

Life in HD: An investigation of the jhanas' impact on Jhourney retreat attendees



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Executive summary

The jhanas are a series of altered states that are accessed through sustained concentration, which anecdotally appear to have therapeutic benefits. They are part of an “advanced meditation” trend in the West that’s revived the jhanas in the last few decades. While interest is growing, the practitioner community is still small and nascent, and the benefits claimed by meditators have not yet been studied by researchers.

Our company, Jhourney, teaches the jhanas to beginners, using a pragmatic, secular approach. Because we have unique access to this growing community of practitioners, we decided to ask our alumni to tell us how the jhanas have impacted their lives, using a Google Form survey (n=61) and a handful of followup interviews (n=10).

Our key findings include:

- **The jhanas are strongly altered states that are phenomenologically comparable to psychedelics.** Because they are self-induced, and practitioners remain highly aware throughout, some people find that the benefits of these states are easier to integrate back into their lives afterwards.
- **Most people seem to gravitate towards deeper jhanic states that offer calm and equanimous, rather than euphoric, sensations** – in contrast to media coverage of the jhanas that focuses on the euphoric aspects.
- **Accessing more than one jhana, as well as cultivating deterministic access,** correlates to a higher propensity for people to view their impact as “transformative.”
- Though our samples are small, **those who accessed the jhanas while on retreat were twice as likely to report changes in their relationships and lifestyle, and 1.5 times more likely to report changes in their thoughts and beliefs** compared to those who did not.
- **Benefits reported by alumni include** feeling kinder, calmer, and more empathetic to others, as well as more aware of pleasurable emotions and moments.
- **Even one-time jhana access is often described as “transformative,” but some acute benefits of, and access to, the jhanas can decay over time,** especially given the daily stressors of life. The initial retreat “afterglow” – a state where subjective effects are especially strong – tended to fade after a few days to weeks. Despite this, most (77%) who accessed the jhanas for the first time on retreat still described it as transformative, because they were able to identify enduring benefits from the experiences they did have (see below).
- **People relate to the jhanas in different ways,** which is partly determined by ease of access and how far they progressed. The primary categories that we heard were: as a *benchmark* that helped them understand how pleasurable states actually feel; as a *tool* for altering their mental states; as a *safety net*, where knowing they can access positive emotions gives them confidence to explore deeper personal challenges; and as a

profound and enduring *perception shift*, marked by a deepened clarity, which fundamentally altered their relationship to reality itself.

- **Accessing the jhanas often makes people want to meditate more**, including non-meditators, because they are associated with fun and pleasurable emotions. Those who accessed the jhanas for the first time on retreat were nearly eight times as likely to report meditating more often now, compared to those who did not. This could mean that the jhanas are a useful on-ramp to other types of meditation.
- **Prior meditation experience doesn't seem to affect benefits gained from the jhanas**, which further makes the case for the jhanas' therapeutic potential.
- There were a small number of negative changes reported (6.5% of respondents, or n=4), nearly all from those who *did not* access jhanas on retreat. These included uncovering new emotions or insights about themselves (such as anger or increased sensitivity), or feeling disappointment about not having accessed the jhanas. In addition, some people expressed frustration at not being able to access the jhanas in their post-retreat lives. We suggest that **special attention should be paid to those who do not access jhanas on retreat**, as well as **setting appropriate expectations and offering support** for those who may find the jhanas more difficult to access after the retreat.

Our sample was small and self-selected; we encourage others to further investigate and validate our claims. Nevertheless, our insights give us confidence that we are only at the beginning of understanding the full benefits of the jhanas. We hope this report can serve as a jumping off point for jhana researchers and practitioners, and to help inform others' agendas and program design.

Introduction



There is a quiet renaissance underway in meditation circles. A new wave of “advanced meditation,” as some call it, promises access to a range of unusual subjective experiences – from the euphoric, to psychedelic, to voluntary loss of consciousness – all of which are unlocked solely through sustained concentration. In particular, the *jhanas* are a series of eight altered meditative states that have attracted growing attention from media, researchers, and the public.

The jhanas were first described centuries ago, but they have only recently been revived the West, where meditation styles that downplay the role of altered states – such as Zen, Vipassana, and

mindfulness – are more common. In those traditions, the mind is typically trained to be nonreactive to all stimulation, rather than develop flow states of effortless, looping concentration (as with the jhanas).

It was previously thought that only highly experienced meditators could access the jhanas after years of practice. But new teaching methods have made them available to meditators of all experience levels, some of whom have successfully accessed them in days or weeks. Jhourney is proud to play a role in bringing advanced meditation to a wider audience. Since 2023, we’ve hosted retreats to teach the jhanas to hundreds of people, with encouraging results.

That advanced meditation makes it possible to access intense, altered states isn’t just a party trick. Many meditators report benefits – feeling more calm and joyful; detachment from cravings; improved outlook and relationships – that mirror what’s been reported about psychedelics, MDMA, and ketamine therapy. Unlike drug therapies, the jhanas are also free and legal to practice.

But advanced meditation is new to researchers, and is still understudied. To our knowledge, no one has yet studied the impact of these experiences on meditators in a structured way. One of the issues cited by academic researchers is that, because this practice is so new to Western meditators, it is challenging to recruit enough subjects who are able to reliably enter these

states. (Hagerty et al, 2013¹; Yang et al, 2024²) Jhourney is currently the only retreat company that teaches these techniques in a pragmatic, results-oriented way to people of all meditation backgrounds. This puts us in a unique and privileged position to be able to study and document the impact of these techniques on meditators.

We decided to ask our retreat alumni to tell us about their experiences: what it felt like to access these states, how their lives changed after the retreat (if at all), and how they practice today.

What we wanted to learn

Our goals in pursuing this project can be mapped to a few major areas:

- **How do we describe the jhanas' impact on meditators?** Are the benefits more comparable to *mindfulness meditation*, where we'd expect to see incremental improvements to mental health and wellbeing, or that of *psychedelics*, which can occasion profound experiences that change how people view themselves and the world? In conducting this investigation, we hoped to find an emergent vocabulary and framework to describe the benefits of the jhanas.
- **How do meditators use the jhanas?** Outside observers often wonder why – if the jhanas are supposedly as intense as MDMA or an orgasm – practitioners don't spend all day self-stimulating into rapturous bliss. We wanted to know: how do people use the jhanas in their daily lives, if at all? Are the jhanas closer to a "natural neuromodulator" that nudges people into positively valenced states, or a one-off experience – like psychedelics – that changes how they view the world?
- **How consistent are phenomenological reports, and interpretations, of the jhanas?** Other altered states, such as psychedelic experiences, can be complex and bidirectional in valence. While people have consistent ways of describing the *phenomenology* of these experiences, their *interpretation* of those events varies widely, based on factors specific to that person, such as prior life experiences and cultural context. We wanted to understand whether people describe and *interpret* their jhanic experiences in similar ways. We remained open to all types of changes reported by meditators, including neutral or negative ones.
- **Are there differences in impact between experienced vs. novice meditators?** We've previously found that prior meditation experience doesn't seem to impact one's ability to access jhana (Asparouhova, 2024³). But do novice meditators also gain similar benefits

¹ Mike Hagerty et al, "Case Study of Ecstatic Meditation: fMRI and EEG Evidence of Self-Stimulating a Reward System," *Neural Plasticity*, 02 May 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1155%2F2013%2F653572>.

