

## TINA RASMUSSEN

Interview with non duality magazine. July 2011



Tina Rasmussen learned to meditate at the age of 13 and has been meditating for more than 30 years. In 2003, after many years of spiritual practice in non-dual and Buddhist traditions, she completed a year-long silent solo retreat during which an awakening to true nature occurred. In 2005, she was ordained as a Theravada Buddhist nun by Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw of Burma, who later authorized her to teach. She is the co-author of *Practicing the Jhanas* (with teaching partner and husband Stephen Snyder), published in 2009 by Shambhala. She now offers retreats, daylongs and spiritual guidance, in addition to working as a professional coach and Ph.D. organizational development consultant, which she has done for more than 25 years.

***NDM: Can you please tell me how you first became interested in jhana meditation?***

Tina Rasmussen: I had been attending long silent meditation retreats of up to a month for some time, primarily practicing vipassana. In an interview, I was describing my experience and one of the teachers remarked that what I was describing sounded like jhana. My primary teacher at that time, Guy Armstrong, then suggested that I might have a natural faculty for concentration meditation, and that I might want to undertake intensive samatha practice, which I did. A few years later, I did a year-long solo retreat and had many deep experiences, including the jhanas arising. Some of this was outside the known teachings, so Guy suggested that I study with Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw, as the Sayadaw was considered the greatest living teacher and practitioner of the jhanas. I attended Pa Auk's first U.S. retreat in 2005. He had me start from the very beginning, which was good because then I could understand my experience from scratch, within the context of his presentation of the Buddha's teaching. I completed the entire samatha path at that time, including the eight jhanas as they arise using many different objects of meditation.

***NDM: When you were practicing vipassana and began to have this jhana arising experiences, what do you mean by "arising". Do you mean energy in some way as with "kundalini" in yoga for example?***

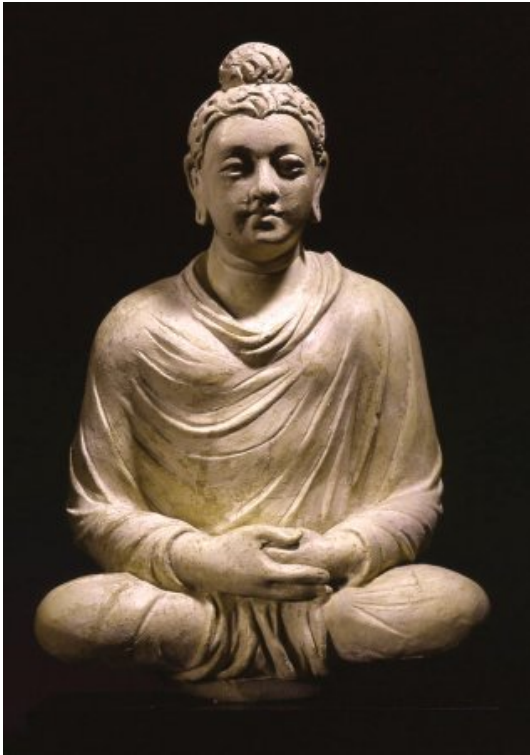
Tina Rasmussen: By "arising" I mean that "I" do not "get" jhana. There is a lot of confusion about the jhanas, some of which has to do with the idea of jhana as an attainment that we go out and "get." A full jhana absorption is actually the arising of a non-dual state of awareness that only happens when there is sufficient concentration, purification of mind, and relaxing of the egoic state for it to arise on its own. This is



Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw

why we use the word "arise." In addition, because the full jhana absorption is a non-dual state, there is no sense of "I" when it is happening. For those in a non-dual state without meditation, there would not be this distinction, but there would still be the different state of absorption of awareness into the jhana. For the vast majority of people who are operating from a sense of a separate self, a "surrender" to the ground of Being needs to happen for the state to arise, which is counter to the sense of "doing" of the "me." We call this process the "thinning of the me," which is a very important aspect of the Samatha practice.

Jhana is not really energy, it is a shift in awareness from dual to non-dual, and is also an absorption of the awareness into a specific state that is mysterious and purifying to the consciousness. The energy from the samatha practice is a by-product of the concentration, not the goal of the practice. The energy can be intense and feels somewhat like kundalini but is also different. Like kundalini, jhana arises on its own (at first) and is cultivated by the practices that lead to it.



***NDM : What do you mean by the "ground of Being" exactly and how do you teach someone to surrender to the ground of Being for this state to arise?***

Tina Rasmussen: We use the term "ground of Being" as a general term to refer to the Source, the mystery which is fundamental to all that is manifest and unmanifest. We don't teach people to surrender to it. Rather, as our ground shines through the veils of the ego become thinner, and our true nature shines through. To the ego, this can feel like surrender, as it is a type of letting go.

