

*I want to know the truth, I want to know the deepest truth there is.*

## Sharpening Mañjuśrī's Sword

*An Interview with Leigh Brasington*

*Leigh Brasington has been practicing meditation since 1985 and is the senior American student of the late Ven. Ayya Khema. Leigh began assisting Ven. Ayya Khemma in 1994, and was authorized to teach in 1997. He teaches in Europe and North America.*

**Leigh, you are a teacher perhaps best known for guiding people through an exploration of the *jhānas*, stages of concentration meditation known as “absorptions.” But this is not all you do, am I right?**

For my day job I'm a software engineer. I live in Alameda, CA and work for a small software company where I'm responsible for the Windows and Web interfaces to their database. But yes, I also teach dharma in two major aspects, both concentration meditation and insight practices.

**How did you come to learn and eventually teach these practices?**

Well, I had injured my knees and was seeing a massage therapist who was a student of Ruth Denison's and she suggested that meditation would be good for me. Not long afterwards, she pointed me to a retreat with Ayya Khema, and I signed up. I went off into the desert for ten days to meditate, and it changed my life. I felt there must be something

to this, so I kept practicing. I was on my second retreat at Wat Suan Mokkh with Ajahn Buddhadasa and stumbled into a state of rapture and happiness that was given the name *pīti* [joy, rapture]. For the next couple of years I would go on retreat and I would get to *pīti* and ask the teachers about it. They told me I should not pursue that, but being rather stubborn I tended to ignore them and went back to looking for *pīti*. When I experienced *pīti* it was a good sitting, and if I didn't—well, better luck next time.

After about two years of this I had another chance to do a retreat with Ayya Khema, and off I went. In the first interview with Ayya, she said to me, “Tell me about your meditation practice.” And I said, “Well, I can get to *pīti*.” And she said, “Good. That's the first *jhāna* [absorption], here's how you do the second.” Finally, somebody knew what I was doing, and knew what I was supposed to be doing with it. So during the course of that ten-day retreat, I learned the second, third, fourth and fifth *jhānas*, and a year later I came back and

learned the sixth, seventh and eighth. As I learned what I was supposed to be doing, I was also hanging out having fun going through these altered states of consciousness.

**“A pleasant abiding here and now,” is how the texts refer to it, yes?**

Exactly. But Ayya Khema also insisted I do insight practice in the same sittings that I was going through the *jhānas*. In other words, use the *jhānas* as the preliminary practice and then do insight practice. Ayya Khema was not someone you would disagree with. It was just “Yes ma'am, I'll go try that right away.”

So I did as she said and was totally astonished at the amount of insight that came flooding in. Luckily this was a five-week retreat, and I had lots of time to take the concentration skills I had learned and apply them to generate a mind that could do insight practice much more effectively. And the insights changed my life in a very dramatic way. When I came back my friends could tell that I was different.

And over time, Ayya Khema felt I had learned these states fairly well and had some understanding of what the Buddha was teaching and began encouraging me to teach. Eventually in 1996, at her last retreat in North America as it turned out, I said, “OK, if somebody will organize a retreat, I’ll teach it.” And one of her students organized a retreat for me to teach in 1997 at Cloud Mountain in southern Washington. The retreat went well, and I seem to be invited to places to teach ever since.

### **Tell us something about Ayya Khema. What was she like?**

She was a very amazing person. Her autobiography *I Give You My Life* [Shambhala] is a really fantastic read, and if you want quite a good adventure story I highly recommend it. Without getting into the whole story here, I’ll just say that in addition to being a Theravada nun she was your favorite Jewish grandmother and she was as German as they come. That is, she was warm and she was stern. If you were a person who had trouble with authority figures, she probably would not be a good teacher for you. But if you were willing to do what she told you, you would find her to be a brilliant teacher and a very loving person as well.

She had a magnificent way of doing metta meditation, with fantastic guided imagery. She knew the suttas [texts] amazingly well, and had a deep respect for the Buddha and his teachings, which really came across in her own teaching. But it was her clarity that was her most memorable skill. Her teaching was basically *sīla* [virtue], *samādhi* [concentration], and *pañña*

[wisdom], taken straight from the Buddha. Morality as a foundation, *jhāna* practice as right concentration, which takes you directly to insight practice and the gaining of wisdom.