² Winson Fu Zun Yang et al, "Intensive whole-brain 7T MRI case study of volitional control of brain activity in deep absorptive meditation states," *Cerebral Cortex*, vol. 34, no. 1, January 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cercor/bhad408>.

³ Nadia Asparouhova, "Does meditation experience improve success with the jhanas?," 27 June 2024, <https://nadia.xyz/meditation-experience>.

from their experiences? If so, this would make the case for broadening access to the jhanas to help people from a wide range of backgrounds – not just longtime meditators – experience their benefits.

- **How can Jhourney further support its retreat attendees?** Finally, we wanted to understand how we're doing! While we always conduct exit surveys after our retreats, we don't get as much insight into how our alumni come to regard these experiences in the longer term. We wanted to know if there was anything we could do to further support our alumni before, during, and after a retreat.

Glossary

For those who aren't familiar with the jhanas, or contemplative practices more generally, here are a few terms you'll come across in this report:

- **Afterglow:** Refers to the positive sensations – and sometimes, altered subjective experiences – that linger immediately after an impactful meditation experience, akin to a runner's high.
- **Cessation:** A "total absence of consciousness during meditation," which is often characterized by "the absence of any time experience or tiredness." Sometimes referred to as the "9th jhana." (Laukkonen et al, 2023⁴)
- **Deterministic access:** The ability to access the jhanas at will. We define deterministic access as responding "yes" to the question: "Are you confident that you can return to at least one jhana in under an hour when you want to?"
- **Jhana:** A series of "sequentially ordered states of (a) intentional, effortlessly stable concentration and aware absorption in which (b) negative mind states are reduced or completely absent, while (c) factors including bliss, peace, and formless aspects are developed and refined, and (d) the mind is inclined towards mental rejuvenation, psychological and philosophical insight, and meditative endpoints." (Terje and Sparby, 2024⁵)
- **Mystical experience:** An experience that is characterized by "feelings of unity, sacredness, ineffability, peace and joy, as well as a sense of transcending time and space and an intuitive belief that the experience is a source of objective truth about reality" (Maclean et al, 2012⁶). The term derives from Walter Pahnke's Mystical

⁴ Ruben E. Laukkonen et al, "Chapter 4 - Cessations of consciousness in meditation: Advancing a scientific understanding of nirodha samāpatti," *Progress in Brain Research*, vol. 280, 2023, pp. 61-87, <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.pbr.2022.12.007>.

⁵ Terje Sparby and Matthew D. Sacchet, "Toward a Unified Account of Advanced Concentrative Absorption Meditation: A Systematic Definition and Classification of Jhāna," *Mindfulness*, vol. 15, pp. 1375-1394, 22 May 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-024-02367-w>.

⁶ Katherine A. MacLean et al, "Factor Analysis of the Mystical Experience Questionnaire: A Study of Experiences Occasioned by the Hallucinogen Psilocybin," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 51, issue 4, December 2012, pp. 721-737, <https://doi.org/10.1111%2Fj.1468-5906.2012.01685.x>.

Experience Questionnaire, an assessment developed for psychedelics research in the 1960s.

- **On the mat / On the cushion:** A phrase used by meditators to mean “during a dedicated meditation session.”
- **Sit:** Meditation session

We'll also refer to various jhanic states throughout this report, which will be abbreviated as, e.g. “J1” instead of “1st jhana.” A brief description of each jhana is as follows, which we've adapted from Dhamma Wiki⁷:

1st jhana: Euphoria

2nd jhana: Joy, gratitude

3rd jhana: Contentment, satisfaction

4th jhana: Peace, equanimity

5th jhana: The feeling of viewing an infinite space

6th jhana: The feeling of becoming infinite consciousness

7th jhana: A state where the meditator perceives absolute nothingness

8th jhana: A state where perception itself begins to dissolve

9th jhana: Cessation of consciousness (see definition above)

The first four jhanas (J1-J4) are often referred to as the “form” jhanas, because they are felt in the body and mind. The next four jhanas (J5-J8) are often referred to as the “formless” jhanas, where the sense of body disappears or fades far into the background.

Methodology & sample demographics

We used a combination of a survey and interviews to help us answer our questions, with a strong emphasis on open-ended responses, from which we hoped to develop an emergent vocabulary and framework for describing the impact of the jhanas.

Survey

A survey was emailed on August 8, 2024 to those who attended Jhourney retreats from August 2023 - July 2024. We collected answers via a Google Form, which were anonymous by default, with the option to leave one's name and contact information. We did not offer an incentive for completing the survey.

⁷ Dhamma Wiki, “9 Jhanas,” https://www.dhammadownload.com/index.php/9_Jhanas.

We received 63 responses, which were timestamped between August 8 - September 2, 2024. We further filtered this sample to only include those who completed their retreat (n=61).

A snapshot of this sample is as follows:

- 52% (n=32) accessed a jhana while on retreat
- Among those who accessed a jhana:
 - 59% (n=19) have accessed them since their retreat
 - 56% (n=18) currently have deterministic access to the jhanas; an additional 19% (n=6) said they had deterministic access in the past, but not currently
- 54% (n=33) did an in-person retreat; 46% (n=28) did an online retreat

Among jhana *novices* (meaning, they had never accessed a jhana before) who first accessed them on retreat (n=26):

- 19% (n=5) accessed J1 only
- 54% (n=14) accessed J1-J4
- 27% (n=7) accessed J5+
- The median estimated lifetime meditation experience (self-reported at the time of the survey) was 300 hours, ranging from 10 to 5,000 hours overall
- 77% (n=20) said that gaining access to the jhanas was a transformative experience

Interviews

We additionally conducted followup interviews with a subset of survey respondents (n=10) to better understand their experience. These interviews were held between August 30 - September 10, 2024. They were 45 minutes long and conducted remotely via Google Meet. We did not offer an incentive for these interviews. Candidates were selected according the following criteria:

1. They completed the survey
2. They opted in to being contacted for a follow-up interview (i.e. gave us their name and contact information)
3. They were new to the jhanas at the time of retreat (responded “Yes” to “*Before embarking upon the Jhourney retreat, would you describe yourself as new to the jhanas? (i.e. you had never intentionally accessed a jhana before)*”)
4. They accessed at least J1 (checked “J1” on “*Which jhanas have you accessed? Check all that apply.*”)

A snapshot of this sample is as follows:

- Most had completed a retreat in either February or May-June 2024. Everyone had completed their retreat at least six weeks prior to being interviewed
- Participants were 70% male and 30% female
- Nearly everyone (n=9) had attended an in-person retreat
- Jhana access ranged from J1 through J7. 60% had accessed J1 through J4

- 100% said that gaining access to the jhanas was a transformative experience
- 50% had accessed the jhanas since their retreat
- 40% said they currently had deterministic access to the jhanas; another 30% said they previously had deterministic access

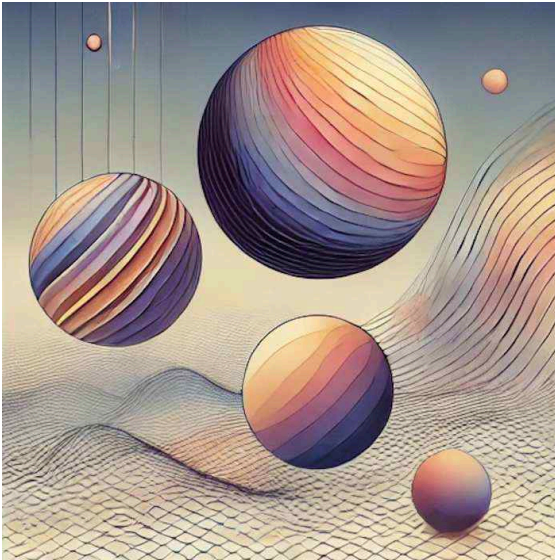
Caveats and limitations

There are limitations to our analysis that we would advise readers to keep in mind as they read through our findings:

- **The email survey was opt-in**, and may not be a fully representative sample of all Jhourney alumni, nor of those who practice the jhanas more generally.
- **Our sample is small**, especially with further segmentation, which limits the conclusions we can confidently draw.
- **Those in our sample had completed a retreat at various times throughout the prior calendar year**, though everyone who filled out the survey had finished their retreat at least a month before. The impact reported may vary between someone who went on retreat, say, a month ago, versus six months ago. Our sample was not large enough to segment by this parameter.
- **Jhana access was determined by self-report**. Although there is quite a bit of overlap between jhana instruction manuals (Sparby and Sacchet, 2024⁸), there is still no widespread consensus as to what constitutes a jhana.

