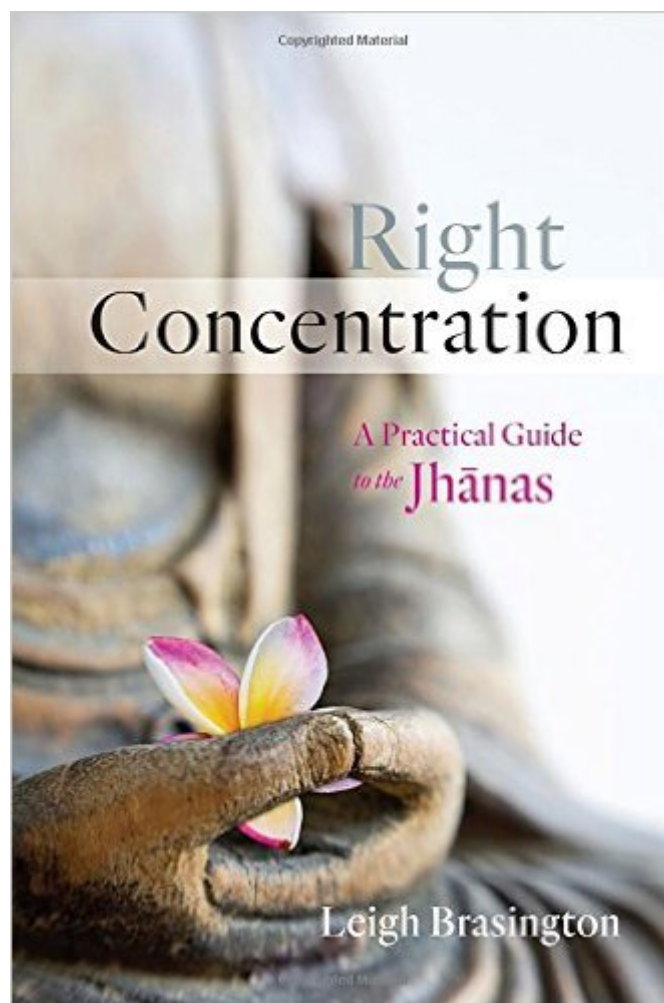


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Right Concentration: A Practical Guide To The Jhanas



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

After nearly twenty years of teaching the jhanas (initially at Ayya Khema's request), Leigh Brasington has gathered his approach into a very useful book. I have been on one of Leigh's retreats, and I got to read through an early draft of this book in 2013; I can highly recommend both. His approach to the jhanas is based primarily on the early suttas (in contrast to later traditions), and aims at making a realistic beginning that can be deepened with time and practice. Like his teacher Ayya Khema, he is relentless in framing the experience of the jhanas as a support for

insight. Wisdom distilled from helping thousands of students find and navigate these mindstates combines with a clear and nuanced reading of the relevant sutta texts.

Brasington's book is one of at least three to appear this fall (two others are Richard Shankman's and Culadasa John Yates's) that help us reintegrate and rebalance the Buddha's teachings about mindfulness, samadhi (concentration), and insight. Any perusal of early Buddhist texts reveals that these are not three separate aspects of the path of practice but rather are meant to be developed in concert, each supporting the others. This book helps reset the balance among the factors of the path by significantly turning up the importance of cultivating a collected mind in the mix relative to the emphasis frequently given mindfulness in western Buddhist practice. Brasington's direct and conversational tone, and his focus throughout the book on practical approaches to developing and sustaining an undistracted and clear mind, help demystify the process of cultivating mind-states in which liberating insights can arise. His method focuses on following the pleasures and more ever more subtle beneficial qualities that arise in meditation into ever deeper and stiller places. This is a very powerful technique because the pleasures of meditation, which were highly praised and often recommended by the Buddha, help us stop chasing after pleasures that can't last and that are dependent on exterior external conditions being arranged just so, something we just can't control in life. The most important thing to say about the method presented in this book, which the author (on pages 39 and 160) explicitly makes clear is just his method, the method he learned from his teacher, is that it actually works in practice. I and many others can attest to its effectiveness in our own meditative experiences: among many ways into great stillness of mind, the way Brasington teaches is a very natural and easy way that anybody can cultivate. Some critics may say that Brasington's method is invalid because it isn't spelled out in the early texts or later commentaries. But, as Brasington notes, the instructions available to us in the early texts are elliptical in the extreme: the practice of meditation in the Buddhist traditions has always been passed on from teacher to student, with the teacher tailoring and adjusting techniques so that each student can master the practices and put them to use in cultivating insight. It's silly to debate whether a technique is orthodox and correct if it works: the Buddha only cared about one thing, ending suffering, and any technique that works for you toward this end is the "right" technique. (The Buddha did hold that all awakening happens in fundamentally the same way "by not clinging to experience as *me* or *mine* or *mine's*" but individuals develop their own understanding of this way and their own toolboxes of techniques tailored to their life histories and personalities.) Brasington is one of the

few authors who discuss ways into the four immaterial realms in addition to the classic jhanas, describing how to access them and use them. Here too, he provides simple instructions that work; again, there are other ways in, but the approaches he describes are natural and easy. Anyone who has stilled the mind through his previous instructions can keep going over time into places/spaces that are increasingly spacious and boundless in quality. As Brasington emphasizes, all of these states are all naturally occurring states of mind that were cultivated from ancient times in India: the Buddha saw that they could be used to prepare the mind for letting go and Brasington encourages us to use them to this same end. In the second half of the book, Brasington presents textual analysis to show that his instructions for cultivating an undistracted mind are in accord with texts in the pre-commentarial tradition. This section provides a refreshing addition to our understanding, with many original comments and corrections. In particular, Brasington's work to unpack the meaning of key terms in the various texts provides one more nail in the coffin of the idea that somehow the later commentaries are more useful than the suttas (the early discourses that capture the Buddha's teachings) in understanding how meditation practice develops. Simply put, the commentaries perform scholastic contortions in an attempt to make the teachings of the suttas internally consistent; but the Buddha's teachings simply don't appear to have been designed to work this way, being practical approaches to ending suffering rather than philosophical or theoretical offerings. One of the many beauties of this second part of the book is that Brasington shows that any practitioner can make use of the early Buddhist discourses to guide his or her practice in ways that lead toward freedom. You don't have to be an academic or even an intellectual to enter the thought-world of the discourses, soak up their beautiful and inspiring language, and be guided by the wisdom of the teachings they hold. And, in these early teachings, there is a constant and thorough-going emphasis on the importance of cultivating an undistracted, clear, and still mind in order to create a field for penetrating insight into the nature of all experience. With a method convincingly based in the suttas, Brasington takes us right into the very heart of this practice.

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.

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