

Journey



Retreat
instructions

Jhourney Retreat Instructions

Version 6.0.3

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To seekers.

May they find what they seek.

May they treasure the journey.

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1. Core ideas and teaching philosophy

1. The real value of jhana practice is not the jhanas themselves; it's making it easier to be the person you aspire to be

- Most people hear about the jhanas as altered states—profound bliss or peace. That's true, but incomplete.
- The benefits begin even before reaching jhana.
 - Pre-jhana practice builds emotional openness and curiosity. You learn to welcome emotions you've avoided, relate to goals playfully rather than through striving, replace your inner critic with self-compassion, and develop agency through experimentation.
 - *"I haven't gotten into jhana yet, but this has already been life-changing."*
 - *"Rather than get hooked on bliss states, access to emotional safety led me to naturally allow a wider range of emotions than ever before."*
- While the jhanas create positive emotion, they transform the experience of every emotion. Dropping resistance to an emotion changes your experience entirely. You can imagine grief that feels light and openhearted—like crying in a loved one's arms about a loss, perfectly relaxed, treasuring the love with the grief. One saying goes, *"It hurts more, but bothers me less."*
- At intermediate levels, the jhanas can support a process called memory reconsolidation. By co-activating a visceral sense of safety/love and the charge of a challenging memory, meditators can reset emotional defaults that have shaped behaviors for years. This is one of the most valuable and neglected aspects of jhana practice, and a major reason experienced practitioners value the jhanas beyond the bliss.
- At advanced levels, practice supports shifts in day-to-day perception outside of meditation that can reduce suffering. We'll explore the full extent to which the jhanas can improve self-awareness, wellbeing, and agency throughout the week.

2. The striving trap is your first meditation object

- One of the most valuable things about jhana practice is that it presents a rare paradox: you can't crave a jhana and get into jhana.

- For many of us, goals are contracts to self-criticize until we succeed. You can think of jhanas as indicators that we've learned to spot and change this habit. This is a powerful life skill.
- Imagine a spectrum of relating to a goal from:
 - Desperation – “I need the jhana or I'm a failure or going to be doomed to sadness forever”
 - Obligation – “I should get to jhana. It will fulfill my word or reputation.”
 - Want – “I would really like this.”
 - Play – “This is going to be a blast, like playing my favorite sport or dancing to my favorite song when nobody is looking. I can't believe life installed trapdoors in my own nervous system, and I've got a full week to go on a scavenger hunt.”
- The same goal in each of these cases, with a different way of relating to them, will lead to wildly different experiences. The last one is much more likely to get into jhana than the first three. The first two may be impossible.
- Which raises the question: How might we shift our perspective in our inner world so that play is possible? That's a terrific line of inquiry. If you spend all your time pondering that question this week, you're likely to have a great time, and the takeaways will be invaluable, whether or not you experience jhana.

3. Distinguishing between object and relation

- Everything in experience has two parts: the object and how we relate to it. Two people can relate to the same rollercoaster ride completely differently—one terrified, one delighted.
- Jhana meditation is fundamentally about changing how we relate to sensations. When you allow sensations—relate with acceptance rather than resistance—they transform in surprising ways. When you allow rain on your head, it bugs you less. When you allow an emotion, pleasure naturally arises.
- **Allowing unlocks jhana.** Actively trying to make a sensation bigger is resisting it – one of the biggest beginner mistakes. The opposite is allowing – sinking in like slipping into a warm bath.
- We are here to become skilled at a particular kind of relaxation.
- **Always monitor your window of tolerance.** When you open to experience, notice whether it feels more connected or less connected. Too intense = hyperarousal; too numb or spacey = dissociation. Either is a signal to pause, widen attention, or change posture.

- Taking a break if we begin to experience hyperarousal or dissociation is part of mastery, not a regression. Like interval training: rest consolidates learning.

4. **Two wings of jhana: collectedness and conductivity**

- Relaxation is a skill. But if you've ever told someone to "just relax," you might notice that this instruction is not always helpful without elaboration. So let's elaborate.
- The skill of profound relaxation that creates jhana can be broken into two attentional sub-skills: collectedness and conductivity.
 - Collectedness - How absorbed you are in a single object (like being lost in music)
 - Conductivity – How much you accept vs resist your experience (like being unreservedly kind to yourself when distracted from music)
- If you're a system of many parts, collectedness is how aligned your parts are, and conductivity is how much they trust each other.
- When both are high, jhanas happen.

5. **Three core phrases**

- We often boil down all of jhana practice to one of three phrases, each pointing at the same idea:
 - *"Awareness and love all the way down."* At every level, jhana practice is loving awareness toward experience.
 - *"Recursive self-acceptance."* Trouble accepting an emotion? Accept the trouble. Resist acceptance? Accept that. Notice striving → accept striving → accept resistance to accepting striving → accept frustration with this process. You can laugh at the absurdity.
 - *"Spot and release mental tension."* Each layer of tension is conflict between parts of your system and an opportunity for greater release.
- If you're stuck, you either have an awareness problem (can't spot what's tense) or a love problem (can't embrace what you've spotted).

6. **Progress is about running *playful* experiments!**

- Meditation isn't about grinding or efforting. It's a process of discovery much closer to searching for buried treasure than lifting weights.
 - You already have everything you need within you.
 - We want to work smart, not hard.

- Making progress *requires* coming up with and running experiments.
 - Wondering how to relate to things differently? Try a bunch of different mental cues like “I’ll sink into this sensation,” “I’ll let myself coexist with this sensation,” “I’ll pretend I can look out *from the perspective of this sensation*.” Try more—invent your own. You experiment with outside things too: “What happens if I meditate after exercise?” “How about while I’m eating?” See how they all change your experience.
 - Are you finding yourself stuck? Don’t bang your head against the wall. Assume you’ve hit a dead end that you can maneuver around. Brainstorm possible solutions with “what if...” questions, like: “What if I cut my effort down by 10x?”, or “What if I increased my openness by 10x?”
- The point of experiments is twofold:
 - To learn and gather data (this makes success inevitable eventually)
 - To build self-knowledge and agency. At times, things will feel difficult. You will progress faster if you can see the difficulty as a leading indicator of self-discovery. The more challenging it feels, the more fun and exciting the opportunity! (As long as you don’t just bang your head against the wall, and remember to experiment.)
- Your best experiments cannot come from us. Given how unique our minds are, your intuition will often be a better guide than the instruction manual. Pay attention to when your intuition differs from what you think you’re “supposed to do”. Learning (when) to trust the part of you that says “I think I’m right and everyone else is wrong” can be liberating.
 - Deeply trusting yourself, especially once you’ve replaced self-criticism with self-compassion, is essential for making progress with meditation.

7. **Replace your inner critic with compassion, then surrender to your intuition**

- A corollary to “recursive self-acceptance” is that the jhanas may be seen as indicators of the extent to which we’re replacing *every single moment* of self-criticism.
- This week, experiment with rejecting internal violence. Instead, try making your inner voice gentle, loving, and light-hearted.
 - A child with blocks isn’t attached to building the perfect tower—they’re delighted by stacking, watching things fall, trying again. No deadline for completion. Just wonder at what happens next.
 - How would you speak to a child, or someone you loved? What if you spoke to yourself the same way?

- Is kindness more motivating for you than judgment? Is compassion more motivating for you than guilt? Find out!
- “Recursive self-acceptance” goes beyond replacing your inner critic. You must embrace all your “inner parts” —including ones you traditionally neglect.
 - Many people identify with analytical minds and ignore body signals, or vice versa. You don't need to rewrite your subconscious, but you do need to embrace everything at play in this moment. If you habitually ignore or suppress part of experience, this may take some experimenting.
- Eventually, this becomes about surrendering to intuition. Once you've replaced criticism with compassion and aligned your whole system, jhanas become a matter of surrender. Absorption happens when wonder, relaxation, and enjoyment converge on surrender.
- Two common ways we go wrong: beating ourselves up or going uncomfortably fast. Both are tempting when you want to get somewhere, but it turns out the tension in all three – beating ourselves, pushing ourselves too fast, and desperately trying to get somewhere – is exactly the teacher we’re looking for.

8. The game is played **across** the full range of emotions but **within** your Window of Tolerance

- Another corollary to “recursive self-acceptance” is that special progress is often found in learning to embrace challenging emotions.
 - We say “challenging” rather than “negative” because the difference between positive and negative experiences is how we relate to them.
 - With patience and self-discovery, we can learn to imbue any inner grief with compassion, like the image of two loved ones holding each other in priceless grief-love. The same can be done with fear, anger, or more.
 - Shinzen Young defines **suffering as pain x resistance**. Pain may be unavoidable (physical and emotional). But what happens to the experience when we reduce our resistance?¹
- This allows us to make a bit of a game out of experimenting with challenging emotions:
 - How might we imbue any challenging emotion with sufficient compassion to transform the experience? (If “compassionate” doesn’t do it for you, insert your favorite pointer word instead.)

¹ Paying attention to the moment discomfort dissolves into euphoria in cold showers is a favorite Jhourney experiment to practice reducing resistance.

- How might we build subconscious habits so that we do this for greater and greater amounts of sadness, grief, or love over time?
- The exception to embracing challenging emotions is when they risk taking us outside our optimal zone of learning and regulation (AKA Window of Tolerance)
 - Meditation is NOT a “no pain, no gain” sport – pain, physical or emotional, is not required for progress, and like injury, often indicates setback.
 - Staying within what is known as the Window of Tolerance (discussed in detail later) is always the top priority.
 - If you begin experiencing signs of significant hyper- or hypo-arousal, pause and re-center – resting consolidated learning, and different meditation moves are required.

9. Jhana practice is about sinking into the here and now

- You do NOT need to process all your emotional baggage. You just need to imbue with self-compassion anything that comes up in this moment so that you can fully sink into your meditation object.
- Remember: you already have everything you need within you. The jhanas are not something you achieve—they're something you allow.

Teaching philosophy

1. **Teaching skills, not experiences:** Our goal is NOT to teach students the jhanas—it's to teach students how to learn the jhanas themselves. We know that if students gain agency and self-discovery tools, it is only a matter of time before they enter the jhanas and beyond. To this end, we ask you to:
 - a. **“Run your own experiments”**
 - b. **“Jump in”.** At times, we'll ask you to take on advanced assignments without much preparation. In our experience, this kind of “learning by doing” leads to faster learning and better retention. Sometimes you'll discover you can move much faster than you expected. Sometimes you'll discover what's difficult for you, which will make it easier for us to guide you.
 - c. **Imitate.** In domains where good performance is visibly apparent, like tennis, we can imitate experts to learn faster. Tennis beginners can watch a pro and then immediately try it out for themselves, rather than discussing foot skills, hand grip, and swing. Unfortunately, it's much harder to “see” someone meditate into jhana because mental experience is private. But we can still try! At times, we will have experts lead a guided meditation as they move towards jhana, narrating their experience along the way. You will follow along. Sometimes this will be challenging. Other times it will be exhilarating. In all cases, it's not expected that you “serve like a pro,” so to speak. Imitation isn't about getting into jhana; it's about building intuition wherever you're at in your own journey. Hopefully it's fun too!
 - d. **Find ways to fall in love with the process.** We know that if you're not approaching the journey with play or falling in love with self-discovery, motivation is likely to wane. Nothing is more important. We hope to model our own playful relationships with meditation, and will check in regularly on how motivated and confident you're feeling.
 - e. **Embrace formative feedback** (e.g., “try this next”) rather than evaluative feedback (e.g., “that's a jhana!”). Rather than provide our own assessment about what state a student has reached, we usually prefer to teach students to steer to experiences so powerful that our judgement is not needed.
 - f. **Embrace a sense of challenge.** The first few days are intentionally busy, with lots of material, for a few reasons:
 - i. We believe in the power of *eustress*—the sense of purposeful challenge that drives learning. We want you to feel enough eustress to feel alive, to seize the adventure.
 - ii. We're here to meet people where they are. Some students are hungry for resources and some are not. We've had some students read 100 pages of

curriculum with detailed notes on the first night, while others skim just the minimum amount all retreat. All have had great experiences.

To make this work, we will strive to set clear expectations. When you *need* to read something, we'll be clear about this, and you can study more to the extent you find it helpful. When we're intentionally "jumping ahead" to material that hasn't been covered, we'll let you know. This teaching philosophy means that, **at times, you'll feel a little uncomfortable and perhaps uncertain whether you'll be able to keep up** or succeed at the requested exercise. That's healthy; research even suggests that a little discomfort accelerates learning.

What's NOT healthy is feeling confused about how to spend your time, demotivated, or unclear on what to do next. If that happens, please let a facilitator know immediately so we can create the best trajectory for you.

2. **Spiral curriculum:** We return to the same fundamental principles repeatedly, uncovering new layers of understanding each time. The principles that will lead you to jhana are counterintuitive to almost everyone who starts learning them. We hope repetition will help you set aside your default assumptions—like that meditation is about mental effort, or that you should resist certain emotions.
3. **Intent over wording:** Meditation is nonverbal by nature—words are only pointers. If you get caught up in *precisely* what we mean by a given phrase, you might be getting too attached to the words. We try to be specific and helpful with our language. But if the language isn't proving helpful, look for the intent behind the instructions, which might be more visible from the instructor's tone or body language, or might be clarified by the fundamental principles we will continue returning to.
4. **Learning from multiple perspectives:** Triangulating across different people's experiences (teachers, peers, past students) helps minimize the guesswork inherent to meditation.
 - a. For example, if you hear someone say that "curiosity" is important to them, you may make an assumption that the word denotes intellectual effort, which might cause you to engage in counterproductive mental tension. But upon hearing someone else describe a more embodied experience, you may realize a better pointer for you is "awe" and move away from more intellectual effort to more emotional surrender. By triangulating, you found your own best pointer.
 - b. We know that learning from peers can occasionally invoke a sense of "comparing mind," for example, "That person is already in jhana and I'm not, I'm bad at this!" We see that as an opportunity, not a problem. It's another chance to spot and release mental tension. Envy, fear of failure—these are all emotional experiences to be embraced and welcomed. There's nothing wrong if you experience them – every meditator has. If you believe it's negatively affecting your meditation, please share. We'll happily support you through it.

5. **We're in this together:** It turns out that, in many ways, meditation is not a solo activity. In addition to triangulating across multiple perspectives, meditating together and sharing our experiences (especially our struggles) can create a sense of togetherness. We want to feel like a team, and will periodically be investing in our sense of being a team throughout.