⁸ Terje Sparby and Matthew D. Sacchet, "Toward a Unified Account of Advanced Concentrative Absorption Meditation: A Systematic Definition and Classification of Jhāna," *Mindfulness*, vol. 15, pp. 1375-1394, 22 May 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-024-02367-w>.

Part 1: Discovering Jhourney and the jhanas



People discover the jhanas through trusted connections

Jhanas are still very much in “word-of-mouth” mode. Among those we interviewed, everyone had learned about Jhourney or the jhanas from someone they trusted, whether it was a friend or an influencer online. Specifically, most had discovered the jhanas via Twitter; Nick Cammarata (a meditator who tweets about the jhanas); Stephen Zerfas (Jhourney’s CEO); Scott Alexander’s blog post about the jhanas, which was itself a response to Nick Cammarata’s tweets

(Alexander, 2022⁹); or a personal friend. Two people also discovered the jhanas through the writings of meditation teachers, namely Leigh Brasington, Ayya Khema, and Daniel Ingram.

These responses support the intuition that there are two active communities driving interest in the jhanas today, with some, but not complete overlap – one being tpot (or “This Part Of Twitter,” a Twitter subculture) and its adjacent communities (such as rationalists and the tech industry), and the other dharma leaders like Brasington or Ingram, who have stronger ties to longstanding meditation communities.

They don’t fit the meditator stereotype

Those we interviewed appeared to be motivated by curiosity and novelty, more than spiritual or self-improvement goals – though it’s possible that they were unaware of, or reluctant to share with a stranger, their private motivations for going on a retreat.

Nearly everyone said that they were primarily motivated by curiosity: the jhanas sounded cool, and they wanted to try it. They had few or no expectations going into the retreat. Nearly half said that if nothing else, they figured they’d get to enjoy a quiet week in a retreat setting.

⁹ Scott Alexander, “Nick Cammarata On Jhana,” *Astral Codex Ten*, 26 October 2022, <https://www.astralcodexten.com/p/nick-cammarata-on-jhana>.

The novelty factor of the jhanas seemed to be a major draw. Several people were curious about the descriptions of the jhanas they'd read and suspected they had felt something "jhana-like" in their lives, whether during meditation or activities like intense exercise. They wanted to know if the states they'd experienced were in fact jhanas, and if so, whether they could recreate them on retreat.

Others were motivated by the idea of building a new skill. The jhanas had an air of mystery, and people wanted to see what they were all about. We also spoke to a few "super meditators" who had been on many different meditation retreats and recounted their interest in the jhanas in the way a wine connoisseur might describe a new Burgundy or Chardonnay. It seemed they enjoyed trying new meditation techniques as a hobby, which offer different ways of relating to their minds.

They come from a mix of meditation backgrounds

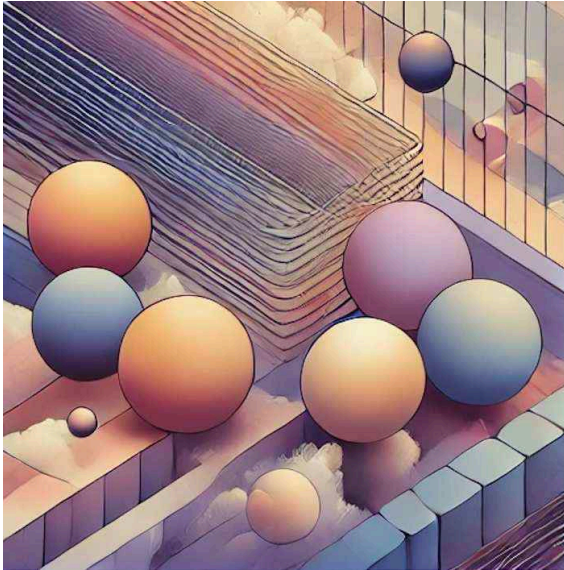
Everyone we interviewed – even those who had little to no meditation experience – had had at least *some* exposure to meditation, whether they had attended a retreat many years ago or tried a mindfulness app. A few people also said they enjoyed meditative activities like yoga, extreme sports, or hiking.

Overall, however, those we spoke to came from a mix of meditation backgrounds. This was not a uniformly experienced group, which suggests that prior meditation experience is not a clear prerequisite for accessing, nor benefiting from, the jhanas.

- More than half (n=6) had never been on a meditation retreat before
- Half (n=5) said they meditated at least two hours per week in the 6 months leading up to the retreat, while nearly half (n=4) said they didn't meditate at all beforehand

Among those who had meditated before, nearly half said they had used a mindfulness app like Calm or Headspace, while experienced meditators cited a variety of practices, including Transcendental Meditation, "noting," Vipassana, Compassion Cultivation Training, Judith Blackstone, Zen, and Goenka. There was no clearly preferred school, method, or technique.

Part 2: Gaining jhana access



There aren't any hidden tricks to getting into jhana

Though the jhanas are often regarded as mysterious and rare, **we didn't hear any strong opinions about techniques emerge from our conversations.** Among those we interviewed (note: not necessarily representative of all jhana practitioners), it seemed like the basic technique of "Find a pleasurable sensation and amplify it" was what worked. Tapping into a specific positive memory or experience seemed to be especially helpful.

"I brought up a memory of my partner at the beach, laughing really big, and I focused on the feeling of that image, holding it for five to ten minutes. About 40 minutes into the meditation, I felt a pleasant buzz in my forehead. I shifted my attention to that buzz and felt like I'd been lifted up into a different place. It was such a strong experience – an altered state – that I thought: 'This must be J1.'"

The jhanas are sometimes described as the "opposite of a panic attack,"¹⁰ a statement that is meant to explain how pleasure can be amplified into euphoria to access J1 – in the same way that anxiety is amplified into a panic attack. This "amplification" technique seems to work for other types of emotions, as well. One meditator used this technique to skip the first three jhanas and access J4 (characterized by peace and equanimity) first:

"The standard jhana teaching says to do xyz things; then you'll be in J1. Then you do J2, J3, et cetera. J1 and J2 sound fun, but I wasn't sure that's what I wanted long-term. I wasn't looking for an entertainment thing, like a roller coaster ride or an orgasm...I told my Jhourney teachers that if I could just get into J4, I'd be thrilled."

¹⁰ Oshan Jarow, "What if you could have a panic attack, but for joy?," Vox, 7 June 2024, <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/354069/what-if-you-could-have-a-panic-attack-but-for-joy>.