### **Let’s try to unpack this terminology a little. What exactly is a *jhāna*, and what is concentration practice?**

Concentration is the broader term, and there are many levels of concentration. The commentaries speak of momentary concentration, access concentration, and full concentration, which are the *jhānas*. The suttas actually talk about four *jhānas* and four immaterial states, but these are now commonly lumped together into the eight *jhānas*. These are eight altered states of consciousness that are brought on by concentration, each yielding more concentration than the previous, allowing you to stair-step your way into deeper levels of concentration. They are ordered according to increasing subtlety of object.

Concentration is one of the factors of the eight-fold path. Again and again throughout the texts, the Buddha defines right concentration as the practice and development of the *jhānas*. It’s not some sort of adjunct to his teaching—it’s central. Neglecting the *jhānas* is like practicing a seven-fold path.

### **So how does one go about gaining access to the *jhānas*?**

You sit down and settle the mind upon a single object of attention. The nature of the object is not too important, but keeping it steadily in mind is. Of course the mind will wander off the object. As it does this, you gently bring it back—again and

again and again. You can’t force the mind to stay on the object, but if you bring it back often enough, it will eventually settle on the object. Whenever it does so successfully for a short while, this is called momentary concentration. Such basic concentration is important for any meditation practice, and one is often told at this point to open up one’s mind to various other objects in different kinds of insight practices.

But you can continue working with bringing the mind back, until the mind stays back. At that point, you’re at what the commentaries refer to as access concentration, in the sense that this is sufficient concentration to give you access to the *jhānas*. You can then step into these *jhānic* states, and continue the process of refining and focusing your concentration.

You initially experience the *jhānas* with an object that is not particularly subtle. An intense burst of mental and physical joy—called *pīti*—which naturally emerges when the mind arrives at steady concentration. The joy/rapture gradually calms down to happiness, then to contentment, and then to quiet stillness, as the objects of awareness become more and more subtle and as your concentration becomes stronger and stronger.

### **Is it a matter of greater intensity of concentration in one moment, or of increasing the continuity of concentration over multiple mind moments?**

It’s both of these. The intensity of the concentration in the moment increases, and the non-distractibility over time also increases. The result is that the mind can be one-pointed with more and more subtle objects.

**However compelling the *jhāna* practice is, gaining real insight into the nature of experience is much more so.**

Objects you could hardly stay with at all in normal awareness can now be held clearly in mind, and as concentration deepens the likelihood of losing your focus decreases considerably.

All this generates a mind, as the Buddha says, that is focused, clear, sharp, bright, malleable, wieldy, and attained to imperturbability, which is just the kind of mind you want to have when you're doing insight practice.

**What kind of insight practice does one then do?**

It's basically the same insight practice that you've been doing all along, but it's now done much more profoundly. The number of insights that arise is much greater, and the depth of the insight is much more profound. It's like you've turbo-charged your practice. So if you're doing the Mahasi method of simply noting everything that's going on, you are able to notice much more subtle things. If you're doing choiceless awareness practice, again, you're able to notice much more subtle things. You're able to take something like dependent origination and investigate it in a way that is more than just reciting the twelve links. Your mind has the capacity to really stay with a mental object and not go wandering off.

**Is it true that you can't, strictly speaking, do both at the same time? If the mind gets settled on a**

**single object, it's not really able to discern characteristics about that object (such as its impermanence or selflessness), and if one is discerning characteristics of the objects of experience (a process we would call wisdom or insight) it's not, almost by definition, going to be one-pointed.**

That's my understanding. There are some teachers who encourage such a modest level of concentration that you would be able to discern the characteristics of the object you're one-pointed on. They tend to cite the example (Majjhima Nikaya 111) of Sariputta having insight into states one by one as they arise and pass away in experience. But this is just one sutta, and there are many others in which the Buddha gives instructions to step systematically through the *jhānas*: first abandon the hindrances, move steadily through the *jhānas*, and then turn the mind to insight practice afterwards.