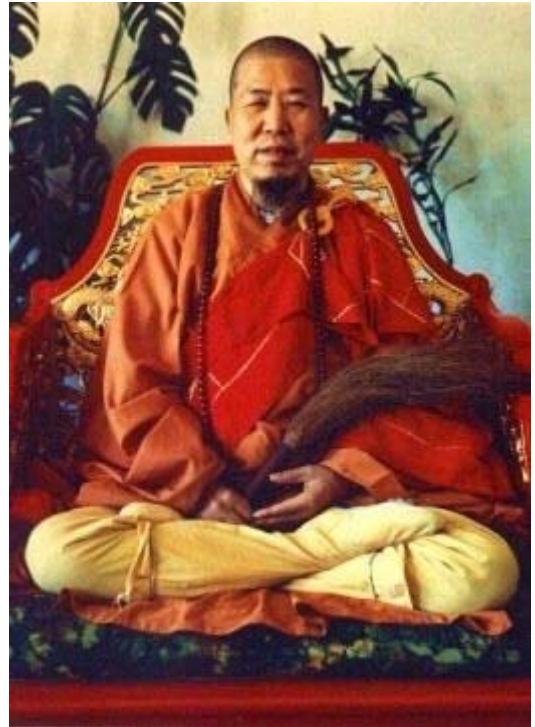
***NDM: When you say non dual awareness, do you also mean non-indicative awareness (anidassana viññāna), meaning awareness that does not indicate the presence of a subject, as mentioned by the Buddha?***

Tina Rasmussen: Stephen and I are not scholars, we speak based on our direct experience rather than theoretical knowledge. As such, I prefer not to comment on the fine distinctions made in the scriptures to the various types of awareness, consciousness, etc. What I will say is that non-dual awareness as found in the material jhanas (1-4), and even the immaterial jhanas (5-8), is NOT the same as what Buddhists know as "cessation," but it is non-dual in that it does not include a dual sense of "me" and "other." The subject-object split is absent.

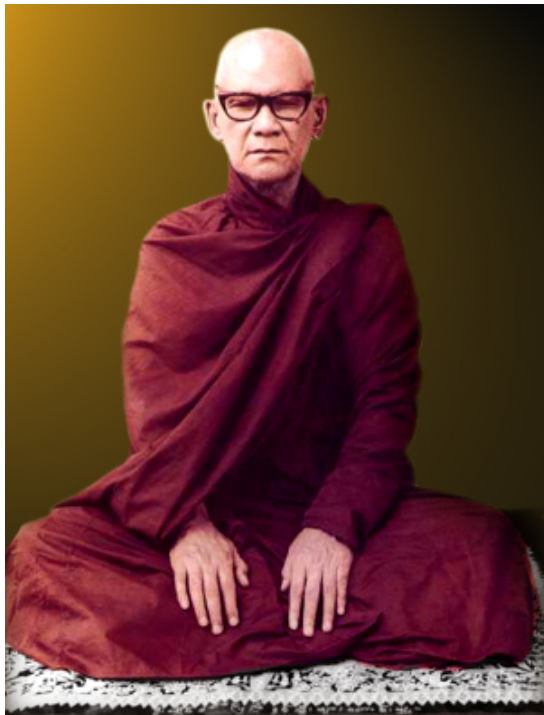
**NDM: Why do you think the jhanas are not practiced as much in the US, the way that Vipassana or Zazen is for example?**

Tina Rasmussen: The jhanas aren't practiced very much (or at least not very openly) within Asian Buddhism either, despite the fact that they were practiced extensively for thousands of years until just recently—the last 50 years or so. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the Westerners who brought the Theravadan Buddhist teachings back to the U.S in the 1970s didn't really practice Samatha (concentration meditation) when they were in Asia, they only practiced Vipassana (insight meditation), so that's what they brought back. Secondly, until recently, many Asian and Western teachers thought that the jhanas were only accessible to monastics and / or Asians. Thirdly, some Asian teachers actively discouraged people from practicing the jhanas, for various reasons.

