

SHAILA CATHERINE'S *FOCUSED AND FEARLESS* A REVIEW BY SANTIKARO

948 words

Shaila Catherine's *Focused and Fearless* is inspiring, practically detailed, systematic, and well-grounded in the Pali sources. This is the best book *jhāna* book I've come across in English. Building upon the teaching of pioneer Western *vipassanā* teachers and drawing upon some of the best modern Dhamma teachers from Theravāda Southeast Asia, Shaila both reconnects with vital Pali sources and develops the *jhāna* teachings for modern practitioners. Further, which is important to me, it aims at making these teachings alive and relevant today, not merely repeating the Theravāda orthodoxy à la the *Visuddhimagga*¹. While based in the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, of Theravāda mindfulness practice, this understanding of practice goes beyond them, deepening *samatha-vipassanā*, and leading to liberation from suffering.

Focused and Fearless passes my first criteria of a book on meditation. It inspires me to practice with sobriety. It provides insights that help me understand practice more skillfully. It brings actual practical benefits. It explains practice in ways I can pass along to students. It is thorough, clear, systematic, and skilful, an important contribution to our modern understanding of the Buddhist path as expressed by Theravāda Buddhism.

Because *Focused and Fearless* is well-grounded in the Pali suttas² (and not overly encumbered by the *Visuddhimagga*), it revalues *samādhi* and *jhāna*, helping to restore them to their proper balance with *sati* and *vipassanā*.³ The search for short cuts has fostered illusions that some of these key elements of the path — along with right understanding, right ethics, and right effort — are unnecessary or secondary. None of these can be denigrated, as in the spurious phrase "just *samatha*." Such illusions are ludicrous and harmful, but all too common in an impatient culture that obsesses about success. Teachers such as Shaila and Leigh Brasington are important voices for the Middle Way.

As clear accounts from *jhāna* practitioners emerge — especially in practical, down-to-earth, non-elitist language — we get a better understanding of the core essentials of *jhāna*, which are usually close to the original sutta descriptions, sans later scholastic analysis. At the same time, we sense a diversity in how various meditators approach, enter, experience, and master the *jhāna*. Some of this diversity is a matter of language and how we variously define terms such as "thoughts," "one-pointedness," and even "concentration." This diversity is richer than the desiccated analysis of scholars who may not have worked things out on the cushion. Though Shaila deems certain details to be universal that I suspect are not (e.g. on page 100, directing attention to the area between the nostrils and upper lip when practicing mindfulness with breathing), she is never doctrinaire. And she wisely avoids the theoretical attachments of those who argue over whose version of *jhāna* is right.

Shaila gives us detailed, workable descriptions of how to practice *jhāna*. I have not come across better. They seem to have worked for her; she never sounds as though she's just repeating received teachings. Will these explanations work for you and I? We will have to practice to find out! She inspires us enough to make that possible.

Shaila poses many good questions for our reflection, such those on page 174, that challenge common assumptions and thinking. Many of us have had enough of being told the way things are. I find it more helpful to be challenged with questions that provoke to inquire for ourselves. The best questions point us to look in the places we most need to understand yet least want to look.

Not unlike the suttas, there is repetition in this book. Please don't be put off by it. Fashions of good writing change more than the necessities of good practice. All practice involves repetition,

¹ A medieval Buddhist commentary that Ven. Ñāṇamoli, one of its translators, has described it as the "lynchpin" of the commentarial system. It has dominated and to some extent distorted Theravāda orthodoxy for the last 1500 years.

² The closest thing we have to a record of the original Buddhist teachings.

³ *Sampajañña* and other important *dhammas* remain under-appreciated.

especially with the discipline required for *jhāna*. Consequently, the guidance of such practice necessitates repetition.

Shaila is not one of those bliss junkies one occasionally meets, the sort who claim *jhāna* experiences, often over the top, and cavalierly disregard the main thrust of the Buddha's middle way. While the many synonyms of joy are prominent throughout this book, they are well-grounded in the actual *jhāna* teachings, the broader Dhamma context of those teachings, careful reflections on experience, and the influences of competent teachers. Most of all, this is in service of quenching dukkha, not merely "attainments."

Shaila rightly sees *sullatā* and non-clinging at the heart of practice (Chapter 20). Surely, this helps her and us to avoid being partisan regarding technique. Arguments over technical expertise are generally distracting and often fraught with clinging, hubris, or both. Further, *Focused and Fearless* puts *jhāna* and *vipassanā* in the bigger, proper context. Rather than the trendy promises of pop Buddhism — better relationships and the like — Shaila points to the promise of non-clinging to anything in this world, that is, liberation from suffering.

Focused and Fearless is liberally populated with good advice, sanity, and well-phrased wisdom. Here are some of the passages that provoke a smile:

Don't be too disappointed if the world is just as wacky, painful, and imperfect as when you entered absorption. (186)

Meditative training is more about letting go than it is about attaining levels of absorption. (45)

"If you don't want to suffer, don't cling" could summarize the main thrust of all the Buddha's instructions. If you can't follow that simple instruction completely and need (as so many of us do) more complex approaches to help you along or keep you busy until you finally tire of clinging, an extensive array of meditation tools have been devised by generations of Buddhist practitioners. (46)

The wisdom that understands attachment as the root of suffering reveals the possibility of a transformation that doesn't require us to abandon one obsessive thought pattern after another. (49)

Shaila is a clear, fervent, eloquent, delightful voice within this movement to restore a well-rounded understanding of Buddha-Dhamma, which is itself a healthy sign of maturity within American Buddhism. May this worthy book receive the attention it deserves, and may we take it to heart and into practice.

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