

## Working with the Breath to Develop Samatha:

### A Calm, Centred Mind

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The Theravāda Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia has a long and rich meditative tradition. It has two broad and interacting streams, that focus respectively on *samatha* – calm, tranquillity, inner peace – and *vipassanā* – direct insight. It is said that both *samatha* and *vipassanā* are aspects of liberating knowledge:

when *samatha* is cultivated ... the heart/mind (*citta*) is developed ... [leading to] abandonment of attachment/lusting after (*rāga*); if *vipassanā* is cultivated ... wisdom (*paññā*) is developed ... [leading to] to abandonment of spiritual ignorance (*avijjā*).<sup>1)</sup>

Here one sees that the spiritual path involves work on both affective and cognitive aspects of the mind: attachment-rooted emotional reactions for and against things, and how one sees and understands things. These are inter-related, for emotional turbulence makes it difficult to see clearly, and confusion and misperception feeds emotional turbulence. Working together, *samatha* and *vipassanā* bring about a state in which direct knowledge can arise in a calm, clear, peaceful mind.

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1) AN. I, 61.

It is said<sup>2)</sup> that one can develop calm then insight, insight then calm, both together, or insight with minimal calm, which came to be seen as ‘dry insight’: a trend which became popular in Myanmar from the 1950s, and spread to other Theravāda countries, weakening rich samatha traditions. This trend is now starting to be re-balanced.

An important quality in both samatha and vipassanā is *sati*, mindfulness.

### Mindfulness (*sati*)

Buddhism is perhaps unique in its emphasis on this quality – though in recent years, aspects of it have been taken up in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy. The second of these secular therapies has been recognised by the UK National Health Service as an effective means to prevent people who have suffered from depression from relapsing back into it by being drawn into negative thought patterns.

Buddhism sees mindfulness as a crucial aspect of the process of meditatively *calming down* and *waking up* so as to see things as they really are. Both of these help us to reduce the suffering that we inflict on ourselves and others. As is said by the Buddha in his Discourse on the Establishments of Mindfulness (*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, sutta 10), mindfulness is ‘the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the ending of pain and unhappiness, for

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2) AN. II, 156-158.

acquiring the true method, and for experiencing Nirvana', that is, it leads to the end of greed, hatred and delusion.

To be mindful is to be clearly aware of what is experienced in the present moment, being present with, and paying careful attention to, the wondrous flow of here ... now. When we stand back from and alertly take stock of what we are thinking, feeling and doing, this allows things to ... naturally ... calm ... down. We are then open to experiencing a dropping away of normal mental horizons and limitations, perhaps a kind of timeless presence, and with feelings of happiness and ease.

As we become more mindful, we tend to more easily notice simple natural events in the environment, such as a leaf gently falling to the ground, or ripples on the surface of a river or pool, or a trickle of rain running down a car windscreen while one waits in traffic. Mindful observation of these can allow a natural delight to arise ...

Mindfulness is mind-ful-ness: full presence of mind, alert attention, mental clarity, being wide awake, fully with-it, vigilant, not on auto-pilot. During a normal day, much of the time we are operating on auto-pilot, involved in habitual actions and thought patterns. But when mindfulness arises, we are more alive and alert; something switches on that was previously inactive.

Mindfulness is a thorough observation which is not careless in its watchfulness: it sees things as they are, without overlooking aspects of them, or projecting things onto them. It is also disinterested and non-judgemental, observing, without reacting for or against; a 'bare attention' that simply notes and registers what is going on, a full awareness of what is happening in and to us, as it happens – the aspect emphasised in secular

forms of mindfulness.

Mindfulness also has an aspect of memory to it. It remembers what one is supposed to be attending to, so one does not ‘float away’ from it; and if the mind *has* wandered off, it reminds one to return to the focus of meditation. It is also used when one has undistorted memory of a past experience, especially of meditative experience and its beneficial qualities, so as to not lose one's connection to these, which helps them arise anew in the present.

