

**Counting Within the Breath (Guided Meditation)**  
**Practising the Jhānas**  
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Okay. As I mentioned, we're going to be offering, in the first – I don't know – five days or so, quite a few different practices for you to try, or not. Like I said, if you already know Newton Abbot, it's fine. It's okay. But still, some of them can be really worthwhile. This one I want to offer tonight, it seems that it's not that well-known, so it might be quite new to most of you, maybe. It involves counting with the breath. Like I said, it may be breath isn't even your thing, it turns out, but that's fine. We're just offering some things.

Now, many people are familiar with counting. You count breaths up to ten, right? That's quite common. Or you just count indefinitely – 3,790 ... Or one counts up to ten, and then sometimes one counts before the breath, or after the breath, right? That's quite familiar? Yeah? What I want to do now is count *within* the breath. For example, if I take a long breath, for the duration of that long breath, I can count: one, two, three, four, five, etc., down till nine. And then at nine, at the cusp of the breath, at the turning point of the breath, when that's the longest comfortable breath, the longest possible comfortable breath, then I turn it around: nine, eight, seven, six. And then if I do a slightly shorter breath, I can do a breath that, at the same rate of counting, the length of breath would fit to six. So it's about two-thirds. Then I can do a shorter breath, which would be three – so one, two, three; three, two, one. I could go to one, but we're not going to do that.

So that's it. Let's do it. I'll explain why I'm offering it after we've done it, and say a few more things. Very simple.

[3:00, guided meditation begins]

So meditation posture, we'll talk about that later, but it's upright, comfortable. It needs to be comfortable. Upright, relaxed, open. The posture should reflect the state of attention, the state of consciousness – this balance between uprightness and alertness and energization on the one hand, and relaxation and openness and softness on the other hand. Somehow the posture, someone looking at you just gets a sense of that poise. Somehow that posture captures all of that. And then the mind has it as well. The consciousness, the *citta* has it. So find that posture. Establish yourself in that posture. Feel the posture. Feel, sense, how the posture reflects that poise I just talked about, between those sort of complementary qualities of the *citta*, how the posture expresses that balance.

Just take a few moments to feel, while you're still feeling the whole posture, feel the connection, the sensations of contact with the cushion, the bench, the chair, with the feet or the legs on the floor. Then open it again to the whole body. I mean the whole space, a little bit bigger than your anatomical, physical body. You're sensitive to that whole space. Many times, your attention is going to shrink – countless times. You just keep opening it up to that whole space.

Now, this may be a little tricky, this first part. I want you to keep that whole-body awareness, and keep opening it up, keep returning to it, as many times as you need it (which will be many, many

times). So you notice when it shrinks, and then you open it up. It might be a little awkward at first. You start to breathe. You do not need to move a lot of air. What's the longest comfortable breath that you can take? It needs to be comfortable, and in fact, you *don't* want to move a lot of air. We're not hyperventilating or anything. It's just very subtle, long, slow, smooth, and comfortable as possible. And see if you can kind of gauge what it would be to put a count to nine of that, and then a downwards count from nine to one on the out-breath. It takes a little while just to estimate, and kind of get a feel what's about the right length. Let it be comfortable. Find what's comfortable. Open up the awareness to the whole space of the body. Open up that awareness. Keep opening it.

Take whatever time it takes to gauge the right length and the right sort of speed of counting, if you like. Whole-body awareness. Long, slow, comfortable breath. The longest comfortable breath that's possible. Not a lot of air. And with the counting, take your time to get the sense of the pacing of the breath and the counting. Once you've found that, just stick with that. One to nine, nine to one, with this long, slow, comfortable, smooth, and actually relatively subtle breath.

And what am I concentrating on here? You've actually got four things, potentially, that you're holding together in your attention. Potentially three or four objects:

**(1)** The breath, this long in-breath or out-breath, and the sense of that, the sense of where it is.

**(2)** You've got the whole energy body, the whole space of the body, and what that feels like. You're holding that. You're sensitive to that as well as the breath.