So they said: instead of trying to do J1, do your standard prep stuff, like calming the mind, to try to get into any jhana. Then, instead of focusing on a sensation of pleasure and magnifying it, just bring up the feeling of J4. That's what I did, and it worked."

Two people did mention that forgiveness meditation (a type of practice that emphasizes forgiving others and yourself) was critical to helping them access and unblock emotions, which then made it possible to get into jhana. Both described their challenges leading up to, and the benefit of, forgiveness meditation in a similar way, which suggests that there may be a common underlying pattern where this specific intervention could be useful for jhana access.

"The biggest unlock for me was forgiveness meditation. I had talked to my teacher about how I'd feel some good emotions start to happen, but it'd always get to this point where I'd struggle to let go and surrender to it. It almost felt like something was blocking me from getting into a feedback loop. He suggested leaning into forgiveness meditation, so I tried that in addition to my regular meditation, and by Day 4 or so, I had a massive, unexpected emotional unblock. From there, it was a pretty quick process to get into the jhanas."

Most people prefer calm to euphoric states

Jhanas market themselves easily. Much of the attention they've attracted on Twitter and from media outlets is because they are frequently compared to rapturous states like MDMA or orgasms. For a time, some people were concerned that having on-demand access to these states would lead to "wireheading," or endless self-pleasuring.

The story we heard from those we interviewed was quite different. Firstly, nearly half of the people we interviewed got into a jhana *other* than J1 (the most euphoric state) first. Many spoke fondly of a specific jhana that they had especially gravitated towards. J4, in particular, seemed to have special meaning to several people. Interestingly, no one said that they most preferred J1 – again, in contrast to J1 receiving the lion's share of public attention – and several people even went out of their way to say that they didn't really enjoy it, or try to skip through it when they practice.

"I sort of liked J1 less. It's fun, but doesn't feel as productive. The rest [of the jhanas] feel like they're building a resilience to stress. The afterglow comes from steeping in a deep sense of wellbeing and peacefulness and having a connection to that state."

In other words, when given the choice between unfettered access to a buzzy, euphoric state, or a calm, stable state, most people seem to choose the latter.

To explain why people seem to prefer these calmer states, we might liken the experience of J1 to going to a rave, and J4 to finding long-term companionship. The rave might be a fun and

memorable one-off experience, but most people would find them exhausting to attend every night. Having a close and trusted companion, however – whether a spouse, close friend, or pet – brings a very different sort of satisfying pleasure, which most people seem to gravitate towards the long run, versus going to more raves.

Despite their remarkable phenomenological qualities, jhanas seem to bring people closer to themselves

Across the board, everyone we spoke to confirmed that the jhanas foster unmistakably altered states and experiences. Many people commented that their first contact with the jhanas was “mindblowing,” and that they were surprised by the intensity. Several people explicitly compared at least one jhanic state to a mystical or psychedelic experience. (To quote one person: *“That was a lot higher than I’ve ever been in my life, and I’ve done a lot of drugs.”*)

“I was surprised just by the fact that there was a clear ‘before’ and ‘after’ to it. The way it came on like a drug experience and faded really quickly surprised me a lot.

It felt like the kind of emotional opening I’d only had on psychedelics before, but it came through a totally different vehicle, which was having my eyes closed. And all the stuff that came up for me was unbidden. I didn’t go in seeking any form of emotional release, but I found it anyway.”

When one imagines getting into an altered state – drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana, taking psychedelics – we may think of an experience that takes us out of our usual selves. Being drunk, high, or tripping often serves an excuse to act in ways that we wouldn’t typically.

However, because the jhanas are a *self-induced* altered state, they seem to have the opposite effect, as meditators remain highly aware throughout the experience. Being able to observe the moments leading into, and trailing out of, a jhanic state seems to enable many people to better integrate their experiences in jhana with the rest of their lives.

“I had two particularly memorable experiences [with the jhanas]. The first time, it felt like I was taken to some other place, like an outward vision quest that you get once in a lifetime. The second time was the exact same thing as the first in terms of what happened, but this time I experienced it as who I am, in a much freer way. I realized I didn’t need to change who I am – trying to become more ‘spiritual’ to have these experiences. Instead of being taken to another place, I realized that the place is the here and now. It felt like a more meaningful integration: a personal acceptance of myself.”

“It felt like a lot of release. The last time I felt this way was on a psilocybin trip. But I wasn’t fully conscious during that experience; I think that’s why I wasn’t able to keep anything from it later. Whereas this permanently changed my access to emotions.”

Many people spoke of how *familiar* the jhanas were. Either they realized that they had actually experienced a jhana before, or there was simply a feeling of awe in recognizing how accessible these experiences had been all along.

“The thing I kept saying to myself throughout was ‘It was here all along.’ It was just a matter of stripping away the complexity. It was there all along – I just hadn’t noticed it.”

“I didn’t realize I had accessed the jhanas before, throughout my entire life. It gave me confidence that these states aren’t just accessible when I’m doing an activity like hiking, but that I can pull them into my experience in my daily life.”

These reports raise new questions about what it means to be in an “altered state,” and how that definition might change once we disentangle its connotation from substance use and recreational settings. Instead of comparing the jhanas to taking an external substance like MDMA, for example, perhaps it would be more accurate to compare them to a runner’s high. While a jhana might be subjectively more intense than a runner’s high, they are comparable because a person remains highly aware during both experiences. To compare a jhana to a runner’s high isn’t meant to minimize its altered qualities, however, but rather to suggest that everyday experiences might be more “jhana-like” than they seem, yet go unnoticed – and that this itself is a surprising insight.

In their words: what each jhana feels like

We asked people to describe what each jhanic state feels like. Their descriptions were remarkably consistent with one another, though two people seemed to have reversed experiences of J2 and J3, compared to how they are usually described.

We have only included summaries and example quotes for J1-J4 below, as most people we spoke to had only accessed these states, but we included a few bonus quotes about J5 and J6 as well. We did not receive enough responses about J7 and J8 to include them here.

1st jhana: *Buzzy, euphoric, explosive, vibrating, energetic, tingling. More intense than peaceful*

- "Zinging thrills"
- "Crazy body buzz"
- "An explosion of energy"
- "Like the come-up to MDMA"
- "A fun, psychedelic trip that is high energy and about enjoying the moment"

2nd jhana: *Slower, glowing, pleasure, joyful, gratitude, less charged*

- "Man, existing is awesome."
- "Big happy smile"
- "Being on a mountaintop or watching a sunrise with people you love most, where you can't help but tear up and be thankful."

3rd jhana: *Peaceful, heaviness, comedown, satisfaction, sinking into contentment*

- "Ooey-gooney, delicious, yummy"
- "Drinking a lemonade on vacation"
- "Relaxed after exhausting yourself from happiness"
- "This is perfect"

4th jhana: *Deep quiet, calm, subtle, extreme peacefulness, diffuse and nebulous*

- "Ability to stay there forever"
- "Not as much going on"
- "Sitting in a very large, quiet cave...the silence of undisturbed rest. No one's gonna bother me"
- "Like being under water"
- "Everything is really, really fine"

5th jhana

- “Realizing that the space is infinite”
- “The smell of dead leaves, Halloween, fall season. Being decomposed and broken down, but from there grew flowers and life. Death as a rebirth cycle, not a macabre thing”

6th jhana

- “My person-ness started to ebb and flow away from me...I became ‘one with the universe’ [laughs]”
- “The idea of my ‘self’ became funny. I realized I wasn’t there and didn’t need to be”

Memorable experiences on jhana

Zooming out to our general survey, we asked alumni to describe their most significant experiences with the jhanas, and what their reactions were to those experiences.