An important fruit of mindfulness is that it conduces to a simple, natural, non-habitual state, in which things ‘flow’ better.

In particular, mindfulness *of breathing* takes a look at something seemingly very ordinary, always ‘under one's nose’. It is the steady watching and clear awareness of a smooth breath, particularly noting its length, and clearly noting the flow of sensations and related feelings. This allows one to feel what it is actually like, rather than just thinking about it: as if feeling it for the first time.

Its quality of careful observation helps one not be confused about the breath, and its quality of alertness prevents ‘switching off’ from the breath into a dull ‘staring’ attitude, as when the mind stops taking things in when reading.

It remembers that the aim is to stay with the breath in the present moment, so it guards against losing concentration and switching away from the breath, wandering away into the past, future, daydreams, worries, sleepiness ...

It carefully notices when attention nevertheless wanders onto such things, so that it can be gently brought back to the breath, so as to again

mindfully feel it and know where one is in the process.

If annoyance arises in the mind, whether directed at one's own wandering mind, external noises, or their source, mindfulness recognises this, but helps one step back from involvement in the irritation, so one can let go of it and return to the breath. The same applies, for example, with any anxiety on 'am I doing this right?'.

Once the slow steady breathing has been established, mindfulness observes it without interference, so one can let the breath be, and not be anxious, as one nears the end of the in-breath, about when the out-breath will start, or vice versa; it will happen naturally.

When one has finished a meditation 'sit', it is good to mindfully recollect how it went. Mindfulness can also be used during the day, either to periodically notice what the breath is doing or how the mind is reacting. One can pause to check out how one feels: feeling one's contact with the ground through the feet, noting any tensions in the body. Then note one's emotional state.

Mindfulness is a patient, kindly observation, which gives space for things to be what they are, and then to gradually change and pass. This is very helpful in the day when applied, for example, when one feels low, or irritated, or worried, or afraid ... It helps one to acknowledge these states, but then to let go of them. This is especially so when one does a few long, slow breaths, thinking, for example, 'Breathing in long, there is irritation, breathing out long, there is irritation' rather than 'Breathing in long, *I* am irritated, breathing out long, *I* am irritated'.

## Vipassanā

In vipassanā, mindfulness is applied especially to noticing the ‘three marks’ of conditioned existence, that anything, mental or physical is:

- *anicca*: impermanent, changing, fluctuating, arising and passing away, unstable.
- *dukkha*: mentally or physically painful, whether in an obvious, subtle or very subtle way, stressful, unsatisfactory, not quite what you want it to be ...
- *anattā*: non-Self, not a permanent, essential Self or its possession – it is ‘empty of Self or what pertains to Self’,<sup>3)</sup> it is not I, me or mine in anything but a partial and changing way.

The unconditioned, Nirvana, though, is seen as beyond change and time, beyond *dukkha*, but still non-Self.

## Samatha

In samatha meditation, mindfulness is combined with a state of strong concentration, or gatheredness, focussed mainly on a specific meditative object, such as the breath, though this can also be used as a calming anchor in insight meditation.

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3) SN.IV, 54.

### **Concentration or mental unification (*samādhi*)**

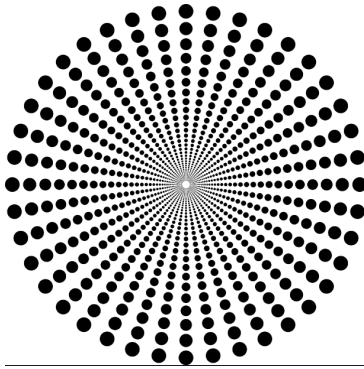
People's normal experience of 'concentration' usually varies from a half-hearted paying attention, to becoming absorbed in a good book, when most extraneous mental chatter subsides. Buddhist meditation, in common with many other forms of meditation such as Hindu yoga, aims to gradually cultivate the power of concentration till it can become truly 'one-pointed', with 100 per cent of the attention focused on a chosen calming object. In such a state, the mind becomes free from all distraction and wavering, in a unified state of inner stillness: mental unification.

