

Pragmatic Guide to the Jhanas

Version 4.3



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Introducing jhanas: bliss-on-demand

Thousands of novices and experts alike are rediscovering a form of meditation once almost lost that leads to *profoundly* altered states of bliss and peace called “jhanas.” At Jhourney, the most frequent question we get about the jhanas is one of disbelief: “*You’re telling me it’s possible to meditate into MDMA-like states without drugs!?*”

The jhanas are most frequently described as eight states, spanning the spectrum from bliss to peace.

They’re sometimes described as the opposite of a panic attack. When we panic, anxiety can capture attention, which can lead to more anxiety, which can capture more attention, and so on. Most everyone is familiar with how anxiety can lead to physiological responses like changes in heart rate, sweating, or a tightening in the throat. In the extreme case, this can lead to a panic attack. Jhana meditators create a similar positive feedback loop between attention and pleasure.

One of the most striking things about the jhanas is that they’re *extraordinarily* pleasurable. People who can enter these states describe them as “life-changing.”

**Nick**
@nickcammarata

Day three jhana log. I just go back every two hours and recharge, it's so good and lasts that long. Yesterday I ordered some dessert, took a bite and was like lol wtf would I eat this it's 1/100x as pleasurable as jhana and also unhealthy, then threw it away

**Nick** @nickcammarata · Jul 24, 2021

Can apparently jhana now (I think) and so far it's the freest lunch of free lunches

12:41 AM · Jul 25, 2021

**Maija Haavisto**
@DiamonDie

Tranquil wisdom insight meditation, which, unlike its name may suggest, is a form of metta focused on getting into the jhanas. I just told my friend that if he can get the metta strong enough, it will form a feedback loop = first jhana. It was life-changing for him, like for me.

7:58 PM · Jul 7, 2022

**John David Pressman**  @jd_pressman · Aug 20, 2022

But craving can be Good, actually.

**John David Pressman**  @jd_pressman · May 8, 2022

How much of the Western esoteric consensus's desire maximalism directly contradicting Eastern desire minimalism stems from Buddha meditating to invoke a bliss state ended by unrequited desire vs. Crowley edging himself on drugs to invoke a blissful lust ended by orgasm?

1 1

**Romeo Stevens**
@RomeoStevens76

Jhana is better than orgasm

7:03 AM · Aug 20, 2022

**Lady Red & co. (1/100 Rupture and Repairs)**
@ladymcscope

Jhana practice is making me pretty weird. I'm blissing put in macys. After ~2 hour practice session today, I did an errand and went to macys for a duvet. Uhh, my senses are heightened and touching fabric feels as intense as sex... and all my pleasures just echo and grow inside me

3:46 PM · Oct 9, 2022

“ Jhanas can... be more pleasurable than drugs and without the nasty side effects.

— Hope Rehab Center, a leading Thailand addiction treatment center

Some quotes from recent retreats:

- “This is the best retreat I’ve done in 50 years of meditating... on the order of the very best sex” – March retreatant
- “I went back to work, and the person I manage told me I was noticeably happier” – October retreatant
- “I used the Jhanas as a way to help process the death of a childhood best friend” – September retreatant
- “This retreat was one of the best things I’ve ever done for myself” – March retreatant
- “Just realised I can and should convince all my internet friends to do a Jhourney Jhana retreat. Possible most EV thing you can engage in in your LIFE (other than getting married, having kids, etc.)” – January retreatant
- “Halfway into the retreat, after a particularly memorable session — my mind exploding into indescribable beauty, followed by nothingness that exceeded the intensity of some psychedelic experiences — I laid in my spare bed, half-curved in my blanket and blinking in the sunlight, and decided it was time to go home and process what I’d learned” – March retreatant
- “My best MDMA experience, where I felt my sense of self-judgment melt away, was in line with the contentment and peace that I could access in my practice later in retreat.” – December retreatant
- “I’ve taken psilocybin, and these states were more enjoyable in general and because I opted into them, versus having the psilocybin pull me into it” – April retreatant
- “Intense, ecstatic, overwhelming joy followed by a state of smooth, symmetrical, cool bliss one morning. The afterglow lasted the remainder of the day. Mood easily top 1% days of my life. Reminded me of how I felt during a tranquil trip to the beach on a sunny, mild day with good friends in graduate school” – February retreatant
- “J4 was like the most relaxing vacation of my entire life compressed into an hour” – March retreatant

Brain images corroborate these remarkable first-person accounts. Research is early, but studies suggest that jhana has distinct neural correlates, possibly activating pleasure centers in their brain at will and without external stimuli. (Hagerty et al. 2013, DeLosAngeles 2016, Dennison 2019, Yang et al. 2023)

If they're so great, why haven't you heard of the jhanas before?

Until recently, the jhanas were believed to require thousands of hours to learn and only something “one in a million people may experience in their lifetime.” This belief limited their

spread and led to criticism of a narrow definition of jhana. Several lineages have deviated from this narrow definition in the last few decades and begun teaching much more accessible but still very powerful altered states. (See [Appendix: Understanding the jhana landscape](#) for more details.)

The story that meditation may be both accessible *and* transformational turns conventional wisdom that meditation is slow and incremental on its head. Thanks in part to the rise of meditation apps, hundreds of millions of people globally began meditating in the 2010s. But to almost everyone, basic mindfulness was like eating vegetables: rarely fun and only ever incrementally good for you. Transformative meditation and peak experiences were reserved for yogis willing to spend years in a cave. Then, suddenly, several books with instructions on accessible jhanas came out in niche meditation circles in the mid-2010s. There's nothing incremental or not-fun about a jhana. "Jhana Twitter" emerged a few years later, enamored with the idea of "MDMA without the drug" and "bliss-on-demand." Public attention and first-person reports gradually became more mainstream, thanks in part to Jhourney publicly sharing data that it was getting two-thirds of novices into jhanas in 25-40 hours of practice, outlets like *The Atlantic* and *Vox* published on the jhanas for the first time in 2024.

One way of thinking about the jhanas is that they span a spectrum of naturally occurring states that progress from bliss to peace. A common analogy is returning from a hike severely dehydrated. The first gulp of water is rapturous. By the time you're drinking your second water bottle, the rapturous euphoria has softened, perhaps to gratitude. After you've had your fill, you might be perfectly content going for a swim before finally lying down in a state of serene peace underneath a nearby tree. These experiences flow from one to the next in a natural arc, and each more or less paves the way for the next.

Unlike a hike, you can learn to enter jhanas on command without needing external conditions, using only attention and emotion. With practice, this feedback loop can be pushed to unusually pleasurable levels, giving you on-demand access to states you may otherwise experience only rarely. We've heard comparisons to scoring the winning basket in a competitive basketball game, getting your dream job after years of hard work, lying in bed with your partner with a sense that everything is just perfect and more.

If they're soooo pleasurable, why aren't they addictive?

First, pleasure and addiction aren't the same thing. In an age of constant digital stimulation *designed* to be addictive, we often confuse the two. But this is obviously a mistake. Nobody would ever say, "Be careful about having great friendships. You don't want to become addicted!" Jhana pleasure is like socializing with loved ones, exercise highs, entheogens, religious experiences, or laughing uncontrollably, not like drugs of abuse.

Despite being strikingly pleasurable, many meditators new to jhanas are surprised that they feel familiar. Renowned teacher Leigh Brasington says 10% of his students report having

experienced one or more jhanas as children. In his book *Right Concentration*, he cites an ancient story of the Buddha entering the first jhana on accident as a child.

Second, personal growth is more appealing, especially as you get accustomed to having access to pleasure anytime you want. We all know that the pleasure we receive from giving of ourselves to others and to causes greater than ourselves is special. These kinds of self-gift-pleasure are often more desirable than sense-pleasure, and the jhanas offer both!

The jhanas make it easier to be the person you aspire to be

That meditation alone can be so strong it's like a drug flies in the face of the conventional belief that we need external stimuli to make us happy.

But the most exciting and important thing about the jhanas isn't that they're altered states, but that they can alter traits. Having bliss and peace on demand profoundly changes how you think about your own nervous system, how you cultivate personality traits, and even how you think about your sense of "self."

At Jhourney, we like to say, *"Come for the bliss, stay for the personal transformation."*

Improving decisions by eliminating a sense of scarcity

Jhanas can eliminate what we call "mood scarcity." If you can enter into bliss or peace on 20 minutes' notice, so profound it's like you're on a psychedelic, you have insurance against bad moods.

This point is subtler than it looks: *you do not need to enter the jhana to escape a bad mood.* This often surprises new jhana meditators. Just knowing they can enter jhana makes it easier to accept whatever mental state they're currently in.

Subtle as it is, this is a big deal. Imagine how much easier it is to work towards your long-term dreams or support your loved ones when you have a roof over your head, food in your belly, and job security.

Research suggests scarcity can have profoundly negative effects on decision-making.¹ One study found invoking financial scarcity decreased effective IQ by 14 points. That's almost a standard deviation and more than the effect of staying awake for 24 hours!²

¹ There's evidence from psychology, behavioral economics, and neuroscience that scarcity negatively affects decisions. Studies that get people to exert willpower have seen them give up on subsequent tasks sooner. During self-control tasks, glucose levels in the prefrontal cortex can plummet, depleting further attention, planning, and motivation functions. ([Source](#))

² [Source](#)

“Poverty—no matter who you are—can make you dumber” – Sendhil Mullainathan, Professor of Behavioral Science at the University of Chicago.

In some ways, scarcity pertaining to moods and emotions is more important than any other kind of scarcity. Challenges from finances to safety create *feelings* in the nervous system that affect our decisions.

This freedom from unuseful moods and feelings grows over time. With enough repetition, you can internalize a sense that all moods and emotions are flexible, allowing you to better adapt in-the-moment in service of personal goals. For example, Someone looking to exercise more might think, “I don’t feel like exercising now, but that’s temporary, and I bet if I do XYZ, I’ll feel like going for a run soon.”

We all have moments in which we see a gap between who we are and who we aspire to be. If jhana access helps us act and think with less scarcity in *any* feeling or mood, it may help us live into our deepest values.

EQ training on steroids: seeing the relationship between attention and emotion

The jhanas can lead to dramatic leaps in self-awareness.

On retreat, we like to describe jhanas in two ways. The first is that jhanas are states that arise as the result of a positive feedback loop between attention and positive emotion. (See the panic attack analogy in the intro.)

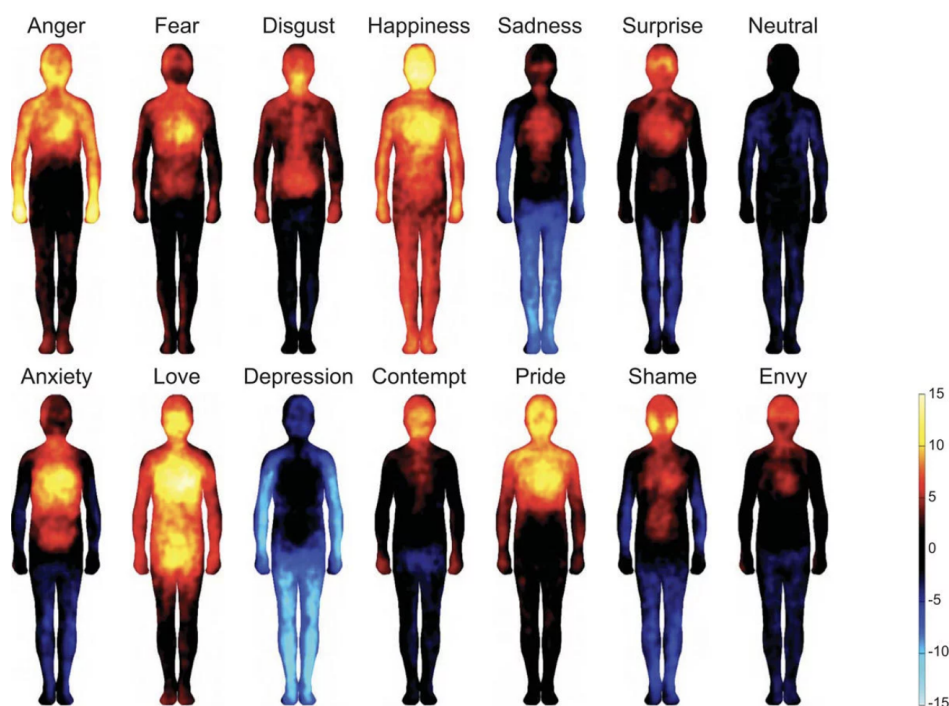
The second is that jhanas are states that arise naturally when you’ve released a critical mass of what we call “mental tension,” a useful concept that starts vague and abstract and becomes clearer with practice. By the time you’re in the later jhanas, the idea of mental tension is self-evident – it’s a faster-than-thought, often subtle sense of contraction or tightness that, if you pay attention, is present to varying degrees in all kinds of experience, especially difficult ones. For novices, just looking for mental tension with increasing sensitivity and learning to relax throughout the day (not just while meditating) is useful even if you do not yet have the resolution and finesse of an expert.