Section summary: ideas behind the technique

Core ideas:

- **The real value of jhana practice is not the jhanas themselves, but making it easier to be the person we aspire to be.** It's about seeing the positive intent behind our subconscious, discovering that joy lives inside us, and resetting emotional defaults.
- **Jhana meditation is not about effortfully intensifying positive sensations,** but changing how we relate to and shift our attention to things already in our experience.
- **Jhanas can be thought of as a feedback loop between attention and emotion,** like the opposite of a panic attack. The process involves collectedness (sinking into the experience as if nothing else exists) and conductivity (accepting experience instead of resisting it).
- **Jhana practice is a somatic and emotional dance, not an intellectual or physical analysis.** It's about losing oneself in the flow of embodied emotions.
- **Progress requires running playful experiments.** Assume you're making mistakes, then brainstorm solutions. The more challenging it feels, the more exciting the opportunity for self-discovery!
- **Jhana practice involves embracing the *full range* range of emotion** while staying inside our Window of Tolerance

Teaching philosophy:

- **Self-sufficiency:** we do NOT aspire to teach students the jhanas. We aspire to teach students how to learn the jhanas. Healthy discomfort is expected; confusion and demotivation are not. The ultimate goal is to fall in love with the learning process.
- **Spiral curriculum:** core ideas are revisited for deeper understanding.
- **Intent over wording:** focus on the intent behind instructions, not the exact words, using tone and body language for better understanding.
- **Learning from others:** triangulating from others' experiences, including your peers, can offer particularly rich learning.

2. Safety & regulation



Heads up

Meditation isn't about pushing through—it's about learning to stay connected. Every nervous system has an optimal range where learning, curiosity, and joy are easiest. This section helps you recognize when you're in that range and how to return to it when you're not.

This matters for two reasons

1. **It accelerates progress.** When you stay inside optimal range, the learning centers of your brain stay online: memory, emotional insight, and compassion all work better. Over- or under-arousal shuts those systems off. Rest and regulation are not detours from progress; they are the path of integration.
2. **If you miss this section, you may make mistakes later.** Practice instruction inside this range is effectively the opposite of instruction outside. So knowing whether you're inside or outside this range is *always the top priority*. The rest of the booklet assumes you know that this takes priority over everything else.

The Window of Tolerance

Your window of tolerance is the range in which you feel both safe and alive—alert enough to engage, relaxed enough to learn. When you drift outside it, experience becomes either too much (hyperarousal) or too little (dissociation / hypoarousal).

In some traditions, the solution to any challenge in meditation is believed to be more meditation, and taking breaks is believed to be less important than practice. Not so at Jhourney. Like an elite athlete treating rest and recovery with the same respect they treat their practice, we want to ensure our nervous systems are operating at their best, accelerate learning, and eliminate unnecessary risk of injury. “Powering through” is NOT good practice; it's careless.

Many students don't find themselves outside of their WoT all retreat. They still take breaks (including naps) to rest and consolidate learning. Other students will discover learning to navigate their WoT is an important (and very valuable) part of their retreat.

Think of your nervous system like a car dashboard:

- **Green light = Learning Zone:** calm, curious, playful, emotionally available.
- **Yellow light = Warning:** irritation, fatigue, numbness, over-focus, or shakiness.
- **Red light = Outside the Window:** panic, derealization, or shutdown.

When any light appears, don't ignore it—adjust. You're learning to drive the mind safely.

Your approach to navigating your WoT depends on whether you're experiencing hyperarousal or dissociation.

	Hyperarousal (Too Much Energy)	Dissociation / Hypoarousal (Too Little Energy)
Typical signs	Racing thoughts · tight chest · shaking · panic · over-intense focus · flashbacks · emotional volatility	Feeling numb · spaced-out · flat · foggy · frozen · emotionally blunted · time distortions · mind feels “blank”
Self-check	“Am I feeling <i>too much</i> right now?”	“Do I feel <i>disconnected or far away</i> right now?”
Corrective action	“Tap the brakes”: • Shorter meditations • Use a wider, looser aperture of attention, especially <i>outside</i> the body • Open your eyes / move them around • Use titration with intense emotions (e.g., 90% focus on a safe resource, 10% on the difficult sensation) Whenever you tap the brakes or apply gas, let the staff know soon. Movement outside the WoT changes how we can best support you.	“Apply gas”: • Increase social connection • Increase movement • Shift focus, especially <i>outside</i> the body, to a safe or neutral experience • Increase conceptual thought (concepts, language)

Dissociation can arrive by **two different roads**:

- The **high road** begins in hyperarousal—when stress becomes so overwhelming that the system abruptly “shuts down,” like blowing a fuse.
- The **low road** begins in subtle suppression—when stillness deepens like a refuge built from avoidance, and awareness quietly slips away into detachment.

Perhaps the most commonly confused signal around the WoT in meditation is distinguishing between dissociation and calmness. Both can feel deceptively peaceful or “deep,” but **dissociation reduces connection whereas calm (AKA “peaceful abiding”) increases it.**²

There’s nothing inherently wrong with dissociation. In fact, it’s a brilliant system. Much the same way a fuse serves an essential purpose electrical systems, dissociation is the nervous system’s way of protecting us from overwhelm. Advanced meditators subtly dissociate all the time. The game is learning to spot when it’s happening, and navigate it intentionally.

At Jhourney, mastery isn’t staying perfectly calm—it’s learning how to notice, adjust, and return. Each time you self-regulate, you strengthen the neural pathways that make insight, joy, and resilience effortless. Incorporating the WoT into meditation builds nervous system capacity over time.

Safety & choice guidelines for the retreat

With the concept of the WoT established, we ask everyone commit to a three safety and choice guidelines:

- 1. You’re always in charge of your own experience**
 - a. You can pause, move, opt out of any session, exercise, or practice at any time.
 - b. You can modify posture (sit, lie down, stand, or walk) whenever your body asks
- 2. Always stay within your window of tolerance**
 - a. If any instruction seems like it’s going to take you outside of your WoT, ignore it
 - b. Notice your indicator lights:
 - i.  Hyperarousal = racing heart, panic, restlessness.

² Subtly confusing dissociation for peace or calmness seems most common among two types of people: those who believe ignoring their emotions is important to function effectively, and long-time meditators from “non-emotional” traditions. These include those that focus purely on the breath or physical sensations in the body, or traditions with very little coaching and practice instruction where “do nothing” or “be equanimous” can inadvertently lead to dissociative or numbing habits. If either of these apply to you, you may want to treat the discovery of the difference between accepting and disconnecting from an emotion as an especially exciting mystery!

- ii. ❄️ Dissociation = numb, spacey, disconnected.
 - c. When these show up, apply brakes or gas (see table above): move, breathe, open eyes, or ground in a sensory anchor.
 - d. Interpret any instruction as assuming you're comfortably within your WoT – guidance like “fully embracing challenging emotions” should be reversed if it's going to take you into hyper-arousal or hypo-arousal
 - e. Regulation is not losing progress—it is the practice.
- 3. Keep your facilitator informed**
- a. If you feel persistently anxious, disconnected, or unsure what's happening, tell a facilitator. You'll never be judged or analyzed; we'll simply help you regulate or adjust practice.
 - b. If you do modify your practice, skip a session, or find yourself outside your Window of Tolerance please make sure your facilitator knows.³

Normalizing intense or unusual experiences

Intense or unusual experiences are common on retreat — vivid energy, tingling, shaking, crying, lightness, or shifts in how you sense your body or self. These aren't signs of success or failure, pathology or enlightenment; they're simply ways the nervous system adapts and releases tension. Treat them as data points: pause, ground, and note whether you feel *more connected or less connected*. The goal is always connection.

³ We've had some unfortunate cases of people taking care of themselves but not letting the facilitation team know. This led to later misunderstandings and mistakes. If you have recently been outside your WoT and your facilitator doesn't know, they're likely to give instructions designed for inside your WoT, which may be unhelpful. Make sure to keep your facilitator informed if you miss a group session, don't complete a reading, or have been outside your WoT since you saw them last.

3. Meditation technique at-a-glance

Dancing is a good analogy for meditation. In both, you start with very simple steps that, with time, reveal layers of depth and nuance, all of which can become second nature when you slip into flow states.

This section outlines the core meditation technique. We list the essentials first, followed by details designed to help you avoid mistakes and focus on the right things.

But the details aren't always that important to focus on. Performance comes from flow towards simple goals: great tennis players know that the thing that really matters is returning the volley, the technique is all in service of that one simple thing. If you find yourself losing the forest for the trees, getting caught up in thinking about mechanics, you can always come back to this section and the [Core ideas](#).

Objective

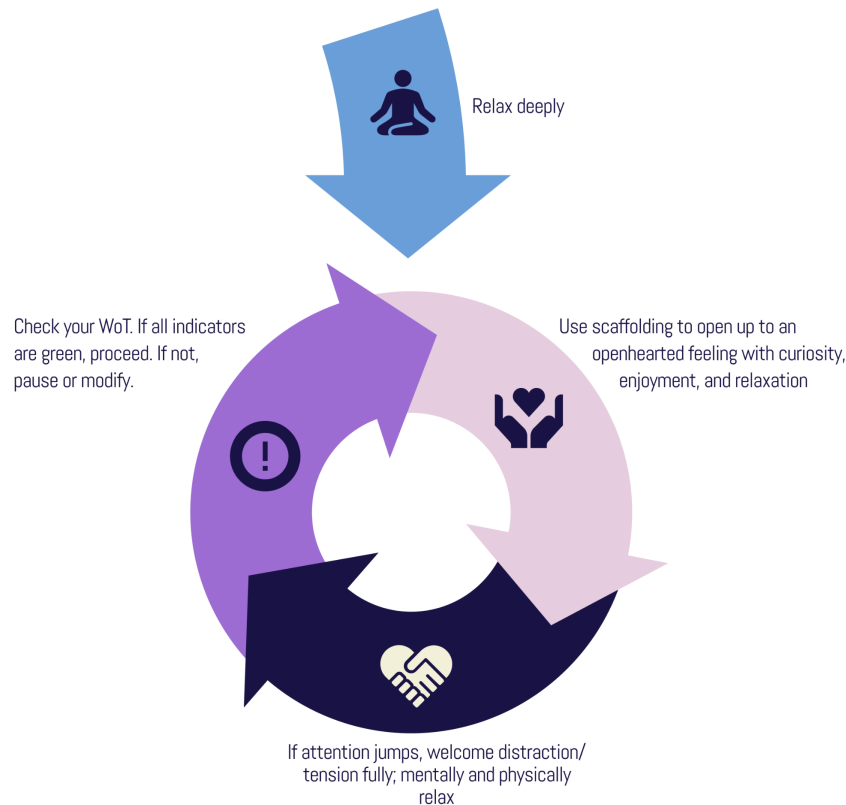
1. Find an openhearted feeling.
2. Gently maintain your attention on this openhearted feeling, relating to it gently and openly, so that it grows naturally.

Technique at-a-glance

The basic technique has a few simple steps:

1. Relax as deeply as you can.
2. Find a mild, openhearted feeling by using a smile, a happy memory, or a phrase like "May you be happy."
3. Gently rest your attention on the feeling, and periodically refresh the feeling every 5-30 seconds, using the same technique you used to start it in the first place.
4. Gradually relate to the feeling with more curiosity, relaxation, and enjoyment. As a sit progresses, your capacity to do this will often deepen.
5. Welcome distractions when they happen. Relax any associated mental tension, physically relax, and gently return to the openhearted feeling.⁴

⁴ If a distraction arises three or more times, look for the emotion underneath, attempt to imbue it with compassion, then physically relax, and return to the openhearted feeling. Sometimes, challenging emotions arise that require us to make them the object of meditation. We'll discuss techniques for doing so later, but our end goal is to always eventually return to the openhearted feeling.



You know you're doing this effectively when you find your meditations leave you:

- More relaxed
- In a better mood (even if the sits contain difficult emotions)
- Softer, more open, more curious, and more empathic

It only takes a few hours for the basic technique to become second nature. The bulk of practice is following your intuition to open up in three ways:

- Relaxation—How might I relax into this even more?
- Enjoyment—How might I enjoy this even more?
- Curiosity—How might I get more curious about this, let it fill me with more awe or wonder, or even overwhelm me?

With time, you'll notice this leads you to more effortlessness:

- “Collectedness” - clarity, sensitivity, continuous, and stable attention—it may begin to feel as if, for moments in time, nothing else exists but the object of attention
- “Conductivity” - easy receptivity to the world around you, easy acceptance of any thoughts or emotions that come up

We find that most meditators progress through a similar set of stages:

- Initial exploration and reliably finding a positive feeling: Meditators get used to the basic technique, and run experiments to personalize it—e.g., finding phrases and memories that effectively conjure an openhearted feeling. They're mostly changing what they put their attention on.
- Reliably producing a fun and restorative sit: Meditators begin using the basic technique to have consistently fun and restorative sits. Focus shifts to opening up to or "sinking into" the feeling via enjoyment, relaxation, and curiosity. It becomes easy and enjoyable to sit past 30 minutes. They're now mostly changing *how they relate* to their meditation object.
- Consistently entering states of flow: Meditators begin to recognize that how they relate to experience is a skill, and that allows them to begin working on becoming a virtuoso. Meditating becomes like dancing or playing music, and they increasingly enter states of flow. They discover how to move towards jhana from different starting techniques, maintain a sense of momentum between sits, and begin to apply some of their discoveries in meditation off-the-cushion. They're often pulled into sits longer than 60 minutes.

At some point, everyone has to truly learn "recursive self-acceptance"

- As discussed above, "recursive self-acceptance" involves (1) replacing our inner critic with self-compassion, (2) discovering parts of ourselves (somatic, affective, etc.) we habitually ignore, (3) embracing the full spectrum of emotions, and (4) surrendering to intuition.
- Some meditators struggle with self-criticism or challenging emotions right out of the gate, hardly getting scaffolding working. Others discover subtle analysis about whether or not they're in jhana prevents them from slipping into a flow state. One of the great qualities about the jhanas is they serve as forcing functions for this much richer journey.

Always remember:

- "It's awareness and love all the way down." Meditation is a game of spotting and releasing (AKA embracing, loving) mental tension.
- Reflect like a scientist, play like a child!

That's it! That's an at-a-glance preview of the basic technique. Soon we'll provide more detailed instructions on each step. As we go, you will have time to tease apart the nuances.

For now, we suggest jumping straight into "learning by doing"—try the technique out for yourself, and make note of what seems natural and what does not.



MP3: The track accompanying this section is titled "Basic technique demo."

4. The value of imitation

As mentioned in the *Core ideas and teaching philosophy*, we offer opportunities to imitate a teacher as they narrate their experience live while meditating towards and into jhana.

Imitating an expert can accelerate learning meditation, just as watching and attempting to imitate a tennis pro returning a volley is a much faster way to learn tennis than reading or discussing the mechanics of the technique.

However, the point is not to achieve expert status immediately. It's not valuable for the beginner to get frustrated with themselves when they don't imitate an experienced meditator perfectly.

Timothy Gallwey tells a brief story, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, that captures both how valuable it is to learn by imitation and how important it is to avoid self-criticism. Here's an edited version for brevity:

The most common complaint of sportsmen is, "It's not that I don't know what to do, it's that I don't do what I know!"...

Imagine what goes on inside the head of an eager student taking a lesson from an equally eager new tennis pro. The pro carefully evaluates every shot: "That's good, but you're rolling your racket face over... Now shift your weight onto your front foot... Your backswing should be lower..."

Before long, the student's mind is churning with six thoughts about what to do and sixteen thoughts about what not to do. Both are impressed by the careful analysis, but improvement seems dubious and complex.

I once taught a beginner named Paul. Instead of my usual detailed instructions, I simply hit ten forehands and asked him to observe without thinking—just grasp a visual image and let his body imitate. After watching, Paul took the racket, dropped the ball, and executed a nearly perfect stroke on his first attempt! The only element he consciously tried to remember—moving his feet—was the one thing he didn't do. Everything else was absorbed and reproduced without a word being uttered.