Our alumni described phenomenologically remarkable experiences, some of which seemed to match the criteria – as defined by psychometric tests that are used by researchers, such as Hood's Mysticism Scale or Mystical Experience Questionnaire – of a mystical experience. For example, they described a feeling of indescribable beauty, oneness with all things, or overwhelming awe and gratitude.

“I've heard people describe experiences as ‘beautiful’ before, and I always thought that was a lazy way to describe something. Then I experienced J6 and the only word for it was beautiful. The best sensation I can ever remember experiencing, up there with the feelings of looking at my baby fall[ing] asleep. Entirely different, but both are just overwhelmingly amazing.”

“When I entered J1 for the first (and only) time, on retreat, I felt a really intense joy and feeling of unification with all beings.”

“I reached a formless state in the jhanas after spending a long amount of time in the 4th jhana.Upon further deepening into the sit, I felt one of the deepest feelings of beauty I have ever felt in my life. This brought me to the edge of tears.”

Several people compared their most significant experiences to something they had experienced as a child:

“The intensity of the love felt like an altered state, and it was associated with a relatively obscure childhood memory about the feeling of being around a kind, loving [athletic] coach I had.”

“The first access to jhanas 3 and 4 left me with a feeling of contentment that I haven’t felt since I was a child.”

And a few people said that their experience fundamentally changed their views of reality itself:

“I had one experience on retreat where I felt my body flickering in and out of existence while in a (not quite fully absorbed) eighth jhana. Really just changed my perspective on the world, to realize that my basic impressions of ‘real’ things were just fabrications that could be decomposed.”

People generally had positive reactions to these experiences – including feeling surprised

The vast majority of people had positive emotions associated with these experiences, such as joy, excitement, awe, relief, gratitude, and calm.

One of the most common emotions reported was feeling surprised, especially from those who’d been previously skeptical or unsure of claims about the jhanas, who were now convinced of their validity. Several people described realizing that they could access these states on demand as “empowering.”

“A mixture of gratitude (for being able to fully experience love, both giving and receiving), of release (for being able to cry fully), surprise (WTF just happened), and excitement (that I am filled with love even though I don’t experience it on a daily basis).”

“[I] discover[ed] that if I put in the time, I can find deep positive equanimity whenever I choose.”

“Accessing [a] state of deep inner peace and stillness help[ed] me understand what this feels like and how I can always return to this state.”

“Easy access to unconditioned positive emotions has been a game changer.”

“Very empowering to know I can access jhanas.”

Around 6.5% of all survey respondents (n=4) had a reaction to their most significant experience that might be classified as neutral. They described feeling overwhelmed or confused, or said that the experience had unlocked new emotions.

“I was initially shaken from the sit. No other experience in my entire life was like what I had [just] experienced.”

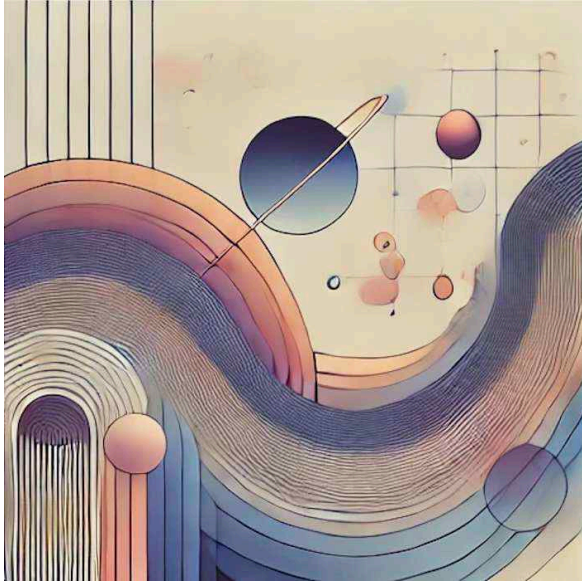
“I was pretty unnerved but also extremely curious about what was going on, and if I could go deeper.”

“Lots of grief for how I’ve been treating myself.”

We also asked survey respondents to describe how they processed their experiences. Nearly half said they didn’t do anything at all. One-quarter of all respondents said that they journaled or reflected about it on their own; another quarter said that they continued to meditate and explore their practice.

About 10% of respondents (n=7) said that they discussed the experience with friends or loved ones, while roughly the same number (n=6) spoke to a Jhourney staff member. An implication of this finding might be that people talk to their friends and loved ones at least as much as retreat staff members to process their experiences. Their non-retreat support network can play just as important of a role in integration as designated teachers.

Part 3: Impact of the jhanas



There is an initial post-retreat “afterglow” that fades after a few days or weeks

Life immediately after the retreat wasn't all just buzzy euphoric highs. Those we interviewed were just as likely to say that they felt something like calm, peace or equanimity as they did “really good” or pleasurable. Many people brought up specific situations that would have typically been challenging – family visiting, heavy travel, hectic work schedules, interacting with strangers – that were noticeably easier to navigate after their retreat.

“Whenever I heard classical music, I had a loving feeling in my heart. That lasted for a week or two.”

“Everything felt different for about four to five days, to a week after. Especially the very first day after the retreat. I remember thinking I felt – not entirely like a changed person, but as if I'd discovered a different lens or aperture. Especially in my interactions with other people.

I could read and see their emotions in a way that I realized I could have done before, but hadn't wanted to acknowledge previously. My attention would snap to things I'd never noticed before, like birdsong or colors in nature.”

“I went directly into teaching a very intense, all-day class, which typically has a lot of stress and immediate deadlines. It felt easier than usual to rebuff invitations to get upset.”

“I felt a level of peace and groundedness that I would liken to coming out of the mountains after a week, or the end of a really long ultramarathon. Quieting down that top-down processing for long enough that you're able to feel so much more present. It was definitely up there, if not stronger, than anything I'd felt before.”

Over time, however – ranging from a few days to a few weeks – this afterglow seemed to fade, as the demands of life crept back in. (Note that “afterglows” are a heightened subjective state where the mind is particularly relaxed, and sensory experiences, like colors and sounds, may be enhanced, which are distinct from long-term benefits. They are widely reported on by meditators and understood to be a temporary boost.)

This decay effect was also quite notable among survey respondents, where we asked them to describe how their feelings towards their “peak experience” had changed over time.

“There wasn’t an exact point where I thought I could feel the difference. It probably took about 2 weeks to recognize I was in a different place. I had kept up my practice for an hour per day for at least the first month, and in that first week, I maintained the intensity. By the second week, that intensity had started to drop off, the clarity of each jhana started to fade, and those after-effects had started to fade a bit as well.”

“The experience feels a bit less accessible now several months out and less obvious.”

“It feels less special after time has passed.”

Some people expressed frustration at their inability to get back to these states, which we saw echoed in both the survey responses and interviews.

“Overall this experience became less impactful for me. This is mostly due to the fact that I wasn't able to consistently replicate the experience.”

“I'd like to be able to go back to that ‘place,’ but to do so without the benefit of retreat concentration powers I've had to work a lot at just building up my skills.”

“Perhaps a bit more frustrated over time as it became clear [that] simple access was not forthcoming.”