In meditation, 'concentration' refers not so much to the gentle effort of *concentrating* – though this is also needed – as to the state(s) of mental unification that this leads to, as when a chemical substance is concentrated into a 'concentrate'. This kind of concentrated mental state arises when the mind's energies are gathered due to an engaging interest in a focus of attention, when one is undistractedly happy to calmly stay with that focus.

Concentration yokes the mind onto an object or project, be this good, bad or indifferent. It is a state of being focused, whatever the level of one's alertness/awareness. It is possible to be quite focused, but not very aware/mindful: e.g. Sir Isaac Newton boiling his watch instead of an egg, when concentrating on an intellectual problem. It is possible to be very mindful without necessarily focusing on any one object, though if there is good mindfulness, this makes concentration easier. When concentration is combined with mindfulness, and focused on a simple object such as the breath, it becomes 'right concentration', and integrates the mind's energies so as to bring about mental stillness, tranquillity and peace: a quiet yet positive state of mind.

Right concentration is a wholesome one-pointedness of mind: a wholesome state of mind steadily focused on a calming object. It is an intensified steadiness of mind, a state where the mind is like a clear flame burning in a windless place, or the surface of a clear, undisturbed lake.

It is a state of steady focus, mental composure and stillness, which unifies and harmonises the mind's energies, as when a class of children are all intently listening to a good teacher, not fidgeting or looking out of the window. It is experienced as a state of tranquillity and clarity, and comes about when there is a state of happiness that allows the mind to contentedly stay on the object, as one has developed a natural interest in it.



[Fig.1] Circle of concentration

### **Mindfulness and concentration together**

In samatha meditation on the breathing, mindfulness establishes a link between the mind and the breath, knowing its length and how it feels, while concentration is the state of being well-focused on the sensations known by mindfulness, initially aided by some form of counting the breath. At any time in the meditation, *mindfulness* will give awareness of:



- the length of the breath, its speed, smoothness, and whether it is an in or out breath.
- the subtle sensations which arise along the path of the breath, and subtle feelings that come when one attends carefully to the flow of the ‘breath body’.
- where one is in the process, such as the stage of practice one is in, and what one is supposed to be doing.
- aspects of posture that may need re-tuning.
- whether the mind has wandered.

*Concentration* is the quality of remaining generally focused, ‘centred’, on the breath, hopefully including the sensations in a particular part of the path of the breath as one scans along this. At first, this is particularly aided by attention to the numbers one is counting as one breathes. The counting aids both mindfulness and concentration.

When the mind wanders, this is because, first of all, mindfulness slips, and one forgets what one is supposed to be doing. Concentration is then lost, as the mind becomes distracted, and loses its focus. If one then becomes involved in a long wandering thought, there may be concentration on *this*, but no mindfulness. When one notices that the mind is not on the breath, this marks the return of mindfulness, which then allows one to re-establish awareness of the breath, then concentration on it.

The practice starts to work well when there is a balance of a high degree of both mindfulness and concentration, so as to bring about a state of alert stillness.

## The *Ānāpāna-sati Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya*, sutta 118)

This gives a series of 16 stages in the process of being mindful of the in-breath and out-breath to cultivate mindfulness, concentration and then insight.

The first four stages focus on the breath itself: noticing if it is long or short – or in my Samatha Trust Tradition, gently adjusting it to be slow and long, longish, shortish, or very short. Then following the feeling of the flow of the breath through its full cycle, then allowing it and the mind to become tranquil as one focusses on one point in this cycle, such as in one nostril.

The next four stages focus on attention to the energising joy, and gentler happiness, that can arise from this process, then calming these down. The next four focus on attention to the mind itself, and the final four focus on impermanence and letting go.