**(3)** If you have a visual imagination, you have a third thing that you're concentrating on, holding in mind, and that's the visual sense of the numbers, the numerals, right there: 1, 2, 3. Bring some energy. See them, bright, bright like the sun. White, golden light. Bright, shining, with the breath, with the whole body.

**(4)** And you might, as well, have a fourth, which is the aural, the inner hearing. You're hearing yourself say each number: one, two, three. So you have maybe three, maybe four objects here: the whole body space, how that feels; the breath; and either or both the visual sense, the imagination of the number, and the aural sense. Let yourself hear them, loud and clear – not shouting, but loud and clear. So four things your attention has to hold together, coordinate, and really open yourself to, give your attention to them.

Don't worry if you don't have a visual imagination. Just go with the inner hearing. If you can do both, great. Keep stretching that attention – the whole body, whole body space, filled with alive, alert presence and sensitivity.

Let this long breath open up the sense of the body. Meet every number. Be there. Sense it, alive. If you're drowsy, make those numbers brighter. Make them louder. Keep opening up the awareness – the whole space, larger than the body. Keep opening it, again and again and again. To have to keep all of these three or four objects at once helps, gives the mind something to do. You can still play with giving an emphasis to one of them, or another one of them. But always you keep the whole body sense. Never lose that, even if it's in the background.

Then when you feel ready, let the breath become just a little shorter – still pretty long – to the count of six. So whatever the same pace of counting and breathing, it's a breath that's about two-thirds of that size, and you have a count of six in, and six back down on the out-breath. You've got all these objects:

the whole space of the energy body, the breath in and out, perhaps the visual sense of the numbers, and the hearing internally of the numbers.

Perhaps you might begin to notice *when* it is, in the cycle, that you tend to space out a little: “I always kind of miss the beginning,” or “I’m not quite as present at the end of a cycle,” or “when it turns around,” or whatever it is. Just a little less bright, maybe. A little less alert, a little less there. See if you can notice where that is for you right now, and just apply a bit more intention there. Really show up then. Intend to show up. Make it alive there. Be really present.

Keep opening up that attention, whole body space, again and again and again. Fill it with awareness. Fill it with alive presence. Inhabit the whole of that space with sensitivity. Make the numbers, make each number loud and clear, and/or bright and clear to the inner eye.

And then when you’re ready, allowing the breath, supporting the breath, shaping the breath to a shorter breath, to the count of three at the same pace. It’s a relatively short breath. Comfortable, smooth. Quite slow. Whole-body awareness. Whole space, filled with presence, alive, bright. Each number.

Make it work for you. What do you need to do right now to make this work for you, make it come alive? What helps? If you want, for a few breaths, you can play with – if you’ve got a visual imagination – imagine the numbers behind you. Usually we construe things in front of us. What if they’re behind us? Just play. Whole-body awareness.

When you’re ready, coming back to the slightly longer breath with the count of six. Comfortable, smooth. Opening the body with the breath. Opening the attention to the whole body. Holding this multiply-aspected object in the attention, engaging with it, open to it.

And then, again, when you’re ready, just returning shortly to the longest breath, with the count of nine. The longest comfortable breath, smooth, slow, long and comfortable. The numbers bright, loud, clear. Opening your attention. Opening the body.

[29:20, guided meditation ends]

And when you’re ready, just letting your breath return to normal, whatever that is right now. Seeing if you can keep this whole-body awareness, and opening your eyes when you’re ready.

How was that? Was that difficult, awkward? Yes? For everyone? Anyone find it helpful at all? Yeah? Some people? It may or may not be helpful to you. Beware of what I said earlier, about inertia. Why do I even offer this one? A couple of reasons, which are worth going into. Most people, at the beginning of a retreat, you may feel like your mind is a box of frogs, and you’re very agitated or whatever. Most people actually suffer from low energy. Their mind might also be a box of frogs as well, but there’s generally a pretty low energy, and the long breath will energize. It energizes your energy system, and it will open the body that way and energize the mind. Mostly, at the beginnings of retreats, that’s often what’s needed. Or a busy day, etc. – again, you might feel frazzled and agitated, but actually there’s (maybe *as well*) a low energy.