It's very strange that the jhanas are not even recognized within Zen Buddhism any more, when the word "Zen" is actually derived from the word "jhana." As Buddhism and the word "jhana" went to China, it became "Chan," which then became "Zen" when Buddhism went to Japan. But the actual practice of the jhanas was lost. Well known Mahayana scholars such as Master Hua have written about this. So, in many ways the loss of this practice is a bit like the "telephone game" where the original teaching becomes obscure. The Buddha actually predicted 2,500 years ago that the time would come when certain things would lead to "the decay and disappearance of the true dhamma." One of the things he said would lead to this decay is the decline of concentration meditation.



Master Hua



Mahasi Sayadaw

**NDM: Can you please tell me what are some of the reasons why this jhana meditation practice was discouraged by these Asian teachers? Do you mean mostly Japanese Zen, or Chan Buddhism in China? Also what about Tibetan Buddhism? Do they practice this?**

Tina Rasmussen: Within Theravadan Buddhism, the jhana practice was discouraged mainly for five reasons. The first two of these are a somewhat long explanations.

Reason one: Earlier this century, Theravadan Buddhism was slowly declining in Asia, because it was too difficult for lay people to practice. Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw (of Burma) revitalized Theravadan Buddhism with some innovations that made it more accessible, which is what we know now as the "mindfulness" / Vipassana commonly taught in the West. Part of this refocusing eliminated the Samatha practice and focused people solely on Vipassana, which in its new form was more accessible and thought to be easier to practice. Because of this, as well as a small number of sutta references, some people think that Samatha simply is not necessary.

Secondly, we must remember that the Buddha learned the Samatha practices from his own teachers; he did not invent them (although it is thought that he did make some

enhancements to what he learned). He completed the entire yogic path of his day, which culminated with the completion of all eight jhanas. At that point one was thought to be fully enlightened. This belief is still held today in other (non-Buddhist) traditions, which we can see outlined in ancient texts like the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. However, the Buddha felt there was more to the path, and his great innovation was the Vipassana practice. After his full enlightenment, he continued to practice Samatha throughout his life, and entering jhana was his final act on his deathbed. He also talked about jhana constantly, as one can see in reading the suttas. Nonetheless, if one is to view Buddhism from our perspective today, given the strong influence of the lineage of Mahasi Sayadaw and the prevalence of Vipassana, it is easy to see how Vipassana could be thought of as the “real” teaching of the Buddha, and the practice that one should emphasize, rather than the Samatha.

The third reason is that people often oversimplify the Samatha practice, emphasizing attainment rather than purification of mind. With the wrong context, the practice can become an exercise in spiritual materialism, grasping after an egoic “notch in the belt” rather than being sought from wholesome intentions. Much of the teaching that Stephen and I do attempts to overcome this distorted and superficial approach to this ancient and worthy practice. There is a reason why this practice has survived so long, possibly as long as 5,000 years. There are very few things that have endured this long in human history, other than sex and war! This is because the Samatha practice uses the inherent functioning of consciousness to liberate itself. To reduce a practice with this kind of staying power, to being able to tell our dharma friends “I got XX jhana” is a complete distortion of the depth that the practice is intended for, which is purification of mind. Unfortunately, some teachers discourage people from concentration practice because it can “foster striving”, rather than seeing it as a practice which purifies what comes up in the mind stream, INCLUDING striving (if it is taught in the proper context.)

Fourth, there has been some thought throughout the ages that yogis who practice the jhanas will get attached to the practice, and not want to go on to Vipassana. This is due to the fact that the practice—while intense and demanding—also can be quite blissful and serene.

Lastly, the concentration practices have been used by yogis throughout history to cultivate the “supranormal powers.” These are outlined in texts such as the Visuddhimagga. In Asia people often become fascinated with these powers and get distracted from the true purpose of the path, which is liberation.

With regard to other Buddhist lineages, the jhanas are practiced in a few Mahayana lineages, Master Hua’s being one of them. When Stephen and I were on retreat with the Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw, I ordained as a nun. There were several other nuns there, some of whom were Mahayana