In practising mindfulness of breathing, one can thus develop the four establishments of mindfulness, the *sati-paṭṭhānas*: mindfulness of the body, feeling-tones, states of mind, and the changing patterns of experience. The latter include all the processes of body and mind, qualities hindering meditation, and qualities aiding it, especially the seven factors of awakening, the *bojjhaṅgas*: mindfulness, investigation of states, vigour, joy, tranquillity, concentration, and equanimity.

Mindfulness of breathing, along with meditations on other topics, such as lovingkindness (*mettā*), compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity, can take the mind to very peaceful, concentrated states called *jhānas* (Sanskrit *dhyāna*). But to attain these, one must first gently train the mind so that what are called the five hindrances fall away for a time.

## *Mettā*

In seeking to calm and purify the mind – and in ordinary living – one finds that there are many negative, limiting, restricting, ego-centred emotions; these all help to keep the mind/heart ‘small’.

Our relationships with other people, with animals, and with our own emotions are often marred by aversion, resentment etc. From inner tensions come tensions with those around us; and we also store up the charge of outer tensions as inner tensions of body and mind.

All meditation helps to gently undermine such negativities, but it is also possible to work on them more directly. Relevant, here, are what are known as the four ‘immeasurables’: when fully developed, they to make the mind/heart (*citta*) ‘immeasurable’ by breaking down the mental barriers we usually hide – and imprison – ourselves behind. They are also known as the ‘divine abidings’ (*brahma-vihāras*): at a high level, they are seen to lead to rebirth as a loving, compassionate divine being. The four are these positive attitudes:

- **Lovingkindness (*mettā*)**: which counteracts ill-will, anger, aversion, frustration.
- **Compassion (*karuṇā*)**: which counteracts tendencies to cruelty, and wishes that beings be free from pain and suffering and their causes.
- **Empathetic/appreciative joy (*muditā*)**: a gladness which counteracts envy and jealousy by rejoicing at the happiness and success of other beings; being happy for others, and even appreciating the happiness of skilful meditative states in oneself. For example, being happy for

each person that reaches the end of a long queue (US: ‘line’) that one is further back in! To be happy, rather than jealous, at the good fortune of others means that there is then, overall, more happiness in the world.

- **Equanimity** (*upekkhā*): which counteracts attachment and partiality and is an even-mindedness in the face of the ups and downs of one's own life and the life of others, even though one wants them to be happy and free of suffering.

These are seen as four very positive, uplifting, purifying attitudes or emotions. To say more on the first of these, what is *mettā*, ‘lovingkindness’? –

- The heartfelt aspiration for the happiness and health of a living being, whether oneself or any other – for all wish to be happy: ‘May I/you/we/all be well and happy, truly well and happy’.
- Friendliness, open-hearted goodwill – though this need not entail that one positively ‘likes’ those who one directs *mettā* is at.
- A feeling akin to the love of a mother for her young child, but without its tendency to over-attachment, and radiated to a range of people and beings.
- A warm, accepting patience, free from all hatred, ill-will, bitterness, resentment, festering self-pity, or stoic indifference.
- A willingness to patiently work with what life and other people present one with, without anger.
- A warm glow of zestful energy in the ‘heart’, which melts some of the icy-encrustations from one's ego.

## The five hindrances

In working to develop a mindful and focussed state of mind, one must learn to deal with what are called the ‘five hindrances’ (*nīvaraṇa*). These are common human reactions that tend to hinder, obscure and stultify the mind's potential for developing sustained, well-focused application to any task, including meditation. In their different ways, they are all expressions of the mind's constantly shifting, restless nature. They are limiting, restricting, ego-centred emotions which keep the mind/heart ‘small’, make it unworkable, brittle, hard to skilfully apply in a flowing way, and muffle mental lucidity. Hence it is said that they are ‘makers of blindness, causing lack of vision, causing lack of knowledge, detrimental to wisdom, tending to vexation, leading away from Nirvana’.<sup>4</sup> They are akin to a dirty or steamed-up car windscreen that prevent a driver from seeing the road clearly and driving effectively and safely.