So the long breath is really, really helpful in bringing energy. In this particular practice, it’s tricky, because it takes a while to get used to it: “How do I actually find a count of nine to that? And how long? And that’s too long, and it’s uncomfortable, and then it’s not smooth,” etc. But it’s a really

powerful practice. Don't underestimate. That practice, what we just did, actually even just the first stage of it, just with the nine, could take you right up to the edge of the first *jhāna*, potentially. So don't underestimate its power, if you want to play with it. If you don't, that's also fine. But bear in mind what I said about inertia.

If you *do* want to play with it, you can do it any time. I mean, it can be a good start to the practice. It can be good at the beginning of the retreat. But it could be something you're doing in three weeks' time, or three years' time or whatever – it's just part of your practice that you use, either a lot, or now and then. Really any time. If you find it helpful, it can be developed as something really quite helpful.

Why? What's the advantage here? Maybe it's obvious to you. When we count within a breath, it's like we're putting more pegs for the attention. There are more pegs for the attention to grab hold of, right? In the same period of time, one in-breath, let's say, there's not much there. It's very easy for the mind to get lost. The mind's given more to do here, and more to kind of really peg the attention in. And the pegs are clearer, and louder, potentially, and brighter, and all that's going to allow the consciousness to kind of coalesce more in an energized way. So it's there if you want. Some people, some portion of people, will find this extraordinarily helpful, if you bother to develop it, if you take the time to develop it. For other people, it's like, "Okay, whatever." But it's there.

[33:47] Okay. Tomorrow, Kirsten and Sari will lead a session for anyone who wants any input, or advice, or feedback, or help around your posture. It's important for *jhāna* practice that you're comfortable, that actually your body is comfortable. I spent the first – I don't know how many years of my meditative life really uncomfortable in my body, and it was only when Christina suggested to me, "Why don't you alternate postures, and sit cross-legged?" I had some soccer injuries, both knees. "Why don't you just sit sometimes on the floor, and sometimes ...?" And that's the point where my *samādhi* took off. It actually allowed my body to be comfortable enough. It's really important that the posture is supportive. So do come, get some input, ask in interviews, etc. And consider that, for some of you, it's a lot of stress on the body to sit all day in one posture. If it's not, it's fine, but if it *is*, then consider alternating postures – maybe kneeling, and whatever it is.

In *jhāna* practice, we *are* interested in working with pain, so that *does* have its place in *jhāna* practice very much. It's very important. But we're going to do that later. You can't start with that. It doesn't work so well. First get comfortable. Let's get the thing going, and then we can introduce allowing the pain to be there, and relating to the pain within the *jhāna* practice. But that comes later.

Good to move as well. You'll be doing a lot of sitting, a lot of slow walking and standing. It's good to move in the day. So if you've got a yoga practice, or qigong, or whatever, yeah, that can be really helpful, moving the energies, taking care of the body, etc. I suppose – I don't know – maximum, like an hour a day, or something like that. But it can really be supportive, you know, if you're sitting a lot, and walking and standing a lot.

Also, go for walks. In other words, go for a walk out there, off the grounds, with the idea of enjoying yourself, and opening the heart, taking in the beauty, appreciating, opening the senses, etc. So *do* do that. The question of whether – we're still on movement now – you should go running or not, that's a sensitive one. It can vary from individual to individual, and the same individual at different times. Sometimes running, or that kind of more vigorous exercise, is exactly what we need for the energy to get a bit more circulated [when] it's getting very stagnant. Other times, running is actually

just disturbing the energy. This is part of the art and the responsiveness. You're going to have to feel and get a sense, "Is this going to help right now? I actually don't know. I'm going to try. I don't know." But it's there as a possibility. If it's something you do, it's something you want to pay attention to: how is that affected, etc., the energy, the body?

