

Two Types of Jhāna?

Thānissaro Bhikkhu

The role of jhāna as a condition for transcendent discernment is one of the most controversial issues in the Theravada tradition. Three basic positions have been advanced in modern writings.

1. One, following the commentarial tradition, asserts that **jhāna is not necessary for any of the four levels of Awakening** and that there is a class of individuals — called "dry insight" meditators — who are "discernment-released" based on a level of concentration lower than that of jhāna.
2. A second position, citing a passage in the Canon [AN 3.88; MFU, pp. 103] stating that concentration is mastered only on the level of non-returning, holds that **jhāna is necessary for the attainment of non-returning and Arahantship, but not for the lower levels of Awakening.**
3. The third position states that the attainment of **at least the first level of jhāna is essential for all four levels of Awakening.**

Evidence from the Canon supports the third position, but not the other two. As §106 points out, **the attainment of stream-entry has eight factors, one of which is right concentration, defined as jhāna.** In fact, according to this particular discourse, jhāna is the heart of the streamwinner's path. Secondly, there is no passage in the Canon describing the development of transcendent discernment without at least some skill in jhāna. The statement that concentration is mastered only on the level of non-returning must be interpreted in the light of the distinction between mastery and attainment. A streamwinner may have attained jhāna without mastering it; the discernment developed in the process of gaining full mastery over the practice of jhāna will then lead him/her to the level of non-returning. As for the term "discernment-released," passage §168 shows that it denotes people who have become Arahants without experiencing the four formless jhanas. It does not indicate a person who has not experienced jhāna.

Part of the controversy over this question may be explained by the fact that the **commentaries define jhāna in terms that bear little resemblance to the canonical description.** The Path of Purification — the cornerstone of the commentarial system — takes as its paradigm for meditation practice a method called kasina, in which one stares at an external object until the image of the object is imprinted in one's mind. This image then gives rise to a countersign that is said to indicate the attainment of threshold concentration, a necessary prelude to jhāna. The text then tries to fit all other meditation methods into this mold, so that they too give rise to countersigns, but even by its own admission, breath meditation does not fit the mold very well. With the other methods, the stronger one's focus, the more vivid the object and the closer it is to producing a countersign; but with the breath, the stronger one's focus, the more subtle the breath

and the harder it is to detect. As a result, the text states that only Buddhas and Buddhas' sons find the breath a congenial focal point for attaining jhāna.

None of these assertions have any support in the Canon. Although a **practice called kasina** is mentioned tangentially in some of the discourses, the only point where it is described in any detail [MN 121; MFU, pp. 82-85] **makes no mention of staring at an object or gaining a countersign**. If breath meditation were congenial only to Buddhas and their sons, there seems little reason for the Buddha to have taught it so frequently and to such a wide variety of people. **If the arising of a countersign were essential to the attainment of jhāna, one would expect it to be included in the steps of breath meditation and in the graphic analogies used to describe jhāna, but it isn't**. Some Theravadins insist that questioning the commentaries is a sign of disrespect for the tradition, but it seems to be a sign of greater disrespect for the Buddha — or the compilers of the Canon — to assume that he or they would have left out something absolutely essential to the practice.

All of these points seem to indicate that what jhana means in the commentaries is something quite different from what it means in the Canon. Because of this difference we can say that **the commentaries are right in viewing their type of jhana as unnecessary for Awakening, but Awakening cannot occur without the attainment of jhana in the canonical sense**.

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