“There was a tragic sense that I’d seen a glimpse of the jhanas, but couldn’t find it again. I spent a long time dealing with that sense of clinging and loss, like I had messed up a great gift. I'm still not completely sure I understand how to relate to that experience – the insights that came from it were hugely valuable and I know there's a ton more to "gain" from continuing that journey, yet I also know that clinging to it or "pursuing" it isn't the right response either. I guess I finally landed [on] a sort of reluctant patience that I'll find my way back at some point.”

Not being able to access the jhanas after a retreat could be a potential disadvantage of working with self-induced altered states. With psychedelics, for example, accessing an altered state is

much more deterministic: taking an external substance all but guarantees that one will have some kind of memorable experience. It's also understood that one doesn't typically take psychedelics on a regular basis, which might lead someone to cherish the experience more deeply. But because the jhanas feel more "natural" to induce, the positive aspects that come with increased ease of access – "Wow, I can generate these states anytime!" – can also lead to frustration – "Why can't I access this again?" – if the conditions aren't optimal.

That said, most people still reported that gaining access to the jhanas was a transformative experience, even if they hadn't accessed the jhanas since (see next section). This suggests that it is possible to identify long-lasting benefits from even one-time experiences with the jhanas. Setting expectations appropriately on retreat, as well as helping people identify and process insights from their retreat experience, could mitigate feelings of disappointment or frustration.

"Even though I haven't experienced a true Jhana state since the retreat, I don't feel deficient in any way or...that I need to experience them again for them to have value. I know those states are there, inside me, whether I can reach the full depth to feel them or not....I'm fine with not knowing when or where that will take place. Just the practice and process continues to add immense value to my everyday life, and in many ways feel like repeated echoes of that experience on retreat."

"[I] understand that this state is my natural state of being and aspir[e] to bring more of it into my everyday presence."

"I felt super light, radiant joy over time as more happiness seeped into all aspects of my life."

Most who accessed the jhanas felt it was a transformative experience

Among those who had never accessed the jhanas before the retreat, 77% (n=20) said that gaining access to the jhanas was a transformative experience. While our samples are small, we did notice some differences between those who responded "yes" versus "no" to this question.

Differences in characteristics between jhana novices who accessed them while on retreat, who did vs. didn't find them transformative

| | Found them transformative (n=20) | Did not find them transformative (n=6) |
|--------------|---|---|
| Jhana access | Accessed more than one | Accessed only one jhana |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|---|------------------|
| | jhana (85%, or n=17) | (67%, or n=4) |
| Deterministic access | Yes (55%, or n=11); in the past but not currently (30%, or n=6) | No (67%, or n=4) |
| Have accessed jhanas since retreat | Yes (65%, or n=13) | No (83%, or n=5) |

While we would encourage others to validate our findings, these differences may suggest that meditators are more likely to report transformative impact from the jhanas if they have accessed more than one jhana, and/or are able to cultivate deterministic access.

Those who accessed the jhanas were more likely to report changes in thoughts and behavior, vs. those who didn't

In our survey, we asked respondents to tell us about whether they'd noticed any internal (ex. thoughts and beliefs) or external (ex. relationships or lifestyle) changes since their Jhourney retreat. We phrased this question neutrally – using the term “changes” instead of, say, “benefits” or “challenges” – so as not to bias respondents towards positive or negative experiences.

Questions asked on survey about internal and external changes

| |
|---|
| Have you noticed any internal changes (e.g. your thoughts and beliefs) that you would specifically attribute to your experiences at, or resulting from, the retreat? Please describe. |
| Have you noticed any external changes (e.g. your interactions with others; lifestyle changes such as sleep, diet, or activities you typically enjoy) that you would specifically attribute to your experiences at, or resulting from, the retreat? |

Though our samples are small, we noticed a difference in rates of change reported by those who did, vs. did not, access jhana on retreat.

Jhana novices who reported internal or external changes, who did vs. did not access the jhanas

| | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| | Accessed jhana (n=26) | Did not access jhana (n=17) |
| Noticed internal changes | 92% (n=23) | 59% (n=10) |
| Noticed external changes | 84% (n=21) | 41% (n=7) |

Jhana access seems to make people kinder, calmer, and more aware of pleasurable sensations

Among those who accessed jhana, the most common internal changes reported were:

- *Embracing and being kinder to themselves* (n=7)
- *Quieter, calmer mind* (n=6)
- *More awareness of pleasure in their day-to-day experience* (n=6)
- *Increased awareness of how they feel or relate to their body* (n=6)

“Since the retreat I am able to be more present throughout the day – I appreciate the world around me, savor pleasant sensations, and feel grateful.”

“There is less mental chatter overall, I spend more time with other senses. Pleasantness is closer by and deeper.”

“[T]he retreat showed me how powerful our experience depends on where we choose to point our attention, together with the understanding that there really is love permeating all things somewhere in the background, even if seemingly faint.”

“Less feeling of scarcity around positive emotions as it's easier to find unconditioned access to them.”

“[M]y harsh inner critic has lessened.”

“My immediate reaction to certain events has changed. I can't really describe why; I'm just more compassionate and kinder to myself. The default voice in my head is nicer.”

We also presented survey respondents with a list of twenty statements and asked them to rate on a 5-point scale how their response to these statements had changed since the retreat. For example, they were presented with a question such as, “My life has a clear sense of purpose.” and asked to respond with one of the following: *Much more true* - *Somewhat more true* - *No change* - *Somewhat less true* - *Much less true*.

Because we weren't sure which types of changes to expect, we drew questions from several different psychometric assessments associated with wellbeing and spiritual experiences,

including the Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ-30), GAD-7 Anxiety Scale, and Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS).

From our list, the statements corresponding to the biggest self-reported changes – meaning, the greatest deviations from the average distribution of responses overall – were associated with **positive emotions, being satisfied with one's life, and feeling less nervous and anxious**, which corroborate to our findings from the open-ended responses above:

- *I am kind to myself when things go wrong.* [more true]
- *When I summon a positive feeling – such as joy or gratitude – I feel it distinctly in my body.* [more true]
- *I am aware of my emotions when I experience them.* [more true]
- *I am satisfied with my life.* [more true]
- *I often feel nervous, anxious or on edge.* [less true]
- *I find myself preoccupied with the future or the past.* [less true]

The statements where people were most likely to report *fewer or no changes* were associated with **having a mystical experience and searching for meaning in life.**

- *I have the sense of being “outside of” time, beyond past and future.*
- *My personal self has fused into a larger whole.*
- *I am searching for meaning in my life.*

External lifestyle changes were more varied

When it came to external changes, there were fewer strong effects reported, with a longer tail of observations.

The most commonly reported change (n=6) was being kinder and feeling more empathetic towards other people, especially family members. Other changes reported were meditating more often (n=4) and a reduction in, or absence of, cravings (n=4), including alcohol and junk food. A few people (n=4) noticed changes in sleeping patterns, though some were sleeping less versus more, and their confidence was low as to whether these changes were attributable to their experiences with the jhanas.

“I think I have been nicer in interactions with my parents, it is easier to find love and understanding for them.”

“I have a deeper connection with my family than I had before, partly because of the realization that life is short and is mostly made up of our interactions with others.”

“My sense of genuinely felt (as opposed to just the intellectual idea of) compassion for others increased noticeably.”

“My craving for alcohol has basically totally disappeared. I'll still drink at social events sometimes, but there's very [little] element of craving [or] attachment. When I'm practicing 2+ hours a day consistently I notice the same thing happen with junk food — zero craving!”