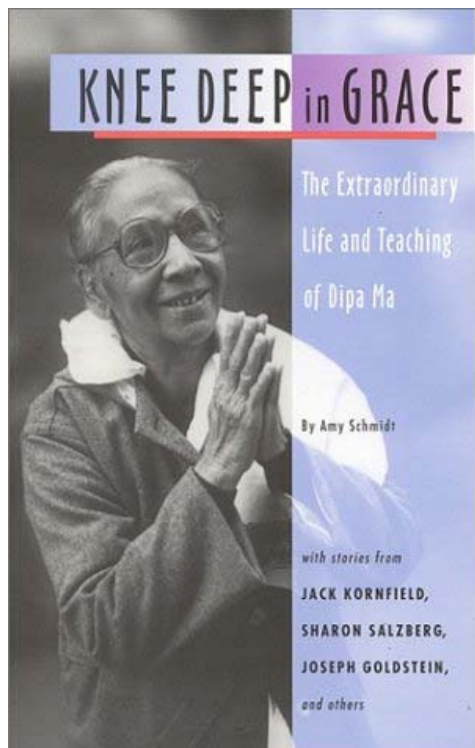


Stephen Snyder

nuns from Taiwan, all of whom were greatly interested in the Samatha practice and quite skilled at it. Within Tibetan Buddhism, one does absolutely find the jhanas. I have seen the practice outlined in books, in a very similar manner to what Stephen and I teach as we learned it from Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw. However, I have never found a Tibetan Buddhist teacher in the West who teaches or even talks about the jhanas in the same manner as we know the practice in the Pa Auk lineage.

***NDM: Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw says in his book "Knowing and Seeing" that the odds are going into absorption/samadhi are quite slim, but it seems that Dipa Ma (from accounts in the book, "Knee Deep in Grace") and others are able to do this meditation quite easily.***

***Why do you think this is? Would you say that jhana is suited for a certain type of person?***



Tina Rasmussen: I imagine that Pa Auk Sayadaw is basing his estimates on what he has seen with the many thousands of people he has encountered over his decades of teaching. We have heard that when he was Abbot of Pa Auk Monastery in Burma, he would see hundreds of people a day. They would line up and scoot up on their knees in front of him, for just a 30 second interview. He would ask how long they could stay on their object of meditation without their attention wavering, and if it was under 30 minutes consecutively he would give the instruction to "focus here" (on the breath as it passes the anapana spot) and ask the next person to come up. Based on the hundreds of people he saw per day, I imagine that the number who progressed was indeed a small fraction. We have found the percentage to be somewhat higher, given a more intensive one-on-one teaching ratio and a supportive bridge to the modern context that can be helpful to yogis.

However, to think that the average meditator is like Dipa Ma, would be a gross mis-estimation. Dipa Ma was one of the great meditators and yogis of our time. She was the best student of Munindra, which is why he chose her to undertake the experiments regarding the Visuddhimagga and jhanas (as described in "Knee Deep in Grace"). Yes, the jhanas were easily assessable for Dipa Ma but she could also do things like sit down in one spot to meditate, and not break the meditation or get up or move in any way for several days. Show me the person who can do that!

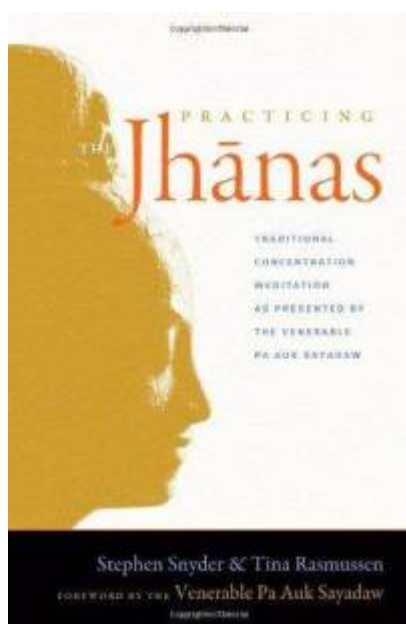
We have found in our teaching that the over-emphasis on attainment (spiritual materialism) and striving that is so pervasive in modern jhanas discussions, is actually one of the biggest barriers to the true practice of purification of mind. When "average" people come to the practice and purify their motivation of WHY they are doing the practice, combined with teaching that emphasizes a wholesome orientation to the practice, their practice itself changes. Grasping at attainments is an act of the ego, so if that isn't purified, jhana will not arise. People may imagine that jhana is arising, but once again that is only a manifestation of ego and actually blocks the liberating aspects of the practice rather than cultivating them.

The beauty of the Samatha practice is that by its own design, it purifies the mind

stream, including unwholesome aspects like striving and delusion. Unfortunately, because the teachings vary quite a lot about what jhana is, and because people sometimes imagine that they are experiencing jhana when they aren't, much confusion exists about the practice, why it is done, and what's actually happening. This is why we can't verify second-hand or after-the fact accounts of a person's practice without actually being with them in person while it's happening. Even then, we have to rely in part on the person's self-reports. The Sayadaw once told us that even with his powerful wisdom eye, he needed to see the yogi within a short number of mind-moments after the event occurred. If someone mis-reports, it can't be detected because it is no longer visible in their field. Because of this, verifying a yogi's experience is a tricky endeavor. When Stephen and I were on retreat with the Sayadaw, we would be undertaking a particular mastery, and upon concluding that would hear a knock on the door from someone telling us the Sayadaw wanted to see us. Only later did we understand that he wanted to see us right away so he could confirm our experience directly.