As I said, a lot of interviews on this retreat. Tomorrow, or rather after tomorrow until near the end of the retreat, we're going to be signing you up for interviews. So you look on the board, and you see, "My interview is at such-and-such a time, with this teacher, in this room." So you have to check, "When's my interview?" Yeah? Tomorrow, though, what we'll do is, if you feel like you want an interview – some of you have been here for a while; some of you may have things on your [mind], whatever it is – if you feel like you could benefit from an interview, please put your name on the sheet of blank paper marked "Who wants an interview tomorrow?" It's already up there. Please put your name, and one of us will see you tomorrow. We'll give you a time, etc. And I think, yeah, at some point we'll stop taking interviews tomorrow, and that will be it. But that will be some point in the afternoon. If you know *now* that you're going to want an interview tomorrow, put it up now, because it helps us plan our times and rooms and things like that. So you may not want one; that's fine. Probably the next day, we'll tell you when to come, and then we might change that. We'll see how that goes. But there are going to be a lot of interviews.

And with the interviews, again, on this retreat, please see it in the larger context. Usually on a *vipassanā* (insight) retreat, bring *anything* into an interview – anything about your life, or about whatever difficulty, or some situation, or relationship, or whatever it is, and we can talk about it. On a soulmaking retreat, bring anything, and we look at it: "How can it become soulmaking?", etc. On *this* retreat, what we mostly want to hear about is what's happening in your *jhāna* practice. It's not that we're not interested in the rest of your life, but part of the supporting conditions, we're really kind of containing the content of the interviews. So that's what you bring: what's happening on the cushion? What's happening in the walking? What's happening in the way you're thinking about the practice? I mean, not 100 per cent, but generally speaking, we want to try and do that. And that, I think, will be really helpful.

Okay. If you've got any business left over, things you need to take care of, calls you need to make, emails, if you need to write an email or whatever it is – hopefully not, but any business, if you can do that tonight, that would be great. It's going to be so helpful, way more than even for a usual retreat, if you can just put unfinished business aside, and just really get into enjoying being here, relaxing and opening. So if you *can* do that tonight or, at the latest, first thing tomorrow morning, really do that as a gift to yourself. Just have it done.

Last thing: let me introduce, because of the complexities of my situation, and practicalities, and my needs, I've got three helpers on this retreat. They won't necessarily all be here at the same time, but they'll be coming and going, and you will see them. Sometimes there might be situations where they need to sort of jump to the start of the lunch queue and stuff like that, so can we just – everyone see them, so we know who ...? Do you want to stand up, guys? Please. This is Laurence, and right at the back is Lea, and Nic. Okay? So you will see them coming in and out. They're going to sit with us when they're here, but they'll be coming and going a lot, and as I said, they might need to do stuff. So just so you know what's happening there.

Last thing: slow down. But don't slow down *too* much, meaning we're not doing that very slow Mahāsi thing, if you know that – lifting, moving, placing, etc. That's not the pace that's helpful for what we're doing, okay? Neither is too speedy. Eventually you can be either very slow, or very speedy, and it's fine within the context of a *jhāna* practice. At the moment, we want a pretty slow, comfortable thing. Why? [silence] Okay, I'll tell you. [laughter] Because it's the pace, at first, at which you can move around and keep the whole-body awareness. Now, one way or another, whole-body awareness is going to be part of this practice. It might be very secondary. It might be a background thing. But it might be a foreground thing. When you get to *jhāna* – I'll talk about this more – it's all about whole-body awareness, anyway. But moving slowly around enables you to kind of keep that basic, whole-body awareness, that basic mindfulness. Too slow, and you get into the details too much, and you're just backing up the queue for whatever – people want to go to the toilet. But it's also a different practice. Too fast, it's actually hard at first. So that's why I'm saying "slow down." It's part of the whole kind of energetic awareness we want to gradually cultivate, this bubble of resource. So find that pace where actually that's what you're doing when you're moving around – you've got some sense of the whole body, and the energy of the whole body. That's the sort of pace.

Okay. Long evening. Thank you for your patience. Sleep well, and have a good night's rest, and we'll see you – well, 6:45 to 7:30 here for the sitting, and then there's the posture session. There's the ritual with the phones. There are all kinds of things tomorrow. But see you tomorrow at some point, yeah? Okay.

*[Transcriber's note: this closing was followed by some practical retreat information, omitted in this transcript.]*