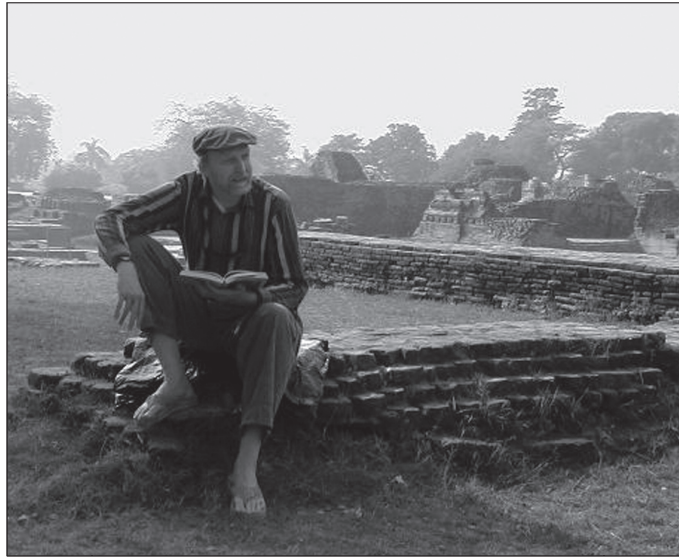
Formal concentration practice sharpens the mind to a remarkable extent, and this is actually a very helpful metaphor. In the Mahayana tradition you have Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva of wisdom, who has the sword of wisdom he uses to cut through the bonds of ignorance. *Jhāna* practice is simply sharpening Mañjuśrī's sword. It's sitting down, taking the time out to get the sword nice and sharp, and then you go to work cutting the bonds. If the sword is dull, it's a lot more difficult to do any cutting. If you sharpen it up, you actually make up all the time you

“wasted” doing the sharpening. *Jhāna* practice is about generating a sharp mind that is much more effective at insight practice.

**What do you make of the view that the *jhānas* are dangerous because they are so alluring and seductive that you can get stuck in them and become a “samadhi junkie,” as it were?**

This is a slight problem, but only very slight if you are working with a knowledgeable teacher. Somebody might learn these altered states of consciousness, full of rapture, happiness, contentment, quiet stillness, and there may be a tendency to get hooked on them. But as most of us have learned at one stage of life or another, getting high is wonderful, but with our famously short attention span we eventually say, “Okay, been there, done that, what's next?” I know this very well because that's exactly where I was.

What's next is insight. When I can get students to stop just playing with the bliss of *jhāna* and start using their concentrated minds to do insight practice, they invariably find there is all sorts of insight dangling like low-hanging fruit. However compelling the *jhāna* practice is, gaining real insight into the nature of experience is much more so. Seeing the impermanent nature of things, the unsatisfactory or selfless nature of things, is truly remarkable. These insight practices work, as we all well know! They just work so much more powerfully with a concentrated mind.



*At the site of the Buddha's first teaching, Sarnath, India.*

**It sounds as if you are a rather gentle teacher, trying to steer people toward what they have the most enthusiasm for rather than try to break them of their addictions and drive them into a rigorous practice.**

Hey, I'm an old hippie! I grew up questioning authority. And, I also have a leaning toward tantra, in the original sense of the word: discover what the student likes to do and put that in service of the spiritual path. That's so much easier than trying to tell them they've got to do this or that. If I were enlightened, maybe I would have the ability to say something like that. But I'm just another seeker on the path. I don't know what's best for people. I think what's best is to use what people are willing to do. What I am offering them that is really useful is a sharper knife to cut through the jungle.

**I can't help asking about one of the classical fruits of *jhāna* practice: magical powers?**

My favorite answer is a story from the Tibetan tradition. There was a man whose teacher sent him off to

meditate in a cave on his own. Over the next twenty years, he learned the ability to walk on water, which he used as a shortcut when he went to town for alms. His teacher finally comes to visit him and asks, "So, what have you learned in these twenty years?" He stands up all proud and he walks down to the river, walks across, turns around, and comes back. His teacher says, "You fool, you just wasted twenty years of your life! There's a bridge a quarter mile upstream." So, I think they're a waste of time. The Buddha forbade his monks to exhibit them to the laypeople. And he forbade them to even use them unless they were fully enlightened.