I learned what all good tennis teachers discover: images are better than words, showing is better than telling, and consciously trying often produces negative results.

Throughout the retreat, we'll give you lots of instructions and descriptions. But **our hope is that all of this—this entire booklet—is secondary to the imitation and experimentation you'll give yourself permission to do without self-criticism.**

Before and after the experience, reflect on what surprised you about the differences between your instincts and the expert's approach. These surprises are potent illustrations of how the expert sees meditation differently. Simply noticing these surprises will help your subconscious begin to integrate the expert view.

Some gentle reminders for longer meditation sessions:

- If you're uncomfortable, feel free to move slowly and mindfully
- When your mind wanders (and it will!)
 - Welcome those thoughts back like old friends joining you in meditation
 - Take a moment to relax your body, perhaps even laugh at yourself, and celebrate the self-discovery

5. Basic technique in detail

Heads up!

This section is detailed and contains counterintuitive ideas that you won't fully internalize in one reading. You'll return to it repeatedly as you practice.

Suggested approach:

1. Read once quickly to get oriented, noting what surprises you
2. Try meditating with what you understand
3. Return to this section with specific questions
4. Repeat the cycle of practice → reflection → targeted reading

Think of it like **consulting a map while hiking**—don't sweat most of the details or try to memorize the full map. Instead, briefly orient yourself to the various sections, continue your journey, and refer back when needed.

Accompanying quiz

We include a quiz for this section. There's no grade. It's just a convenient checklist of misunderstandings we've seen students have in the past.

As outlined in the [Technique at-a-glance](#), the core technique consists of relaxing to start, using scaffolding to spark an openhearted feeling; deepening into the feeling with curiosity, relaxation, and enjoyment; and welcoming distractions. This section provides practical guidance on executing these steps effectively.

Working with scaffolding

Recall that the second step is to use "scaffolding" to create a slight openhearted feeling. Here are your scaffolding options:

- Smile
- Positive memories
- Emotional visualization
- Phrases
- Embodied memory

Important: The bulk of your attention is NOT on the scaffolding—it's on the openhearted feeling generated by the scaffolding. The openhearted feeling is the object of meditation; the scaffolding is just used to find it.

The openhearted feeling can be: joy, delight, gladness, (emotional) warmth, love, compassion, gratitude, appreciation, tenderness, softness, wonder, or friendliness.

We know emotions by the sensations they produce in the body. (If this isn't clear to you, try asking yourself: how do you know what you're feeling?) Attending to an emotion includes attending to the specific physical sensations in the body associated with that emotion.

You'll experiment with finding the right scaffolding for you in the dedicated [Scaffolding](#) section.

Understanding "pulsing"

Once you've found the openhearted feeling using scaffolding, gently rest attention on it and periodically "pulse" the feeling every 5-30 seconds using your scaffolding.

How to pulse depends on the nature of your scaffolding:

- Phrases and wishes are pulsed by simply repeating them
- Pulse a smile by momentarily looking for the most intensely pleasant feeling about it
- Pulse a memory by replaying the most intensely emotional moment or feeling directly

After each pulse, observe the feeling for several seconds. If it fades out, pulse the feeling with the scaffolding again.

Key principles for effective pulsing:

- Don't pulse quickly and effortfully to try to stack good feelings on top of each other. Instead, pulse only every 5-30 seconds and do so as gently as possible.
- Look for ways to let yourself be overwhelmed by whatever good feeling does arise. You'll learn much more by exploring how to relate with curiosity, awe/wonder, and surrender to a small feeling than forcing a big one.
- **Don't cling to the feeling as it fades.** See its fading as relaxation arising. Like swimming—each stroke is followed by gliding through the water. Enjoy both the pulse and the glide equally.
- Don't stop using the scaffolding too early. It's best to stop only when the scaffolding is clearly pulling you away from sinking into the feeling.

Welcoming distractions

You will suddenly discover your attention has wandered. **This is normal, even for advanced meditators.**

Mind-wandering isn't a distraction—it's an opportunity to bring another part of yourself into the meditation. Every mind-wandering signals a subtly resisted tension calling for attention. **The only true "distraction" is relating to it with suppression or rejection.**

To do this effectively, follow these steps:

1. **Briefly extend gratitude** to whatever the underlying emotion is trying to do for you (e.g., boredom keeps your attention on important things; fear draws attention to that which could be painful; anger alerts you to a perceived injustice; sadness draws attention to loss outside of your control, etc.)
2. **Look for and release any mental and physical tension** associated with the mind-wandering
3. **Return to the meditation object**

In the beginning, it may take you a few seconds to extend gratitude to the underlying emotion and do a quick relaxation of the body and mind. With time, this will speed up to well under a second. It will become second nature.

Don't just take the opportunity to mentally relax after a distraction—find something to physically relax as well. Mental and physical tension are intertwined. It's common to find physical tension associated with even the most abstract mental abstractions. But don't worry about finding a particular physical tension associated with the distraction—just relax something in the body and move on. Being opportunistic with every "wake-up" moment to do so will make your meditations increasingly easy, enjoyable, and open.

If you experience frustration, it may be useful to be recursively self-compassionate:

- Frustration signals you're resisting something in your experience
- Frustration often stacks: frustrated about pain, then frustrated about frustration, and so on
- If you can't embrace any particular emotion, embrace your resistance to it, or keep moving up the stack
- Once you embrace one layer with compassion, your capacity often grows. Move back down the stack. You may surprise yourself by embracing the initial source as if comforting a small child

With practice, this can transform the common (mis)perception that frustrations or mind wanderings are setbacks: the more resistance you face, the greater your potential for compassion becomes.

When challenging emotions arise that prevent us from sinking further into the openhearted feeling, we may turn to address them directly. That is the focus of later sections, but in the basic technique, **our end goal is to always return to the openhearted feeling.**

Common mistakes to avoid

 **Heads up!** Beginners often make mistakes using this technique. We see the same mistakes over and over again. The following mistakes account for most difficulties beginners experience.

Scrutinize this list carefully. Look for mistakes you likely would have made. If you find anything that is surprising, pause as long as you need to reflect and internalize the surprise.

1. Over-efforting

It's a mistake to apply an ounce more effort than necessary. This is so common that every jhana meditator has to learn this lesson, often many times.

At some level, meditating into the jhanas is about letting yourself come home for the first time in a while. Enjoyment, curiosity, and relaxation are more about not-doing than doing. It's rare to under-effort and easier to correct than over-effort, so **get in the habit of asking yourself early how you might be gentler!** "Pulsing," for example, isn't about "spamming a button"—it's about finding the most essential part of an experience, or the subtlest cause-and-effect dynamic between attention and emotion, and playfully sinking into it.

A closely related mistake is thinking the jhanas require “concentration,” as in narrow, exclusive, effortful attention to a small part of experience.

We want to avoid effort, establish acceptance between all parts of ourselves, and relax our way into a state of stable attention. For this type of meditation, highly focused, one-pointed concentration is often counterproductive.

You want an open, receptive awareness over highly focused, one-pointed concentration.

Regularly ask yourself: *How might I do this with half as much effort? How could I be more gentle?*

2. Focusing purely on physical sensations while excluding emotions

It's a mistake to focus purely on physical sensations while excluding emotions. This is an emotional meditation that is inclusive of physical sensations (we know our emotions by their physical sensations).

Some students treat this like a body scan meditation, carefully noting physical sensations without connecting to the emotional quality. The openhearted feeling is fundamentally emotional—joy, warmth, love, compassion, gratitude.

3. Starting with intense emotions

It's a mistake to search for an extremely intense emotion to begin with. We're learning to relate to even the smallest emotions with a sense of curiosity, awe, and wonder. **We gradually learn to be overwhelmed by how we relate to the feeling, not by the feeling itself becoming overwhelming.**

4. Suppressing negative emotions

It's a mistake to suppress or avoid negative emotions as you sink into positive emotions. We are welcoming all emotions as we go, using them as opportunities to recursively accept and extend gratitude to ourselves, and relax related mental and physical tension we may have previously been unaware of. Let sadness open your heart, let fear about the future be felt as a loving sadness right now—see if any challenging emotion can move you with compassion.

A subtle form of suppression: using "relaxation" to escape

Almost everyone goes through a phase where they try to relax *in hopes of* making negative experiences disappear. This is particularly tricky because it *sometimes seems like it works*—a difficult emotion fades and you think you've done something right. But you've just temporarily suppressed it.

The issue is that *relaxation can only drop intentional control of attention*—the pushing, pulling, and resistance that interferes with experience. It can't make things go away. As meditation teacher Shinzen Young puts it: "If you can't drop it, it's not an intention." If you're "relaxing" but the unpleasant thing won't leave, there's still tension in the system—you're not relaxing, you're running away.

The test: Are you relaxing *into* the experience (welcoming it) or relaxing *away from* it (hoping it disappears)?

When working with challenging emotions, periodically ask: *What would allow me to genuinely be curious about this experience?* The question might feel absurd—that's fine. It's an invitation to relate differently, not to force curiosity.



WoT reminders:

- It's a mistake to mistake numbness or emotional blunting for calm. Calm feels connected and relational. Dissociation feels absent, cut off, or unreal. If you feel blank, move, open your eyes, or widen attention.
- It's a mistake to go outside your Window of Tolerance. If a distraction feels charged or agitating, widen focus and ground in sound or touch. If you feel blank, floaty, or spacey, move your body, open your eyes, or talk with a facilitator.

5. Treating this as a cognitive exercise

It's a mistake to think of this as a cognitive exercise, instead of an embodied, intuitive, and emotional exercise.

Meditation is played at a nonverbal, emotional, and somatic level. Think of an expert meditator like a dancer intuiting the next movement, or an athlete slipping into a flow. It's not like doing multiplication in your head or playing chess blindfolded.

6. Assuming you know how to relax, open up, or bask

It's a mistake to assume you know how to relax, how to fall into a sense of open wonder, or how to bask enjoyably in an experience. Each of these skills can be practiced to virtuoso levels.

When novices assume they know what the words "curiosity, enjoyment, and relaxation" mean, they curb their own learning. Often it's subconscious—we're just less interested in things we believe we already understand. Far better to assume these are entirely new skills, like a true novice learning to play tennis, than to assume you know how to "serve the ball" and so never learn good technique.

Deepening practice with enjoyment, curiosity, and relaxation

Once you've gotten comfortable with the basic technique, your practice develops by following three pathways:

Cultivating relaxation—*At any given moment, how might I relax into this even more?*

In a sense, all jhana practice is about discovering how to relax in a particular way—not in the way that puts us asleep, but in a way that affords a deep letting go, the relief of humility, or a falling back to intuition instead of analysis or willpower. It's a great coming home.

We're practicing open aware, loving jhanas—with a mind effortlessly wide open, embracing every aspect of experience, we're gently slipping into an openhearted feeling like slipping into a hot tub.

It's easy for the opposite of relaxation to creep up on us—clamping down into a narrow, forceful concentration, or bracing against parts of our experience. You may want to periodically ask what tension is most prominent in your experience and how you can relax further as you go.

A common obstacle to relaxation is effort. We find most students start by putting too much effort into the experience. We will repeat this over and over again because it is hard to overemphasize.

Mental and physical tension are intertwined. Physically relaxing will make you more mentally relaxed.

Questions to guide experiments:

- How might I reduce my effort by 10%? By 10x?
- What in my experience feels contracted, tense, or heavy—in my body? In how I'm holding intentions?
- How might I soften, open, or lighten in ways I've not considered before?

Cultivating enjoyment—*At any given moment, how might I enjoy this even more?*

Critically, this pathway is about how we relate to experience, not what is arising in experience. It's about enjoyment (which is the process), not joy (which is a typical product of enjoyment).

Joy arises as you enjoy experience. And joy is easy to enjoy, creating a positive cycle.

You can learn to genuinely enjoy almost anything (e.g., imagine a bodybuilder who loves the pain of training). This creates a choice: at any given moment, you can turn towards things that are easy to enjoy, or see if you can more deeply enjoy whatever is in your experience. By default, many of us spend our days doing a lot of the first and very little of the second. Jhana meditation is about doing the first sparingly (e.g., perhaps to adjust your posture) and doing much more of the second.

Some students may find terms such as "basking," "savoring," or "wholeheartedly appreciating" to be better pointers than "enjoying." They might help remind you that enjoyment is about how you relate to something, not whether or not something is easily pleasurable.

Questions to guide experiments:

- Where in my body is the openhearted feeling most intense? What if nothing else existed?
- How might I relate to this experience with more love, acceptance, compassion, appreciation?
- Assuming I'm doing something that may be curbing my enjoyment, what might it be?

Cultivating curiosity (AKA awe/wonder)—*At any given moment, how might I get even more curious about this, let it fill me with more awe or wonder, or even overwhelm me?*

This pathway is not about breaking something into parts with intellectual curiosity, like you might while trying to analyze the fall of the Roman Empire. It's experiential curiosity – the act of coming to experience afresh, with less expectation, evaluation, and resistance – while opening yourself up to awe and wonder.

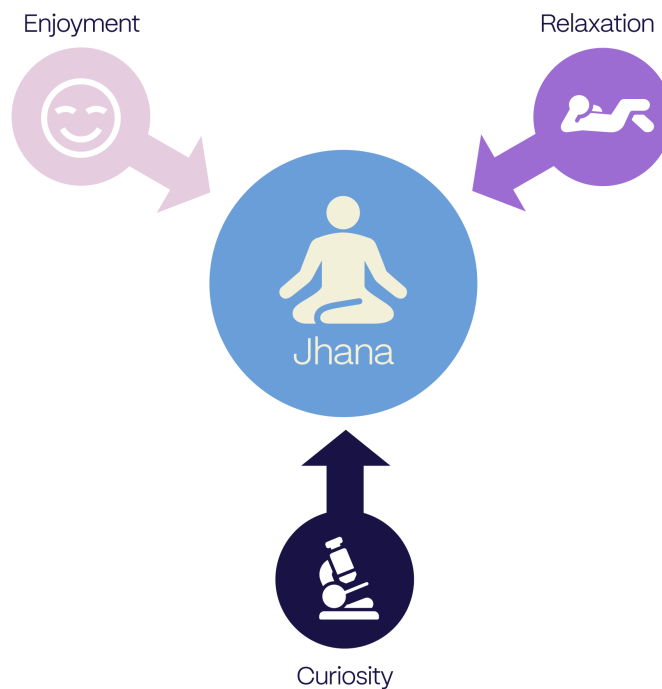
It's the mental shift that two lovers make when they stop arguing and turn to embrace each other, or that an intellectual makes when opening up to the possibility of changing their mind. It's the mental move you make while out in nature, where you take in a beautiful vista with your whole being—you are snapped out of mundanity and bowled over by awe.

Curiosity and opening up are often a virtuous cycle. Curiosity makes it easier to "experiment" and learn from every sit: we'll spot connections and inspiration we would have otherwise missed, and run subtler experiments.

Curiosity and openness don't require effort, or require you to be aware of every precise detail of experience—often, curiosity starts by opening yourself to a general sense of how you are feeling.