We think of the process of increasing sensitivity to mental tension and learning to relax it (or “love” or “embrace” it) as emotional intelligence training on steroids. Most of us have heard about the benefits of EQ in addition to IQ.³ Common attempts to train EQ may use exercises like journaling or periodically attempting to label emotions. Almost nobody trains learning to spot mental tension moment-to-moment within all flavors of emotions, changing their nonverbal

³ Entire academic careers have built on findings like EQ is more predictive of career success than IQ, even for intellectual fields like software engineering. See for example, *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman.

relationship to it and using jhanas as clear, physiological feedback on how effectively they're doing so.

As a result, progressing through the jhanas can transform somatic-emotional awareness. On retreat, we like to share an image from this psychology [study](#) showing emotional heat maps across people.



People drew maps of body locations where they feel basic emotions (top row) and more complex ones (bottom row). Hot colors show regions that people say are stimulated during the emotion. Cool colors indicate deactivated areas.

Image courtesy of Lauri Nummenmaa, Enrico Glerean, Riitta Hari, and Jari Hietanen.

When we share these heat maps, almost everyone finds them relatable, but few people report being aware of these patterns arising and passing away throughout the day with more than the slightest, lowest resolution sense.

Awareness of this kind is another way the jhanas can make it easier to be the person you aspire to be. High-resolution, in-the-body emotional sensitivity allows you to make better use of (or correct) your intuition while making decisions.⁴ The ability to skillfully work with your emotions in real-time, rather than suppressing or ignoring them, helps us turn towards rather than away from difficult experiences, from challenging conversations to procrastination.

⁴ Arguably, it's entirely via emotions and changes in introspective body sensations that your intuitive, subconscious pattern matching communicates to your conscious decision-making. So this might be the *only* way you can make use of your intuition.

In fact, this kind of emotional intelligence is so fundamental it works in extreme cases of addiction and therapy, too. Jud Brewer's famous [research](#) on meditation for smoking cessation coined the phrase "surf the urge" – the process of spotting and simply being with the urge to smoke leads to higher quit rates than leading anti-smoking interventions.⁵ The rise of somatic therapy in the recent decade is built on a related thesis made popular by the phrase "the body keeps the score."

Shaping your personality with memory reconsolidation

We don't want to overclaim – there is no rigorous evidence that jhanas can help you overcome trauma in the way that MDMA doubles the size effects of psychotherapy in treating PTSD. Some trauma also seems to make it difficult to get into the jhanas in the first place.

But jhanas are often described as being like MDMA. And we've heard from expert jhana meditators, alumni, and podcast guests that the jhanas can, like MDMA, help process difficult memories.

This can lead to unprecedented personal growth. So much of who we are happens on autopilot. If you can change your relationship to memories, you can choose to some extent who you'll be in the future.

Google engineer [Zach](#), for example, struggled for years in talk therapy to fully process the death of a close friend. Within hours of entering a particularly peaceful jhana, he finally came to a persistent, calm acceptance of his friend's death. When something makes him think of his friend today, he no longer experiences the anguish he did for years; he experiences gratitude for their time together.

Memory reconsolidation is the technical term for rewriting long-term memory's emotional content and narratives. For theory and studies on how this works, see *Unlocking the Emotional Brain* by Ecker, Ticic, and Hulley.

Loosely, the way meditators report doing this is:

- Entering a blissful or peaceful jhana
- Bringing up a difficult memory
- Letting the bliss and peace of the jhana and the pain of the memory wash over them at the same time, feeling everything at once
- Gradually or suddenly, the resistance to the pain (the "mental tension") gives way and is often replaced by a persistent acceptance. This can also lead to different stories about an event (i.e., "That person wasn't trying to hurt me! They were scared of XYZ.")
- Later, outside of meditation, anything that triggers the memory now permanently triggers less resistance and more acceptance

⁵ [Brewer et al. 2011](#)

Calling up and reprogramming your response to memory isn't the only way meditation can change your personality. Many seasoned meditators in the West engage in so-called "insight" meditation. Instead of bringing up a painful memory, meditators contemplate a spiritual truth, such as the inevitability of death or the insubstantiality of the self. Any permanent shift and relaxation in how you relate to ideas as fundamental as death or self are likely to cascade into more relief and ease in other areas of life, too.

You don't need jhanas to do either memory consolidation or insight meditation, but jhanas may accelerate and deepen both.

Jhana afterglows

The jhanas can leave an emotional afterglow, almost like a positive hangover, for hours afterward.

Researchers in the science of emotions have long documented the carryover effect. If you wake up on the wrong side of the bed, you're more likely to get angry when someone cuts you off on your commute to work, which makes it more likely you'll get short with a coworker that morning.

Moving into powerful emotions of bliss and peace can similarly prime your behavior. Some meditators intentionally use jhanas to:

- Start their day
- Influence their sleep (we've seen anecdotal data from sleep apps and wearables that jhanas can improve sleep and catalyze unusual signs of rest)
- Shape emotions before pivotal moments, like fundraising pitches, board meetings, or reconciliation conversations with romantic partners
- Turn to face difficult things – once you're in a jhana, the pain of doing that which you don't want to face may not seem so bad.

Setting aside 45-60 minutes to create a deep sense of bliss or peace before the big event may recruit your subconscious to work for rather than against you, especially when the stakes are high. Courage may become less about effortfully steeling yourself against fear and more about effortlessly relaxing the mental tension within it.

Conclusion: relating to achievement and pleasure

Over time, personalities are surprisingly malleable.⁶ What we do today is as much about who we are in this moment as it is about who we become in the future.

⁶ ([Damian et al. 2018](#))

The jhanas are not a silver bullet for intentionally changing our personality, nor are they unique – we use many tools, from therapy to exercise, to invest in our future.

But they can lead to a mentality of abundance, greater nervous system awareness, memory reconsolidation, and emotional priming, all of which can help us live into our deepest values.

A few other qualities make jhanas good tools, especially as it pertains to meditation:

- Jhana-pleasure can increase motivation to meditate
- They can serve as guideposts in the broader meditative landscape. Meditation is riddled with guesswork. But if you can learn to enter a particular state reliably, you can orient yourself and more confidently use directions from teachers and peers.
- They can accelerate other forms of meditation: The calm, quiet mind and familiarity with mental tension taught in jhana training can accelerate meditation techniques like noting techniques or nondual practices.

There's one more way jhanas can help us become the people we already aspire to be: They can teach us to change our relationship to fit our desires. You can't get into a jhana if you desperately want it – the mental tension constituting craving has to be relaxed. Learning to spot and feel the tension associated with a goal, expectation, or desire and learning to relax the tension without fulfilling the desire can show us our desires may be more malleable than we think.

If we're talking about transformation, should I proceed with caution?

Occasionally, high performers ranging from activists to startup founders hear about the depths of transformation possible with meditation and worry it may lead them to "lose their edge." There's no need to worry. Once you know what you're doing, jhana access often allows people to live with less fear and *more* ambition and energy to pursue the changes they aspire to see in the world.

Meditators who eventually change their life and career plans often report discovering they weren't living into their deepest values or discovering more effective ways to pursue the things they care about. Meditation accelerates discernment and integration rather than injects new values into the system.

That said, the best way to prevent mistakes in significant life decisions is to take it slow. Meditate less if you're worried meditation may change your discernment or mental habits faster than you like! And we strongly recommend NOT making any sudden significant life changes due to meditation. If you've spotted a gap in your lifestyle and aspirations, give it weeks or months to settle, and consider significant changes with commensurate care.

Lastly, some people get particularly hung up on whether or not happiness for no apparent reason will make them less effective. This is a widespread sentiment from effective altruists, who may implicitly believe their happiness is likely to prevent them from affecting good in the

world. This usually merits a longer conversation, but we feel very strongly that that's a well-meaning but grossly misguided idea – happiness, especially in the form of jhanas, will make you *more* effective, not less. It will reduce the extent to which scarcity hurts your decision-making, give you unusual insurance on your mental well-being, enhance EQ (at least via introspective awareness), and more.

The Jhourney approach

At Jhourney, we've embraced a few unusual assumptions that we believe improve how we teach and learn meditation. If you're unfamiliar with these assumptions, our approach may not make sense.

To be clear, we use these assumptions because we find them useful, not because we're not claiming these ideas are true! We expect science to improve these ideas over time, or we'll find even more helpful assumptions in the future. For now, if you don't think you can embrace them for the purpose of learning meditation, our instructions probably aren't for you.

Seeing ourselves as systems

We see ourselves as a system – complex and probabilistic rather than deterministic, but nonetheless understandable and responsive to intervention.

The system consists of conscious and subconscious components. We have limited control over certain conscious aspects, such as:

- The focus and direction of our attention
- Our relationship to what we notice in our attention
- (Sometimes) Our intentions

How we manage these aspects moment by moment gradually shapes our subconscious. Our emotional reactions and automatic behaviors are formed and stored based on our responses to past experiences. These automatic mechanisms largely define our personality.

The important parts of this model are that:

- We have minimal control over the present moment
- Skillful use of limited control can shape our subconscious and personality over time

We're not interested in sophisticated models or declaring a position in debates on consciousness. But we have found this simple model helpful in meditation. You might think of jhanas as states that emerge from the subconscious on a delay after we wield our attention, our relation to attention, and our intention in specific ways.

The critical role of “mental tension”

Perhaps our most important assumption is the idea of mental tension in meditation. It has a few parts:

- Nothing exists in our experience independent of how we relate to it.
- How we relate to something in our attention at any given moment contains a spectrum of resistance we call “mental tension.”
- It’s very useful to think of meditation as the process of learning to spot and release mental tension.

Whether we realize it or not, spotting and releasing mental tension is a life skill we’re all familiar with. We just have little language for it and so often don’t practice deliberately.

It’s the faster-than-thought mental move you make when you open yourself up to the possibility of changing your mind. Or the moment when you apologize to a loved one and mean it. Or the shift you make that allows you to be filled with awe and wonder while hiking, instead of ruminating on the day’s events.

Some of our other favorite pointers⁷:

- In this moment, how much of your experience are you bracing vs. embracing?
- Suffering = pain x resistance
- Most people have no problem sorting all emotions into two categories: “open” and “closed.” Closed emotions are usually associated with more mental tension.

We prefer to use the phrase “mental tension” to distinguish it from a few other commonly mistaken ideas:

- Physical tension—Mental tension often arises with physical tension but is distinct. Imagine maxing out a weight lift while ruminating on the inadequacy of your strength vs. celebrating the miracle of your body.
- Negative emotions—While emotions contain varying degrees of mental tension, negative emotions, in particular, are a specific, more subtle phenomenon that cuts across emotions and is associated with other things, like goal-setting.

If mental tension seems a little intuitive but not yet clear, don’t worry. Novice meditators typically start with a fuzzy intuition for what mental tension is based on these kinds of pointers and get better at spotting and working with it with practice. Some advanced meditators eventually report it is a powerful leap in self-understanding to “see mental tension directly” in very quiet states of mind. Regardless of where you are, we’ve found it helpful to see meditation as a practice of spotting and releasing subtler and subtler levels of mental tension.

Among other things, it puts front and center the roles of sensitivity, curiosity, and learning (to spot mental tension), as well as relaxation, acceptance, open-hearted emotions, and well-being (to release it). It’s also very simplifying: if you’re stuck and you don’t know why, you likely need

⁷ Thanks to Joe Hudson, Shinzen Young, and Jud Brewer respectively for each of these

to increase sensitivity and ask what mental tension is in your experience that you have not yet recognized. And once you've spotted it, the game is to find ways to open up to, relax, or otherwise release it.

"Awareness and love are like two wings of a bird; they must be of equal size and strength for flight to take place." – paraphrased proverb

This is a big idea, and we'll return to it frequently throughout our instructions. In fact, sometimes on retreat, we say, *"The entire game – all of meditation from your first sit to the later jhanas and far beyond – is just about awareness and love. Increasing sensitivity and learning to embrace what you find."* This leads us to our next big assumption: meditation should have goals.

Meditation can and should have goals.

Meditation teachers often make confusing statements about the goals of meditation. You may hear things like:

- "There is no goal."
- "You don't want to *do* anything."
- "A common mistake in meditation is thinking you want to change something."

Sometimes, these statements go even further, suggesting not only is there no goal, but there's no such thing as improvement.

- "Don't try to improve anything. Meditation is not about changing your state."
- "You can't get better at meditation the way you can prepare for a music rehearsal."

We couldn't disagree more with these statements. There is *always* a goal to meditation.

At some level, everyone knows these statements are false, or they wouldn't meditate. Whether you want to relax, seek Enlightenment, or just curiously follow your breath for a moment, there's no denying that you're pursuing a goal.

So why do so many teachers and practitioners make statements like this? Viewed through the lens that meditation is about spotting and releasing mental tension, these statements are *not true* but can still be *useful*. It turns out that the idea of mental tension (see above) is intricately tied to goal-setting.

Goals can create tension

Twitter meditation personality Romeo Stevens uses a metaphor:

"Like hydroelectric dams, the creation of mental tension in the nervous system spurs action until the tension is released." (paraphrased)⁸

⁸ <https://twitter.com/RomeoStevens76/status/1650163068410957824>

In day-to-day life, this is usually because we've met our goal. Or we may learn something new and change the goal, releasing one dam and setting up another.

