

# Biting Into The Mango: Doing Jhana Practice With Ayya Khema

By [Barbara Gates](#), [Wes Nisker](#)

*Ayya Khema was born in Germany in 1923 of Jewish parents, and, after a harrowing escape from the Nazi regime, she eventually immigrated to America. While traveling through Asia in the early 1960s, she was introduced to the Dharma. Ten years later she began to teach meditation. Ordained as a Buddhist nun in 1979, she later established the Parappuduwa Nuns' Island in Sri Lanka as a center for women who want to do intensive practice or take ordination. She is also the founder and director of Buddha-Haus in Germany and teaches meditation worldwide. Her many books on Dharma and meditation practice include Being Nobody, Going Nowhere and When the Iron Eagle Flies. We interviewed Ayya Khema at Green Gulch Farm Zen Center where she was leading a retreat. We enjoyed tea and a good deal of laughter as we explored Ayya Khema's unique approach to Theravada practice.*

—Wes Nisker and Barbara Gates

**Inquiring Mind:** You seem to be one of the only teachers in the Theravadan tradition who teaches the so-called *jhana* practices, the meditative absorptions. Describe for us how a meditator enters into an absorption or jhanic state.

**Ayya Khema:** We begin with a concentration practice. It doesn't matter whether we watch our breath or visualize a Buddha statue inside of us or use coloured discs (*kasinas*). Each of these are methods of calming the mind, and in jhana practice it is important to calm the mind to the point where thinking stops. People who are patient and steady in their meditation will eventually stop thinking.

Once we have completely calmed the mind—stopped thinking and reacting—then we can step over the threshold into our inner being, where everybody really belongs. What we experience at that moment of entry is utter delight. That is an indication that we are in the first jhana. Immediately after feeling this utter delight, the first reaction of the mind usually is, "Hey, what is this?" And then the absorption is broken. At that time people need a teacher who will tell them, "That's fine, do it again." I've heard that when vipassana students accidentally enter the jhanas, many teachers will just say, "Go back to the breath. That's not insight." It's unfortunate that people are not guided through the jhanas with teachers who can tell them how to use the jhanas for insight.

After we have experienced the first jhana, we have to do three things before we open our eyes. First is to recapitulate how we got there, because people have individual ways of doing it. Some get there through lovingkindness meditation, some through watching the breath, some through "sweeping," or other methods. The second thing we have to do before opening our eyes is to see that this pleasant state is impermanent. And the third thing is to ask, "What am I learning?" The jhanas are a means to an end, so we have to learn something from them. What we are learning from them initially is that the delight which we are looking for in the world lives inside of us. Anybody who is able to meditate properly has this delight at their fingertips anytime they want it. Even in a dentist's waiting room...anytime. [Laughter]

So the experience of delight in the jhanic state is a very major breakthrough. The meditator will then understand that our senses—seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, and thinking—are only survival systems. They are not an amusement park. Everybody thinks their senses are an amusement park, and if they don't get the right kind of amusement from them

they get irate. But the senses are only our survival systems. And survival is a guaranteed failure. Nobody makes it. Birth is a guarantee for death.

**IM:** So, the jhanas are the real amusement park, the place to go for a good time?

**AK:** Absolutely. A good time, and much more. In sutta sixty-six of the Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima Nikaya) the Buddha says:

*Here, Udayin, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first jhana. . . . With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, he enters upon and abides in the second jhana. . . . With the fading away as well of rapture . . . he enters upon and abides in the third jhana. . . . With the abandoning of pleasure and pain . . . he enters upon and abides in the fourth jhana. . . . This is called the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of seclusion, the bliss of peace, the bliss of enlightenment. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should be pursued, that it should be developed, that it should be cultivated, that it should not be feared.*

My own teacher, the Venerable Nannarama Mahathera, who died in 1992 at the age of ninety-one, told me, "Go to the West and teach the jhanas. They are a lost art."

**IM:** Perhaps one reason why jhanas are not widely taught is because of a bias against the concept of "absorption," which has the connotation of being lost, or spaced out or hypnotized.