Questions to guide experiments:

- What would it feel like to turn off expectations, predictions, or evaluations?
- What subtle parts of my experience might I be missing?
- How might I become more moved with awe, wonder, or curiosity right now?
- How might I become more vulnerable? More intimate? More susceptible to emotion?



The pathways are not separate. All three feed into each other. At any given moment, you may use one to magnify the others. Follow whichever calls to you in the moment.

What progress looks like

💡 Counterintuitive callout: progress is not linear, and not a function of effort

Beginners often misinterpret signs of progress and then change their practice in unhelpful ways. Understanding this can prevent you from doubling-down on mistakes or giving up too early.

Progress is not linear and not a function of effort. The dynamics that govern progress are counterintuitive to many novices:

- **Meditation isn't like weightlifting** (effortful repetition until you're stronger). **It's like searching for buried treasure**—through trial and error, reflection, and self-discovery, you make non-linear progress until suddenly you find yourself in new experiences.
- **Less effort often yields better results.** Over-efforting is such a common mistake that, regardless of how much effort you think you're applying, it's worth regularly asking yourself how you could playfully still do the meditation with half as much effort.

- **Playfulness accelerates progress.** Any ideas or discoveries about how to slip into effortless play or flow are especially promising. If you're not having fun, ask: what would make it more fun?
- **Focus on the process over outcome.** While jhanas will come in time, the greater value may be developing the life skill of relating to all experiences with openness and compassion.

Over time, your openhearted feeling will grow through a few milestones:

- At first, you may struggle to find it.
- Then the feeling will arise, subtle and slow, and fade after each pulse.
- Then it will remain stable.
- Then it will begin to grow with each use of scaffolding.
- Then you can pulse the feeling directly without scaffolding.
- At some point, there will be a phase change, and it may feel like the feeling is pulling you in—like the transition from starting a flame to letting it grow into a bonfire. You will begin to feel as if you want to sink into or surrender to it, rather than actively cultivate it. At this point, you are near or in a jhana.



WoT Reminder: Titration & Resourcing

Meditation is learned inside your window of tolerance—not by pushing past it.

Titration means touching the edge of challenge in small doses, then returning to safety and enjoyment. Like alternating between gas and brakes:

- Brakes: Soften focus, open your eyes, move your body, feel your feet, or take a short walk.
- Gas: Once grounded, gently re-engage curiosity or pleasure.

Each oscillation strengthens capacity and trust. Learning to sense when to brake or accelerate is the nervous system's version of skillful means.

Remember: Progress comes from integration, not intensity.

Those are the essential elements of the basic technique. Make sure you understand them clearly before proceeding, and refer back to this frequently. The appendices provide additional depth for when you encounter specific questions.

6. Posture

Is there a 'right' posture for meditation?

- **No!** The purpose of meditation posture on this retreat is to provide you with a way of being comfortable for an extended period of time. We don't want posture to be at the top of your mind during your sits.
- It is worth experimenting with various ways of sitting and lying down.

Sitting

- There are many ways you can try sitting, depending on your comfort, flexibility, and preference.
- Below are a few examples for inspiration.



Full Lotus

Half Lotus

Burmese



On a stool

Seiza

On a Chair

Laying down

- Many people are worried about falling asleep when lying down.
- The short answer is **let yourself**. It can be helpful to not treat falling asleep as a failure, but just as an opportunity to experiment. Often, the liminal states between sleeping and waking, experienced mindfully, can provide a novice meditator with helpful glimpses of what it really feels like to relax.
- You can try a few tricks outlined in the recording or come up with your own!



The track accompanying this section is titled “Posture.”



WoT Reminder: Moving is Okay

Often in meditation we assume we need to sit still. Stillness can be helpful to allow the mind to settle on subtler experience. And moving constantly unmindfully in response to distractions may rob us of the opportunity to play the game.

But you can learn the jhanas via walking meditation, and you certainly don't need to be perfectly immobile. To get the best of both worlds, some students enjoy moving slowly and intentionally, such as after two more breaths.

This is especially important to remember if you find yourself approaching hyperarousal or dissociation (the edges of your Window of Tolerance). You can always move or open your eyes. Movement is a safety valve for your nervous system, not a failure of discipline.

7. [Optional] Sample student arc through retreat



Speedup notice: skippable or skimmable

This section is useful for getting a sense of what it looks like when students adopt a high-agency “run your own experiment” mentality. It’s not as necessary as other sections.

Below is a summarized and adapted arc of a student’s experience throughout the retreat. Read this to help imagine how you might shape your own experience, and begin to anticipate the ups and downs of the process.

We think this sample arc does a good job of illustrating a few things:

- *A highly agentic, experimentation-first approach: from Day 1, this student was engaging with their facilitator to make breakthroughs. They were self-sufficient and also asked for help.*
- *They hit lots of challenges, from back pain to grief and fear, and found novel ways to lean into self-compassion every time.*
- *Their progress was non-linear—they started off with a solemn relationship to meditation, made a few adjustments, and tasted jhana in the first few days before stagnating. Days 4 and 5 were punctuated with sits in jhana, but had large stretches of monotony and frustration. They discovered on Day 6 that a sense of expectations and “should” language had crept back into their experience—entering J3 in some ways was learning the lesson of spotting and surrendering mental tension all over again that had allowed for entering J1 and J2. “Awareness and love all the way down” is easier said than done.*

Day 1

Challenges

I’ve struggled to make meditation playful, feeling it’s become overly solemn. I sometimes feel like I’ve forgotten how to have fun and find myself bouncing between joyful memories, only to lose their impact over time. Physical challenges like back pain while sitting and drowsiness when lying down add to the difficulty.

Experiments

After discussing with my facilitator, I tried “embracing fading”—focusing on joy and sensations without adding stories or expectations, and savoring the fading of each feeling as a form of relaxation. This helped, though I still felt some tension from hoping the feelings would last. At some point, I realized that I was “trying to be good at the techniques,” rather than “trying to sample techniques with curiosity about how they could affect my experience,” and I tried to move to the latter mentality, which was helpful. An exercise of trying to adopt a subtle smile sparked feelings of mischievousness, which grew into joy.

Best Sit

In one sit, I discovered a gentler, more relaxed way of pulsing joy, which created a more stable feeling of joy. I also started to sense that “wonder” might be what the facilitators mean by “curiosity.”

Moving Forward

Tomorrow, I’ll try gentle, sustained pulsing over longer periods to see if joy can deepen and stabilize further.

Day 2

Challenges

I felt distracted and drowsy throughout practice, bouncing between techniques and feeling drawn away by thoughts of someone I’m dating. I also noticed an inner coaching voice adding subtle pressure.

Experiments

I approached distractions and my inner coach with “nonverbal friendliness,” letting thoughts fade naturally rather than trying to stop or chase them. In a longer sit, I surrendered completely to drowsiness and found a calm, relaxed love emerging. Practicing 70 minutes of NSDR (Non-Sleep Deep Rest) allowed me to truly welcome distractions, letting them release without effort. I also explored new postures to balance relaxation and alertness.

Best Sit

A 60-minute sit led me into gentle joy. I centered on my gut’s warmth, held awareness of nature sounds and visuals, and noticed that relaxation itself could fade into a peaceful joy. I have intuition now for the direction of J2.

Moving Forward

I'll keep working on relaxing into distractions and letting intuition guide technique changes based on what feels natural.

Day 3

Challenges

Today, I encountered grief, fear, and boredom, which were intense at times. Back pain during walking meditation added frustration, as I'd hoped for a jhanic experience.

Experiments

I practiced "intimacy with grief and fear," letting myself fully feel each without resistance. In walking meditation, I focused on enjoying the present moment, even with the discomfort. This allowed the pain to become part of a spacious awareness, bringing some relief. I also released expectations around reaching jhana, focusing instead on embodying compassion and playfulness.

Best Sit

During a metta practice, I dedicated time to my parents, feeling warmth in my chest and a quiet joy. This sit brought a sense of connection and peace without forcing anything.

Moving Forward

I'll continue welcoming emotions as they arise, meeting each without resistance and allowing playfulness and compassion to guide my practice.

Day 4

Challenges

I encountered intense dizziness and a sensation of my visual field shaking, which made it difficult to stay grounded. Distractions also arose early in the session, adding to mental activity.

Experiments

I practiced staying with the dizziness, tilting my head to reinvoke the sensation and reassure myself of safety. Sending metta to various people, including myself, helped release tension and added a humorous perspective. I entered meditation through "flow" rather than just relaxation, which created a firm but relaxed awareness.

Best Sit

In a 90-minute evening session, I sustained J2, moving between J1 and J2, feeling a warmth of love. Allowing all thoughts without reacting softened my focus and allowed me to experience deeper love and warmth.

Moving Forward

I plan to keep using “flow” as a meditation entry point, welcoming whatever arises without categorizing. This gentle, playful openness seems to foster a naturally loving awareness.

Day 5

Challenges

Today, I felt mental and physical fatigue, creating a sense of monotony in practice. I also noticed subtle resistance around allowing joy to deepen.

Experiments

I refined my attention to small sensations in breath and posture, practicing letting creative thoughts pass naturally without holding onto them. Using metta for loved ones helped me focus on connection and warmth. I also experimented with deep relaxation after each sit, observing how mental and physical shifts integrated the experience.

Best Sit

An 80-minute sit led me to a subtle joy, with hints of J3. By relaxing into the experience, I was able to rest in an expansive awareness, enjoying each sensation as it came.

Moving Forward

I’ll continue letting go of specific goals, trusting in the flow of practice. My focus is shifting to enjoying the process rather than chasing outcomes, allowing each sit to unfold naturally.

Day 6

Challenges

I sensed a “cap” on how much joy I could feel, possibly from concerns around dignity and appropriateness. I was frustrated that this was the second day in a row meditation had felt monotonous, with multiple goals seeming to weigh me down. How is this possible, even though I can access the first few jhanas?

Experiments

I brought a lighthearted approach to meditation, seeing each session as an exploration of subtle pleasures. Letting go of specific expectations allowed me to experience joy and contentment without pressure. I also experimented with deeper relaxation between jhanas, observing subtle sensations of stillness and restfulness as I let go of clinging to any particular idea.

Best Sit

A 65-minute sit in J2, and possibly J3, brought waves of contentment and bliss. By focusing on the question, “What’s the most subtle stillness I can enjoy?” I reached a calm joy, free of striving.

Moving Forward

I ended the day with the breakthrough I’ve been looking for: brushing J3 helped me re-learn that it’s “awareness and love all the way down”—expectations and “should” language had crept into my experience, even though I could access J1 and J2. But I see the mental tension now, and I’ll continue softening my approach.

8. Getting the most out of solo meditation

Throughout this retreat you'll be spending the majority of your time meditating independently. We want to share a few pieces of advice to help you get the most out of this time.

General advice

- **Please sit for at least 30 minutes at a time.** We encourage you to sit for longer, but we want you pulled into longer sits, not pushed.
- How do you get pulled into longer sits? Often, by experimenting. If 30 minutes have passed and you're considering ending, ask yourself these experimental questions:
 - *What's most fun or relaxing about this? Could I do just that part of it for 5 minutes?*
 - *What's the most interesting 5-minute experiment I could run now because of the state this meditation has put me in that I could not run at the start of the sit?*
- Then, after 5 minutes, repeat those questions. If at any point you decide you genuinely would prefer to just end the meditation and take a break, take a break!
 - Taking a break can be good research. When you take a break, ask yourself, What is so nice about taking a break? Does some tension relax? If so, how might you bring that nice relaxation into the next meditation?
 - Eventually, little discoveries from experiments like these can create an inflection point: it can begin to feel as if you're meditating all day long. No matter what you're doing, from exercise to falling asleep, you're sinking further and further into enjoyment, curiosity, and relaxation.
- **Alternating walking and sitting meditation is very effective.** It can help resolve bodily discomfort and help you sleep better at night while offering a way to string together sits. Let's say you blend an hour of sitting into a 30-minute walk, into another hour of sitting—this might allow you to go as deep as you would in a 2.5 hour sit, with a lot more ease and bodily comfort.

Before a sit

- Think about what experiments you're interested in running and set an intention. If helpful, jot your intention down in a notebook.

- An example: The purpose of this sit for me is to see if I can find a pleasant sensation in my chest when I think about the mantra “May I be happy”.
- Another example: My intention is to approach this sit in the most relaxed way possible and see how that changes the experience.

After a sit

- At the end of the sit, debrief and ask yourself the following questions:
 - What was the duration of the sit?
 - What was your scaffolding?
 - What was your intention when you started?
 - About how long, on average, were you going between mind-wanderings (where you forgot the feeling/meditation object)?
 - If you had to use three words to describe your experience, and they had to be emotion words, like “sadness” or “peace” or “happiness,” what would they be? Where in the body? How did your feeling(s) change over the course of the beginning, middle, and end?
- Hopefully, the sit has helped you gather data that will help you design even better experiments moving forward. Are there new experiments you want to run based on the results of this sit?

Throughout the day

- Savor the little pleasantries all day long, like a kid licking honey out of a jar.
- Pay attention to your energy levels and how they impact practice.
- Periodically ask yourself throughout the day, during and outside of meditation:
 - How might I enjoy this more?
 - How might I relax even more?
 - How might I open myself up to even more curiosity?
- If you experience anything—say, a moment of relaxation, an enjoyable feeling—that’s better than your meditation, ask yourself “What mental move am I doing here that I could bring into my meditation?”

- Conversely, if you discover a repeatable way to enjoy, relax, or open up to awe/wonder in your meditation, ask yourself, “What mental move am I doing here that I could take with me off the cushion?”

9. Scaffolding

This assignment will walk you through several experiments to choose a scaffolding that works best for you. By the end of running these experiments, you should have a scaffolding to use while practicing the basic technique from here on out.

The importance of finding a steady scaffolding

Finding a scaffolding and sticking with it is important because if you keep changing your scaffolding, you're unlikely to ever drop deep enough into meditation to enter flow states or the jhanas.

How do you know if a scaffolding is working for you? A good benchmark is that scaffolding works if you can use it to generate a subtle but clear, openhearted feeling at least 20% of the time in about 15 minutes. If you find something more reliable than that, excellent. But you need not worry if it only works sometimes.

Let's restate that, to make our modest expectations clear. A scaffolding is great if, one in five times, you put your attention on it, you get a subtle but recognizable feeling, like a pleasant brief rise of emotion in your chest that you can *just* notice.

Spoiler alert. Once you have your scaffolding, if you start using it to meditate, it will reliably STOP working for you. This happens to almost everyone. Most students misinterpret it as a sign they're doing it wrong, or they need to go try a bunch more scaffoldings.

Don't. Treat it as a sign of progress.

How does that make sense? Well, when you first find a scaffolding that works, chances are you're benefiting from a novelty "bonus," so to speak, that makes it easier to relate to the experience with more curiosity, enjoyment, and possibly relaxation.

As time goes on, this novelty wears off, and you're left to figure out how to relate to experience in an appreciative fashion, even if it lacks the extra buzz of novelty. This is just what we want! It's an opportunity to practice changing how we're *relating to experience* rather than changing the *objects in experience*.