"Desire is a contract you make with yourself to be unhappy until you get what you want."

– [Naval Ravikant](#)

With meditation, we begin to sense the constructions of these hydroelectric dams in our nervous system almost mechanistically. Another Twitter influencer, Nick Cammarata, [describes](#) mental tension as a "fast, grabby thing" that leads to an "evil vibrating blob." It's as if prior contracts we made with ourselves to be happy have a physical-emotional manifestation in the nervous system, causing suffering until we get what we want.

Meditating offers a third way of engaging with these dams. Rather than relying on goal completion or new information, we can learn to decide for ourselves if we want to keep that dam in place and release it directly.

"I like to stay aware of [desire] because then I can choose my desires very carefully. I try not to have more than one big desire in my life at any given time, and I also recognize it as the axis of my suffering. I realize the area where I've chosen to be unhappy." – [Naval Ravikant](#)

Goals without tension

The tight relationship between mental tension and goals is why meditation teachers say, "There is no goal." Ironically, they're attempting to support you in the true goal of meditation: the release of mental tension.

We prefer to take a different approach: distinguishing explicitly between what we believe is true, what's useful, and why. Pretending we don't have goals when we do can get confusing and lead to unconsidered, unwanted tradeoffs. By embracing goal-setting, we can be explicit and intentional about these tradeoffs.

But if goal-setting creates mental tension, how can we create goals to reduce mental tension? The key is to use a careful sequence and hierarchy. Our highest-level goal is likely "to be happy or live a life without suffering." We're asking you to set another then: "to learn to spot and then release mental tension of all kinds." This includes mental tension associated with various emotions and physical sensations, as well as goals. From here, you can stack on any number of goals, ranging from specific experiments you want to try in a given sit to new skills you want to learn across sits.

Eventually, setting and reaching these lower-level goals will improve your ability to spot and release mental tension. You'll be able to *feel* what it's like to have a strong intention or goal influencing how you relate to your moment-to-moment experience. And once you learn how to

release it, you'll begin to be able to start choosing which goals to keep and which goals to release with newfound precision. At some point, likely in advanced meditative states of extraordinary relaxation and well-being, if you want to enter into a truly effortless state without any mental tension at all, you can turn the process on itself and set the goal to release the remaining goals.

We think the value of this process – spotting and releasing mental tension – is hard to overstate. As you grow more sensitive and skillful, you can get much better at navigating your nervous system, including setting and releasing the contracts you make with yourself responsible for driving (subconscious) behavior. What could be more important if you're a high performer chasing a big dream or just an earnest person looking to be a little happier?

Sample first, then invest

The final assumption we ask students to make is always to assume the opportunities in front of them are extremely unequal. Assume that one or two of the opportunities you have to learn meditation may be worth all the rest of them combined.

We can't prove that this is true, but it motivates working very smart rather than hard, and can be applied to almost everything:

- Are you considering reading a book? Sample 10 of them first; assume 1-2 is worth the rest combined, and only read those.
- Are you considering meditating today? Make the most out of it by setting a clear intention before the sit, running a couple of experiments at the edge of your practice, and saving time to reflect afterward. You want to maximize the odds that each sit reveals one of the critical insights you need to unlock the next chapter of your practice.
- Are you considering choosing a meditation retreat? Read books, podcasts, and reviews before committing serious time and money to what would otherwise be a much worse outcome.
- Are you feeling stuck? Assume you're missing just 1-2 critical things, and plan to discover the important unknown.
- Are you feeling unmotivated? Assume there are 1-2 things sapping your subconscious of motivation, or 1-2 things you can do to restore it if you can find them.

In a world where 1-2 opportunities are more valuable than the rest combined, you can't just fall back on grit! Unthoughtful practice will almost certainly deliver mediocre or stagnant results.

This idea is fractal—it applies to the lowest-level decisions about what to experiment with moment-to-moment mid-meditation, all the way up to which meditation practices to explore. Like the word sports, meditation is not a monolith. Just as sports shape your body in distinct ways, various meditation practices will produce unique experiences and influence your personality differently.

Challenges, mindsets, and opportunities to work smart, not hard

Since efficient progress is about working smart, not hard, we want students to learn more than just a meditation technique. We want students to practice instructions within a broader understanding of:

- **Challenges unique to meditation** compared to learning other skills and how to adapt your approach
- **Mindsets** to adopt even before engaging with literal practice instructions
- **Off-the-cushion opportunities** to improve on-the-cushion results

If you can take advantage of all these, we believe it's only a matter of time before you learn the jhanas or any other meditative experience. You'll make much better use of specific instructions.

Challenges unique to meditation

At Jhourney, we view learning jhana meditation as learning any other skill: time to mastery can be accelerated by structured reflection, a growth mindset, and other evidence-based learning tools.

Unfortunately, no matter how fast you are, there are two fundamental differences between learning meditation and most other skills.

One is that meditation is hard to verify and requires an unusual amount of guesswork. In other domains, ranging from swimming to astrophysics, you can usually rely on accurate, fast, and unambiguous feedback loops between teacher and student. Swimming instructors, for example, can see immediately and confidently when your stroke is off and proactively intervene.

Since meditation experiences are mostly invisible to outside observers, we have to use words to describe them. But since meditation is often practiced at the level of sensations and feeling tones, many of which are complex and nonverbal, words are an obviously lossy and limited tool for the job. Until we have accurate, real-time, personalized measurements, we must make our words count.

All this guesswork means working smart, not hard, is especially important. We have to be unusually humble about our assumptions and unusually diligent in taking ownership of our own learning. In most domains, novices are smart to defer judgment to an expert until they cross certain milestones and can emulate expertise themselves. In meditation, it may be slower and harder to reach certain milestones with confidence.

It's tempting to respond to this challenge by deferring judgment to experts even more than usual. Especially if we've learned the value of grit in learning hard things, we might "try harder" or persist longer attempting to implement our current understanding of expert instructions. This is working hard, not smart. It's also risky. Running someone else's algorithm on an infinite loop in your own head is a high-stakes gamble. In our experience, it's also how meditation quickly gets boring, ineffective, or even dangerous for mental health.

Instead of applying our grit to intensely attempt to follow expert instructions, it's much better to use our grit to manage our learning process actively. Below, we'll discuss ideas like explore-exploit tradeoffs, triangulation, and "the map is not the territory." Diligently reflecting on these ideas, watching for latent misunderstandings, and intentionally running our experiments are much more effective than "trying hard" with a given technique. Given how important relaxation is to meditation, more often than not, progress involves *learning how to relax* in novel and deeper ways. So apply all your grit to the learning process, not intensely doing whatever you currently understand meditation to be.

The second fundamental difference in learning meditation relative to other skills is that it can be unusually affected by expectations. The lens through which you experience anything affects your experience. But in meditation, expectations will literally shape the available state space of your experience. If you correctly believe it's unlikely for you to win a hand in poker, you'll still win a handsome percentage of the time. But if you believe you won't reach jhana during this meditation, it's likely to be a self-fulfilling prophecy: your expectations are part of your mental landscape. They will influence the results of any mental experiments you run, condemning you to failure before you start.

In our experience, the solution is unfortunately not to "have no expectations." No matter what you do, you'll have some form of expectation.

Instead, one of the most essential foundational skills we can learn in meditation is what it *feels* like to spot, set, and release expectations. This isn't a cognitive task so much as an emotional one. And for most of us, it's releasing that's hardest.

Our instructions are designed to support you in navigating guesswork and expectations, and learning to increasingly spot mental tension from the start. If these challenges seem daunting, don't worry: most of our students reach peak experiences they describe as "the best thing that's happened to them in 6 months or more" in under a week.

Mindsets for learning meditation

To recap, the unique challenges of learning meditation and a few assumptions we find useful mean we're operating in a particular context:

- Meditation requires unusual guesswork
- Meditation is unusually influenced by expectations and goals
- Our job is to spot and release mental tension, at least some of which we'll find associated with our expectations and goals
- We want to work very smart, not hard

This can get tricky, and we've found five mindsets can make a big difference. Together, they can improve your guesswork, right-size your expectations, and reduce the extent to which your progress is left up to chance.

1. Maximize your agency via experimentation and reflection
2. The map is not the territory
3. Get playful
4. Get curious
5. Embrace self-compassion

Mindset 1: Agency via experimentation and reflection

Few things are more critical when learning meditation than a sense of agency and ownership. Since the world's greatest teacher can't see inside your head, and since words are so limited in describing meditative experiences to each other, you have to take the lead in shaping your own experience. Teachers can be nothing more than advisors.

How can we cultivate as much agency in ourselves and our students as possible? The best answers we've found are to

- cultivate playful experiments
- make use of daydreams via "the top idea in your mind"
- be intentional about explore-exploit tradeoffs
- make regular use of reflection

Run your own experiments for agency first, learning second

One of the phrases we say most frequently on retreat is "run your own experiments." The most successful students are doing this constantly. Before sitting, they set an intention for what they want to explore. During a sit, they periodically check in to see if they want to prioritize a new experiment. After a sit, they take a minute to reflect on what went well and what didn't go well. And between sits, they often daydream about what they learned and what they want to try next.

None of this is work; it's all play. These students have "caught the bug" – they've seen firsthand how much agency and learning can come from running experiments in their own heads in ways they've never tried before. For them, it's exhilarating and fascinating to discover novel ways they can interact with their internal environment. "Run your own experiments" is much more of an attitude to live and learn by than it is literal instruction.

This is so valuable that it might be the most important instruction we give. It's a two-way street: it's not just that highly agentic students run their own experiments; it's that running your own experiments can *create* agency and ownership.

If you've fallen in love with the process of "running your own experiments," every failure is a lesson, and every unexpected result just moves the goalposts for what to do next.

Feeling stuck? Run an experiment. Feeling unmotivated? Run an experiment. Lacking clarity, brainstorm possible options from here, organize it into a framework, and test your ideas with a more experienced meditator.

If that still sounds like work, it's only because you've not yet tasted the exhilaration of solving a problem that at first seemed unsolvable. Guess how you do that? Run your own experiment!

When we see people truly embody this out of love for having agency itself, or out of love for the process of learning and discovery itself, we know it's only a matter of time before they reach their meditation goals, jhanas or otherwise. We also expect their progress to accelerate as their learning compounds. And most importantly, we know they're going to enjoy themselves along the way.

Because meditation is difficult to verify and talk about, instructors can only offer so much to their students. There's nothing more reassuring than seeing a high-agency student take full ownership of their learning journey.

Be intentional about the “top idea in your mind”

A closely related idea to “run your own experiments” is cultivating the right “top idea in your mind.” This is inspired by Paul Graham's essay of the same name.⁹ The thesis is that at any given point in time, you have a stack of things important to you, but your subconscious is mostly likely to direct daydreams only to the most important idea – the one at the top of the stack.

We think this is excellent advice for a few reasons. First, many meditation breakthroughs happen when you're not meditating. You suddenly connect the dots between a few of your experiences while in the shower. Or you have a mini-breakthrough while relating to an internal experience unexpectedly softer while slightly distracted over dinner.

Second, monasteries go to great lengths to create lifestyles conducive to meditation. They often emphasize “guarding of the senses” as a way to accelerate progress. At some point, this changes your relationship to meditation such that life off the cushion becomes a form of meditation. Needless to say, this can be a major inflection point as your time meditating, in a sense, jumps by a multiple depending on how many hours of the day you're formally meditating. Making your meditation progress the top idea in your mind can be an almost effortless way to reach this inflection point sooner. In some ways, we see it as the modern, non-monastic equivalent of “guard your senses.”

Third, the top idea in your mind is surprisingly controllable. It is important to envision in detail what it would be like to reach a meditation milestone, especially if you imagine *feeling* the outcome. You can also name commitments competing for the top of your stack and address them now or actively decide if one is more important than the other and why.

⁹ <https://paulgraham.com/top.html>

Make intentional explore-exploit tradeoffs

One of the most challenging parts of learning any skill is choosing to allocate your time between exploring novelty and exploiting familiarity. For instance, a beginner guitar player must decide how to balance time spent mastering familiar pieces (exploitation) with learning new songs and techniques (exploration). Explore-exploit tradeoffs are so challenging that entire careers in mathematics and machine learning have been dedicated to addressing them.

Meditation is no exception. If you constantly bounce around from new things to new things, you may never go deep enough to make the discovery or develop the skill you're looking for. But if you just do the same thing repeatedly, you'll never discover the alternatives that await you.

We see both mistakes constantly. We commonly meet students that have over-invested in the same technique unquestioningly for years, and have developed bad habits or learned helplessness as a result. Somewhat less commonly we meet students who have tried a little of everything without having ever invested to get good enough to see returns in any one thing.

There's no easy answer here. The most important thing is to be intentional about how you're navigating the tradeoff. It's worth asking yourself as you go: "Am I more likely to be over-investing in exploration or exploitation here, and should I do something to calibrate?"