We often hear people saying that someone is "inclined to concentration practice" or "a natural" or conversely, "not inclined," but overall we haven't seen this bear out. On our 2-week retreats so far, we can say that 100% of the people have been able to undertake the practice and advance to a high level of momentary or access concentration (as well as purification of mind), even if this was not their previous experience. People who may have only meditated for 45 minutes in the past, are choosing on their own to sit for 2 hours (or even 3 or 4), comfortably and with a lot of stability. It would be an interesting experiment to see how widespread the access to this practice and the jhanas actually is, with a conducive container and context! But even with the folks we've worked with, I would doubt that they would say it comes "easily"—a fair amount of rigor is involved. We do suspect that if someone has had a non-dual experience before, that seems to provide an easier gateway for jhana to arise. And, there is a possibility that some people have a karmic history with the practice which gives them "prior experience."

So, to come back to your question, I think it is interesting that the Buddha himself went to teachers to learn the jhanas. For a modern person to think they could exceed the Buddha's ability with regard to this practice seems questionable. On the other hand, the purification of mind found in the Samatha practice CAN be accessible to people based on their own diligence, purification of mind, wise intention, and past karma—as well as the grace that influences our unfolding in ways that are mysterious and can't be assured just because we undertake a practice.



***NDM: If someone wanted to take up this jhana practice, how could they go about doing this? What kind of practice should one do in preparation before doing one of your retreats for example?***

Tina Rasmussen: Once can undertake concentration meditation as a daily practice to start. Thirty minutes a day is a sufficient amount of time for a daily meditation practice. The basic instructions are simple. In this meditation, one places the attention on the breath as it crosses the area between the upper lip and the nostril, what we call "the anapana spot," and just rests awareness there, noticing the breath as passes on the way in, and on the way out. What typically happens is that we find we can't keep our awareness there, we start thinking and realize our awareness has been drawn away from the object. Some people believe this means "they can't meditate," but the reality is that our habitual thought patterns which are running all the time, are revealed in this incredibly simple act of returning to one object of awareness, to the exclusion of everything else.

The rest of the unfoldment of the practice is the purification of mind that deconditions our habitual thought patterning, as well as the attachments that keep our habitual thought patterns, personality attachments, and believe in the duality of “me” running. The gradual deepening into the mystery that occurs through the simple endeavor of focusing on the breath crossing the anapana spot, is why this practice has survived for more than 5,000 years! For jhana to arise, a whole series of developments need to occur, which is why longer retreats are required. We suggest that people who attend one of our 2-week retreats (or our 25-day retreat to be held in 2013) work up to several hours of meditation a day, so that they arrive at the retreat “primed.” The process as it can manifest in both daily life and on retreat is described in our book, *Practicing the Jhanas*

In closing, I’d like to address a seeming conflict I often hear between the non-dual community and the Buddhist community. People with a non-dual orientation say, “Why meditate? This effort and desire for things to be different is just keeping you from the non-dual reality of the ground that is already present.” The Buddhists say, “There are millions of people on the planet who aren’t doing spiritual practice. How many of them are enlightened? Sitting on a couch watching TV seems less likely to precede awakening, than meditating does.” From my perspective, as someone who is part of both communities, I see that both views represent a truth. The mind can’t reconcile them, but they can both be held in harmony for what they offer, as a paradox. From the non-dual side, we are, always, the ground manifesting in perfect oneness, whether we know it or not. From this perspective, the “doing” of a structured practice (like meditation) seems to come from and reinforce a sense of “me.” *And even that* is the manifestation of the ground! At the same time, even for people who have tasted the truth, the personality has a way of coming back and reclaiming non-dual experience as something that happened to “me.” In these cases, over time, one is living from a memory of past non-dual experiences, or a spiritual ideal, rather than an ongoing reality. From the Buddhist side, the rigor of a deep meditation practice is seen to help clear away remaining debris that isn’t usually cleared out through a spontaneous recognition of our true nature. And, for people who haven’t yet tasted the mystery for themselves, intensive meditation practice can provide direct experience of our deeper nature that might not arise without it. Meditation is no guarantee of awakening, but it does seem to improve the likelihood. And even if it doesn’t, some of us just enjoy it.



Tina Rasmussen

For more info visit [www.jhanasadvice.com](http://www.jhanasadvice.com)