Eventually, you'll get to a point where you can use almost any scaffolding to find and cultivate an openhearted feeling. But early on, it's best to crack yourself open emotionally with whatever scaffolding feels most natural to you, and expand from there.

Finally, you need not think this is all-or-nothing. If you can't find a scaffolding that works for you, there are plenty of other ways to progress. Similarly, if you decide some hours or days after this assignment that it would be best to switch your scaffolding, that's fine and part of a journey of self-discovery too.

Introduction to the assignment

- During this assignment, you will be experimenting with at least four different types of scaffolding.
- You are looking for something that produces a subtle but clear, openhearted feeling in your chest, head, and/or gut.
- Think of this like tuning an instrument or playing with a metal detector: you are looking for *resonance*—a glimmer or shimmer in somatic-emotional experience in response to the scaffolding. Finding resonance is as much about listening as it is intuitively (and playfully) searching. Often, a scaffolding powerful for one person does little for another.
- If you find a scaffolding that resonates strongly partway through, you may still find it useful to try the other options (in many sports and skills, cross-training can accelerate mastery). But you're also welcome to skip ahead.
- Extra tips
 - Diffing: If any particular scaffolding seems subtle, or you're having a hard time finding anything in the body, you might try "diffing" the experience. For example, compare the feeling of the mantra "may my loved one feel happy" with an infuriating memory. The contrast may help you feel the aspects of openhearted scaffolding.
 - Stacking: You're welcome to combine any number of scaffolds to help something resonate. (We just don't recommend constantly changing scaffolding.)

Mantras

- A mantra is just a phrase, gently repeated internally, in whatever voice you choose to use.
- Many participants find that mantras can be a very helpful way to create a feeling.
- You can experiment with different ones (and try different lengths). You can keep pulsing the same mantra or select 2-3 and loop them.
- Some examples include (non-exhaustive):
 - *May I (or someone else) be happy*
 - *May I (or someone else) be safe*
 - *May I (or someone else) be loved*
 - *May I (or someone else) be peaceful*
 - *May I (or someone else) feel joy*
 - *May I (or someone else) be free from suffering*

- Some students have taken extra time to find a mantra that *really* resonates with them. You can do this by following your intuition to openhearted phrases, or by following your intuition towards a fear-based mantra and then flipping it. For example, recognizing “I am afraid of failing this week” may be flipped to “May I feel worthy.”
- **Bonus:** One built-in benefit of using a few different mantras is that you can ask yourself how they “glimmer or shimmer” in experience differently. If “may I be safe” feels the same as “may I feel joy,” it’s fun to remember that this is an opportunity to experiment—try to open with awe or curiosity until you can begin to clearly feel their differences.

Smiling

- Many students find this simple technique quite strong. Our emotions and physiology share a two-way street.
- Remember: we know emotions by the sensations they produce in the body. When you smile, you may first notice purely physical pleasant feelings. To connect with the emotional aspects (e.g., joy or excitement) of the smile, ask yourself: **What is pleasant about this pleasantness?** This helps you notice the emotional warmth, the sense of lightness, the joy that accompanies the physical sensation.
- You can try smiling in different ways—half-smile, a full-blown grin, or a smile in the heart.
- Observe the feeling that arises as you smile (and potentially how the smile changes).

Visualization

- Many participants use visualizations of various kinds as a way to create a positive feeling. You can be as creative as you want. Some examples that have worked for others in the past:
 - *Visualizing sending a ball of love to a loved one*
 - *Visualizing a beautiful sunset*
 - *Visualizing lying on the beach and enjoying the rays of the sun*
 - *Visualizing hugging or spending time with a loved one*
 - *Visualizing someone close being joyful (can be a person, a happy pet, etc.)*

Memories

- Remembering a pleasant memory can kickstart an openhearted feeling. You know your own memories best, but spending a few minutes thinking about what are some of the most lighthearted/loving/joyful memories can be a good cue.
- Some of the memories participants have used in the past:
 - *Doing a fun or exhilarating activity (skiing, surfing, hiking, etc.)*
 - *Spending time with a loved one*

- *A moment when something really important or beautiful happened (birth of a child, a first kiss, etc.)*
- *Happy moments from childhood and the lightheartedness/joy/love contained in them*
- *Being in nature (e.g., moments of seeing a beautiful view from a mountain and feeling awe)*

Sink into the feeling behind the scaffolding

Remember, scaffolding is NOT the meditation object! It's just a tool. The openhearted feeling produced by the scaffolding is the meditation object.

To do the basic technique, you'll soon want something like 70-90% of your attention on the openhearted feeling produced by the scaffolding, and only the remainder on the scaffolding.

When you're first customizing your scaffolding, your attention may skew more towards the scaffolding. But after you finish combining memories, right-sizing the effort behind your smile, etc., you'll want to really sink into the openhearted feeling generated by the scaffolding. This may require its own adjustment step – perhaps simplifying a visualization or memory to its most openhearted essence, or asking “where is the feeling behind this smile really most intense?”

Now, reflect

- How confident are you that you found scaffolding that works, and why?
- What did you try and learn?
- What do you want to try next?
- Do you have any other questions?

Next steps

- If this assignment leaves you with a scaffolding you know you want to use, great! Begin using this for your solo meditations from here.
- If you're still not sure:
 - Pick 1-2 types of scaffolding that worked best for you (out of the four we tried) and design 2-4 more experiments on different options you can try to use. These might include different mantras, sitting without guidance, etc.
 - Spend at least 15-30 minutes on your experiments.
 - Reach out to your facilitator - we'll offer additional next steps.

 There are several tracks accompanying this section titled “Scaffolding.”

10. Self-sufficient learning: mindset and tactics

As you know, we do NOT aspire to teach the jhanas. We aspire to teach *how to learn* the jhanas. If we succeed, you're likely to find the jhanas on your own faster and in ways we couldn't have predicted. You're also more likely to shoot far beyond the jhanas—using them for personal transformation and to complement other forms of meditation.

To do this, we want to equip you with a few things:

1. **Clear starting technique** (e.g., core ideas and the basic technique)
2. **Knowledge about what to look for** (e.g., jhana descriptions from facilitators)
3. **Knowledge about what to avoid** (e.g., common mistakes)
4. **Debugging** (e.g., the tendency to ask good questions when stuck and running experiments)
5. **Accelerating** (i.e., leaning into doing everything above faster, effectively, and more playfully)

5 aspects of self-sufficient learning



Since talking about learning can itself be a cognitive exercise, it's especially valuable to remember the mindset "Reflect like a scientist, play like a child!"

Accelerated Learning

We've found three simple ideas that can go a long way in accelerating your learning.

Keep it playful

We know teachers who go so far as to say there are only two rules on retreat: smile and have fun. This may be good advice for any learning process—keeping it playful leads to more motivation, creativity, and adaptability. But in meditation, it's even more important. Your starting headspace can literally shape the available state space of your meditation. It's possible that if you treat your meditation as light, fun, and playful, you may be able to access states that would be otherwise unavailable to you.

But this is easier said than done. How might we act our way into a more playful way of thinking? Here are specific behaviors we see among our most playful students.

- **Zero-should policy:** For many adults, especially high-performing achievement-focused types, the instinct to treat meditation and learning like hard work is strong. Activities like journaling and debugging can feel like chores. If that's happening to you, stop, throw it all out, and ask yourself how you might engage with the process differently. It's probably better not to meditate at all than to engage with meditation like a chore. It may be helpful to reconnect with your motivation and journal about where a sense of "should" is coming from. As Marshall Rosenberg says, *"Should" is the most violent word in the English language.*
- **Gratitude-and-wonder-based motivation:** You can hold different relationships towards the same goals. *"Holding a goal from a place of 'I desperately need this' vs. 'I should do this' vs. 'I'm delighted I get to do this' vs. 'I can't wait until this is a reality' are very different experiences."* — Joe Hudson. The latter approaches make learning much more resilient to setbacks, open-minded to mistakes, and more enjoyable in the process.
- **Self-compassion:** Research is clear that self-compassion optimizes learning, not self-criticism. For some students, self-critical habits are so ingrained that the solution is to be slow and explicit. One of our founders was so viciously self-critical that he had three migraines in 8 days on his first meditation retreat. For a year after that, every time he caught himself saying something self-critical in his head, he mentally verbalized in response: *"Come here, my dear friend."* You may find you don't need such a deliberate approach. For

him, it gradually became a faster-than-thought, nonverbal, somatic habit, and the inner critic softened into a much quieter inner coach.

- **Process over outcome:** Intellectually acknowledging failure as a catalyst for growth is a good start. What's even better is to get genuinely interested in "errors" like Sherlock Holmes does with clues. This is the "process over outcome" mentality, where you are more focused on learning than you are on what happens in a given meditation. To install this mentality, celebrate small wins, and let yourself feel curiosity when things don't go according to plan. Notice that this is not about suppressing disappointment. In fact, you might find it valuable to welcome and fully feel disappointment to make space for celebration and curiosity. As Sherlock would say, "The game is afoot!"
- **Flexible and opportunistic goal-setting:** You may go into a meditation intending to do one thing, but have an unexpectedly terrible (or wonderful) time. In that moment, how fluidly do you leave your prior intent behind and move the goalposts?

Journaling

- We like to say, *"It's not experience that leads to expertise, but experience plus reflection."* Jotting down a few quick thoughts on what went well and what didn't go so well, and what you'd like to try next, can chain momentum from one sit to the next, and increase clarity and motivation.
- Jotting down a clear intention *before* you start sitting can also create a sense of momentum—you set the intention and then just "get out of the way," softening into more curiosity, enjoyment, and relaxation as you go.

Infuse your whole day with practice

- You don't need to practice all day. But if you daydream about practicing when you're not meditating, you may be shocked by your progress. Daydreams involve a looser, more diffuse, and often more creative form of thinking than active focus.
- It turns out that it's surprisingly easy to influence daydreams—strong intentions, following a sense of curiosity, and intermittent periods of focused work can readily make it so that even the most relaxing shower thoughts are put to work on your toughest problem. Famous thinkers like Edison and Dali used to take strategic naps or wake themselves up just before falling asleep in hopes of capturing the power of their more diffuse thinking.
- At some point in your meditation learning, it will become easy (and fascinating) to observe and run mental experiments throughout the day, even while doing other things. "How can I release my mental tension?" is a question you will be able to ask in the flow of normal things. This mental experimentation often starts during menial tasks like washing dishes,

but can extend to almost any experience. Taking practice off the cushion often creates (or follows) a big inflection point in progress, and is especially easy to try while on retreat.

“Debugging” yourself

Debugging in software engineering is the process of identifying and removing errors from code. It’s a fundamental skill that separates novices from experts, and determines the speed at which an engineer gets better.

So too with meditation. If you can correct your own mistakes, the speed at which you progress in meditation will accelerate. The process of crafting the sharpest question, getting a hold of a teacher, interpreting their response, and experimenting with their solution is *extraordinarily* slow relative to spotting and solving your own issues in real-time.

This could be the difference between a moment of learning that requires hours (or days) and one that is literally faster than thought.

But this is a much bigger deal than a one-time speedup: effective debugging changes your *growth rate*. Each new problem you solve makes the next one easier. Learning speed, confidence, and motivation can all compound. A single rewarding debugging experience can leave you excited to meditate more and persist longer in the face of novel challenges, which will make it likelier you find more exhilarating debugging moments in the future, and so on.

If there’s any secret to our curriculum, this might be it: we don’t just want you to get good at debugging, we want you to fall in love with it. We know that as soon as you get addicted to the rush of puzzle solving and self-discovery, you’ll never truly get “stuck” again. Your learning trajectory becomes exponential, and milestones like special states or insights become only a matter of time.

Broadly speaking, debugging involves alternating between two types of thinking: divergent and convergent. Divergent thinking is about enumerating all the possible problem framings or viable solutions. Convergent thinking is about ranking the ideas and trying them out. A phrase that captures the process of divergent thinking, convergent thinking, and testing things out is: “list, rank, iterate.”

We find that students often get stuck on the first step. They start with a loose sense that something is not quite right, and often give up or ask for help before getting specific on what exactly the problem is, and what list of ideas may be involved in the solution.

We suggest three tools for generating specific ideas: evergreen questions, putting structure on the unstructured, and how/what questions.

Once listed, ranking and iterating (deciding which ideas are best and trying them out) is often much easier. We can just ask our usual question and follow our intuition: what will lead to more enjoyment, curiosity, and relaxation?

Evergreen questions

We've found a short list of questions to be "evergreen." No matter what your challenge, this list can help with debugging:

- *What is my objective?*
- *What have I tried and what have I learned?*
- *What do I plan to do next?*
- *What key additional information would make my plan substantially more informed or effective?*

Often by just walking through these questions, you'll discover new ways of thinking about the problem at hand, which will lead to new potential solutions and experiments.

You can use the PLAN framework below to remember this sequence of questions:

PLAN

- **P - Purpose:** "What is my objective?"
- **L - Learned:** "What have I tried and what have I learned?"
- **A - Actions:** "What do I plan to do next?"
- **N - Needs:** "What key additional information would make my plan substantially more informed or effective?"

Putting structure on the unstructured

One of the secrets to brainstorming is that if you dwell on high-level questions, like "how do I feel my emotions more in the body," good ideas are hard to come by. Questions like that are daunting. But if you come at the high-level question with more specific related inquiries, it's often easier to start coming up with possible experiments that can crack the big issue.

One way to generate more specific questions is to come up with a way to *structure* the problem. Often, it's not important what structure you pick, just that you have one.

This might sound a little abstract, because it is—so it's easier to explain with a concrete example. Let's return to the question, "How do I feel my emotions more in the body?" To break out of the impasse created by such a big question, imagine a sequence of thoughts like:

- This question has two parts: emotions and body. Let me focus on each.
- **Emotion:** When do I feel emotions particularly strongly?
 - **Think big:** What about those conditions of strong emotion can I replicate in meditation? Could I “fake it till I make it” with a massive smile? Could I learn what actors do when they cry on stage?
 - **Think small:** Conversely, what reliably inhibits emotions? Can I meditate in such a way that perfectly stunts emotions, and then take a shot at the opposite?
- **Body:** When do I experience things particularly intensely in the body? Are emotions also present then? How might I link emotions then?
 - **Think big:** I feel lots of emotion in high-energy states, like euphoria or terror. Could I spike energy levels with cold water euphoria, a HIIT workout, or intense yoga?
 - **Think small:** I feel emotions strongly in low-energy states, like depression and exhaustion. Could I drop energy levels to unprecedented lows by intentionally napping and waking up, or doing yoga nidra?

Suddenly, a simple structure (emotion vs. body, and then big vs. small) has yielded a bunch of possible experiments!

The magic is that this structure was just arbitrary—we made it up on the spot and have no reason to think it’s any better than another structure. You don’t need a “good” structure; you often just need a structure to get the ideas flowing!

How/what questions

Closely related to both of the above approaches—evergreen questions and putting structure on the unstructured—is using “how” or “what” questions. If you force yourself to ask a few questions that start with how or what on a problem, new ideas often begin to flow.

