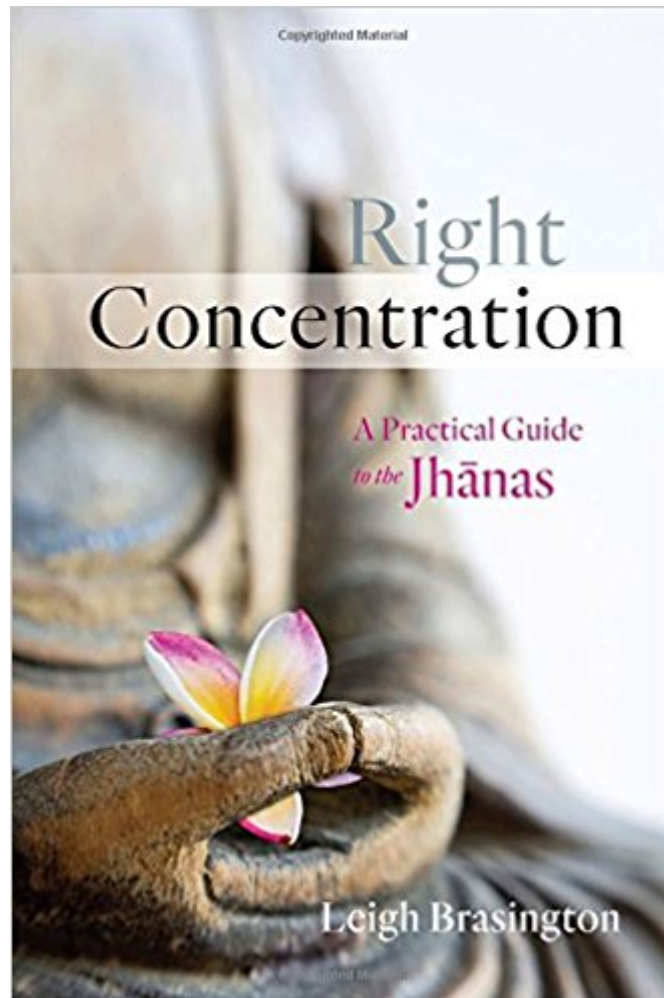




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Right Concentration: A Practical Guide To The Jhanas



Synopsis

The Buddhist jhanas—successive states of deep focus or meditative absorption—demystified. A very practical guidebook for meditators for navigating their way through these states of bliss and concentration. One of the elements of the Eightfold Path the Buddha taught is Right Concentration: the one-pointedness of mind that, together with ethics, livelihood, meditation, and so forth, leads to the ultimate freedom from suffering. The Jhanas are the method the Buddha himself taught for achieving Right Concentration. They are a series of eight successive states, beginning with bliss and moving on toward radically nonconceptual states. The fact that they can usually be achieved only during prolonged meditation retreat tends to keep them shrouded in mystery. Leigh Brasington is here to unshroud them. He takes away the mystique and gives instructions for them in plain, accessible language, noting the various pitfalls to avoid along the way, and then providing a wealth of material on the theory of jhana practice—all geared toward the practitioner rather than the scholar.

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Customer Reviews

"For those interested in exploring jhana, Leigh brings many years of skillful teaching to this accessible, clear, and helpful guide."—Jack Kornfield, author of *A Path with Heart* Leigh Brasington presents a clear map of jhana practice as he learned it from his teacher, Ayya Khema. As with many aspects of the Buddha's teachings, different traditions and lineages have different views on what constitutes these deeper states of concentration. Leigh offers many examples from his own experience and from his reading of the Buddhist texts in

providing a valuable guide to this particular way of understanding and practicing them." Joseph Goldstein, author of *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*

LEIGH BRASINGTON is a teacher of Insight Meditation who was the senior American student of the late Ven. Ayya Khema, who authorized him to teach the jhanas. He has taught them, along with other insight practices, at well over one hundred residential retreats throughout the United States and Europe.

There is no greater endeavor in this lifetime, than awakening. In particular, awakening to an experiential understanding of no-self. And quite frankly, dry Vipassana practice is a very hard way to do that, near impossible. I'm not sure why Jhana practice is not taught by the American Buddhist establishment, and even disparaged it would seem, but they're not doing their students any favors in that respect. As one exits Jhana, the mind is optimally calm, allowing a rare opportunity to practice insight. Optimally calm, because, at that time, the Hindrances are totally suppressed and one can witness the illusion of self re-asserts itself, re-assembling itself. But without the lucidity of the post-jhanic state, I just don't see how Realization is possible. This is the only practical book I have seen on Jhana practice that guides the meditator, one step at a time, how to meditate the way the Buddha taught it to his monks, even if you're just starting out. We all are starting out, over and over, when we sit in meditation. And it's written in the simplest non technical style so it is totally accessible. This book deserves reading and re-reading and I bet you'll feel the same.

