the muscle, you're building that muscle on a bunch of different objects to make it stronger and stronger all the time.

Vince: Like cross-training.

Tina: And then there's... Exactly. Exactly. That's exactly it. And then there's one last part of the vipassana, do you want to talk about that?

Stephen: Yeah, the last big segment is the dependent origination, and in this tradition the way that's practiced is that one actually will, through meditation, will go back to the very first mind moment of this lifetime and then will make the leap into the last mind moment

of the prior lifetime. And in this way will sequentially go back and see prior lifetimes and the importance of this is seeing how we got here today most particularly our orientation towards liberation, that there's been a theme in which lifetime perhaps we didn't really follow that and lifetimes where we did. It of course puts us more in touch with that, that for lifetimes there's been this hunger for liberation, this draw and we can see that through the prior lifetimes. And then when one goes back sufficiently one comes back to this lifetime and then turns the other direction and moves into future lifetimes and follows the future lifetimes to the point of becoming an Arhant. So then one can see, oh look at the choices that are going to be made up to the point of Arhant. And I asked the Sayadaw when he gave a public talk, I asked him, Well Sayadaw, since one is doing this path, the samatha-vipassana path, of course if one completes it the first time then that may be the first stage of awakening in the Theravada, which is the stream enterer. Of course one is doing the path again hoping that it will all work in such a way that the uprooting will take place in the vipassana sufficiently to advance the stages of awakening. And my question was, wouldn't that automatically change the future lifetimes? Because of course, with the sotapanna they have up to a maximum of seven more lifetimes before becoming an Arhant, and the next stage is a once-returner meaning coming back one more time so clearly there's a change. And he said yes, absolutely it changes as you go through and do it again. If you did dependent origination again, you would only see the next lifetime.

So it's fascinating that that's built into the system and also, as Tina says, our own consciousness it's all dovetailed into this. And it's hard not to have for us not to have just immense gratitude and respect for the Buddha and for our own teacher Pa Auk Sayadaw really maintaining this and thinking that this system the Buddha in effect designed this or this recognized this 2,600 years ago, and it's still relevant to us sitting here as westerners in the U.S. as modern people.