For example, if we take the same challenge, “How do I feel emotions more in the body?”:

- *What allows some people to feel emotions more sensitively than others?*
- *How do emotions get “stuck”? Why do I sometimes cry and sometimes just “choke up”?*
- *What happens right before a thought? What happens right before an emotion? How are they related?*
- *When do I remember feeling emotions strongly in my body? What was different?*

After a few how/what questions, the challenge has a lot more surface area to explore.

Section summary: self-sufficient learning

We don't teach you the jhanas - we teach you how to learn the jhanas. To do so, you need five key elements:

Three are covered in other sections:

1. **Clear starting techniques** (Meditation Technique and Technique In Detail)
2. **Knowledge of what to aim for** (The First Four Jhanas)
3. **Knowledge of what to avoid** (Common Pitfalls)

The other two are covered in this section: Debugging yourself and Accelerating progress.

Debugging yourself

- **Use the 3-step approach**
 1. List problems/solutions
 2. Rank them
 3. Iterate
- **The “list” step is often the hardest; we suggest:**
 - **Asking evergreen questions**, such as:
 - What is my objective?
 - What have I tried and what have I learned?
 - What do I plan to do next?
 - **Putting structure on the problem**
 - Break problems into smaller parts and add structure to help with brainstorming (e.g., body vs. emotion).
 - **How/What questions spark ideas**
 - Examples: “How do emotions get stuck?”, “What are the bright spots in which I’ve felt emotions strongly in the body?”

Accelerating progress

- **Playful practice** unlocks creativity and motivation. Avoid rigid or effortful approaches.
- **Journaling.** Reflect on your progress and set intentions.
- **Practice throughout the day.** Explore ideas about meditation and integrate them into everyday activities and tasks (e.g., washing dishes) to deepen progress.

11. [Optional] Practice patterns that limit progress



Speedup notice: skippable or skimmable

This section is useful as a reference for debugging yourself. You may want to skip until you're in need of ideas.

"All I want to know is where I'm going to die, so I'll never go there"—Charlie Munger

"Invert, invert, always invert"—Carl Jacobi

You've learned the basic technique. Now let's invert: what broader patterns limit meditators who are otherwise executing the technique correctly?

These aren't about technique errors (like over-efforting during a sit). They're about how you relate to practice itself—your mindset, approach to learning, and relationship with challenges. You might be relaxing into the openhearted feeling perfectly, but still be limited by learned helplessness that prevents creative troubleshooting. Or you might nail the technique but subtly use relaxation as an escape mechanism.

Periodically review this list and ask: "Which pattern is limiting me, even though my technique is solid?"

1. Learned helplessness

While we will provide lots of guidance and support, at the level of your first-person experience, nobody can show you the jhanas but yourself.

Some students appear to see fewer ways to overcome challenges and make progress on their own than others. Typically, this pattern is not a failure of cleverness. It's that the thought of unsticking themselves doesn't occur to them at all.

This is very understandable. It's a phenomenon called "learned helplessness," and it's been studied by psychologists. Studies suggest that we may stop even thinking about solutions to any problem if it *feels* like another problem we previously learned cannot be solved.

We ALL grapple with learned helplessness to varying degrees. And we can ALL unlearn our helplessness by getting better at coming up with novel solutions.

The opposite of learned helplessness is agency, the ability to see and act on the degrees of freedom available to you.

An anecdote about agency: we know of someone who, as part of a recent job search, reached out to the leader of an organization they admired and said “Hey, I’m looking for a job. Can I have yours and run your org?” (They were perceived as interesting, not arrogant.) We love this as an example of incredibly high-agency behavior we would have never thought of!

But how do you acquire agency in a given situation? If learned helplessness prevents us from even thinking about the problem, how might we notice it and entertain solutions?

Antidotes

- Run your own experiments, and make them fun! These can be goofy (like dancing alone to your favorite song and seeing how it changes your headspace), intense (like physical exercise), or anything in between. The more playful and excited you get from devising tiny little experiments that yield micro-self-discoveries, the less learned helplessness can exist.
- Consume inspiring content, and be opportunistic about taking advantage of when you find yourself naturally inspired. If you can do it without critical self-comparison, ask what the happiest, most imperturbable, or highest-agency person you know would do if faced with your challenge.
- Intentionally break the rules. Remember, even perfect instructions have been designed for an average of many students. If you’re not breaking some rules or questioning how you might do some things better yourself, you’re not being maverick enough. You wouldn’t drive a car without adjusting the seat to fit your needs; don’t leave this curriculum unadjusted either!
- Ask how you can make the content work for *you*. We love this quote about making reading fun: “[Don’t] read like a dog obeying its master, but like an eagle hunting its prey.” — Dee Hock

It’s tempting to become discouraged when considering your own learned helplessness and engage with it harshly.

But that is... Your learned helplessness talking. If you think this section applies to you, and you experienced anything other than excitement reading it, consider how self-criticism may be at play! Learned helplessness is part of being human; it says nothing about how good or bad you are.

2. Under-exploring or under-committing

Meditation is a balance of exploring many new techniques, and deepening within a single technique when it proves to be effective. Practice requires both breadth and depth at different times.

Some meditators spend years practicing a single technique that isn't making a significant impact in their lives. They could benefit from *exploring* more and trying various approaches, even if they think a technique might not be "for them." Most meditators eventually find that practices they initially thought wouldn't suit them turn out to be unexpectedly helpful at some point in their path.

Here's what under-exploration looks like. Once, we had a student who couldn't get anything to work in the first two days. In response to this, they picked a routine and committed to doing it on repeat for 6 hours per day until the end of the retreat, in hopes that it would work.

This wasn't helpful. They worked hard, but not smart—they should have waited to commit until they had more insight about what would work for them.

On the other hand, some meditators tend to dabble with one practice and then quickly move on to another without giving enough time to see if a particular technique works for them. They could benefit from *committing* more deeply to a single technique. They miss out on seeing how a single technique can progress and deepen in unexpected and delightful ways.

Finding the right balance between exploration and commitment is *fractal*—it repeats at smaller and smaller scales. Even when committed to a single technique, our relationship to the technique continues to evolve and change over time, as we experiment with ever-finer micro-adjustments and incorporate the ones that work, like a boxer perfecting their jab over a career.

Antidotes

- Balance exploration and commitment. It's less about getting this perfect and more about just being intentional. Ask: am I sticking to it too early? And *also* ask: am I giving up too easily?
- Start by exploring a wide variety of techniques to find which ones resonate with you. Then, commit to a single technique and practice it more deeply for a period of time. Later, begin another cycle of exploring finer and subtler variations of that technique. These alternating cycles of exploration and deepening will lead to an increasingly fine-tuned and sensitive practice.

3. Thinking meditation is only when you sit quietly

What you do outside of meditation impacts your experience just as much as what you do while meditating. **No minute is more important than any other minute.** If you are enjoying a lot of

experience in your “daily life”, then your “formal sits” can go a lot deeper. Some helpful pointers on this front:

Antidotes:

- Make sure you are sleeping enough!
- Pay attention to how your eating patterns impact your state of mind.
- See how exercise, cold showers, and breathwork impact you.
- What happens if you smile (literally or metaphorically) all the time? (You are allowed to be crazy in this way on retreat.)
- As you go about your daily activities, can you find anything unexpected to appreciate, savor, or relax into?
- Be curious about everything that you do! What is it like to be you? How often do you really *look* at your experience?

4. Subtle self-criticism

Many of us habitually engage in self-criticism. For some, our harsh inner critics become so familiar that we hardly notice them, nor the faster-than-thought, emotional violence that precedes fully-formed self-critical thoughts.

Occasionally, we see students who are so accustomed to their own self-criticism that they fail to see it at all. In fact, this used to describe one of our founders! Students in this position understand the meditation instructions to be about relaxation and enjoyment, but they get stuck in beating themselves up over and over again for not doing so successfully, which is hardly relaxing.

Antidotes

- It may be helpful to hear that self-criticism isn’t just unfun and unsustainable, it’s also ineffective! A number of psychology studies have found that self-compassionate people are more likely to make amends after moral transgressions, study harder to rebound from poor grades, and otherwise engage and follow through more on self-improvement efforts. It’s easier to correct errors when you stop making them painful.
- Forgiveness meditation
- Playfully run experiments to grow more aware of any faster-than-thought negativity. What if you treated literally everything your mind did as an amazing, praiseworthy feat, including self-criticism? Once we’re aware of self-criticism, we can begin to play with relaxing, embracing, and comforting those parts of ourselves in conflict.

12. Non-sleep deep rest (NSDR)

NSDR, or “non-sleep deep rest”, is a term coined by a Stanford neuroscientist. It refers to relaxation practices such as yoga nidra which are designed to take your body and mind into states between waking and sleeping, in order to provide rejuvenation and rest.

You may find it valuable to wind down for the evening, perhaps even after you get ready for bed. It's not expected that you will fall asleep during NSDR, but if you do, it's considered a great part of the practice.

In yoga nidra, the practitioner progressively inquires into “layers of one's being”: body sensations, emotions, thoughts, and visualizations, and sense of self. With each level of inquiry, we relax tension and look more closely into experience. This can go to the point where our perceptions break down into component parts: we stop perceiving an abstraction we call “hand,” and start perceiving a mass of hand sensations. After we've deconstructed these various layers, we imagine putting them back on in order to end the practice and return to waking consciousness.

The way NSDR embraces sleep, liminal states, and layers of relaxation makes it a great preparatory practice for jhana. It can prime your intuition for how relaxation may be practiced in service of jhana (along with our two other pathways, enjoyment/savoring and curiosity/awe). As alumna Nadia Asparouhova writes, “The first step to jhana is to relax so deeply it's as if you're going to fall asleep, but don't.”

Here's how effective NSDR can be: a participant took our suggestion to do NSDR prior to retreat and, after doing NSDR an hour a day for a month, spontaneously had his first jhana experience the week before joining us on retreat.

While it's nice to know NSDR can help foster relaxation for jhana, when you're doing NSDR, don't worry about jhana, just fully enjoy the layers of relaxation NSDR can bring, like a kid licking honey out of a jar.



The track accompanying this section is titled “NSDR”

The speaker in this recording is Kelly Boys, a well-known yoga nidra teacher who has worked with the United Nations and appears in the Waking Up app.

13. Walking meditation

In short, the instructions for walking meditation are the same as the instructions for sitting meditation, you'll just do them while walking! As you walk, continue to cultivate and stay with an openhearted feeling. If it helps, you can imagine sending that feeling out to the world around you, or you can just stay with the feeling yourself.

Walking meditations are often not as deep as sitting meditations, but still have significant value:

- Some students have still had some of their most powerful experiences during walking meditations – don't underestimate them!
- Walking meditations often serve as a happy break for bodily discomfort.
- Walking meditations can be a wonderfully integrative practice that serves to bring meditation into everyday life.

At its best, walking meditation will feel like it maintains momentum between sitting meditations. You might find it easiest to alternate, for example, 30 min sitting and 15-30 min walking.

We encourage you to experiment with the guided walking meditation track on your MP3 player!



The track accompanying this section is titled "Walking Meditation."

14. Collectedness via curiosity

Curiosity, awe, and wonder are essential ways to cultivate collectedness while sitting. These exercises are designed to draw your attention to new ways in which you may open up with curiosity/awe/wonder to your experience.

As you follow along, see if you can *feel* any of these pointers

- Opening up
- Surrendering
- Letting your guard down
- Becoming more vulnerable
- Becoming more malleable
- Filled with awe or wonder
- Letting sense data overwhelm you
- Dropping a sense of boundaries or distance from experience
- Softening into humility
- Ready to change your mind
- More likely to cry (not that you have to, but that you are more open or likely to do so)

After listening, make a mental note or quickly jot down

- Anything surprising
- Anything you might want to play with more later

Additional points on curiosity

These are a few points we think are especially powerful to take away about curiosity and meditation:

1. When you are keenly observing reality, the idea of predicting sensations is laughable. It's easy to assume we know what something as mundane as a leg or shirt on my skin feels like, and blow past it with zero curiosity or awe. But when we really soften and open up to

the point we're noticing subtle buzzing or vibration in our experience, it's absurdly complex. That particular mix of vibrations may truly be once-in-a-lifetime.

2. Curiosity can increase collectedness via a virtuous cycle with relaxation and enjoyment. Curiosity can lead to discovering more to enjoy or more to relax into, which leaves more to be curious about, and so on.
3. Curiosity may also help us spot mental tension we've been missing. Often, the "spotting" part of "spot and release" is harder—we don't know what we don't know.
4. We can try to open up to new parts of experience in two ways: by globally widening the aperture, like tuning into our periphery or falling back to notice all of our experience at once, or by using a checklist of sorts to go looking for ways we may be resisting experience. The audio tracks accompanying this section explore both.
5. The value of the "crying pathway" - the feeling of opening up to a deep feeling is often accompanied by a welling up or crying. This means that one way to deepen into a sit may be to ask, what about this would take me towards an openhearted cry? And conversely, if it seems impossible or far-fetched to cry, what subtle tension might I be unaware of? (It's not that you *need* to cry to enter the jhanas, but the *possibility* can be a promising trailhead.) Note that we're looking for the type of crying that people talk about when they say "a good cry," not the anguished "gnashing of teeth" crying that accompanies an effort to suppress a big emotion, or a traumatic event.
6. The power of "I don't know" as a mantra - one of our founders likes this one in particular. He says: *"When I'm all crusted over because I haven't meditated in a few days and life kicked me in the teeth, I'll sit down and just say 'I don't know' or maybe 'I'm sorry' for 30 minutes to soften me up. I'll be completely jhana-blocked, but give me 30 minutes of genuine 'I don't know' and the system starts to flow again."*



The tracks accompanying this section are titled "Collectedness via curiosity."

The first explores lowering mental boundaries all at once in an attempt to let sensations flood up through our experience. In a sense, it's quite passive—just find the mental move that drops the expectations.

This next exercise is more proactive. It uses a checklist of qualities of experience we may not normally attend to. Some of these pointers may sound strange or even nonsensical. That's expected. See if any still help lead to more curiosity, enjoyment, or relaxation in any way.

15. Collectedness via embodied emotions

Learning to enter and progress through the jhanas is an exercise in somatic-emotional awareness.

