

Jhanas and 'Focus on Rest' ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 Someone wrote in and asked, what's the relationship between what I call the, quote, restful states
00:00:12 and the traditional practices that are known as shamatha or jhanas or absorption practices?
00:00:21 Well, the relationship is pretty simple.
00:00:25 The restful states are my reworking of the absorption practice of early Buddhism.
00:00:33 By reworking, I mean I've taken some of the principles involved in that, not all of them,
00:00:41 and put them into a completely modern type of vocabulary and formulated them as a procedure.
00:00:53 I technically refer to that procedure as focus on rest.
00:01:00 I have people work with six distinct flavors of restful experience.
00:01:06 That way, the experience of restfulness or tranquility, shamatha, by the way, means tranquilizing.
00:01:13 It's from the same root as shanti.
00:01:16 That means peace.
00:01:18 I like to make the experience of the tranquilizing or tranquility aspect of the practice to be
00:01:26 tangible and sensory.
00:01:28 I always like to work with tangible sensory flavors that have locations in space and durations
00:01:35 through time so that the practice is always based in just sensory experience.
00:01:44 I distinguish six flavors of restfulness that I have people work with.
00:01:50 One is physical relaxation of the body, which I call relaxed or relaxation.
00:01:57 Another one is what happens when you intentionally defocus your eyes.
00:02:02 Your eyes are open, but you're just sort of letting light in.
00:02:05 This is used in East Asian martial arts where it's called far mountain gazing.
00:02:11 It's also in shamanic cultures among native people.
00:02:15 It's sometimes called spirit eyes.
00:02:19 It's a restful experience of the external world of sight.
00:02:24 You're not fixated on objects.
00:02:26 You're just sort of letting light in.
00:02:28 It turns out, actually, you can process visual information better in that state than in the
00:02:34 sort of fixated gaze on this or that.
00:02:37 That was actually used by some samurai.
00:02:40 They would put their life at risk.
00:02:42 They would defocus their eyes when faced with an enemy, if you can believe that, with a
00:02:47 live blade because they found that they could respond more quickly in that unfixated visual
00:02:54 state.
00:02:56 So I call that light because you're just letting light in.
00:02:58 I count that as one of the restful states.
00:03:02 Then you listen to the absence of sound in different directions.
00:03:05 The absence of sound, you sort of defocus your ears with regards to physical sound.
00:03:12 So that gives you a way of having a tranquil experience of the objective world.

00:03:18 The body physically relaxes, the eyes defocus, the ears defocus.

00:03:23 So you have relaxation, light, silence.

00:03:26 Then you can find some restful states within your subjective world.

00:03:31 For example, at any given instant, you may or may not have internal talk going on.

00:03:36 Now I know you might think it's always there, but it's not necessarily always there.

00:03:42 There are even ways that you can sort of turn it off without fighting yourself.

00:03:48 In general, we don't want you to fight with yourself.

00:03:51 There are ways of finding quiet in your head where talk normally occurs.

00:03:58 It could happen that there's no emotions in your body.

00:04:01 I call an absence of emotion in the body.

00:04:05 You could have pain in the body without having emotion in the body, for example.

00:04:10 Emotion is things like anger, fear, sadness, joy, interest, smile, that kind of thing,

00:04:14 those flavors.

00:04:15 So conscious awareness of an absence of emotional sensation in the body is an awareness of a

00:04:23 presence of emotional peace.

00:04:25 So I call that restful flavor of peace.

00:04:28 That takes care of sort of the affective side, the emotional side of subjective experience.

00:04:36 Then we have, of course, thought.

00:04:38 Well part of thought is internal talk, so if you experience quiet, that's a restful

00:04:43 state in talk space.

00:04:46 Then you could look into your image space.

00:04:50 Image space means where you see mental pictures.

00:04:54 You could look into image space but not at any images, or maybe there wouldn't be any

00:04:59 images, there's just blank.

00:05:02 So we'll call that blank.

00:05:04 So a restful state in the visual part of thought I call blank, a restful state in the auditory

00:05:11 part of thought I call quiet, and a restful state in the emotional body I call peace.

00:05:19 That then gives you six really delicious and distinctive flavors of tranquility, relaxation,

00:05:28 light, silence, peace, blank, quiet.

00:05:33 So I have people work with those to note them, to create them and note them.

00:05:38 And that will then take you deeper and deeper and deeper into states of high concentration

00:05:46 and restfulness.

00:05:48 Shama-ta is interesting because it means, the shama part means tranquil, but the ta

00:05:59 is sometimes taken to mean abiding.

00:06:04 In fact in Tibetan it's called shi-ne.

00:06:07 Shi means tranquil and ne means abiding.

00:06:09 So the ne part is high concentration, one-pointedness, and the shi part is this restful or tranquilizing.

00:06:17 So there's a relationship.

00:06:19 The way I interpret the, at least part, not all, but part of the traditional jhana system

00:06:26 is that it's a biofeedback device.

00:06:29 You produce pleasant experiences, the more you focus on those pleasant experiences, the

00:06:35 more pleasant they become, encouraging you to focus even more, thus creating a positive

00:06:42 feedback loop that revs up your concentration power and also takes you into deeper and deeper
00:06:47 states of tranquility.

00:06:49 And hence the shama-ta, or the tranquil but also developed concentration, the ta part,
00:06:56 is the high focus.

00:06:59 That's my reworking of part of the classical system.

00:07:05 And if you look at how the classical system of the absorptions is described, for example

00:07:10 in the Digha Nikaya, you'll see that what the Buddha describes over and over again is

00:07:17 going into these tranquil states and then seeing beyond them to something, to an absolute

00:07:22 rest called nirvana, or nirota, meaning cessation, that is not a pleasant, tranquil experience.

00:07:32 It's something beyond that, beyond time and space.

00:07:36 But one of the classical ways to get there is to go into these tranquil states and then

00:07:42 see beyond them until they are penetrated and dissolve into the absolute rest of the

00:07:52 source.

00:07:54 By giving you, by making them sensory experiences, you can then observe their impermanence, eventually

00:08:00 get to their emptiness, and then that becomes a path to classical enlightenment.