**AK:** That might be the case. People often get scared at the beginning of the first jhana because they think they're losing control. As their teacher I tell them, "When you are swept away by feelings of ordinary unhappiness, you obviously have no control over yourself. A person who is in control would never voluntarily be unhappy. So in your ordinary life you must be lost, or out of control." By contrast, in absorption, we are no longer projecting our ego onto reality. We are experiencing a taste of the emptiness of self, and while it may feel as though we are losing control, we are actually, at last, arriving at truth.

*Absorption* means that we're within the feeling base of our inner being. We believe we're living on the thinking base of our being, but we're actually living on the feeling base. And the absorption brings us to that feeling base. And the only way we can be enlightened is when we *feel* or *experience* that there's nobody home.

**IM:** Let's go back to that feeling base for a while. You left us in the first jhana. Tell us what happens next.

**AK:** The first jhana is characterized by delightful sensations. One of the most common of these is a feeling of losing gravity, a feeling of almost floating. Others include a feeling of warmth in the spiritual heart area, or a very pleasant movement in the body, such as tingling from top to toe. Another is a sense of losing the limits of the body.

In the first jhana there is also a feeling of joy. Now if we want to go to the second level of absorption, we can deliberately put the delightful sensations in the back of our consciousness and put the joy in the forefront, as the next meditation subject. The pleasant sensations don't totally disappear, but they are no longer predominant.

**IM:** So the joy was present in the first jhana, but it was in the back of the consciousness.

**AK:** Yes, and it is often quite difficult for Westerners to bring it to the forefront of their consciousness. They're not used to being joyful without any outside stimulation.

**IM:** Without being at the movies or being on a Ferris Wheel.

**AK:** Exactly. Or buying ice cream. [Laughter] But even though it may be difficult, we should never bypass any jhana when we are practicing them. They must be done step by step, and they must be learned in such a way that we know exactly which jhana we are in at any given moment.

**IM:** Do people have a hard time distinguishing between the delightful sensations and the joy?

**AK:** Usually not, at least when they are being guided by a teacher. The delightful sensations are more closely associated with the body, while joy is an emotional state, which appears in the area of what we call the spiritual heart. We will find that as we proceed on through the jhanic states, these meditation subjects become more and more subtle. For instance, the first four jhanas are called the *fine material* meditative absorptions, or "*rupa* jhanas," and the last four are called *immaterial* or *formless* meditative absorptions, "*arupa* jhanas."

**IM:** Okay. And we are still only in the second jhana. Six more to go.

**AK:** But we are in joy. So, what's the problem? [Laughter]

What we are learning in the second jhana is that the joy we've been seeking through the senses has absolutely no comparison to the joy we're already carrying inside of us. That brings an enormous change in one's life, because what mankind is doing—and America is the great example of this—is looking for happiness through sense pleasures from the external world. It's not that we don't get pleasant sense contacts anymore. On the contrary. But we don't go looking for them and when we get them we're grateful. The sense pleasures also become far more impactful because we're not trying to grasp them or hold on to them. They're just happening. And that's a result of the second jhana.

Now, to get to the third jhana we have to let go of the joy, and what happens then is a feeling of deep contentment. And when the contentment is dropped, that leads to the fourth jhana which brings about utter stillness and peacefulness.

We can see how the jhanas are connected by cause and effect. Concentration leads to delightful sensation, delightful sensation leads to joy, joy leads to contentment, and contentment leads to utter peacefulness. It all proceeds through cause and effect, as is common in the Buddha's teaching.

By the time we are in the fourth jhana, the observing ego has receded far into the background. And what we're learning from this jhana is that utter peacefulness can only come when the ego has been relegated far into the background. These realizations are all leading us toward the goal.

**IM:** In the Burmese *satipatthana* method people are taught that deep states of concentration are not vital to the attainment of wisdom.

**AK:** I would reply that it's like biting into the mango. If we've never eaten a mango and want to know what it tastes like, you ask someone. And he or she will tell us, "Oh, it's delicious. It's soft, juicy and sweet." Well, it could be a peach, couldn't it. It doesn't have to be a mango. But if we bite into the mango, we will know what it is like and won't have to ask anybody.