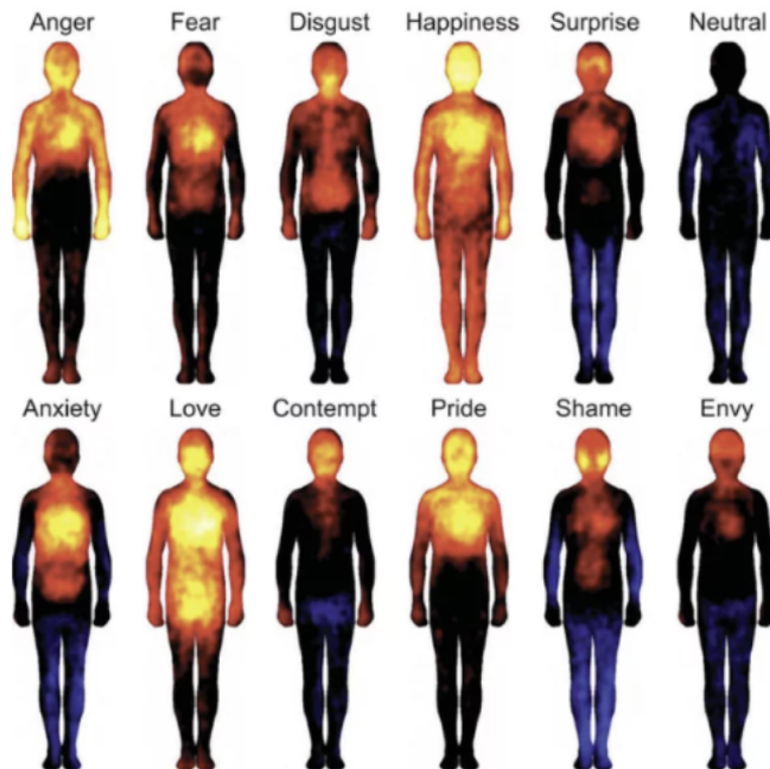
Different approaches to learning the jhanas have you learn moves for tuning into emotional qualities at different times. In our experience, emphasizing tuning into the emotional qualities of experience from the beginning makes learning the jhanas faster for most people and more useful for everyone.⁵

The term “openhearted feeling” is meant to invoke the ideas of both physical and emotional sensations. Some research suggests we may know our emotions by patterns of physical sensations, so meditating on our physical, embodied sense of emotions can be one way to more fully experience them.

One useful idea is to think of our bodies as heat maps. One [study](#) exposed over 700 subjects to different emotional primes and then asked them to color in what parts of their body felt activated and deactivated. Here’s the result:

⁵ How does this approach make jhana training more useful?

- It can make it so jhana training doubles as training across the full spectrum of emotions. We explore this further later. This can improve decision-making, ability to connect with others, and tendencies to turn towards, rather than away, from hard things, from challenging conversations to procrastination.
- It can make the jhanas more robust. You want to be able to navigate towards jhana from any starting place, not just when things are going comfortably.
- It can make the journey more valuable—those who find themselves with muted emotions pre-jhana often report learning to navigate their emotions with more sensitivity and finesse is more valuable to them than the jhanas themselves.
- It can make your jhanas more enjoyable—some students have reported entering “somewhat unemotional jhanas” (usually using other techniques). When they learn to make them more emotional, they find them more enjoyable.



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.

The idea of seeing the body as a heat map for emotions can have big implications for practicing jhana. While meditating on an openhearted feeling, you might explore questions like:

- What signals in my body and mind are telling me this is an openhearted feeling (or not)?
- What is most intense about this experience? Does the intensity have a shape or location?
- Could I sink into the most intense part? What would it feel like if nothing else in the world existed other than the most intense sense of gratitude located in my chest or the back of my head?



The tracks accompanying this section are titled “Collectedness via Embodied Emotion.”

The first asks what emotions we associate with different parts of the body. The second does the reverse: it asks which parts of the body we associate with an emotion.

16. [Optional] Speculating about the relationship between jhanas and predictive processing



Speedup notice: skippable

This section is technical and only distantly related to meditation. Skip if you're not interested.

There's an emerging theory of the mind, the predictive processing model, that is not only fascinating but also offers interesting ideas about *how* to practice jhana and why the jhanas work.

Context: For decades, the field of cognitive science was dominated by the "bottom-up" information processing model, where sensory information was thought to flow primarily from sensory organs up through increasingly complex processing stages. This was heavily influenced by computer science metaphors—the brain was seen as primarily reacting to and processing incoming sensory data.

However, this model presented two problems: it would be computationally expensive, because there is so much data to take in. Also, it didn't align with observed feedback loops in brain activity.

Introducing “predictive processing”: About 10-15 years ago, a framework that fundamentally reversed the “bottom-up view” took the field by storm. In this new framework, the predictive processing model, the brain is a prediction machine. Instead of passively receiving information, your brain constantly predicts what it expects to experience. These predictions flow top-down, meeting incoming sensory data bottom-up. The key ideas are:

- The brain maintains a model of what the world is going to be like
- It uses this model to constantly make predictions about incoming sensory information
- Only prediction errors (differences between expectations and reality) become salient information
- The brain tries to minimize prediction error either by updating its model in the face of prediction errors (believing new things about the world) or by acting to make its predictions true (shutting out the things that violate prediction)

This model means your expectations about the world around you play an essential role in shaping your experience. The literature calls these “top-down priors.” They're built from past experience and

help the brain make sense of noisy, ambiguous sensory data. For example, when you see a partially-obscured object, your priors help you "fill in" what you can't directly see.

This explains a bunch of curious phenomena. One we're all familiar with is confirmation bias. One study, for example, found that if a lion walks across the street in a city, everyone sees a dog until they're close enough for the confidence in their sense data to override their expectation that a furry four-legged animal in a city would be a dog, not a lion.

Connecting jhanas to predictive processing: One way of thinking about the absorptive quality of the jhanas from a predictive processing perspective is:

- Singular attention around the meditation object (in our case, an openhearted feeling) floods the system with clear, consistent sensory data stronger than the brain's usual predictive models.
- And/or a jhana meditator is relating to a meditation object in a way that is softening or relaxing top-down predictions (e.g., perhaps by cultivating a sense of curiosity, awe, or wonder).
- This creates a unique state where the bottom-up sensory experience overwhelms top-down predictions.

This may explain:

- Why jhana states often feel so different from normal consciousness. It's rare that bottom-up sensory experience overwhelms our top-down predictions rather than the other way around.
- Some of the benefits touted by jhana meditators include therapeutic breakthroughs, developing a more fluid and malleable mind, or the production of meditative "insight" (where experiences in meditation change your perceptions or expectations persistently afterwards). In normal perception, top-down priors help us make sense of the world, but can also trap us in habitual ways of seeing things. The jhanas might temporarily free us from these constraints by allowing raw sensory experience to dominate over our usual predictive models.

If it's true that jhana states are states in which sense data overwhelms top-down priors, *the implication may be to meditate in a way that lets sense data overwhelm you*. Rather than dissect something with effortful precision, see if you can relax all expectations to the point your sense data threatens to overpower you.

17. The first four jhanas

The jhanas are altered states you can learn to enter into with meditation practice. Until you experience them, it can be challenging to know from words alone what to look for. We try to be precise and varied to help you triangulate. There's also some truth to the saying "If you're questioning whether or not you're in a jhana, you're probably not in a jhana."

What they are

Here are three ways to think about jhanas that are useful for practice.

1. **Progressive states of collectedness**—more and more of your mind relaxes around a dominant part of your experience (which progresses from bliss to peace as you move through the jhanas).
 - Mind-wanderings and thoughts increasingly lose their pull and happen less often. In the first jhana, you may go 3-5 minutes without mind-wandering off your meditation object. You may feel as if you have a joyful "seclusion" or "refuge" from your "wispy" thoughts—thoughts no longer pull your mind along with them, and what thoughts you do have are almost exclusively about your meditation. By the fourth jhana, you may go up to 10 minutes or more without mind-wandering, and thoughts may seem to only partially form, if at all.
2. **Flow states that amplify familiar bliss and peace**—like the opposite of a panic attack, you may feel as if you are relaxing or sinking into some pleasurable feeling on the spectrum of bliss/peace. As you sink into it, it becomes a bigger part of the experience, which makes it more pleasurable and easier to sink into, and so on.
 - This will feel like opening up, surrendering to, or sinking into something rather than contracting around anxiety or panic.
 - The pleasant, effortless drawing in of your attention is like slipping into your favorite flow state—it's much more like a dancer getting lost in the music than effortfully trying to "do" something in meditation.
 - On our retreats, a minority of students experience this loop very quickly—we call it a "hard takeoff." In a hard takeoff, it can feel like something is ramping up quickly. In response to this, we often naturally contract out of excitement or nervousness, and doing so knocks us out. It can feel like a repeated false start, or never getting to the top of a half pipe and sliding back down. With practice, you'll learn to relate with more openness—more curiosity, enjoyment, and relaxation—and surrender to the takeoff before you get knocked away.
 - The bliss-peace starts out as something very small, familiar, and mundane, and grows into an unusually intense instance of a normal feeling. The first three jhanas are not especially strange—they are just remarkably intense forms of everyday experiences. A meaningful minority of students, upon achieving jhana, report remembering earlier, unintentional jhanic experiences—during childhood, in flow

states, on psychedelics, or in prayer. (This is less true for the fourth and later jhanas, which are more unusual states.)

3. **Progressive reduction in mental tension**—the jhanas arise naturally as you embrace more and more of your experience while anchored to a single meditation object. This suggests that every difficulty is not a distraction but traction. You can't release mental tension until you're aware of it, so the game is to gently anchor yourself on a meditation object (the feeling from the basic technique) and then see if you can spot all the tiny ways you didn't realize you were tense, and let them go. *"It's awareness and love all the way down."* It also suggests we're not adding anything to experience, we're subtracting and learning to rest in what's already there.

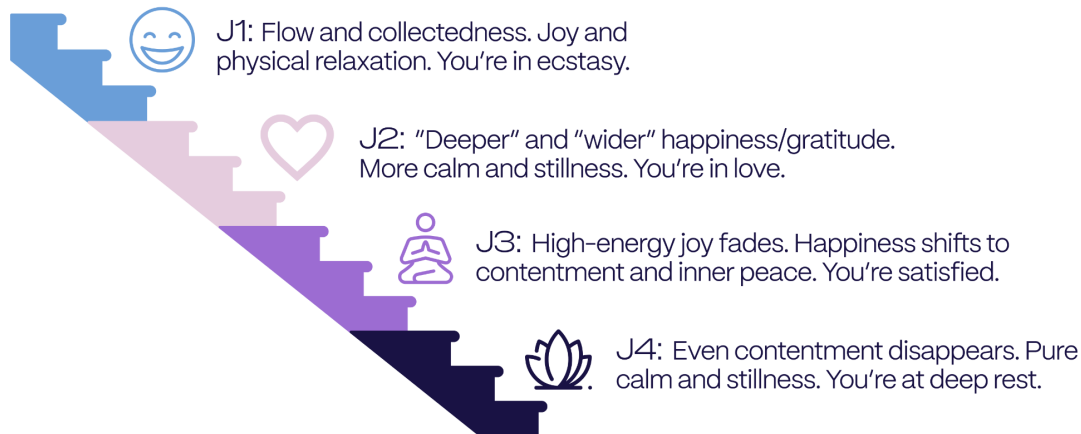
Signs you're in jhana

Each jhana refers to a cluster of states. Just like there are different kinds of "headache" and "giggling fit" in terms of amplitude and accompanying circumstances, there are different kinds of "J1" and "J4." Your experience in jhana will change over time—in fact, no jhana experience will be *exactly* like another. Their depth and intensity will vary, and you can learn to enter jhanas from different starting places and different methods, each of which may color the experience differently. (Just returning to J2 from J3, rather than entering from J1, for example, will change the experience). There also appears to be some degree of individual difference in how jhanas are experienced.

Here are the signs we look for:

- **There's a phase shift where you feel less in control of a self-sustaining experience**—you don't do the jhana, the jhana does you. Your attention is gently pulled back into the jhanic factors even when briefly pulled away, almost of its own accord. It's resilient, not fragile.
- **There is an afterglow where you are still feeling the impacts of the jhana even after the experience itself has settled down**—the jhana does not immediately end but continues to impact you even when you are not meditating.
- **There is a noticeable decrease in other sensory cravings**—like being sated after a meal or getting the job you always wanted, pleasures and desires don't feel as "grabby" as usual.
- **There's a certain magnitude to the bliss-peace**—this is hard to quantify, but if it feels like something you'd experience daily or weekly in everyday life, the feeling has probably not yet grown to jhanic levels. (Unless you experience truly high-stimulus or mystical peak states regularly.)

What do jhanas feel like



1. **First Jhana:** You feel "in flow" and collected around the feeling from your basic technique, with a strong sense of joy and physical relaxation. Distracting thoughts fade, and you're absorbed in a pleasant, euphoric state. You're ecstatic.
2. **Second Jhana:** The joy becomes more subtle, opening up to a "deeper" or "wider" happiness/gratitude, and you feel even more absorbed. There's an increase in calm and mental stillness, with little to no thinking. You're in love.
3. **Third Jhana:** Any energetic joy, like euphoria, fades out completely, and the happiness/gratitude settles into a more diffuse contentment and inner peace. You're satisfied.
4. **Fourth Jhana:** Even contentment disappears, leaving pure mental calm and a deep, serene stillness. You're at deep rest.

	Emotional Quality		Location	Size	Oasis Metaphor	Clubbing Metaphor
Jhana 1	Delight, Euphoria	Glee,	Head	Pebble	Seeing the Oasis	Dancing at a rave
Jhana 2	Contentment, Satisfaction, Lovely		Heart	Softball	Entering the Oasis	Fresh air with friends
Jhana 3	Assurance, appreciation	Calm	Abdomen	Beachball	Swimming at the Oasis	At the beach, watching the sun come up

Jhana 4	Peaceful, Luminous, Equality	Root/Pervading	Pervading	Resting in the shade at the Oasis	Crawling into bed
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Here, we are going to offer descriptions of the jhanas from one of our teachers. They can be helpful to triangulate your own experience and understand what you're steering towards. However, they can also be a hindrance: remember that the map is not the territory. The expectations generated by these words won't quite ever match up with the real experience of jhana.

1. **J1:** A glee/rapture/euphoria/bliss, almost more physical than emotional, arises in the heart or the head. It starts as a warm response to generous intent. When I give the feeling away and/or "sink into" it, it grows until it becomes a dominant part of my experience, even if my attention were to temporarily move to other things. It will likely pervade most of the body, especially the upper body. If I have not experienced this recently, it's as if there's a store of energy to burn off, and it can be (but isn't always) dramatic. I typically tear up, but I know some people shake or get hot.
2. **J2:** After some time, it becomes apparent (a) that in addition to the more physical glee/rapture/euphoria/bliss moving through the nervous system, there's a softer, more emotional happiness/gratitude/love in the background, and/or (b) the glee/rapture/euphoria/bliss is a little coarse and tiring. I gently relax the coarser, more physical energy, which moves into the background, and the softer, emotional happiness/gratitude/love moves to the foreground. As I do, there's a clear sense that the most intense part of the experience shifts from the head area to the heart area, and becomes more diffuse (even if it's still a whole-body or beyond-the-body experience). This association is strong enough that sometimes I can start the transition from J1 to J2 just by shifting my attention from my head to my heart. This feels a bit like cuddling early in a relationship: the white-hot infatuation that could keep you up all night may still be present in the background, but most of the experience is warm, loving happiness. If I wasn't already shedding soft tears in the first jhana, I am now, and they're likely hotter and more frequent (but I know many don't always cry the way I do).
3. **J3:** After some time, J2 begins to feel coarse and tiresome. I can intentionally relax the glee/rapture/euphoria/bliss, eventually turning it off like a switch. Alternatively, I can just continue to gently radiate friendliness to the idea of a friend, or all my experience, and let the nervous system gradually quiet down on its own. Or I can move my attention from my heart area to a more gut/lower abdomen. In each case, I end up abiding in just the happiness/gratitude/love in a much lower energy state, without the glee/rapture/euphoria/bliss. The lower energy happiness is like a deep contentment. The most intense part of this delightful, delicious contentment is loosely in my abdomen, and it is generally larger and more diffuse than the source of J2 (which was larger and more diffuse than J1). My body may feel heavy or thick (although after some time and as I begin to transition to J4, it may begin to feel light or "fuzz out").

