



## Dhyāna

Dhyāna (ध्यान), a Sanskrit word translated as “meditation” or “concentration,” refers to a focused meditation practice applied in numerous South Asian religious traditions, including Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism. The root word is *dhyai*, referring to contemplation. The term appears in early Hindu texts, including the Vedas and Upaniṣads. A general interpretation of dhyāna is that of sustained, single-pointed concentration on an object or focal point. References to this word as a meditation practice are found in early textual examples, such as in excerpts from the Chandogya Upaniṣad. Verse 7.61 states:

dhyānaṃ vāva cittādbhūyo / Meditation is superior to the intellect/mind.

dhyāyatīva pṛthivī: The Earth is also in meditation.

Dhyāna later emerged as a systematic technique applied within yoga practice. It thus appears in the famous premodern Yogasūtras of Patañjali, where it is described as the seventh “limb” (*āṅga*) of Yoga. As this text exemplifies a crucial attempt to systematize the numerous yogic regimens practiced throughout South Asia, the inclusion of dhyāna illustrates its importance as a widespread technique of meditative concentration.

In the early Buddhist texts often referred to as the Pāli Canon, dhyāna is discussed as the Pāli term *jhāna*. The interpretation of this technique is similar to the Hindu context, wherein the mind is drawn away from external sensory impressions in sustained concentration. *Jhāna* practice constitutes the Buddhist attempt to purge mental defilement and distractions through meditative practice. These early texts refer to successive states of *jhāna*: four stages comprising form (*rūpa*), and four formless stages (*arūpa*).

The first two form-*jhānas* aim to still the mind and cultivate the qualities of absorption and non-sensory pleasure (*sukha*). The second *jhāna* accompanies more refined concentration, as the flux of discursive thought (*vitarka-vicara*) is stilled with single-pointed awareness (*ekaggata*). The third *jhāna* is *uppekhā*, a calm detachment from sensory perceptions. The fourth *jhāna* is a more pronounced and purified form of equanimity, *upekkhāsatipārisuddhi*.

The formless *jhānas* gain the practitioner access to formless realms due to diligent concentration. These formless states include infinite space/sky, *ākāśānañcāyatana*, infinite consciousness, *viññāṇañcāyatana*, infinite non-being, *ākīñcaññāyatana*, and the exalted meditative state of neither perception nor non-perception, *nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*.

Ultimately, cultivation of these successive *jhānas* should lead to supreme, liberating insight. How this is precisely achieved is debated among the current Theravada, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions.

Dhyāna was transliterated into the Chinese word Ch'an (禪) to become the Ch'an Buddhist tradition in the early centuries of the common era. Ch'an was transmitted to Japan and referred to as the Japanese word Zen. The technique of dhyāna is a crucial aspect of Ch'an practice, important enough for the tradition itself to be named after dhyāna. Buddhist monk Kumārajīva (4<sup>th</sup> century CE) was integral in translating Indian Buddhist dhyāna texts and introducing the practice and term to China. The Ch'an school is founded upon the central role of meditation practice, which was deeply influenced by the Yogacara meditation sūtras developed in northwestern India. Similar to the practices described in the Pāli Canon, *ānāpānasati* or mindfulness on the circulation of breath was a primary exercise in the cultivation of meditation practice. More advanced concentrative exercises develop from primary mindfulness practice. Zen Buddhism is one of the most prominent contemporary Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions, having major centers distributed throughout North America, Europe, Asia and Australia.

In the Jain tradition, there are numerous texts attributed to the founder of Jainism, Mahavira. One important meditative text is the Sthānāṅgasūtra, dated around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. This text describes four states of dhyāna or concentration which may be harmful or helpful. Given this interpretation, any state of focused concentration – including being immersed in anger or hateful emotion – may be a form of dhyāna. Similar to Hindu and Buddhist contexts, Jain dhyāna practice aims to cultivate serenity and detachment through focused concentration while calming lustful desire and excessive emotional distractions.

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