Make use of reflection

Reflection is the process by which experience is transformed into expertise. We encourage students to reflect after every sit. No matter how little time you have to meditate, it's best to save time at the end to reflect on:

- What went well
- What didn't go well
- If there's anything you'd like to explore next
- How you might recreate your most recent experience if desired

Writing these reflections down can be a fantastic forcing function to clarify your thinking, make it more likely you'll remember your most important lessons, and allow you to see arcs of progress (and any meta patterns) over time. We highly recommend briefly jotting down your thoughts, with the caveat that it can get counterproductive to over-journal or analyze.

We recommend reflecting and writing a form of meditation—notice how your experience changes as you think and write. If you don't want to write, we still suggest taking 3-5 minutes to think through the answers to these questions post-meditation thoroughly. You may also find it valuable to socialize your reflections—telling others can further crystallize your thinking, improve memory, and solicit feedback.

On retreat, we also ask students to share with us a reflection at the end of each day. One of the Redditors famous on the subreddit [r/TheMindIlluminated](#) for quick progress through all ten

stages of the meditation book *The Mind Illuminated* cited a daily mindful review process as the most important factor behind his success.

Mindset 2: The map is not the territory

The phrase “the map is not the territory” refers to the idea that no matter how precise we attempt to be, there will always be a difference between the actual world and our understanding of it. Maps just can’t capture the full complexity of the real world. If they did, they’d be so cumbersome they would lose their usefulness as maps.

It’s a call for humility and caution. No matter what you currently believe to be the truth, there’s always a chance you’re wrong!

In learning meditation, we think this has a few implications:

- Hold all ideas and words tentatively
- Listen for the intent behind the message
- Triangulate
- Sample the landscape before investing lots of time and energy in a given path

Hold all ideas tentatively, and treat all words as inherently flawed pointers

The map is not the territory that is true in every domain. But because it’s nonverbal and invisible, meditation is especially lossy. We can never assume we know exactly what another person is experiencing. It’s best to treat every phrase and every term as a general pointer for our own experiments.

The irony is that once you have an experience, you will likely think, “Why did they explain it that way? I would’ve said XYZ differently.” This is so common that meditation teacher Romeo Stevens says the unfortunate nature of meditation is that before you have an experience, the instructions read like poetry. Afterward, they read like a technical manual.

Suppose you humbly hold all language tentatively until you’ve confirmed it in your own experience and, even then, remain open to subtle misunderstandings. In that case, you’re much less likely to over-invest in a dead-end.

This is subtler than it looks: it’s very natural to be over-confident you know what a word means, especially if you’ve been meditating for a while. As Adam Grant says, “*The curse of knowledge is that it closes your mind to what you don’t know.*” This may be the number one reason we see novices and long-time meditators learn the jhanas at surprisingly comparable rates – the novices may cling to any given word in instructions with much less confidence.

Listen for the intent behind the message

A natural extension of holding terms loosely is to rely on more than just words to understand a given pointer. It can often be revealing to pay attention to *how* a meditator is talking about something. If their eyes and tone of voice soften, perhaps their instruction to “stay focused on the meditation object” is more about relaxation than intense diligence. Or if you know from other instructions that this is a “feeling meditation,” perhaps the instruction to repeat a mantra should draw your attention to the emotions it invokes rather than the words echoing in your head.

This is also why we think it’s so important to bring the right mindsets, assumptions, and models to understand jhana and interpret our practice instructions. We know we can only give you the map, not the territory – you’ll want to use these tools to read it.

Triangulate

One great way to help you navigate the uncertainty of lossy language is to triangulate. Hearing different meditators describe the same thing in their own language can help you design meditation experiments that make the most sense for you.

Our instruction team regularly goes through what we call periods of convergence and divergence. In periods of divergence, we read widely and speak to multiple teachers to expose all the different trailheads we might pursue in our personal practice. In periods of convergence, we focus on a particular trailhead. We still often talk to multiple teachers or read multiple books, but we do so in order to synthesize, clarify, and triangulate on a particular meditation point. Then, we meditated a lot and ran our own experiments to navigate the terrain ourselves.

We encourage you to triangulate using any information source you can find, making sure to incorporate what you know about the source, not just the information itself, to inform your experiments. Unusual perspectives from novices may reveal novelty behind a familiar idea, peers may be more recently familiar with challenges you’re facing, and experts can often draw special signals from noise. One of these sources may be more valuable than another, depending on what you’re looking to explore.

Sample the landscape and only take advice from people you’d want to trade places with

Lastly, since meditation is hard to verify, the landscape of teachers and traditions can seem endless, and everyone will claim to have the secret sauce. Unfortunately, against such a challenge, people often appear to relax their criteria for who they learn from, not increase them. They often default to accessibility – leaving it up to chance rather than quality who they learn from.

We think this is a big mistake. You won’t have time to map the landscape, but given that, 1-2 teachers, traditions, or resources will likely be more valuable to you than the rest combined, we think it’s careless not to sample what’s out there before committing a large amount of time to a particular teacher, tradition, or technique. Odds are an hour (or 10) spent exploring ten teachers

each before investing 10 hours (or 100) in one, which will be a much better use of time than dedicating 20 hours (or 200) to the first teacher you come across. At some point, you'll want to go deep, but sample first!

One heuristic we use is to only invest large amounts of time in practices recommended by someone if you think you would want to trade places with them. For our instructor team, meditation is a priceless life skill that makes us more open, compassionate, and at ease. It's also high stakes. We give special emphasis to information from gurus we personally admire because we know we pick our sources at our own peril!

This doesn't preclude learning from someone we're not sure we want to trade places with; we just do so more cautiously and with a lot more triangulation.

Importance of playfulness, curiosity, and self-compassion

A quick note on the next three mindsets: playfulness, curiosity, and compassion:

If you want to become a virtuoso in any domain, or even if you just want to make quick progress, there are few things more important than ensuring the experience is enjoyable.

Playfulness, curiosity, and self-compassion aren't just about enjoying the process. They also improve effectiveness and rates of learning. If you're playing rather than working, you're much likelier to enter flow more often, spend more time on the task, come up with more disparate and creative ideas, and push the bar for excellence to new highs, perhaps effortlessly so. If you're curious, you'll ask new questions, challenge existing paradigms, and look into things few people have looked into before. And if you're self-compassionate, you'll bounce back from setbacks faster and are more likely to make amends at the next opportunity.

But in meditation, having fun, getting curious, and being self-compassionate is even more important because the mindstates you enter into are the subject of study! Every mind state is a function of both what's in experience and how we're relating to it, so playfulness, curiosity, and self-compassion can shape the mindstates available to us in meditation.

These alternative mind states may yield different results for your meditation experiments, even holding everything else equal. Since playfulness, curiosity, and self-compassion are likely to assist in releasing mental tension, these mind states may be essential for entering the jhanas.

Playfulness, curiosity, and self-compassion aren't just mindsets to accelerate your learning journey. They're literally practice instructions!

Fortunately, all three are surprisingly malleable. And with meditation practice, you'll begin to *feel* what it's like to get playful, curious, or compassionate. With training, you can learn to inject whichever you need in order to relate to your experience differently.

Mindset 3: Playfulness

The difference between play and work is a feeling. If you're feeling fear or obligation while engaged in any task, it's work. If you're having fun or feeling love while engaged in the task, it's play.

Playfulness is so important in meditation that if you're operating from a place of fear or obligation – if you're telling yourself you *should* meditate – we suggest you stop immediately. Pull up, identify where this idea of “should” came from, and run your own experiments to let go of ought language or fall in love all over again with the process of meditation or learning.

Playfulness goes hand-in-hand with agency. So, if you find yourself without play, you might ask why you don't feel safe or what limiting belief is robbing you of your agency. And if you're without agency, you might ask how you might change the task or environment at hand to allow yourself to play.

Enjoying yourself can also be influenced by posture and body language. We'll discuss later how intentionally smiling while you meditate can be a surprisingly effective tool to enjoy yourself.

Mindset 4: Curiosity

Curiosity and playfulness go hand-in-hand: if you have one, it's easier to have the other, and they both accelerate learning.

In meditation, curiosity plays a special role. It's essential for levels of sensitivity and sensory clarity to spot subtler forms of mental tension. If you're not curious about your own experience, you'll stagnate.

Curiosity, like playfulness and agency, is also highly malleable. Conventional tricks like taking stock of all that you don't know, brainstorming ways to fill in the sentence “I wonder if...” (run your own experiments!), and accepting challenges all work.

Mindset 5: Self-compassion

For some, it can be tempting to think that self-criticism plus self-confidence can be an effective headspace for learning and personal growth. But research shows self-compassion isn't just more enjoyable than self-criticism; it leads to better results faster.¹⁰

Self-criticism and self-doubt contain lots of mental tension. For many of us, this runs surprisingly deep – our mental habits mean we constantly introduce mental tension throughout the day. In fact, one of the most common mistakes we see novices make is meditating, completely unaware of faster-than-thought self-criticism or self-doubt operating in the background. This can *increase* mental tension even as they attempt to find mental tension and let it go.

¹⁰ The NYT has a great article citing some of this research [here](#).

For this reason, self-compassion is often some of the lowest-hanging fruit for overcoming and releasing mental tension, even for those of us with relatively little self-criticism. In fact, one of our models for understanding jhanas (see below) is as recursive self-compassion – jhanas arise naturally when all the parts within us are in open, easy, and compassionate relationships.

Off-the-cushion opportunities to accelerate on-the-cushion progress

Instructions and mindsets aren't the only tools you have to influence the mind states available to you in meditation. Who you are and what you do off-the-cushion have large effects on what you experience on-the-cushion.

If you're significantly sleep-deprived, stressed out, grappling with emotional agitation, struggling with a guilty conscience, or out-of-touch with emotional and other sensations in the body, profound meditative states like the jhanas can be much harder to access. Retreats are valuable in part because they can offer temporary separation from mindstate-inhibiting life events. As you'll see below, forgiveness meditation is one of our favorite complementary techniques to use before, during, and after jhana access.

While inconvenient for those of us attempting to learn meditation quickly, this is ultimately a feature, not a bug. It's a virtuous cycle: values-aligned behavior helps enter these states, and a pleasurable mentality of abundance makes it easier to live in more values-aligned behavior.

Values-aligned and sober lifestyles

Some teachers think the most important part of learning meditation is lifestyle change. Conventional wisdom is that a clean conscience and baseline healthy lifestyle, especially without mind-altering substances like alcohol, is essential for entering states like the jhanas.

We largely agree. Many meditators stop taking social drugs like alcohol altogether because they grow sensitive to the lasting effects in the system. A couple of our instructors have alcohol at most once a year, not out of some obligation or moralistic belief, but because every time they think about it, they prefer to pass because they know it will affect their meditation the following morning (much less sleep, workout, and day!). Increased sensory clarity can make alcohol less fun, and inhibiting jhana access can change the cost-benefit analysis.

Pre-meditation activities

What you do immediately before meditation will have a meaningful effect on your sit. If you're looking to have a particular experience—run an experiment or attempt to enter jhana for the first time—these can be excellent ways of getting closer to target mind states and making the most of meditation.

This section is a laundry list of experiments we've run personally and on our retreats. We suggest you run your own experiments!

- **Time of day** – Sitting first thing in the morning or last thing before bed can affect alertness and attention. (Meditation afterglows can also affect your day, sleep, or dreams).
- **Breathwork** – can increase alertness and flood the nervous system with simultaneously relaxing, energizing, and pleasant sensations.
- **Yoga** – can help relax the body and by extension, relax the mind. Many traditional forms of yoga were originally designed as body postures that in turn help the mind move into specific postures. Shavasana can easily be extended to a full 60+ minute meditation.
- **Non-sleep deep rest** – forms of meditation targeting near-sleep states can take the edge of dullness while simultaneously increasing relaxation.
- **Positive psychology exercises** – activities like gratitude letters can be effective ways to “prime the pump” before a sit.
- **Exercise** – endorphin-inducing workouts like HIIT make meditation more pleasant
- **Cold water euphoria** – like exercise, this can inject pleasant, alert sensations into the background of your sit. We've also had several students report cold showers were a pivotal point in learning a “surrender move” for releasing mental tension. When you first enter cold water you're likely to resist it strongly, but at some point you give up resisting even as the physical cold and discomfort remain the same. That may point to how to spot and engage with mental tension in a powerful new way.

Community

The community you choose and create while learning to meditate shapes all the following: the instructions you receive, the models you adopt to make sense of your experience, the strategies you use to shape your learning journey, and the lifestyle decisions you make outside of meditation.

Community is so powerful that some traditional instructions go so far as to imply your friends alone can determine your meditation progress. Several of our instructors cite a weekly routine with friends as the greatest driver of their progress. We would meet weekly, sit briefly, and share what experiments we ran last week, what worked and didn't work, and what experiments we wanted to run next week. Over time, we created a log of weekly entries loosely capturing our findings and inspiring new ideas for and from each other. This iron-sharpens-iron experience was essential in discovering jhanas and transforming meditation from a hobby into a personality-changing life skill.

We have limited time on our retreats, and time spent building community is time we can't meditate. Even still, we're increasingly dedicating more time to building community on retreats. We're experimenting with ways to create a sense of togetherness before periods of silence, sharing structured peer-to-peer reflections throughout, and highlighting inspiring, vulnerable, or

clever stories. We expect a substantial future investment to be in building a community outside of retreats.