The five are:

1. ***Desire for pleasurable sense-experiences (kāma-cchanda)***: desire (*chanda*) directed at pleasing sense-objects of various kinds, sexual and otherwise: the five ‘strands of sense-pleasures’ (*kāma-guṇas*), objects of the five senses that are ‘agreeable, loved, charming, attractive, pleasurable, arousing desire’.<sup>5</sup> It occurs when, during the attempt to develop sustained concentration, the mind does not want to be confined to the focus of concentration, such as the breath, but reaches out and is drawn away to

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4) SN. V, 97

5) DN. I, 245.

more ‘interesting’ objects of a pleasant or alluring nature, such as a sexual image, or memory of a TV programme, or simply the thought of the greater comfort that might come from moving the legs. In this way it loses its calming focus and becomes coloured by the process of desire. It is the mind reaching out, like a baby for a dummy (rubber teat).

It is said that this sense-desire is like being in debt, for one feels that one ‘owes’ the desired objects attention, and so is pulled towards them; they have a hold on one.<sup>6)</sup>

2. *Ill-will (vyāpāda)*: this is where the mind reacts with aversion, discontent or irritation: with the task at hand, with other people making a noise, or with oneself for having difficulties with the task. It is the mind seeking to push something away, or shrinking away from it.

It is said that ill-will is like having an illness which makes everything taste bitter: to an irritated mind, the world is an irritating place!

3. *Dullness and lethargy (thīna-middha)*: this is a lack of mental and physical vigour, a sluggish state of inertia: the mind closing down, going into neutral, becoming like a piece of putty, going into a passive blank gaze, rather than applying itself to the task at hand. While this can sometimes be due to simple tiredness, it is often due to allowing the mind and body to become too passive.

It is said that dullness and lethargy is like being in jail: one is incarcerated in one's passive state: not engaging with any worthwhile activity, one gets nothing out of life. You don't want to do this, or that, or

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6) DN. I, 71-73.

anything else.

4. ***Restlessness and unease (uddhacca-kukkucca)***: here the mind fluctuates between two extremes. Firstly, an over-energised state of excitement in which interest in the task stimulates a flurried scattering of thoughts; and secondly, a ‘low’ state of unease, worry or guilt in which there is lack of clarity and everything seems to be ‘going wrong’. This is the mind wavering up and down. A strong form of this is expressed in manic depression.

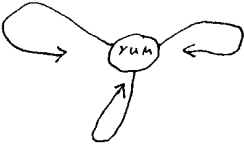


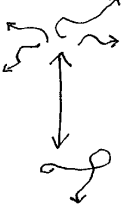
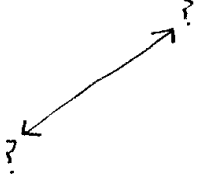
Restlessness and unease is said to be like being a slave: being *very dependent* on what mood or frame of mind one happens to be in, being pulled between emotional highs and lows.

5. ***Vacillation or fear of commitment (vicikicchā)***: here the mind wavers in a perplexed state. Holding back from full commitment to the task of mental development, with facile doubts arising about one's own ability, and the worthwhileness of meditation and its goals (hence it is sometimes translated as ‘sceptical doubt’). It is a state where the mind wavers forwards and backwards, dithering, ‘sitting on the fence’ and back-peddling in a state of fear of commitment and of the unknown. It is holding back from putting one's energy into a task because, even though it is starting to progress well, one raises specious doubts about it. It can be seen when someone stands on a diving board at a swimming baths but decides not to dive, even though they are capable of diving from that height.

Vacillation is said to be like turning back half way through a journey: just when one is starting to get somewhere, one starts thinking of all sorts of

imaginary problems and reasons for not continuing.

In these various ways, unwholesome aspects of mind throw up barriers in the way of developing a calm, strong, clear state of mind. In effect, they are, respectively, the reactions: ‘I want’; ‘I don’t want’; ‘I can’t be bothered’; ‘This is exciting ... but I’m no good at it’; ‘I’m not sure’.

