

Is dhyana possible?

The Pali term *jhāna* is not found in the most authoritative of English dictionaries. Its Sanskrit form *dhyāna*, however, can be found anglicized as “dhyana” in the multi-volume Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and the Webster’s 3rd New International Dictionary. According to the OED, “dhyana” appeared in William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902:401) and Aldous Huxley’s final work, *Island* (1962: vi.76).

OED unimpressively glosses “dhyana” as “profound meditation,” while Webster’s 3rd more helpfully defines it as “an uninterrupted state of mental concentration.” These are from the best English dictionaries but their definitions of dhyana leaves much more to be desired. More properly, we can say that dhyana (Pali *jhāna*) means “a suprasensual thought-free mind characterized by profound bliss and clarity.” This is, of course, the early Buddhist usage of the term, and this is the definition we will work with in this reflection.

Most people interested in early Buddhism would use the original Pali term *jhāna*, often writing it simply, without the diacritic, as “jhana.” My personal choice of “dhyana” with the same sense as “jhana” is because dhyana is a widely accepted English word, and is found in the major English dictionaries. Similarly, I prefer to use English words like “Dharma or dharma” and “nirvana” because these are accepted English words. It makes beautiful and helpful reading, unless the context is such that we need to use the Pali terms, which is also perfectly acceptable. As **the Araṇa Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 139) advises us, we should use words that people are familiar with.¹

Coming back to the topic of dhyana. Our vision, knowledge, and experience of meditation has advanced to such a level that we can speak of two extreme “camps” of practitioners or believers: those who are all for dhyana, and those who seem to be against dhyana. We should accept such a dichotomy with a Dharma smile, reflecting on how far we have grown in our awareness of the Dharma, suttas and Buddhism as a whole.

It’s like we have so many toys now, and we can afford to say which ones we like, and which ones we don’t. However, surely we should go on enjoying these toys that we see as pleasurable or helpful, so that we are happy Buddhists. The very first step to being an effective Buddhist is to learn to be happy, especially in an unconditioned and unconditional way. That is, simply to be happy, “unreasonably” happy (we don’t really need a reason to be happy). To be truly happy means that we want others to be happy, too. This is lovingkindness, and the effects of good meditation and mindfulness habits.

Here, I will only briefly mention a couple of names of well known teachers, because of their interesting contrasts, and also due to space constraint. They are all well respected by me, and have something good to teach us, and have contributed much by way of Buddhist teachings and methods. In other words, we should ask ourselves what can we learn from all these really inspired and diligent teachers, even when their views do not coincide, or especially when their views do not coincide.

It actually helps to know that there are **2 kinds of dhyana teachings**: the sutta tradition and the Visuddhi,magga tradition. The sutta teachings on dhyana are easier and more accessible to the

¹ M 139,12 @ [SD 7.8](#).

laity. Visuddhi, magga teachings on dhyana tend to be more “technical” (like the Abhidhamma), whose practices tend to be more complex, even philosophical.

One of those remarkable lay practitioners who have freely shared their meditation experiences and views on dhyana with others is Leigh Brasington. He is himself a student of the late nun, Ayyā Khemā.² His teachings and writings are easily accessible through the Internet.³

Another person who enthusiastically teaches about dhyana is Ajahn Brahmavamso (b 1951).⁴ He is from the Ajahn Chah lineage, but since 2009 has been working on his own.⁵ He openly speaks of dhyana, and is perhaps one of the most “engaged” Buddhist monastic teachers. His approach to dhyana is sutta-based, very lay-friendly and easily practised, with an emphasis on open engagement with the world.