Jhana instructions

In order to make our instructions as useful as possible, we aspire to give them in a way that (1) sets you up to devise and run your own experiments and (2) minimizes misunderstandings.

So, while we provide explicit practice instructions, we encourage you to see these as only the start – it's on you to take these instructions, begin experimenting, and make them your own.

We also share our instructions with the following:

- Several models by which to think about jhanas, which are somewhat like skillful mindsets, you can use to help come up with promising experiments and better understand instructions
- A list of antipatterns we've seen from prior students – it can be helpful to periodically review this and not ask, "Am I doing any of these?" but instead ask, "Which of these am I most likely doing?"

(Starting) practice instructions

<On retreat, please see the retreat booklet or talk to a facilitator for instructions and more information>

Rationale behind each line of the instructions

<On retreat, please see the retreat booklet or talk to a facilitator for instructions and more information>

Models for understanding jhanas

Having explained the context and approaches we think are useful for learning meditation more broadly, we now want to introduce a few models with which to think about jhanas.

The causal mechanisms of jhana are still poorly understood, but we've found a few models to be useful lenses by which to ideate on how we might change our practice to help us experience jhanas quicker and deeper. They can be used to interpret practice instructions – helping you develop your own intuition for which parts of the instructions to emphasize in your experience and when. They can also help you design more promising experiments.

We provide multiple models because (1) the models themselves each have their strengths and weaknesses, and (2) in our experience, jhanas are a gift that keeps on giving. You can enter

them from multiple starting places, you can use them for different purposes, and your experience in them will likely evolve over time.

Not every jhana teacher will use or agree with these models; these are just ones we use with our students.

Jhanas as positive feedback loops between attention and emotion

Our preferred way of introducing the jhanas is as a positive feedback loop between attention and emotion. It's somewhat like the opposite of a panic attack.

Everyone is familiar with how anxiety can capture attention, which can lead to more anxiety, which can capture more attention, and so on, leading to a physiological response (e.g., increased heart rate, sweaty palms, a knot in the throat). Jhana meditators create a similar positive feedback loop between attention and positive emotions.

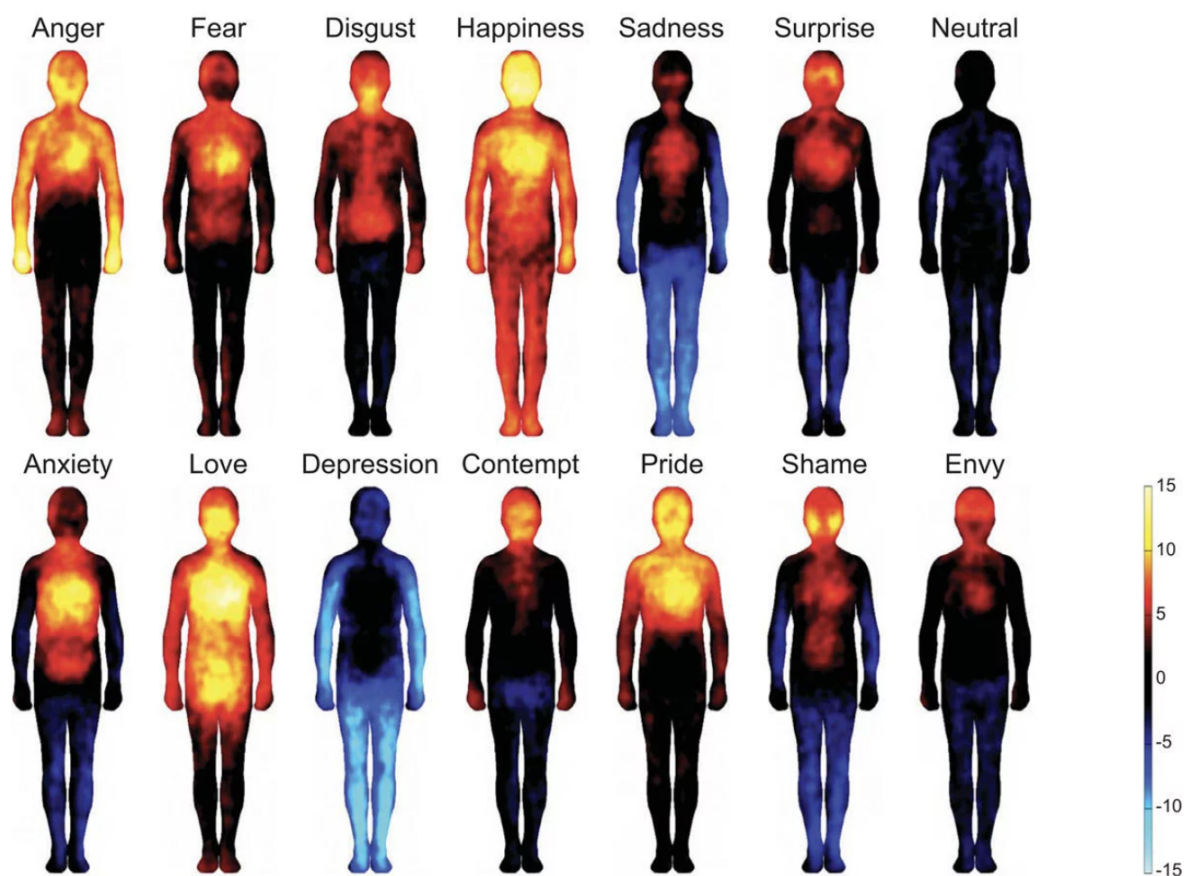
It's as if the positive emotion quiets the rest of the mind-body system, allowing you to attend to the emotion with more sensitivity and stability, which further quiets the system, which allows you to attend even closer, and so on.

In this model, emotions play a central role. This idea can help emphasize a few things in practice:

- Knowing that positive emotions (especially those on the jhana spectrum from bliss to peace) are essential may prevent you from wasting time, for example, by mindlessly repeating mantras and ignoring the emotions they are meant to invoke or paying attention to pleasant but purely physical sensations.¹¹
- Continuity of attention is important – if the attention isn't continuous, the flywheel between attention and emotion may lose momentum.
- There may be inflection points. Before anxiety gets too strong, you can simply switch to thinking about other things. But once it's going, it's hard to pull back. Similarly, with jhanas, you may start small and need to “kindle the fire” before it takes on a life of its own.
- Choosing a strong source of initial emotional content prior to the feedback loop taking off may be useful. Just as a high-stakes situation can lead to large amounts of anxiety, choosing to cultivate positive emotions from something dramatic may accelerate jhana. We've seen new parents discover a lot about jhanas by playing with the joy and love they feel at the thought of their children.
- Pre-existing emotional fluidity, well-being, and access to positive emotions are likely to make jhana access easier.

¹¹ You can use pleasant, purely physical sensations to enter jhana, especially if you're using an approach like Leigh Brasington's. But even in this approach, you look for “the pleasantness of a pleasant sensation,” which is very likely to redirect your attention to joy, delight, bliss, euphoria, etc.

Because emotions play such a central role, this model suggests it can be useful to get very familiar with low-level experiences of emotions in the nervous system. Not all somatic sensations are emotions, but all emotions have somatic counterparts. Getting familiar with these in-the-body aspects of emotions can help us put our attention on the most important parts of our experience to turn the attention-emotion flywheel. Some students on our retreats find it useful to see “[emotional heat maps](#)” highlighting common in-the-body correlates with emotions.



People drew maps of body locations where they feel basic emotions (top row) and more complex ones (bottom row). Hot colors show regions that people say are stimulated during the emotion. Cool colors indicate deactivated areas.

Image courtesy of Lauri Nummenmaa, Enrico Glerean, Riitta Hari, and Jari Hietanen.

Asking yourself, “What about this experience is pleasurable?” to zero in closer and closer to the most positive part of the in-the-body emotional experience can be a great way to enhance sensory clarity, turning the jhana flywheel faster and more robust.

Jhanas as positive feedback loops between generous intent and emotions

This second model for thinking about jhanas puts more emphasis on generous intent than attention. This is most commonly used when teaching jhana entry through the cultivation of prosocial emotions, which is how we prefer to teach jhanas on retreat.¹²

The idea is that feelings of joy, happiness, euphoria, bliss, love, etc., are a byproduct of generous intent. We're naturally social, compassionate creatures, and wishing someone or something else well creates a positive, prosocial emotion like joy. We can then weave our joy into our generous intent for someone or something else (e.g., "May they experience this joy too"), which may create further joy, and so on.

This model goes beyond attention to emphasize *how we relate* to our experience (i.e., via generosity). This can emphasize a few things for practice:

- Relating to our experience with generosity, kindness, or well-wishing, rather than focusing on detailed visualizations or teleporting our experience so someone else can magically experience it.
- Experimenting with extending well-wishes even to distractions before returning to meditation objects.
- Focusing attention primarily on the emotion, as jhana meditation is a feeling meditation. For example:
 - 70% on the prosocial emotion, especially the most intense or pleasurable parts in the body.
 - 20% on the intent to share your positive experience.
 - 10% on minimal "scaffolding" (e.g., a generous mantra or visualization), which can be dropped when no longer useful.

Jhanas as critical thresholds in collectedness, consensus, or release of mental tension

This model combines two big ideas into one.

First, Robert Wright, author of *Why Buddhism is True*, describes a model we've found very useful. He calls it the Modular Model of the Mind. It suggests rather than thinking of ourselves as a singular entity, it may be more accurate (or at least useful) to think of ourselves as a collection of many modules, each one somewhat simplistically concerned with one thing in particular. One module may be concerned with monitoring hunger, another approval at work, another chasing life dreams, etc.

So instead of "I" it makes sense to think of ourselves as a collection of well-meaning parts with limited information (this overlaps with parts-based therapy modalities like Internal Family Systems and Core Transformation). "I" is more like a herd of cats or a U9 soccer team. As Robert Wright puts it, the "CEO self is an illusion."

¹² We originally began teaching jhanas using loving-kindness because after interviewing a dozen or so teachers, it appeared to be the method of choice for those with the fastest results in getting novices into jhanas. We've since slightly adapted our instructions to something broader but similar.

The Modular Model of the Mind also offers a new way of thinking about mental tension: it's the faster-than-thought internal violence that occurs when parts of us conflict.

Second, our instructor team thinks “concentration” is an unfortunate translation to English because it often has effortful and exclusive connotations. Counterintuitively, you don't enter a jhana by carefully and effortfully holding your attention on the meditation object. Focus and stability of attention come from relaxation.

Instead, we like the word “collectedness,” another preferred word by many translators of meditation texts. Meditation is the process of gradually *collecting* our various modules into a unified, shared experience. Each “distraction” is actually traction, an opportunity! It reveals another module we haven't collected into our shared experience. Rather than push away that part of our experience in order to maintain a laser-like focus on our meditation object, which might create more mental tension, it's as if we welcome it to join us in meditation.

Viewed with these lenses, *jhanas are forms of unusual consensus among the various parts of ourselves as they unify into a shared experience. They may also arise naturally once a critical threshold of mental tension is dropped.* Each successive jhana is another threshold in the release of mental tension at subtler and subtler levels.

This has a few implications for practice:

- We “address” forms of internal agitation with acceptance and ease. You would never lead a U9 soccer team like a critical drill sergeant; you'd lean heavily on praise and kindness. Making sure you're relaxed, having fun, and highly motivated may be a prerequisite for jhanas.
- This model might have us recast common “hindrances” as forms of internal violence: doubt, restlessness, ill will, craving/aversion, even lethargy, etc. There's no role for internal violence or agitation of any kind—self-criticism, self-doubt, and any similar experience have to be addressed.
- We need not view mental tension in any form as obstacles but as opportunities and teachers! Each internal conflict is like a trailhead. Our job is to chase down every trailhead and figure out how to take openness, acceptance, and ease where we hadn't before.
- Our tendency to “try hard” at learning or reaching a new goal may be precisely the opposite of what we want to do. In fact, this tendency is so strong that we like to give the instruction: *“Whatever effort you're planning to apply to this task, cut it in half. Then, cut it in half again.”*¹³ Over-efforting to jhana is by far and away the biggest mistake we see students make.
- For those who are fans of parts-based therapeutic modalities (e.g., Internal Family Systems), this might inspire experiments to try faster, lower-level, nonverbal parts work.

¹³ Thanks to Delson Armstrong, David Johnson, Scott Jordan, and the TWIM community for this instruction.

(We don't recommend engaging in narratives the way people do at the level of therapy. It's best to stick to the level of feeling tones if you can.)

- Jhanas may be the result of recursive self-compassion, or at least recursive self-acceptance, in which more and more subtler and subtler parts of ourselves are in open, accepting relationships with each other.
 - This might spark novel “recursive” experiments, like extending generosity toward the experience of generosity itself.
 - One activity highly self-critical students find valuable is to mentally forgive themselves for all their mistakes throughout the day, ranging from being clumsy to misunderstanding someone. Seeing the myriad of faster-than-thought ways we self-criticize can illuminate the subtlety at which the jhana game is played. Once students have access to jhana, they can use newfound familiarity with these faster-than-thought mental moves to spot and release subtler and subtler layers of their inner critic throughout the day.
 - This might explain why a small percentage of people appear to fall into jhana by accident, why training jhana can affect baseline well-being outside of meditation, and why some people have discovered that learning jhana correlates with silencing their inner critic.