		
<p><i>Desire for sense-pleasures</i></p>		<p><i>Ill-will</i></p>
		
	<p><i>Dullness &amp; lethargy</i></p>	
		
<p><i>Restlessness &amp; unease</i></p>		<p><i>Vacillation</i></p>

[Fig.2] The five hindrances

The early Buddhist texts also liken the hindrances to various processes which obstruct a person from seeing a clear reflection of his or



her face in the surface of water in a pot.<sup>7)</sup> This is likened to gaining a clear understanding of what is for the true benefit of oneself and others. The hindrances are said to get in the way of this clear seeing, as follows:

- sense-desire is like the water having dye in it: it is like looking at things through coloured glasses, which put a false ‘gloss’ on things.
- ill-will is like the water boiling: suggestive of the state of inner ‘seething’ that distorts one’s perception.
- dullness and lethargy is like the water-pot being covered with moss and weeds: suggestive of a ‘shut in’ state.
- restlessness and unease is like the water being stirred and agitated by the wind: the wind of emotions produces ‘highs’ and ‘lows’.
- vacillation is like the water being stirred up and muddy and the pot being in the dark: vacillation obscures clarity.

The water being pure, unheated, uncluttered, unstirred and in clear daylight, then, is like the mind which has transcended the hindrances. Another water simile compares the hindrances to outlets opened from a river, so as to disturb its flow.<sup>8)</sup>

The hindrances are like five confidence tricksters: very good at plausible enticements to unskilful states, and also very good at disguising themselves in subtle forms once their more obvious guises have been seen through, as they may in time transform into:

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7) SN. V, 121-125.

8) AN. III, 64.

- attachment to the happiness that arises in meditation;
- aversion to meditation, if meditative effort is forced, or because boredom sets in from doing the meditation in too passive or habitual a way, or ill-will to someone who disturbs ‘my meditative calm’;
- mental passivity due to too much concentration without balancing energy and mindfulness;
- excitement at the joy that can arise in meditation, or agitation at the presence of a hindrance;
- vacillation about pressing on to deeper aspects of meditation.

We all experience the hindrances, to varying degrees, both in our ordinary life, and in relation to meditation. They are universal patterns, as real now as in north-east India 2,500 years ago, when the Buddha identified them. We should learn to recognise them for what they are; but there is no point in feeling ‘guilty’ when they occur. Guilt is itself an aspect of the fourth hindrance – it agitates the mind –, and may also verge into ill-will towards oneself! When one observes the arising of a state in oneself that one can recognise as one of the hindrances, or related to them, one should note this in a clear but light-hearted way, but resolve to try to avoid this kind of inept mental state in the future.

By recognizing the hindrances and learning to undermine them, one can allow the calm, stillness and brightness in the depths of the mind to ‘shine through’. One can indeed think of the hindrances as like five jammed doors, that once opened allow through a flow of skillful energy, or as five weeds, that when rotted down and composted, can release their energy for more positive growth.

## The brightly shining mind

It is said:

Monks, this mind is brightly shining (pabhassara), but it is defiled by visiting defilements. The uninstructed ordinary person does not understand this as it has come to be. So, I say, there is no meditative cultivation of the mind for the uninstructed ordinary person.

Monks, this mind is brightly shining, but it is free of defilements which arrive. The instructed disciple of the noble ones understands this as has come to be. So, I say, there is meditative cultivation of the mind for the instructed disciple of the noble ones.<sup>9)</sup>

The hindrances are the main ‘defilements’ of the basic nature of mind, and they are akin to ‘visitors’ to the mind: one might also see the them as like five guests who have overstayed their welcome. They ‘have got their feet under the table’ and think they own the ‘house’ they are visiting. The task of the meditator is to recognize this and to invite them to leave. And like mice in one's house, they may only stay around if they can find nourishment.