4. **J4:** After some time, J3 begins to feel coarse or tiresome. As it does, it's as if a way to relax further gradually comes into view, and I let go of the tension I didn't notice previously within the contentment. Alternatively, I can just keep radiating friendliness and let the nervous system run its course in the background. Either way, the contentment fades, and I'm left in a deep, deep peace that some people say can "teach you what equanimity feels like." In the early days, it was as if I were emotionally underwater—everything was so still, from my breath to my emotions. With time, and as I intentionally practiced an ever-so-gentle sense of giving this beautiful state away to other beings, it became lighter, just a touch more joyful, but joyful in a deeply peaceful and relaxing way. It's so still, it feels healing. Sufficient depth in J2-J4, and especially a peace-joy J4, makes me feel as if my nervous system is recharging in some fundamental way, as if it's to emotional healing what sleep is to physical restoration. My body fades out and, with time, "the experience rises to the head." It's not as if I *can't* feel my body; it's just that abiding in peace looms so large in awareness that, by default, the body is not a part of the experience.

18. View: the hidden lever of practice

Earlier, we introduced the concepts of technique and experience. This chapter adds a third concept that quietly shapes the other two.

- **Technique**—what you do
- **Experience**—how you feel
- **View**—what you expect and how you interpret what happens

View is the lived-in expectations, stories, and evaluations through which a practitioner predicts what practice will do and judges what actually happens. It is the lens through which technique becomes experience. It has a few key characteristics:

- **Largely tacit**—We don't hold a view so much as are held by it until we look.
- **Trainable**—View can be adjusted on purpose (e.g., by reading, listening to teachers, or running “belief experiments” discussed below).
- **Bidirectional with experience**—Changing view changes how sensations feel; fresh experiences can also loosen a rigid view.

Why view matters: same technique, different view, different results

Our expectations and interpretations shape our experience, so in effect:

Technique + View → Experience

The same technique with a different view leads to different results. Without right-sizing their view, meditators can easily strain after fireworks or dismiss subtle progress.

The idea of view, and distinguishing it from technique or method, is used across many contemplative traditions. It's most commonly used to counteract the temptation of novices to engage in striving or over-efforting in its various forms, but it goes well beyond that. View can prevent even advanced meditators with regular jhana access from applying them effectively or benefiting from their full potential.

For example, imagine three different people all following the basic technique flawlessly, but one is practicing with a view that emphasizes performance, another self-soothing, and a third, the beauty of interconnectedness.

Background view	Possible experience and outcome
Performance: <i>"I must hit J1 today to prove I'm progressing."</i>	Tight chest, restless scanning for thrills, rising frustration when bliss doesn't appear → sit ends early, confirms self-doubt.
Therapeutic: <i>"This is self-soothing – I'm allowed to feel cared for."</i>	Warmth spreads through the torso, thoughts slow; the session feels nurturing even if no strong jhana markers arise.
Relational: <i>"Each pulse is a chance to taste interconnectedness."</i>	Attention widens to ambient sounds and imagined others; tenderness becomes buoyant, sometimes tipping into effortless generosity and mellow J2.

Likewise, imagine two students practicing the same walking meditation technique. One takes a background view of "Walking is a filler between real sits," while the other takes the view "Every footfall is the earth loving me back." Which do you think will have a more profound experience?

How to run belief experiments

Belief experiments are experiments that target the beliefs we're carrying and shape our view. Experimenting with beliefs is similar to experimenting with technique. Steps include:

1. Name your default view ("I have to reach J1"; "Deep states require hard work"; etc.).
2. Flip or tweak it into a contrasting hypothesis.
3. Hold the new view lightly—as if you were putting on rental goggles at an aquarium.
4. Measure the sit by the typical litmus tests (relaxation, enjoyment, curiosity) or your own metrics (mind-wandering interval, emotional vocabulary)
5. Debrief: Did this belief make the technique easier? Harder? What surprise did it reveal?
6. Treat it exactly like the other playful experiments: *"Reflect like a scientist, play like a child!"*

Unlike techniques, views often go unrecognized in the background, so the most challenging step is often naming your default view. Here are a few ready-made belief-experiments to help seed your own ideas:

View experiment	Swap this view for one session	What to watch for
Process-over-Performance	<i>"My only KPI is how warmly I relate to each moment."</i>	Does the craving for fireworks drop? Do the three litmus tests improve?
Already Complete	<i>"Nothing is missing; I'm simply recognising the jhana that's already here."</i>	Notice if effort collapses and subtle bliss becomes more obvious.
For You, Not Me	<i>"Every pleasant pulse is being gifted to someone I love."</i>	Often expands the field, melts self-conscious striving, and leads to warmth that feels bigger than the body.
Curiosity First	<i>"Experience is a mystery novel—I have no clue what the next page says."</i>	Does awe/wonder ramp up? Does collectedness deepen without forcing?
Self-Friendliness	<i>"Every micro-failure is my cue to say 'Come here, dear friend.'"</i> (Antidote to subtle self-criticism)	Gauge whether recovery from distractions speeds up and inner tone softens.

To design your own experiments, you may also find it useful to:

- Flip a fear ("If I lie down I'll doze" → "Let's explore liminal drowsiness.")
- Borrow a slogan ("No gaining idea," "Mind, relax.")
- Turn the dial (10× less effort, 10× more kindness).

When “view” misfires

There may be an infinite number of views that can prematurely halt progress. Here’s a quick look at some of the most common ones we see by stage of practice.

Stage in the journey	Limiting view	Likely consequence
Pre-jhana	<i>“It’s jhana or bust.”</i>	Constant self-monitoring → no surrender → no jhana.
Pre-jhana	<i>“Jhanas aren’t accessible to me.”</i>	Expectation filters out subtle jhanic cues.
Early jhana	<i>“These states can’t be very deep.”</i>	Stops refining collectedness, plateaus at mild J1/J2.
Applied jhana	<i>“Other tools beat jhana for healing.”</i>	Misses jhana-assisted reconsolidation & priming.
Trait-work	<i>“Personality change or emotional processing is the finish line.”</i>	Never explores jhana as a launch-pad for cessation/non-duality.

Particularly useful views

You can’t really talk about view separate from technique, but most of our curriculum emphasizes technique while smuggling in comments about view. In the discussion of the basic technique, for example, we mentioned a view that can be particularly helpful for both avoiding striving and ensuring the journey is more valuable along the way.

It can be helpful to think of the technique as primarily an opportunity to develop our curiosity, relaxation, and enjoyment, rather than thinking of the feeling as a goal. The jhanas will come in time. But once in jhana, you may discover that the more valuable prize was the life skill of learning to relate to all of experience, no matter what it is, with openness and a loving embrace.

Our favorite view is that the purpose of jhana practice is to make it easier to be the people we aspire to be. There’s a reason we list that as the first and most important principle in the core ideas

section. It's not an abstract philosophical point, it's an instruction on view. This simple idea can seed many related and helpful views that make it easier to avoid striving and apply jhanas to their full potential, which ultimately is about connecting with ourselves and others.

A few curriculum sections are explicitly about view:

- Every stage of Jhana learning is valuable, right to the end
- The far end of the jhana landscape

These sections are not philosophical discussions, but important practice instructions.

19. Every stage of jhana learning is valuable, right to the end



Heads up!

This section contains core ideas for right-sizing your “view.” It’s not a philosophical discussion, but context for helping set expectations and interpretations that can affect your meditative experience.

For more information on “view”, see the section *View: the Hidden Lever of Practice*.

We repeatedly stress that the jhanas are so much more than tourist destinations. They’re milestones on a journey of self-discovery and skill development that make it easier to be the people we want to be.

We stress this so much for good reason. We’ve seen many people make headway in this journey and quit just before discovering astonishingly valuable things.

There are seemingly sensible reasons to prematurely end jhana learning at each stage, so we understand why people quit. But unless you have gone to the very far reaches of jhana practice, which is detailed in this chapter, there is always much more ahead of you.

Of course, it is your choice how far you want to take your studies. We want you to have an informed choice, based on knowing what is out there.

The whole journey

To give you an idea of what we mean by “right to the end,” here is a rough map of the stages one progresses through while working with the jhanas.

Almost all beginning students start in one of these categories:

- Can’t feel emotions in the body at all
- Can feel emotions with low resolution, typically with only access to negative emotions
- Can feel emotions with medium resolution, with access to both negative and positive emotions, but are unaware that they’re resisting negative emotions
- Can feel emotions with medium resolution, with access to both negative and positive emotions, and are aware that they’re resisting negative emotions

- Can feel emotions with medium resolution and are able to unblock themselves enough emotionally to get the basic technique working reliably

And then proceed here:

- Begin to lose themselves in meditation, slipping into flow states, enjoying themselves, and wanting to sit longer
- Experience their first jhana
- Begin getting back to jhana probabilistically
- Begin getting back to jhana deterministically
- Begin progressing through all of the first four jhanas
- Begin using jhanas intentionally for
 - personality change (e.g., reshaping internal thought habits, emotional patterns)
 - shifting their nervous system into a desired state for decision-making or performance
- Begin reliably entering the second four jhanas
- Begin using the jhanas to explore additional psychotechnology (like cessation or nondual pointers)

Some meditators early in this progression see the list of stages and experience frustration. It's easy to think it's all or nothing, and that you're not benefiting unless you get into jhana.

This is not true whatsoever.

The benefits of the journey begin pre-jhana

On the contrary, the value of the journey starts from the earliest stages! Pre-jhana practice includes things like:

- Learning to feel more fully
- Learning to fall in love with the emotions we've been avoiding
- Learning to relate to goals from a sense of play and without striving
- Replacing an inner critic with self-compassion
- A sense of agency that comes from running internal experiments

It can feel slow-going at first because we don't yet have the refuge provided by the jhanas. We have not yet spotted and changed the way we're creating friction in our experience, so we're burdened by frustration, boredom, fear, and other challenging emotions. At first, it can be an uphill battle.

But if students go just a little further, remarkable things happen. Emotions come alive in the body like a heat map. We deeply feel how previously aversive emotions, like grief and fear, can be beautiful, heart-opening experiences. Once you experience “grief is love with nowhere to go,” and discover the heart-opening quality of sadness, you may never experience it the same way again. These discoveries may prove more pivotal than all future time in jhana combined. If all emotions can be embraced, there is much less to fear in life.

We are stating this again because we feel it’s hard to overstate: *It can be helpful to think of the technique as primarily an opportunity to develop our curiosity, relaxation, and enjoyment, rather than thinking of the feeling as a goal.* The jhanas will come in time. But once in jhana, you may discover that the more valuable prize was the life skill of learning to relate to all of experience, no matter what it is, with openness and a loving embrace.

Most people hit jhana and realize what a profound territory has just opened before them. But not always. Once jhana is achieved, we see some people think, “wow, *that was neat*,” and miss their practical potential—how they can be harnessed for personal growth, relationships, and decision-making.

Bliss is extremely useful

We think that having access to on-demand bliss is pretty wonderful, intrinsically. But beyond that, there are three main applications we’ve found useful in our own lives, and the lives of many of our students: memory reconsolidation, priming the nervous system, and “emotional insurance.”

Memory reconsolidation

Memory reconsolidation is a fancy name for one of the basic mechanisms of therapy, when therapy works. It’s the process of rewriting the emotional content and narratives associated with a challenging long-term memory. Have you ever had a cathartic emotional release about your past—an opportunity to forgive someone, or a “good cry” that resolved past feelings of shame, loneliness, or anger? Have you noticed how much lighter you feel afterwards? This is the power of memory reconsolidation. (For theory and studies on how this works, see *Unlocking the Emotional Brain* by Ecker, Ticic, and Hulley.)

In fact, we might oversimplify by saying all approaches to therapy boil down to two things: get the brain into a more malleable state, and then update a maladaptive mental habit to be more useful in the future.

Often, the hardest part is getting the brain into a malleable state—this is the point of enhancing therapy with things like psychedelics, hypnosis, deeply trusting relationships, and more. Deterministic access to the jhanas may make this step easy. Because jhanas leave us deeply relaxed-but-focused and suffused with bliss, love, contentment, or peace, they can make it easier and more effective to turn towards and transform our relationships to challenging memories.

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, peaceful 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 the time they had together.

Here is a rough sketch of what happens when someone uses jhana for memory reconsolidation:

- They enter a blissful or peaceful jhana
- They bring up a difficult memory
- They let the bliss and peace of the jhana and the pain of the memory wash over them at the same time, letting themselves feel 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 updated stories about an event (i.e., “My caregiver wasn’t trying to hurt me, they were just scared and didn’t know what to do.”)
- Later, outside of meditation, anything that triggers the memory now permanently triggers less resistance and more acceptance

The jhanas are not necessary for memory reconsolidation, but can make it easier and more effective, in our experience.

(Note, it's always important to follow your window of tolerance. Like an athlete monitoring their tolerance for pain, only you can know when you feel sufficiently resourced to turn directly towards difficult memories and emotions. A history of trauma may make memory reconsolidation more challenging, and the jhanas are one of many powerful tools, not a silver bullet.)

Nervous system priming for better performance and clearer decisions

Jhanas can also be used to prime the nervous system in advance of an emotionally activating moment. For example, meditating in J2 while feeling disconnected from a partner may make it easier and more natural to apologize or find a way to reconnect. Or noticing you're afraid of failure and meditating in J4 before making long-term company decisions may help right-size your relationship to fear in the planning process.

Such priming effects are easy to understate. Studies have found that prosocial emotions like gratitude and self-compassion can lead to much greater self-control, delayed gratification, and more optimal decisions. Perhaps one of the reasons many experienced meditators value a daily practice (often in the morning) is the value of regular priming.

Emotional insurance policy

Lastly, knowing that you can reliably enter bliss or peace within 20 minutes is a potent insurance policy. It reduces the grip of scarcity-driven behaviors, like unwise coping mechanisms used to escape negative emotions, and allows for a more abundant mindset, in which it is simply assumed that positive states will arise eventually, so they don't have to be chased.

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

Remember how much easier it is to work towards your long-term dreams or meaningfully connect with loved ones when you have a roof over your head, food in your belly, and job security. Now, think of how more secure you could be in exploring your life with a similar underlying sense of emotional abundance.

Connection as a primary goal

If it's not already obvious, there's one throughline through all of these benefits: the jhanas help us connect with ourselves and others. Whether it's turning towards and welcoming that part of ourselves we've been subconsciously avoiding for so long, priming ourselves to attune to our partner's needs, adjusting our addictive behaviors, or taking healthy professional risk because of a mentality of abundance, the jhanas are not about meditating out of the world, but meditating into it.

The far reaches

This is powerful stuff. But there is more. Even those who understand jhana's therapeutic power, and have deterministic jhana access, sometimes miss out on the deeper potential of taking jhana mastery "all the way," through the formless jhanas, J5-J8. These turn out to be portals to even more astonishing experiences beyond the jhanas themselves.

We will discuss this in the section "*The far end of jhana practice.*"