The well-known meditation book *The Mind Illuminated* captures all these ideas in two images:



Figure 14. The “mind” is not a single thing, but a rather a collective of many different mental processes. Each has its own purpose and goals, but all try to serve the happiness and well-being of the whole. When you’re dissatisfied with your practice, different parts of the mind urge you toward other sources of gratification. Trying to stay focused on the breath can feel like herding cats.

and then slowly cooling it down, letting new patterns crystallize. This releases the internal stresses of the material and is often used to restore ductility (plasticity and toughness) on metals that have been 'cold-worked' and have become very hard and brittle—in a sense; annealing is a 'reset switch' that allows metals to go back to a more pristine, natural state after being bent or stressed. I suspect this is a useful metaphor for brains in that they can become hard and brittle over time with a build-up of internal stresses, and these stresses can be released by periodically entering high-energy states where a more natural neural microstructure can reemerge.

Furthermore, from what I gather from experienced meditators, successfully entering meditative flow may be one of the most reliable ways to reach these high-energy brain states... So we can think of ('successful flow-state') meditation as a reheating process whereby the brain enters a more plastic and neutral state, releases pent-up structural stresses, and recrystallizes into a more balanced, neutral configuration as it cools. Iterated many times, this will drive an evolutionary process and will produce a very different brain, one which is more unified & antifragile... and, in general, structurally optimized against stress...

Annealing can produce durable patterns but isn't permanent; over time, discontinuities creep back in as the system gets 'cold-worked.'...

Essentially, Buddha noted that as one follows the meditative path and eliminates unwholesome mental states, they will experience various trance-like states of deep mental unification he called 'jhanas.' These are seen as progressive steps to full enlightenment- the first few jhanas focus on joy, and after these are attained, one can move to jhanas, which revolve around contentment and feelings of infinity, and finally, full cessation of suffering. Importantly, these experiences are not seen as 'mere signposts' on the path but active processes which are causally involved in the purification of the mind — in the original Pāli, the root of 'jhana' can refer to both 'meditate' and 'burn up,' e.g. to destroy the mental defilements holding one back from serenity and insight...

If you get a brain into a highly-resonant state (a jhana) and keep it there, this will also start a neural annealing process, basically purifying itself (and making it easier and easier to enter into that particular resonant state- "harmonic recanalization") more or less automatically.

With this in mind, we might separate Buddha's path to enlightenment into two stages: first, one attempts to remove the psychological conditions which prevent them from attaining a minimum level of 'whole-brain resonance'; mostly, this will involve trying to meditate, experiencing a problem in doing so, fixing the problem, trying to meditate again... in the second stage, once enough of these conditions are gone and resonant momentum can accumulate, they can start 'climbing the jhanas,' mostly just entering meditative flow and letting... neural annealing slowly shape their mind into something that resonates in purer and purer ways, until at the end it becomes something which can

only support harmony, something which simply has no resources that can be used to sustain dissonance.

This is more than a beautiful idea; it has immediate behavior-changing implications for practice. One of our instructors says:

*I got goosebumps reading this blog post. The idea of heating up the brain and increasing entropy seemed to be a pointer in how to relate to experience. Rather than carefully deconstructing sensations with laser-like attention the way I thought most teachers instructed, or merely resting effortlessly on a meditation object the way other teachers instructed, I wondered if annealing and “heating up” the brain **pointed to a special form of surrender and overwhelm.***

He began attempting to let his sense data overwhelm him. To do so, he experimented with what it *felt like* to get rid of expectations about his internal and external environment (which, according to the predictive coding theory, may play the role of energy sinks preventing the kinds of “entropic disintegration” you see in the brain on psychedelics). Indeed, he found this form of surrender ushered in a new chapter of sensory clarity, increasing and deepening his jhana access.

We think the most exciting implication of this model is a pointer to learn what it *feels like* to relax expectations as a way to enter jhana. Letting sense data (like jhanic joy or peace) overwhelm us, rather than just function as the anchor of our attention, can accelerate and deepen our experience.

We think this model may have a handful of other implications for practice:

- If jhanas put the nervous system into a higher energy, higher entropy state, somewhat like psychedelics and analogous to annealing metal, it may be unusually malleable.
 - This may support traditional descriptions of jhanas as especially valuable states from which to engage in “insight” meditation.
 - It may also be an especially valuable place to engage in memory reconsolidation, as described in [Intentionally shaping your personality with memory reconsolidation](#) and as reported by several people on our [podcasts](#).
 - It may also be a reason to cultivate prosocial virtues and emotions while in jhana. What you do in this state may have a special ability to change your personality over time. Like a magnetic field aligning filaments in molten metal, cultivating prosocial virtues while in a “neural annealing” state may have lasting effects. One of the meditation traditions that has most influenced us advocates strongly for using loving-kindness to enter and abide in jhana and claims it changes the jhana experience.
- The “cooling” process after annealing may be a way to think about the widely reported jhana afterglow. This suggests both our formal meditation and what we do immediately *after* our sit can have persistent effects on the nervous system. Mike from QRI suggests

it may be far better to gently drift off to sleep than introduce ad hoc “defilements” via an activity like watching TV.

- Most speculatively, this model may offer a pointer towards physical heat. We’ve seen meditators physically heat up on thermal cameras around the time in which they transition to jhana. Once relaxed and starting to turn the feedback loop between attention and emotion, jhana-bound meditators may experiment with relaxing or surrendering into a physically hotter emotional state as an aid-to-jhana. We haven’t yet experimented with this, and we think it’s a long shot, but we include it here as an example of the kinds of unexpected experiments for practice we may find fruitful while speculating on mechanisms behind jhanas.

Jhanas as familiar, natural states of progression in the nervous system

Our final model of the jhanas is a natural state of progression of the nervous system. Little is known about the neurobiological correlates of jhana – we might speculate they’re related to vagus nerve activation or some other mechanism – but the firsthand experience of jhana meditators is remarkably consistent: the jhanas follow an arc of high energy to low energy states of deep rest similar to nervous system arcs we appear to cycle through (or jump around) regularly in day-to-day life.

Our favorite analogy here is coming back from a hike severely dehydrated. Upon return, the most pleasurable activity you could imagine was to guzzle your first bottle of water. Doing so is euphoric, even ecstatic. After your first bottle, the most pleasurable activity you could imagine may be to drink a second. But now, the experience is less likely to be ecstatic and more likely to be delightful or grateful. After that, you might want to go for a relaxing swim. This, too, maybe the most pleasurable thing you can imagine, but the experience may be one of deep contentment and satisfaction rather than ecstasy or delight. Finally, you may want to lie down in the shade and allow your contentment to transition to complete peace.

Other analogies we’ve seen resonate with students include going out dancing with friends or falling in love. High-energy dancing eventually transitions to crawling into bed, somewhat like infatuation, and eventually transitions to more mature love.

This transition from high to low-energy pleasure maps well with the arc of the jhanas. The jhanas appear independent of external circumstances, may be more intense, and may contain fewer other aspects of experience.

Most meditators new to jhanas describe them as surprisingly familiar. One teacher even says 10% of his students report entering the jhanas in childhood and says, “People discover these states all the time.”

We think this model has a few implications for practice:

- If the jhanas are modified versions of states every healthy human nervous system experiences regularly, they likely aren’t super-human states available only to elite

meditators. This may inspire confidence. It may also inspire experiments using embodied memories of extraordinarily blissful or peaceful states to nudge ourselves in the direction of jhana.

- If the nervous system gets closer or further from jhana in day-to-day life, there's reason to be opportunistic. When one of our instructors was learning the jhanas, he would leave Saturday mornings unscheduled. If his sit was going well, he'd continue on for up to 3 hours, taking full advantage of the good luck to go deeper than ever before. If it wasn't a lucky day, he'd end his typical morning meditation and head out to play soccer at the park.
- The jhanas may have been rediscovered by different names across time and space. This may suggest other "psychotech" could be used as analogous inspiration for entering jhana. Michael Ferguson, neurobiology researcher at Harvard known for his work in "neurospirituality" thinks fMRI images of jhana teacher Leigh Brasington in jhana look comparable to fMRI images of Mormons "feeling the spirit." The jhanas predate Buddhism and were arguably known in various Hindu traditions as dhyanas. They may describe the same states as chakra-based systems. The phenomenology of Evangelical Christians speaking in tongues, Carmelite nuns and other Catholic mystics like St. Theresa de Avila, the Sufis, or Islamic mystics like Rumi, and many more contemplative practices may point to the same thing. If true, then the list of available tools to inspire experiments to enter jhanas is long, and students may draw on a variety of prior contemplative experiences. We speculate that students who learned to pray deeply and earnestly as children have a leg up in learning jhanas on our retreats.
- If the jhanas are a natural progression through a common arc in the nervous system, one path through the jhanas is to let them happen in the background, almost on their own. In fact, we teach both volitional and non-volitional movement through the jhanas because we think they can show you different things. The non-volitional jhana movement involves just continuing to meditate in the same way regardless of what jhana arises and just noting it as they do in the background. If you have the time, letting a jhana "run its course" and gradually transition into the next jhana can teach you something about the relationship between the two states. It may also create a deeper, almost more "saturated" experience that will help you get to deeper jhanas by volition later. Conversely, being able to move in and out of these states on command is useful when you have specific plans for the meditation.

Antipatterns

We've taught hundreds of students and have seen a laundry list of antipatterns. Very few students progress through the jhanas on their first attempt without any course correction. We highly recommend *assuming* you're committing an antipattern at any point in time and periodically asking yourself, "Which antipattern am I most likely to be committing?"

A word of warning: in our experience, many of these problems are more likely to turn into persistent, unaddressed issues among *experienced* meditators. Prior meditation experience

usually cuts both ways – you may have already developed some skills and familiarity with certain spaces, but you may also have to *unlearn* certain habits to enter the jhanas.

For example, experienced meditators who are habitually limiting their sensory clarity through a lack of curiosity or baseline certitude or forcefully redirecting their attention may not even know they're committing this antipattern!

As a special call out, we most commonly see latent antipatterns of over-efforting, insufficient sensory clarity, insufficient surrender, or suppressing instead of welcoming distractions from people with Goenka-style or IMS-style vipassana backgrounds or extensive training informed by *The Mind Illuminated*.

Over-efforting, not having fun

This is almost certainly the most common antipattern we see in novices. One teacher we admire says, "There are only two rules on this retreat: smile and have fun."¹⁴

We think these are two excellent rules, but they're unfortunately hard for many of our students to follow. Our external environments select for internal thought habits. If you worked hard to get into college and worked hard to get a job you want, consider that the seemingly trite advice "the key is to relax" is not trite but, in fact, something you may not even know how to do.

Unless you think you're in the top 10% of the population in the world in terms of mental habits with respect to relaxing, do not blow past this advice: Take whatever effort you're planning to apply to this challenge, and cut it in half. Then, do so again.

For most students, part of the process of learning the jhanas is discovering ways in which they've been holding mental tension and applying mental effort in ways they didn't realize they were doing. So, it's not just about relaxing but learning to relax. Most students are better off assuming they're not relaxing enough and figuring out where and how they're going wrong than assuming their typical problem-solving efforts will lead them to jhanas unexamined.

The same goes for having fun. If you're genuinely not having fun, ask yourself what you might change so that you will. And if you're starting to have fun, ask yourself what about the experience is fun or how you know you're having fun. What experience in the body tells you that you're enjoying yourself or is creating a background playfulness? Can you find where the concentration of that feeling is the highest? Does it teach you something about yourself or allow yourself to influence your experience in some way?

¹⁴ Delson Armstrong

Dropping the mantra or visualization too soon

Once a student gets a mantra or visualization (the “scaffolding”) working to generate a pre-jhana feeling, we often see them leave it behind too soon. There will come a point when you want to drop your scaffolding, but doing so prematurely will just slow you down.

This has a simple fix: don’t drop your scaffolding when it’s no longer necessary; drop it when it is clearly no longer useful. Once the feeling has taken on a life of its own and you’re near or already in a jhana, it will feel as if using the scaffolding is clearly distracting from the feeling itself. Drop it then, not before.

Over-focusing on physical sensations

Jhanas are deeply emotional states. We frequently see students – maybe 1 of 10 – that focus entirely on somatic sensations with no emotional context. They usually hear something about jhanas starting with a “body buzz,” or think the “pleasant tingle in the energy body” is a gateway to jhana.

It’s easy to understand why – these pointers appear in the teachings of several traditions we respect. Leigh Brasington, for example, one of the most famous jhana teachers in the West usually has students quiet the mind using the breath as a meditation object, and then go looking for a pleasant sensation that might start as a tingling somewhere on the body.

