

INTRODUCTION

From Focused Concentration to Fearless Awakening

RESTING UNDER THE SHADE of a rose apple tree, the young Siddhartha Gotama (whom we would later come to know as the Buddha) spontaneously entered a state of deep concentration, satisfaction, and ease. Much later, after he had studied intensively with two meditation masters and practiced extreme asceticism, he recalled that quiet moment in his youth. Now emaciated by years of rigorous fasting, Siddhartha Gotama was startled by the recollection. After pondering it awhile, he decided to cultivate those naturally pleasant states as the means to awakening. In so doing, he harnessed the potency of the unified mind and transformed a conventional practice of concentration into a catalyst for awakening, for enlightenment. Austere practices of self-mortification understandably lost favor as he taught his disciples to unlock the power of a happy mind.²

This meditative technology of intense concentration that leads to sublime states of mental absorption, known as *jhana*, predated the Buddha—but since he was able to use it as a foundation for his enlightenment, it became a critical feature of his teachings. The practice of using *jhana* as a basis for insight has been preserved to this day. In the discourses of the Pali Canon, the earliest records of the Buddha’s teaching, “concentration” appears repeatedly and is taught as a pivotal method for inner transformation. In Pali, *jhana* literally means “to think” or “to meditate.”

Consequently, the term is open to a wide variety of uses and interpretations and there has been much debate about its precise meaning. In this book, *jhana* practice refers to a traditional sequence of specific states of absorption where the mind is secluded from sensory impingement and deeply unified with a chosen object. Attention is not distracted by stray thoughts nor affected by the flutter of moods. Even physical sensations and sounds eventually fade as the mind becomes entirely immersed in a single coherent focus.

Jhanas are states of happiness that can radically transform the heart, reshape the mind, imbue consciousness with enduring joy and ease, and provide an inner resource of tranquillity that surpasses any conceivable sensory pleasure. Jhanas are states of deep rest, healing rejuvenation, and profound comfort that create a stable platform for transformative insight. Throughout the development of *jhana*, we intertwine the calming aspects of concentration with the investigative aspects of insight meditation. The fruit of concentration is freedom of heart and mind.

This book will teach you about and guide you through the traditional sequence of eight levels of meditative absorption that constitute *jhana* practice—though it will focus in detail on only four. While *jhana* is a powerful practice not intended for the dilettante, diligent beginners will benefit from the stability and strength afforded by deep concentration and seasoned meditators will find in *jhana* practice a potent method for intensifying insight.

Although the notion of mastering eight stages of deep concentration may appear daunting at first, the *jhana* system is easy to follow, sequential, and surprisingly simple. Traditionally this practice was not reserved for special people nor restricted to the monastic order. During the Buddha's day, lay disciples and busy merchants would, from time to time, enjoy the benefits and joys of *jhana* abiding.³ These eight levels of concentration remain readily accessible to contemporary practitioners, so long as they can find sufficient time for retreat, remain ethically clear, and apply balanced effort. Although I've included many teachings useful to beginners, a working knowledge of one's own mind and some facility with mindfulness practices are assumed as prerequisites to the serious undertaking of *jhana* practice. Nonetheless, I will review

mindfulness practice and how it is used to avoid common pitfalls in jhana practice.

This book emerged from my experiences during a ten-month silent retreat focused on the cultivation of jhana as the basis for insight. Although I had more than twenty years of meditation experience, until this retreat I had not systematically used these refined levels of consciousness to develop insight. The methodical techniques of establishing access to jhana, strengthening and sustaining each level of absorption, and then applying the concentrated mind for insight had a powerful effect on my consciousness: it opened me to an experience of unremitting happiness. When I emerged from retreat and shared some of my experiences with friends, I realized that the personal struggles, attainments, and insights gleaned from this retreat described a clear path of concentration and wisdom. With this book, I want to offer serious practitioners this method for attaining profound and unwavering happiness.

Through reading this book, some experienced meditators will discover that they have already experienced some jhanic factors (rapture, happiness, and equanimity, for instance) while engaged in other meditation practices. Indeed, states of extreme happiness characteristic of jhana naturally arise during many intensive meditation experiences. However, cultivating and harnessing them as the basis for insight is a technique unto itself, quite beyond the random “slipping into jhana” that long-term meditators often describe. *Focused and Fearless* can serve as a manual for contemporary practitioners prepared to cultivate jhana as an expression of the stable mind.

When the Buddha was asked, “Why are some people liberated and others not?” he did not say that the most concentrated meditators attain liberation. He replied, “Whosoever clings to the objects perceived by the senses cannot gain liberation. Whosoever stops clinging will be liberated.”⁴ Liberation through non-clinging is the core of the Buddha’s teaching. The human propensity to cling is the problem; meditation is designed to solve it. Working in tandem, the twin practices of concentration and insight create conditions remarkably conducive to awakening.

Some readers may find variances in method and emphasis from teachings received from other teachers. Many approaches have developed

over the centuries, each based on an individual teacher's understanding of the ancient texts and how those understandings manifest through his or her own meditation practice. If you would like to authentically experience jhana, you will probably need time in silent retreat under the guidance of teachers. A book can provide a map of the terrain, describe the steps of practice, and indicate signposts along the path, but there is no substitute for diligent practice and the guidance of skilled teachers.

This book is an introductory guide, not a definitive nor exhaustive study. Many exercises and reflections are interspersed throughout. Please try them, even if they slow the pace of your reading. Merely reading exercises will not produce the texture of mind useful to concentration. I encourage you to, at times, set the book down, close your eyes, and collect the mind in silence. If you do, these practices will contribute to a living ease and undistracted presence—even without the attainment of jhanic levels of absorption. But do bear in mind that the cultivation of serenity and wisdom can't be rushed. Please give it the time to work. Don't grow impatient if you don't understand it completely at first. Certain principles are repeated throughout the book and deepen in complexity as the practice progresses.

This book systematically explores the framework of eight classical states of unified consciousness: the four primary jhanas and the four formless realms. It gives instruction on accessing these states, discerning their qualities, and using each as the basis for wisdom. While its thrust is cultivating the deep concentration of jhana, the development of right concentration in the Buddhist tradition must always be intertwined with wisdom. Undertaking jhana practice without the framework of wisdom would be pointless at best, and contains the danger of reinforcing attachment to the pleasures of jhana. Accordingly, I have included wisdom teachings that help to anchor the reader's cultivation of concentration, including non-clinging, the importance of effort, the power of intention, the skillful application of mindfulness, overcoming the negative forces of habit and thought, working with emotions, and learning to let go. I do wish to note, however, that the cultivation of morality, right action within the sphere of the relative world, must also be attended to even though it is not explored in this book.

This book contains five sections. The first, “The Joy of the Focused Mind,” positions the practice of jhana as training in relinquishment and an exploration of happiness. The second, “Preparing the Mind for Absorption,” addresses themes necessary for preparing the mind to enter jhana. The third, “How to Establish Meditative Absorption,” contains instructions for the four primary levels of jhana. The fourth, “Doing the Work of Insight,” explores the wisdom that arises when using jhana as the basis for insight. The fifth, “Exploring the Formless Dimensions,” examines the four formless realms as an experiential investigation of emptiness. The Epilogue discusses the significant role jhana can play in living a fearless, awakened life.

*May readers discover deep peace within their hearts
and bring lasting peace into our world.
May this book contribute
to the liberation of all beings.*