**Isn't it tempting, though, to walk on water, pass through walls, or read people's minds?**

I've walked on water—it was in Sweden one winter. I walk through walls all the time, using a thing called a door. And knowing the sort of junk in my own mind, why would I want to pick up other people's junk? Yeah, it might be cool, but how much time and energy am I going to spend

trying to get that to happen? I know I can get insights with a concentrated mind because I've done that. I know that these insights have changed my life for the better. I'm much more interested in going for the stuff that promises to be the highest and I know is working, than to take a side trip for something that might be interesting but might also be just a dead end.

I came to this practice out of curiosity. Many people come to it through *dukkha* [suffering], but my motivation is curiosity. I want to know the truth, I want to know the deepest truth there is. And so I'm much more interested in discovering the true nature of reality than reading somebody's mind or taking a shortcut across the river.

**And in the process, you share your knowledge with others?**

Exactly. If there was a famine and you knew where some bread was, you'd tell people, especially if there was enough of it that everybody could have some. It's as simple as that. I've found something that is very beneficial. There is a great thirst out

***We are reaching a phase where we've got to just integrate jhāna into a mature, well-balanced practice.***

there for spiritual growth, awakening, understanding, and knowledge. This is something thirst-quenching, and there's an inexhaustible supply. It's not like if I give it away, I won't have any [laughing]. It's not even a big deal to give it away, right? It has been so helpful for me, and I have seen it be so helpful for a large number of students. People do get insights that change their lives in very significant ways, and that's great. The planet definitely needs people who know what's going on.

Research has shown that everyone has a particular emotional set point in their brain. Hanging out in these positive states of mind long enough will have a tendency to move your mind, your emotional set point, more towards the positive. But I see that as a wonderful, free side-effect. The real reason for doing it is not so much that it makes you a little happier, but that in the long term you'll gain a lot of insight into the nature of reality. Being able to operate in harmony with the way things really are is what's going to make the biggest difference.

**Leigh, where do you think all this is going?**

It's been very interesting to see the changing role of concentration over the more than twenty years I've been doing this practice. In that first retreat with Ayya Khema, she used the word *jhāna* once, and only in passing. There were no public discourses on the *jhānas* and what they were. By the time I saw her five years later, she was giving dharma

talks on the *jhānas* as part of her course. But nobody else was.

Now, seventeen years later, I'm teaching a course here at BCBS, Bhante Gunaratana is teaching a concentration course at the retreat center at IMS, and Pau Auk Sayadaw was at the Forest Refuge last year for two months and will return next year for four. So the role of concentration seems to be much more recognized, and not only in the Western Theravadan tradition. Alan Wallace has a big project on concentration going now, and the scientists love to wire up meditating monks and see what's going on in their brains.

It's been intriguing to see how interest in concentration has unfolded, and I hope it will continue to be recognized as the important preliminary practice it is. We are reaching a phase where we've got to stop being superficially confused about it and just integrate it into a mature, well-balanced practice.

**One last bonus question: What is nirvana?**

Nirvana is a breakthrough in consciousness such that you never conceive of a separate self ever again. There you have it, from someone who doesn't know [laughs]. That's how I would put it. If you don't conceive of a self, you've uprooted all selfish behavior, including grasping and craving, and hence no more *dukkha*. No more greed, hatred, or delusion.

It is a breakthrough such that you're no longer fooled by an illusion.

If you go down to the beach, you can see the edge of the world six miles offshore; sometimes you can even see a ship fall over the edge if it sails too close. But when you break through the illusion and realize the world is a sphere, with gravity and all that, you see the same thing with your eyes but no longer regard it as the edge of the world. Nirvana is the non-conceiving of any edge of the world—nor of any separate self.

**It sounds like you are in the camp of looking at it as a psychological transformation rather than a breakthrough to an unconditioned transcendent reality?**

I'm firmly in agreement with Nāgārjuna in that I don't think nirvana has ontological existence. There is not a breakthrough to something separate, but there is a transcendent breakthrough that happens in shattering this illusion of self. That's the key point: uprooting of the conceit "I am." When that happens, what you've done is realized the transcendent by having understood that there are no objects. You've gotten beyond subject-object duality and have experienced the entire universe unfolding as an organic whole—yourself included—but not as a separate entity and without any identification of yourself with the whole, either. But the emphasis is upon how to open the door, not about what's on the other side. Do that and you'll know for sure, instead of listening to me speculate.