But in our experience, since our instructions are *designed* to work with emotions right out of the gate, this is usually a dead-end. Even in the Brasington approach, there’s a final step where you switch your attention from the pleasant sensation to the pleasantness of the pleasant sensation. This final indirection may take you to something closer to joy/ecstasy/delight than it is something *purely* physical. (The Leigh approach is great, and we teach it on retreats to students we think would be a particularly good fit on retreat, but we typically don’t lead with it.)

To make full use of our instructions, you want to get in touch with *emotions*. This is a *feeling* meditation.

This does NOT mean you should ignore the body. You should very much be in-the-body. The first four jhanas are separated from the second four jhanas because they’re profoundly in-the-body experiences.

Not all somatic sensations have an emotional component, but all emotions have a somatic component. As described in the section [Jhanas, as positive feedback loops between attention and emotion](#), you want to pay continuous attention to the somatic components of your emotions to increase sensory clarity.

Bouncing around too much

We commonly see people pick a mantra and/or friend to begin extending kindness towards in meditation, see some early progress, and then the progress stagnates as if the mantra or meditation object “went dry.” They’ll then switch things up, make some progress, stagnate again, and repeat.

What’s almost certainly happening in these cases is the novelty of a new mantra or meditation object, which creates some effortless interest, curiosity, or openness in the experience. Once the novelty wears off, unbeknownst to them, they begin relating to their mantra or meditation object in a new, “drier” way.

This is actually an opportunity – discovering how you’re subtly relating to your experience differently will be a fantastic lesson in increasing awareness/sensitivity and releasing a small amount of mental tension. As described in [Jhanas as critical thresholds of collectedness and release of mental tension](#), moving into and progressing through the jhanas is just this same move over and over again – growing aware of and releasing mental tension we didn’t know we had.

The solution is to start running experiments to stoke curiosity and openness.

Suppressing distractions or forcefully redirecting our attention

One of the most common challenges among experienced meditators is learning to gently relax themselves into a steady collectedness around a meditation object, as opposed to more forcefully yanking their attention back to the meditation object. This can be a very subtle difference, but one increases mental tension, and the other decreases it. One of the most experienced meditators we had on retreat, who had even been in the jhanas years back, made this mistake for days before discovering his issue. He called it “sweeping distractions under the rug.”

If you’re not getting progressively more relaxed through your sit, you’re almost certainly committing this mistake. Each distraction is truly an opportunity to welcome another part of you into the experience.

When you catch yourself mind-wandering, take it as an opportunity to let go of anything that feels like mental tension associated with the root of mind-wandering, relax any physical tension in the body, and then return to your meditation object. Some students have found it valuable to just do this for some time at the start of the sit without a meditation object: they just notice every sound in experience or everything their attention might drift to and gently drop it as quickly, as gently, and as relaxingly as possible.

Another litmus test one of our instructors likes to use: Can you meditate in a state so open and at ease that it feels almost impossible to be surprised? This is in direct contrast to forcefully keeping your attention like a laser on a particular point.

Insufficient “surrender” – inadvertently grabbing at or wanting to control sensations

Surrender is a strong word, but in the right context, it can be just what’s called for.

We expect almost everyone to start with a “heavy hand” with their attention. When they “look” at something with their mind’s eye, they subtly grasp at it – some form of clinging (or pushing away) slips into how they’re relating to the object in their attention without them noticing it. A desire (or, more broadly, an expectation) is operating unbeknownst to them in the background. This can prevent a jhana from getting started or growing to its full potential.

For many people, this gradually resolves on its own as they work their way into the jhanas, especially as they learn to *relax* gently into continuity of attention.

For others, this appears to persist and eventually requires explicit attention. This is when the word “surrender” may be an especially good word choice and an even better pointer than “curiosity.” For these people, see if you can let the sensations grow so large in your experience that they *overwhelm* you. And see if you can’t take all of your expectations about experience – everything you know – and throw them out. Let your sensemaking of the world take a break as if you were inhabiting the mind of a newborn.

We speculate but only have anecdotes to suggest this is more likely to be an issue for naturally very confident people or people used to very high degrees of stimulus, possibly via psychedelics.

Over-confidence that you understand instructions / exceedingly literal

Self-assuredness that you will succeed, agency, and ownership are all assets. But high confidence that you understand all instructions perfectly is a clear antipattern. As we described in the [Problems in learning meditation](#) sections, this endeavor requires a tremendous amount of guesswork. No matter how absolutely confident you are that you’ve understood the instructions, understood the intent of the instructions, and are proceeding without error, you’re probably making a mistake.

We occasionally meet students who come into a practice interview and rattle off matter-of-factly something like. “I started with X for A minutes. At this point, I switched to Y, and 123 happened, but not ABC. This proceeded for B minutes when Z happened. That’s it. There was some pleasure but no jhana.”

When we see this, we do our best to probe on where they may be making subtle mistakes, but we’re firing in the dark. Since we can’t see you meditate the way we could watch you swim, we make use of your *uncertainty* in the process as much as we do your certainty. It’s much easier for us as instructors when students are periodically asking “What am I most uncertain about?” or “What do I think I’m most likely to be getting wrong?”

In one case, a student believed the word “mantra” referred only to something that must be repeated steadily and relentlessly (as in the tradition of TM), as opposed to how we intended to use it: only to spark a feeling and reuse again when the feeling fades.

A closely related issue is exceeding literalness. In a world of guesswork and nonverbal experiences, we don’t have the luxury of treating words with our usual precision. The best and most precise instructions in the world are still just pointers and woefully inadequate ones at that. It’s rare, but we occasionally see students find a literal interpretation of our instructions that’s very much against the intent.

Insufficient sensory clarity or continuity of attention

Almost every meditator faces challenges of insufficient sensory clarity (AKA curiosity) or continuity of attention at some point in their journey. Occasionally, we see novice meditators go a long way into retreat with little progress on one or both.

This usually just works itself out with time on retreats, and usually has a root cause in not sitting for long enough, either in duration of single sits or total time spent meditating.

Occasionally, this is that a meditator has not realized they’re doing something to prevent one or the other. In this case, it’s usually solved by running experiments.

If the issue is sensory clarity, the experiments should look to identify ways to stoke curiosity or relate to the meditation object with a sense of openness and even surrender/overwhelm. It’s always worth asking if expectations or certitude have crept into your experience.

If it’s continuity of attention, it’s about taking stock of how frequently distractions are arising. Often novices will start by reporting remarkably low rates of mind-wandering – like 1-3 an hour. We expect a rate like that only in later jhanas. Eventually they’ll begin reporting every 30 seconds to 3 minutes, a rate much more expected, and we see that as a sign of progress – their meta-awareness is up!

Insufficient structured thinking or improper prioritization

There are endless decisions to make in meditation. What mantra should I use? How long should I go between repeating the mantra? Where should I anchor my attention while saying the mantra? How might I balance feeling the phrase, relaxing, and getting curious at the same time?

To reduce the complexity of all these decisions, a meditator often has to do what we sometimes refer to as “putting structure on the unstructured.” This is more art than science, and it requires finding a sweet spot. It’s possible to be not structured enough or too rigid and structured.

Perhaps the most common form of insufficient structure is bouncing around too much. We encourage students to explore mantras, visualizations, and related tools to find a way to cultivate a positive feeling. Some students bounce around for hours or days. Instead, we suggest trying out a few likely candidates from each category and then investing in whichever one works best.¹⁵ Bouncing around may prevent depth and continuity from developing.

Conversely, students occasionally take an overly methodical approach, prioritizing less important parts of their experience, like details in their visualization. One student found a visualization that invoked a sense of loving-kindness on the first day of retreat but insisted on taking days to perfect it. At one point, they drove to their favorite bar in college to enhance their ability to visualize their happy memory. Since the visualization details are unimportant, and you just need a subtle feeling to get started, this was likely not a good use of time.

Self-criticism

Almost all of us grapple with some degree of self-criticism, and we occasionally see students grapple with high amounts of self-criticism. This can add mental tension above and below their levels of awareness at any point in the process and will almost certainly block progress.

Fortunately, this is also an opportunity! Spotting self-criticism and learning how to habitually respond with self-compassion can accelerate progress into the jhanas and may also make the process unusually valuable. Silencing or dramatically lessening an inner critic if you're a highly self-critical person could be a life-changing improvement in well-being before you even reach jhana.

Students working with self-criticism can also lean into forgiveness meditation.

In extreme forms, see [Working with pre-existing sadness, anxiety, judgment, or other emotional blocks](#).

Ineffective use of interview time

Every now and then, we meet students who come unprepared for practice interviews or choose to speak at length throughout the interview on relatively unimportant topics.

¹⁵ As an aside, it's very common for a mantra or visualization to start working at first and then for its effectiveness to fade as the novelty wears off. When this happens, the meditator has almost certainly not yet discovered what it *feels* like to open/soften up, relax expectations, and expose themselves to being overwhelmed with curiosity sufficient to keep any mantra or visualization effective after the novelty fades. Rather than go looking for a new mantra or visualization, they may be better served by learning to open up to this one.

If you have a coach of any kind – on our retreat or elsewhere – it's worth asking if you're preparing to make the most use of their limited time. We suggest students come having prepared answers to a few questions:

- What have you tried recently, and what did you learn?
- What are you actively thinking about now?
- What do you want to try next?
- What is your list of prioritized questions for an expert?

We also suggest rattling off all your questions at the start of an interview so the instructor can form their own sense of priorities and help manage time.

Believing the jhanas cannot be learned without X

If you don't believe you can enter a jhana, you most likely will not. As described in the [Problems in learning meditation](#) section, and speculated in the [jhanas as neural annealing](#) section, expectations have an unusually large effect on the states accessible to you in meditation. It's essential to spot and name limiting beliefs, or you may doom yourself from the start.

We've seen a few beliefs from students on our retreats, all of which we have data to debunk. Usually, these are in the form of "I statements":

- I can't learn the jhanas without hundreds or thousands of hours of practice
- I can't learn the jhanas without coaching from a traditional teacher, possibly from a living lineage
- I'm scared of jhanas because of something I've heard about them (e.g., afraid of losing control)

A variant of this that can get particularly tricky is high self-doubt. For these people, doubt will prevent their progress, but it's also an exciting opportunity: if they can spot, name, and reappraise it or change their relationship to it, they'll likely see a step-change in their experience and learn a very replicable lesson in spotting and releasing mental tension.

We like to have these students enumerate their doubts and address each one individually. For students practicing on their own, we suggest doing the same, perhaps taking inspiration from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy exercises.

Moralistic beliefs that the jhanas are not "good" practice

Occasionally, we hear people say in practice interviews something along the lines of:

- I feel guilty wishing all beings well in some sort of pretend altruism – is that not extractive?
- This feels morally icky because we're not doing anything to deserve this good feeling – isn't this all navel-gazing unless we take action to fight injustice in the world?

In our instructions and on our retreats, we typically avoid discussions about what is good or bad, with a few exceptions:

- At a high level, a clean conscience, as discussed in the [values-aligned and sober lifestyle](#) section, is conducive to entering the jhanas. Traditional instructions often claim this is a hard prerequisite, and we think for good reason. The link between entering into states of deep altruism, whose pleasure stems from profound bliss-peace that creates a sense of abundance, and prosocial behavior is strong. Because we're all naturally compassionate, social mammals, the jhanas and altruistic behavior appear to be a virtuous cycle.
- "Come for the bliss, stay for the personal growth" is our theory of change. The reason jhana meditators continue to meditate is because it makes it easier for them to be the person they aspire to be. The real reason we teach these states, and the real reason so many invest in them, is a much loftier goal than getting high. It's about being there for loved ones, chasing a demanding but other-oriented career with more sustainability, etc.

Other than that, we don't like to engage in moralism. In part because it can be sticky and nuanced territory, and many traditional teachers are happy and more qualified to do so. But more importantly, moralism can quickly lead to "should" language, making it harder to enter the jhanas. Two of our favorite quotes on the topic:

- "Should is the most violent word in the English language" – Marshall Rosenberg
- "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about." – Rumi

The solution to moralistic concerns about the jhanas usually has a few parts:

- Question how certain you are about your moralistic claims. Between inconsistent views and structural complicity, our moral position in the world is usually far from black and white.
- Ask if access to profound states of bliss-peace may not give you the tools to parse moral complexity with better discernment or pursue moral goals with more grace or sustainability.
- Does your moral position on jhanas also condemn other things as morally bad? Few people think it's wrong to be moved to tears thinking of a friend, for example, or to be flooded with awe and wonder by the beauty of a natural landscape.

We're happy to engage with students when these questions come up – in absolutely no way do we want anyone to dismiss their moral concerns – but the sometimes violent certitude of moralism can absolutely block jhana access.

Insufficient sit duration

Related to the total time spent meditating, there are also nonlinear returns in duration of sit. While it's still more important to set clear intentions, meditate with playful gusto, and reflect afterwards, most meditators report an inflection point around 45 minutes. At this point it seems

as if many people settle in and can stay on the meditation object for with less effort. This can allow for new kinds of experiments and amplify the results of all your favorite mental moves.

This means increasing sit duration after 45 minutes can be disproportionately valuable. If you're sitting for 60 minutes, for example, and increase your sit to 75 minutes, you can get 100% more high-value minutes for a mere 25% increase in total time.