H Gunaratana (“Bhante G”) (b 1927) is a good example of a contemporary self-taught meditation teacher, but well qualified with a PhD in philosophy from the American University, USA. His approach to meditation is basically based on the Visuddhi, magga. Brahmavamso and Gunaratana are interesting teachers in that while the former teaches that dhyana is thought-free, the latter claims that thinking does occur during dhyana.⁶ At one point, Brahmavamso also taught that “the Buddha discovered dhyana.”⁷

Of special interest, too, is Yuttadhammo Bhikkhu (b 1979), a student of Ajahn Tong Sirimangalo, who follows the Insight or Vipassana Meditation Method of Mahasi Sayadaw of Myanmar.⁸ In one of his Youtube talks, Yuttadhammo openly rejects dhyana, saying that *jhāna* simply means “meditation.”⁹ He is also a strong critic of Brahmavamso’s methods.

This interesting cross-section of Buddhist meditation as we have it today, shows its wide spectrum of approaches and experiences. Here, too, we have two approaches to meditation: those who talk (or write) about it, and those who actually practise it. For the former, these differences are especially interesting, even important, and that the teacher they approve of must surely be right.

Practitioners tend to see all these teachers as moving in their own Dharma paths. Some teachers – or better, some methods of these teachers – suit us better than others. We can only know when we have tried them. Even then, we could easily be wrong if we are not good meditators

² Khemā was herself ordained by Narada Thera (Sri Lanka), in 1979, and re-ordained under Hsing-yun of the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order in the newly completed Hsi Lai Temple, Los Angeles, in 1988.

³ See Brasington, “Interpretations of the Jhanas.” <http://www.leighb.com/jhanantp.htm>. A helpful introduction to various contemporary teachers and their methods.

⁴ See eg Brahmavamso, *The Jhanas*, Singapore: Buddhist Fellowship, 2003. <http://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/The-Janans.pdf>

⁵ In 2009, he was officially expelled from the Ajahn Chah Forest Sangha, which effectively means that he now runs his own lineage. See Reflection R108, “[Bhikkhuni Sangha revived](#)” (RB6).

⁶ For a fuller discussion on this issue, see **The Buddha discovered dhyana**, [SD 33.1b \(6\)](#).

⁷ See esp Brahmavamso, *Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond*, 2006:127-130. On why this is a controversial view, see **The Buddha discovered dhyana**, [SD 33.1b \(3.2+4\)](#). I was told he has since changed his view.

⁸ <http://yuttadhammo.sirimangalo.org/2011/02/a-critique-of-brahmavamso-jhanas.html>

⁹ See **The Buddha discovered dhyana**, [SD 33.1b \(4.4.3\)](#). If we claim that *jhāna* merely means “meditation,” it is difficult to explain why the Buddha often describes [the 4 dhyanas](#) as progressively peaceful and blissful states: see esp [SD 33.1b \(5\)](#).

ourselves. As such, it is better to err in practice, than not at all. Even better is to learn from our various experiences, and to constantly keep in touch with the suttas, not only to authenticate our own practice by them, but also to deepen that understanding, and ultimately free our minds of all views.

If we accept and understand that our mind is capable of creative thought and great bliss, then surely it is able to be trained to calm and clear itself, to experience joy and wisdom – that is, experience beauty and truth.¹⁰

The twin qualities of beauty and truth are what underpin all acts that humanize us to such a level as to break the barriers of language and our senses. The fine arts, at their best, give us a vision of the true spirit of what is truly good in humanity. Only when an artist is true to himself, he creates beauty, just as a musician mixes silence and sounds to produce entrancing music. It is like watching a beautiful sunset, the soft mist rolling down the rocky heights, or losing ourselves in the space of a clear starry night sky. If we have experienced a self-transcending, an emptying of the self, or a oneness with everything else, then we can understand that dhyana is possible.¹¹

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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¹⁰ See [SD 40a.1 \(8.1.2\)](#) & Reflection "[No views frees](#)," R255.

¹¹ Mastering dhyana allows us to work towards being arhats or non-returners. However, even without dhyana, we can work towards awakening in this life itself as streamwinners or as once-returners: see Reflection "Stream-winning in this life," R414.