“Sometimes I would eat out of anxiety or boredom. But now, I just think, “This cookie is nowhere near as good as J1. I can just go do that, so why am I eating this cookie?” I'll still eat desserts, but this feeling of easy access to positive emotions has reframed my perspective on when and where to see conditional happiness.”

Facilitators should pay special attention to those who don't access jhana on retreat

Finally, across all survey respondents, a small number (6.5%, or n=4) reported changes that were not wholly positive. Generally, these changes were related to either uncovering new emotions or insights about themselves (such as anger or increased sensitivity), or feeling disappointment about not having accessed the jhanas. Two respondents clarified that these changes, while difficult, were still valuable overall.

Interestingly, nearly all of these respondents (n=3) either did *not* access jhana, or weren't sure if they did. When one considers the potential challenges associated with attending a jhana retreat, we might imagine negative effects associated with the jhanas themselves. But just as important might be those associated with *not* getting into jhana, as participants may struggle with disappointment or uncovering difficult insights in the process.

Because jhana retreats are sometimes viewed as more goal-oriented than a typical meditation retreat, increased expectations (whether internally or externally imposed) could leave some meditators especially vulnerable. It is important for retreat facilitators to be aware of these risks and help participants find value in their retreat experience, regardless of jhana access.

Most people identified lasting benefits from the jhanas, even from one-time experiences

Our follow-up interviews gave us an opportunity to learn *how* people valued their experiences with the jhanas, as well as how they used the jhanas in their daily lives, if at all.

Responses were more varied than expected. Everyone seemed to have their own way of articulating the jhanas' benefits and utility. While their *phenomenological* experiences with the jhanas were quite consistent, it seems that each person interpreted the *significance* of those experiences in different ways – though everyone we spoke to had a positive interpretation.

Some of these benefits include insights of varying personal significance gained from experiences on retreat. Several people felt that the jhanas had caused a fundamental *perception shift* in their relation to their environment and daily experiences, giving them a new sense of clarity and helping them recognize that a persistent state of non-suffering is possible. Others felt that the jhanas had given them a *benchmark* for pleasure, where directly experiencing a positive mental state helped them understand what “good” looked like in their day-to-day life, even if they hadn't always found their way back.

Other people continued invoking the jhanas' benefits in their everyday lives, even after the retreat. Some used their jhana practice as a *tool*, which they invoked regularly (even if they didn't always access jhana) to improve their mood and outlook. Others described the jhanas as a *safety net*. Knowing that they could generate positive emotions on demand made it feel safer to explore difficult insights or emotions that they had previously been avoiding. Jhana access released them from a scarcity mindset regarding positive emotions, because they trusted they could bring themselves back to these states if they needed to.

*How meditators described the impact of the jhanas on their lives, based on 1:1 interviews (n=10)*¹¹

| Type of utility | Benefit | Examples |
|-----------------|--|--|
| Benchmark (n=6) | Gave them a reference point for what positive states truly feel like | <p><i>“Jhanas are a thing you can never un-know is there, like the first time you had fried cheese. Now you know there’s fried cheese in the world, and that’s gonna be there for the rest of my life. And you can always make fried cheese if you really want to.”</i></p> <p><i>“The time involved for me to get into the jhanas currently is too much for my day-to-day. But even if I don’t go all the way into a jhana, it’s reassuring to know that this brainstate exists, and I can get into it in principle. Just knowing that that’s there, it’s a subtle knowledge you carry with you forever. That part of my brain is there, and I can visit it if I want.”</i></p> <p><i>“[My experience with J1] is a useful anchor</i></p> |

¹¹ Note that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Several people described their relationship to the jhanas in multiple ways.

| | | |
|------------------------|--|---|
| | | <p><i>to return to. It gave me super tangible evidence that okay, there is something here, I'm not just sitting on a cushion every night convincing myself I'm a better person. Your way of seeing the world is fundamentally altered. I can think about that experience and be in a different space afterwards."</i></p> |
| Tool (n=5) | Used instrumentally to access positive states more often | <p><i>"I feel like I walked away with a proper toolkit. In times of stress, it's a comforting thing, if I'm feeling a lot of anxiety, or overwhelmed by having too much to do. If I'm drowning, I have a hand to get out of the water with."</i></p> <p><i>"The toolbox has been more meaningful post-retreat than my jhana experiences. [Jhanas] feel like an "everyday friend" I can rely on. Even if I'm not actually tapping into a jhanic state, at least I'm tapping into the path on the way there."</i></p> <p><i>"It's not that I did the retreat once and my life was permanently changed. But if I do a 15-30 minute sit in the morning, my entire life is boosted. I'm calmer, I can catch my thoughts faster."</i></p> |
| Perception shift (n=3) | Changed relationship to reality | <p><i>"The Jhourney retreat reoriented my relationship to my own thought patterns, where I'm located in my head, and how I relate to every aspect of my own experience. I realized there might be more to everything. What else have I missed?"</i></p> |
| Safety net (n=3) | Removes scarcity mindset regarding pleasure. Gives them confidence to explore challenging insights | <p><i>"It's like doing bootcamp or spring training, and then the incremental workouts become easier. If I hadn't tried the jhanas and just tried to meditate, it might not have worked as well."</i></p> <p><i>"The changes don't come from ongoing practice, for me. But it's easier to meditate in other ways, knowing now that I can go back to pleasant feelings if needed. ...Pleasure provides a home base to go back to; I know I can generate it myself. It gives me confidence and makes it easier to</i></p> |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| | | <i>do scary things. Now I can focus on what I want differently in the world: I can face the things I've been avoiding."</i> |
|--|--|---|

Regardless of how they described the jhanas' ongoing benefits, many people noted that the jhanas had provided a way to actually *feel* and *experience* positively valenced mental states, instead of being told about them. Especially for those who described themselves as emotionally blocked before going on retreat, the jhanas expanded their range of what was possible to feel – whether that was equanimity, pleasure, or emotions more generally. Simply realizing that these states exist, are a “real” part of who they are, and are theoretically possible to access again, left a profound impact on those we spoke to, even if they hadn’t accessed the jhanas since.

“The jhanas unlocked this capacity to not be greedy about positive emotions. I’m living life in HD mode now. I hadn’t realized I could even physically experience these things.”

“You can show someone a box of tools with a hammer, saw, and nails, and explain what to do, but that doesn’t mean they know how to build a house. Not only was I shown the toolbox and how to use the tools, but my jhana experiences integrated my understanding for how to actually use them in a productive way.”

Finally, several people explicitly said that the jhanas had a positive impact on their longstanding mental health issues, including those related to anxiety and ADHD.

“I used to be afraid of flying, but now I’m fine on flights. My anxiety issues have been reduced by more than 90 percent.”

“For me, ‘clear your thoughts’ is medically impossible. But [the jhanas] gave me ‘something to do’ that was beneficial. Without that, my brain turns inwards, starts getting scattered and thinking about everything. It’s a productive form of hyperfixation [for my ADHD].”

“It felt like the embracing of my full self, in a way I’ve struggled to do my whole life. I always tell people it was like 6 months of therapy in 30 minutes.”

Part 4: Changes in meditation practice



Those who've accessed the jhanas are more likely to meditate more often

One of the most tangible external benefits of learning the jhanas – evident in both the survey responses and interviews – was that it made people want to meditate more regularly.

From our survey, among those who accessed the jhanas for the first time on retreat, nearly half (46%, or n=12) reported meditating more often now, compared to before the retreat, and 85%

(n=22) said they still practice the jhanas regularly.