Considerable effort is spent in Buddhist meditation to reach the state of concentration from which insight follows. The *Mindfulness of Breathing (Anapanasati) Sutta*, foundational in the Buddha's teaching, has that objective. So when a book comes along that takes a close and critical look at the stages of concentration essential to insight, it merits careful reading. *Right Concentration* by Leigh Brasington is such a book. This book has two major sections. The first describes the stages of the jhanas as the author believes the Buddha originally taught them as recorded in the original suttas. The meditator can read only this section and be well guided on the path to higher levels of concentration. The second section takes a critical and analytical look at how the author feels later descriptions and practices went astray. This is more than a mere academic exercise, since how you approach a problem effects the result you will experience. Meditation is no exception. The second section also expands on the importance and effects of the jhanas. Chapter

20 touches on psychic powers, a topic that generally garners great curiosity, but is generally given little importance in the overall teachings. Here too it remains almost a sidebar. The modern application to mental pliancy is touched on near the end of the text. And the end of this fine writing comes all too soon, but then as if to compensate, there are four appendixes to supplement the core teachings with suggestions on methodology. Here is a book that balances the forces of dukkha with the possibility of joyous mental states, a need the Buddha clearly expounded upon, as the author points out.

To my mind, there is little if any doubt that what the Buddha meant by *Right Concentration* (as the Eighth, final, and crucial step of his Noble Eightfold Path) was the Jhanas. I've read most of the Pali Canon by now, and it seems like every second or third Sutra mentions this fact: Jhana is Right Concentration. In my late teens I experienced, quite spontaneously, what most likely was the second Jhana. Unfortunately, the state did not last and I could never get back to it. I'm not sure I have to say that I have spent the better part of my life trying to regain that wonderful state and experience. After looking high and low in both likely and unlikely places I finally stumbled upon Theravada Buddhism and the Jhanas. Yes, yes, I said to myself as I read about them, this is what happened. Man, these guys have known about this all along. That was about ten years ago, and I have been an avid and practicing Buddhist meditator ever since. Needless to say, I have ferreted out, bought and read just about everything I could find in the Jhanas, including: *Breath by Breath* by Larry Rosenberg (my first meditation manual as it were); *Mindfulness with Breathing* by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu; *Focused and Fearless* by Shaila Catherine; *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond* by Ajahn Brahm; *The Experience of Samadhi* and *The Art and Skill of Buddhist Meditation* by Richard Shankman; *The Path of Serenity and Insight* by Henepola Gunaratana; *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* by Nyanaponika Thera; and *Practicing the Jhanas* by Stephen Snyder and Tina Rasmussen. These books are all quite wonderful and highly recommended. And, I have read all these books not once, but at least twice, and each has added to my certainty and enthusiasm in my endeavor. Also, I have listened to many lectures by many skilled meditation teachers about Buddhist Meditation and the Jhanas, always

working on reconciling their message and their advice to incorporate it into my practice. Now, to be honest, these books and other sources on the subject of Jhana do not wholeheartedly agree with each other; in fact, many present conflicting views and advice. At the one extreme there is the Visudhimagga, which quite boldly (and not very encouragingly) suggests that it is virtually impossible to attain Jhana (especially in our day and age, is the conclusion one draws); at the other extreme is the view that the Jhanas are not even needed to attain spiritual liberation and enlightenment (although the Buddha himself begged to differ throughout the Pali Canon). This certainly made one wish for a voice that could reconcile things and spell out a workable approach. Enter, finally, a wonderful and measured voice of reason: Leigh Brasington's simply wonderful book, "Right Concentration: A Practical Guide to the Jhanas." To me, this is the book that reconciles everything. And not only does it make perfect sense, but Leigh's careful handholding and spot-on advice actually works. For I am finally seeing the Jhanas (and my wonderful teen experience) again. In other words, and to use a much over-used phrase: I cannot praise or recommend this book enough. Leigh realized that he might ruffle some feathers in the Jhana community with his views and approach, but I cannot fault him in the least. His take on what the Pali Canon actually says (meaning, in essence, what the Buddha actually taught as well as can be established 2,500 years later) about the Jhanas makes courageous sense. His approach to reaching the Jhanas (and yes, he stresses, they are very reachable indeed) is practical and based both on the Canon and on his long experience both as a meditator and a teacher. In other words, this is a book that not only promises but in fact delivers, and I am very grateful for that. So, if you are a Buddhist meditator, or any kind of meditator, and if your deepest wish is to (in this life) reach enlightenment: buy this book; read this book; treat this book as your best teacher; use this book. And so, may your dreams come true.

A very valuable practical reference to anyone who wishes to lean and practice Jhana. It appears that the author has arrived at a simple, effective, and practical understanding of the art of Jhana meditation. In my personal view Jhanas have nothing mystical or special to them, they are just a set of exercises you do after you have developed your concentration skills. Similar to a body builder in a gym attempting advanced exercises after building some basic muscle power. As I read the book I was pleasantly surprised to see a well known practitioner with a similar understanding. I believe that Neuroscience research will further validate the author's approach in the coming years, and meditation as a scientific method of training the brain will be better understood. I applaud the author

here for breaking the confines of myths and tradition, and moving to a more lucid modern day scientific understanding of what he teaches. Well done

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