Since it's more important to be playfully meditating and enjoying yourself, we don't suggest people set timers for this stuff. Instead, you can block a good amount of uninterrupted time, and after you reach 30, 45, 60 minutes, or some other duration, you can begin asking yourself, "Do I want to sit for another 5-10 minutes? What would make it fun to do so? Are there any experiments that would be particularly exciting to run?" Then, once the honest answer is NOT to go longer, stop!

On retreat, we encourage true novices on the first day to just meditate for 30 minutes minimum, then get up to do a walking meditation if they like for 15 minutes, and return to meditation.

Sometimes, though, we're surprised to learn that on Day 3 or beyond, they're still only sitting for 30 minutes! When we ask why, they say, "My timer goes off." There's no need to set arbitrary limits! Let yourself get playfully pulled to more time so that you can get the best results!

Off retreat, this anti-pattern can get a bit trickier as the rest of our schedule conflicts with meditation. The solution to this is usually a broader discussion about priorities and building habits, which generally involves blocking an hour at least to meditate, even if you choose not to use the full thing.

Insufficient total time meditating, formally and informally

While it's most important to work smart, not hard, and to do so playfully, both total time spent formally sitting and total time spent informally meditating and daydreaming about meditation off-the-cushion have very meaningful effects on meditation. There are nonlinear returns on singular focus in the form of "guarding the senses" and cultivating meditation as the "top idea of the mind," as discussed in the [Mindsets for learning meditation](#) section.

We see people commit this anti-pattern in a few ways:

- On retreat, we recommend people ramp up to 6-10 hours by Day 3. If this sounds like a lot, don't worry; hundreds of novices have ramped up to this because they *enjoyed* doing so at retreats with us. And we have a few tricks for ramping up with motivation. But every now and then, we see people continuing to do <5 hours on retreat, mostly because they've just not fully bought in. We think this is a major loss – why take a week off work and then not set yourself up for success!? The solution is to discuss their motivation and any potentially limiting beliefs explicitly.
- On our in-person retreats we suggest people turn off their devices for the duration of the week, but we've had several people continue to use them to do something we find surprising, like scrolling Twitter. This usually comes up in practice interviews, or in

end-of-retreat surveys when people regretfully admit to doing so: “I lost two days on this retreat because I didn’t turn off my device. I wish I had turned it in.”

Concluding the jhanas don’t get any better

Every now and then, someone appears to have confidence they’re in a jhana, and the description of their experience matches ours. Still, they’re disappointed or confused that they’re not particularly enjoyable. Or perhaps they’re nonplussed. These people usually report it’s as good of an experience they may have in an average week.

We’re not really convinced someone is experiencing a jhana unless someone says it was as good or better than something they’d experience in a typical six months or longer. It’s *possible* people reporting it’s only as good as a typical week are in a jhana, so this may not be an antipattern. But we think it’s more likely they haven’t spent enough time to go deep or ramp up sensory clarity such that the experience overwhelms them.

In most cases, this works itself out with time—they spend more time in these states and continue to progress through the jhanas, and sensory clarity deepens, or they realize some limiting belief is holding them back. For a few people, they kept worrying whether or not they’d ever get into jhana. Once they let that concern go, they could sink much deeper into the experience at hand, resulting in a step-change in the magnitude of the experience.

Inability to cry

A subset of emotionally blocked people sometimes say things like “It’s generally very difficult for me to cry” or “I only cry a couple of times a year or less.” For these people, we first recommend deep physical and mental relaxation followed by lots of forgiveness meditation.

To be clear, you don’t need to cry to enter jhanas. But you do need sufficient emotional fluidity. As a faulty litmus test that we suggest you not take literally but perhaps use as a pointer: If you’re engaging with your emotions in such a way that, should this feeling grow dramatically, it would still be impossible for you to cry, you’re probably doing something wrong. You may not be attending to emotions, or not doing so openly enough, or simply blocked on emotions. It’s worth investing here before moving on.

In extreme cases, see [Working with pre-existing sadness, anxiety, judgment, or other emotional blocks](#).

Metaphysical beliefs about the jhanas

Every now and then, we meet a student with strong metaphysical beliefs. We don’t have opinions on metaphysics, and we have no interest in persuading them to change their views, but at times, this can prevent them from learning the jhanas.

If you have metaphysical beliefs about what the jhanas are, how they work, and how they should be used, be careful that they may prevent you from running important experiments, interpreting their results, or otherwise preventing you from entering into the jhanas.

External factors like sleep and sickness

Possibly, most students on retreat arrive sleep-deprived. The solution is simple: take the first two days and prioritize sleep! Meditating through high levels of drowsiness is not conducive to jhanas, so pay off any sleep debt as fast as you can. And if you're falling asleep in meditation, just lie down and take a nap! When you wake back up sometime later, use the post-nap afterglow to meditate without fear of drowsiness.

If you're still sleeping all the time on Day 3 or beyond, you've made a mistake in caring for yourself, or something else is going on.

It's possible to use sickness as a tool in meditation – you can learn a lot about your nervous system and how illness affects how you relate to things in your experience by default. But it's not easy; we recommend taking care of yourself and returning to meditate in a few days in full health rather than “powering through.”

Unusually difficult starting conditions

Working with pre-existing sadness, anxiety, judgment, or other emotional blocks

Some of our students are materially affected by life circumstances throughout the retreat. This may range from high levels of anxiety about something to sadness like heartbreak to maintaining judgmental mental habits of themselves or others (knowingly or unknowingly).

These conditions can cut either way, largely depending on the person's relationship to their experience. If your “heart has broken open” in which the grief feels like it might drown you, but it's tinged with compassion for yourself or someone else, it may accelerate jhana entry. If, on the other hand, it's creating a “closed” experience of anguish, despair, or depressive rumination, it will likely completely block progress.

It's easiest to imagine a heart-opening form of grief – we often intuit proximity between sadness and love – but the same remains true for every other negative emotion: anxiety, fear, exhaustion, etc. If it catalyzes a form of openness or compassion, you can play with jhanas. Otherwise, you'll want to work through your emotional challenges to unblock yourself.

The exception may be mentally criticizing yourself or others in some sort of “judgmental” way. This will only prevent and never support progress towards the jhanas. If you carry these habits, they'll be trailheads just like any other form of mental tension: opportunities to spot and release faster-than-thought internal violence and find ways to relax it as described in [Jhanas as critical thresholds of collectedness and release of mental tension](#).

If you can't get a warm feeling going using a kindness or gratitude practice or struggle to kindle it after ~8-10 hours

We most frequently suggest people grappling with these preconditions start with forgiveness meditation. <refer to retreat instructions or a teacher for more information>

If there appears to be little emotional movement after ~10 hours of forgiveness, you may consider other interventions, like psychedelic-assisted therapy, breath-work-assisted therapy, and somatic and/or parts-based modalities.

One jhana teacher we know believes jhanas are only accessible if a sufficient amount of emotional fluidity and “parts-alignment” (in reference to parts-based therapy like IFS) is in the system. If not, he recommends 5-9 hours of Core Transformation with a skilled guide. This may be frustrating at first because, like a knotted rope or a bunch of spaghetti code, a lot of upfront work will show little progress until, suddenly, things begin to untangle. In his experience, for most people, this will take 5-9 hours.

Inability to feel emotions in your body

We've had a couple of students report high levels of disembodiment, neither of whom were able to reach the jhanas on retreat. It's a little difficult to say if this was in part of self-limiting beliefs – they seemed to think they were not going to be able to feel things in the body either.

Either way, we understand disembodiment applies to a subset of the population. Questions like “Where do you feel joy?” or “How do you know you're experiencing gratitude?” apparently do not make sense to them. They just know, with little sense for physical sensations in the mind-body signaling the emotion.

We suggest working with a somatic therapist or someone related to restoring embodiment before investing substantial time in the jhanas.

Appendix: Understanding the jhana landscape

The jhanas are becoming more legible in two ways: growing awareness of the different types of jhanas and the rapidly growing practice of a certain kind of jhana.

First, meditation communities are beginning to recognize that jhana means different things to different people, especially in terms of absorption. Some jhana schools believe if you've had a thought in the last 3 hours, it doesn't count as a jhana. Others believe any layperson can learn these states relatively quickly, even while doing open-eyed walking meditation. These differences are often driven by which Buddhist texts (the suttas or the Visuddhimagga) are used as inspiration for understanding jhanas.

Recognizing that any discussion of jhanas contains latent assumptions about absorption is very clarifying. It means practice instructions and implications for when to use jhana vs. other meditation are highly context-dependent.

Second, with this distinction clarified, sutta-inspired, lay person-accessible jhana practice is flourishing. A number of teachers in the last decade or two appear to have independently started advocating for powerfully altered states of meditation accessible to lay people.

There are still many teachers and monastics not on my radar, but several of these teachers have started to garner more mainstream, lay-person meditation attention:

- Leigh Brasington and Ayya Kemma;
- Thanissaro Bhikku and Rob Burbea and their respective communities;
- "Pragmatic dharma" teachers like Michael Taft, Shinzen Young, Daniel Ingram, Kenneth Folk, Vince Horn, Rosa Lewis, John Yates, and others;
- The TWIM community was started by Bhante Vimilaramsi and recently made more famous by Delson Armstrong;
- Somewhat recently, Paul Dennison and the Shamatha Trust in the UK;
- Perhaps to a lesser extent: Bhante Gunaratana, Richard Shankman

These traditions have their own subtle differences, such as whether or not the jhana is open-aware and can contain other things like thoughts and external stimuli (e.g., TWIM is open-aware, and Brasington's jhanas are not). But they all differ from "deep jhanas" typically inspired by the Visuddhimagga. I'm less familiar with these, but I understand they require the use of visual phenomena behind closed eyelids, often involve the temporary loss of external perception, and require much more training. Teachers like Beth Upton, Tina Rasmussen, Steven Snyder, Shaila Catherine, and others trained in the tradition of Pa Auk Sayadaw have a much higher bar for jhana absorption. Some teachers, like Ajahn Brahm, may identify as sutta-inspired but still teach a much deeper level of absorption than the ones I listed above.

Why is lay-person accessible jhana practice growing now? Here's how more accessible jhana traditions might describe the history:

- The Buddha talked about jhanas regularly, encouraging everyone to use jhanas on their way to Enlightenment, which was recorded in the suttas

- Several hundred years passed, during which time religion was institutionalized, and the bar for jhana was raised. The Visudhimagga [implies that only one in a million people](#) can enter the first jhana.
- Later, a “take back religion for the people” movement occurred, and several new schools began teaching paths to Enlightenment without the use of these legendary altered states that were seemingly accessible only to monastics. This gave way to Mahasi Sayadaw’s “noting” methods and “dry insight” traditions like Goenka-style vipassana. It was these traditions that most influenced the founders of modern mindfulness in the West: Jack Kornfield, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Richie Davidson, and so on.
- Recently, sutta-inspired scholars and teachers have developed a following, claiming that these non-jhana traditions mostly criticize deep jhanas and that a (re)interpretation of the suttas is cause to teach much less absorbed but still significantly altered states.

The excitement around these teachings has led to “jhana twitter,” which appeals to a subset of [rationalists](#) and techies, and may be contributing to growing academic interest. Harvard just published a paper and has more studies underway. So too, does McGill.

Appendix: Traditions that have most influenced Jhourney

While sutta-inspired early Buddhist jhana traditions agree on the accessibility of jhanas for lay people, they still engage in nuanced debate about what defines a jhana, how to enter them, and what to use them for.

At Jhourney, we designed our teaching curriculum after interviewing over a hundred jhana meditators and studying with teachers and books mostly from three schools of thought:

- **Ayya Kemma & Leigh Brasington** – described in *Right Concentration*, these absorbed states are still states in which almost nothing else is in awareness except the jhanic factors. Leigh teaches the jhanas to prepare the mind for Insight practice; you must exit the jhanas to then do Insight.
- **TWIM, as taught originally by Bhante Vimilaramsi and a community of teachers, is currently becoming famous in part due to Delson Armstrong** – described in *Path to Nibbana*, jhanas are states that (a) are built by relaxing (as opposed to suppressing) distractions and (b) happen automatically in the background while using the brahmaviharas. They’re not defined by a degree of absorption, although TWIM students often sit for 3-5 hours and go long periods without distraction. TWIM believes the jhanas are insights in themselves because you cannot enter unless you’ve successfully navigated the relaxation of mental tension, which you do all the way to the stages of Enlightenment.
- **Thanissaro Bikku and Rob Burbea** – described in Rob Burbea’s retreat talks *Practicing the Jhanas* and Thanissaro Bikku’s book *With Each and Every Breath* (among others). These appear to fall between Brasington and TWIM approaches: you use the energy body to enter and investigate the jhana factors directly, but Insight can be found from and within them.

Others, such as the “Pragmatic Dharma” community (e.g., Kenneth Folk, Daniel Ingram, Vince Horn, Rosa Lewis, etc.), Richard Shankman, Paul Dennison, and Bhante Gunaratana, have their own interpretations and teachings on jhanas. While familiar with their work, we’ve taken much less inspiration from them in designing our instructions.