**IM:** Let's move on to the last four jhanas.

**AK:** The last four are the formless jhanas. While the first four have a connection to the experiences we have with ordinary states of consciousness, the last four have no connection to our everyday reality.

Number five is called infinity of space, and we would never have any inkling of that unless we meditate. Number six is called infinity of consciousness. Seven is the base of nothingness. And the eighth and final jhana is called neither perception nor nonperception.

Five and six are particularly useful in experiencing that there's no limited person, no identity, because in the infinity of space and consciousness there is no personal form left. "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." Not only is it unlimited, it's not ours. There's nobody having consciousness. It just is. From that we now realize also that there is universal consciousness. That's when we begin to take responsibility for the rest of humanity. We see the importance of not having any negative thought or emotion, which would have a detrimental effect on universal consciousness, because we are all intrinsically connected.

The seventh jhana can be called an extension of five and six because it shows us that there is absolutely nothing solid anywhere to be found, nothing to hang on to. There's nothing that we can put our finger on and say, "That's what I'm going to have" or "That's what I'm going to keep" or "That's what I'm going to be." Nothing, nothing at all.

The eighth jhana is actually a refinement of the fourth, because the observer has receded to the point of almost disappearing altogether. There is neither perception nor nonperception. People who accidentally enter this jhana might think they've suddenly become enlightened, because the observer is so minimal. This experience brings enormous energy to the mind, making it clear and powerful. But this shouldn't be confused with enlightenment.

**IM:** Do you think it is possible to achieve enlightenment without doing the jhanas?

**AK:** I dare say it's possible. But it must be terribly difficult. This is such a smooth, well-oiled path.

Besides, I think that ignoring the jhanas leaves a kind of dryness in the Theravadan teaching. It takes a lot of the joy out of the path. Most of Theravadan teaching in the West is derived from the Burmese tradition, which is largely based on the Abhidhamma. The practices are therefore very analytical. The Abhidhamma is concerned with taking reality apart, bit by bit, which is useful for people whose minds tend in that direction. While that practice certainly produces insight, it does not give access to elevated states of consciousness, which can enhance the quality of life and give us a taste of the end of *dukkha*. Furthermore, doing jhana practice does not prevent the meditator from an analytic observation of him or herself. On the contrary, it facilitates the process, because the mind is unperturbed.

It is my fervent wish and hope that I can at least spread enough seeds so that people become interested and start practicing the jhanas. It changes their very being, and thereby the collective consciousness on this planet. It's the natural way for the meditative mind to go. These states are accessible to anyone. They are like a hidden jewel that we carry within.

**IM:** Once you've been through all eight jhanas, if you aren't enlightened, what is the result?

**AK:** There are two immediate and tangible results. One is that we have had a taste of freedom and will therefore continue to practice with vigour. The second one is an enhancement of our quality of life, based on a much deeper perspective.

However, we don't actually have to go to the eighth jhana. The Buddha taught that after any of the jhanas we can attempt to have path and fruit. The path moment is the experience of being nothing and nobody; it is a universal experience, and everybody explains it in the same way, so the teacher has little trouble recognizing it. The experience is usually described with tears of joy. The meditator feels totally relieved, as if a burden has fallen off his or her shoulders. That's all one can say about the path moment. The fruit moment, which comes immediately afterwards, is the moment when we realize what has happened. The fruit moment feels as though we have been turned inside out. After it happens, it is impossible ever again to believe that we are a separate person, or separate entity. We have to remember and relive the fruit moment over and over again in order to make that experience part of our everyday consciousness. That first path and fruit is only a knowing, but we can remember it whenever we put our mind on it again. When we don't put our mind on it, once again we become "me."

One other thing that happens after a path and fruit moment is that we have no doubt that the Buddha is our teacher. We couldn't possibly have anybody else because we have used the guidelines transmitted to us on the Buddha's path. Also, we can no longer break any of the five precepts, which is a lovely way of checking whether we have actually had this momentous experience. And finally, it is said, that after this path and fruit experience, we will only have seven more lives, maximum.

**IM:** Maybe if we had a few more lives, we could finish describing all the nuances of jhana practice. [Laughter] Maybe some other time.

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