Changes in meditation practice before vs. after the retreat, between those who did vs. didn't access the jhanas

| Meditates... | Accessed the jhanas (n=26) | Did not access the jhanas (n=17) |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| More often | 46% (n=12) | 6% (n=1) |
| The same amount | 31% (n=8) | 53% (n=9) |
| Less often | 23% (n=6) | 41% (n=7) |

Nearly everyone we interviewed had a daily or near-daily meditation practice, including those who didn't meditate at all before. Most meditated for at least 30 minutes per day, and over half meditated for at least an hour per day. They usually meditated either in the morning or evening – or both – as a way to start or close out their day. Many people cited work, or other distractions of non-retreat life, as an obstacle to practicing more often.

"Practicing the jhanas" meant that they would either access the jhanas, or practice the techniques one would typically use to get into the jhanas – even if they didn't successfully enter an actual jhanic state. If not the jhanas, meditators practiced a long tail of other styles and techniques, including gratitude, forgiveness, noting, nondual, and open awareness meditation. Several people who were previously skeptical of, or disinterested in, meditation before the

retreat said they were now curious and motivated to explore a range of other disciplines and schools.

Those who had accessed the jhanas since their retreat did so mostly during dedicated sittings. Many said that they also tapped into jhanas, or light “jhana-like” states, throughout the day. They were able to notice more moments in their day that were “jhana-like,” even if they didn’t always enter the jhanas. Among those who *hadn’t* accessed the jhanas since the retreat, nearly all still practiced the techniques they would use to get into jhana.

“Full access into the jhanas has been only on the mat. But, noticing happiness and biofeedback—ing it into something bigger – I do that all the time.”

“Sometimes when I’m bouldering, I can feel my excitement build and push that up into a jhana, then follow it all the way through. Hiking, walking around, being in a new place can all spark that feeling. I try to acknowledge ‘jhanic spaces’ throughout the day. The more I recognize them, the more they try to find me.”

“I went to a classical piano performance recently, and I found that I could slip into J4 there. I’ve also hit J1 and J2 right after a hot yoga class, while lying down in shavasana.”

“I’m currently playing more with letting go of jhana access being such a goal for me. I think it’s actually blocking me from getting that in a lot of ways. Instead I’ve been trying to enjoy and focus on how it’s become a wonderful daily practice for me that I see value in, regardless of what I’ve attained.”

The jhanas are fun to practice!

Why did people feel more motivated to meditate after learning the jhanas? They gave the same reason as when we asked how the jhanas differed from other types of meditation: it’s fun!

Many people spoke positively about the effortlessness of the jhanas, which made them want to meditate more generally. Whereas other types of meditation could feel like a chore or obligation, the jhanas are genuinely pleasurable: emotions are welcomed and amplified, rather than pushed away.

“The biggest difference is that the jhanas are much more enjoyable. And because it’s enjoyable, you want to do it.”

“Vipassana’s core philosophy is that you achieve peace through detachment, whereas the jhanas are about achieving peace through joy, which is just way more fun.”

“If you’d asked me to do a 2 hour sit before, I’d say: okay, I might not enjoy it, but it’ll be ‘useful.’ I can make the time. Now I’m like: yes, let’s go.”

“While meditation feels like a form of concentration and exertion of will, once you hit jhana access, it feels like those difficulties go away and have their own momentum. It requires its own form of concentration, but a very different kind. If meditation is a wobbly top, jhana is like once you’ve spun the top, and it’s going of its own accord. You just need the littlest exertion of effort to keep that momentum going.”

“After I went on a [different] retreat a few years ago, my takeaway was: meditation is a duty. It’s medicine you take, this is good for you. I didn’t keep up my practice after that. But after this retreat, because the techniques are more joy-based, I was more excited to keep up.”

“Probably the most meaningful thing that’s come out of the retreat for me was redefining my relationship to meditation. It’s become a much more pleasant experience for me. My practice has been very consistent since the retreat, which wouldn’t have been true in the past. I find the time [now] not because I have to, but because I want to. I’ll realize that, yeah, this is actually how I want to spend these 30 minutes.”

“I would’ve said before that I wasn’t a meditator; I’m too distractible. But the retreat gave me the confidence to understand this is something I can do every day if I practice. It made me want to make it part of my routine.”

“It’s motivating if I can meditate and feel good at the same time.”

A cynic might ask whether a meditation practice that gets people to meditate more regularly actually has any intrinsic value, but those we interviewed spoke enthusiastically about what it meant to be able to meditate more often – whether that was simply feeling more calm and collected each day, or giving them the confidence to explore deeper questions about themselves.

“[The jhanas] feel really good. There’s some intrinsic value in having access to that pleasure, but I see it more as a stepping stone to other altered states that may be more useful for insight. Without the jhanas, though, I would’ve encountered hard things and stopped, because I’d have been averse to those sensations.”

“Nondual meditation is a way to understand the way things really are. But for some reason, the jhanas feel much more directly impactful to my life. The “small e” existence that’s gonna live another 40 years and die is going to be way better because I know the jhanas exist.... that instant, tangible benefit is particularly appealing.”

Looking ahead: Areas for further research

Overall, our findings demonstrate that the jhanas offer meaningful, enduring mental and spiritual benefits that are distinct from simply attending a meditation retreat. We would love to see more researchers and practitioners engage in a fuller exploration of all its potential benefits.

While our investigation provided insight into our initial questions, it also left us with new possibilities for further inquiry and research. Specifically:

- **What is the effect of long-term, regular jhana access?** Most who accessed jhanas described it as “transformative,” but our investigation was mostly into the short-term experiences of those attempting to learn the jhanas for the first time. Does accessing jhanas regularly for months or years lead to other, noticeable effects on wellbeing?
- **What does it mean to be in an “altered state,” and are there differences between self-induced and externally induced altered states?**
- When given the choice between euphoria and equanimity, many people seem to prefer the latter. **What does this tell us about pleasure and happiness, and activities associated with the pursuit of these states?**
- **How can we make jhanas more accessible?** Jhourney is a young company, and the jhanas have only been covered a few times thus far by mainstream media. How might we use modern tools (pedagogy science, personalized AI tutoring, biofeedback, neurostimulation, or more) to make learning the jhanas faster and more reliable?
- **How important is ongoing practice of the jhanas to realize their benefits?** We identified a few ways that people describe the benefits of the jhanas (as a *tool*, *benchmark*, *safety net*, or *perception shift*). Is there any hierarchy or directionality to these benefits? Should meditators continue practicing the jhanas, or focus on translating their experiences into deeper insights, in order to realize their benefits?
- The jhanas are often thought to be too difficult for novice meditators to learn, compared to mindfulness techniques, yet many people said that gaining jhana access made them extra motivated to meditate. **How can we use the jhanas to encourage people to establish a regular and enjoyable meditation practice?**
- **How can jhana teachers best support those who did not access the jhanas**, or who have trouble accessing them after the retreat – in terms of setting expectations appropriately, troubleshooting during the retreat, and helping them find value in their experiences, regardless of access?

About

Nadia Asparouhova is a writer and researcher who first wrote about the jhanas for *Asterisk* magazine. Her work has been supported by Emergent Ventures, Schmidt Futures, Ford Foundation, Ethereum Foundation, and others. She is the author of *Working in Public: The Making and Maintenance of Open Source Software* (Stripe Press) and *Roads and Bridges: The Unseen Labor Behind Our Digital Infrastructure* (Ford Foundation).

Jhourney (<https://jhourney.io>) is an education and neurotech company making life-changing meditation fast and enjoyable for everyone.