In the Theravāda tradition, the commentator Buddhaghosa refers<sup>10)</sup> to this radiant mind as the ‘naturally pure latent resting state of mind’. In the Mahāyāna traditions, much more is said of it and it came to be equated with the Buddha-nature, or embryonic Buddha within beings. When unobscured by defilements (which meditation facilitates), the brightly shining basic nature of mind can be a basis for the attainment of the liberating insight that

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9) AN. I, 10.

10) AN. commentary, I, 61.

leads to the experience of Nirvana; otherwise, defilements will in time return and the various kinds of rebirth will follow, though some in the bright heavenly realms where the defilements are weak.

### The first *jhāna*

Once the hindrances are suspended, then:

When one sees that the five hindrances have been given up in oneself, gladness (*pāmuḍḍa*) arises, and when one is glad, joy (*pīṭi*) arises. When the mind is joyful, the body becomes tranquil, and with a tranquil body, one experiences happiness (*sukha*): the mind of someone who is pleased/happy becomes concentrated.

Being thus secluded from sense-desires, secluded from unwholesome states, one enters and dwells in the first *jhāna* which is joy and happiness born of seclusion, accompanied by mental application and examining (*vitakka* and *vicāra*). One drenches, steepens, fills and pervades this very body with the joy and happiness born of seclusion, so that there is no part of one's whole body that is untouched by that joy and happiness.<sup>11)</sup>

So, this is a very pleasant, joyful state, undistracted by thoughts about the everyday world, or any residual input from the five senses: the eyes will be closed, so no visual input; the mind is very concentrated, so any sounds are muffled or not noticed; any slight smells and tastes are not noticed; and while there is awareness of joy throughout the body, there is no bodily discomfort or tension in the body.

Due to the absence of the hindrances, it is common for there to be an

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11) DN. I, 73.

inner experience of light, which can also be seen as an indication of the background radiance of the mind.

There will also tend to arise a *nimitta*, or mental impression of the object of meditation, such as the breath. This might be a simple patch of light with some breath-like movement in it, in the centre of one's mental field of vision.

## The five jhāna-factors

The above quote on the first jhāna highlights certain aspects of it. These are positive factors which help engage the mind, drawing out and intensifying its potential, culminating – when they are fully developed – in the attainment of the full state of mental clarity and unification that is jhāna: meditation in the fullest sense.

The five factors are:

1. *Vitakka*, ‘**Mental application**’ or ‘**Applied thought**’: applying, and re-applying the mind to the meditation object.

2. *Vicāra*, ‘**Examination**’ or ‘**Sustained thought**’: a sustained examination and exploration of the meditation object. This arises as the object becomes naturally more interesting and inviting, as when one gets drawn in to a good story. This means that the mind remains consistently flowing along with the object with a sustained light pressure. 1 and 2 are respectively like: water falling on the ground, and seeping into it; striking a gong, and its reverberations; holding a pot, and rubbing round it to clean it;

a bird spreading its wings when about to take off, and a bird effortlessly gliding; a bee zooming in towards a flower, and it buzzing round it, exploring it for nectar; meeting a new person, and getting to know them.

3. *Pīti*, ‘Joy’: a feeling of satisfaction in the form a refreshing mental and physical energization, felt, at first, as mild tingles, perhaps like effervescent fizzing in the blood, or as like fish nibbling at one's skin. As it develops, it is felt in a more sustained or intense way. It is described as having five levels: *minor* joy raises the hairs on the body; *momentary* joy is like a quick surge or shiver of joy, like a lightning flash; in *showering* joy the surges are repeated, like waves repeatedly breaking on the shore; in *transporting/uplifting* joy, the body may shake or one's limbs involuntarily move; in *pervading* joy, tingles of joy pervade the whole body, even down to the fingers and toes, just as water pervades every crack in a flooded cave.<sup>12)</sup> It is good to know that, when one sits still, and patiently applies mindful attention, joy can naturally arise – when the practice has been going well.

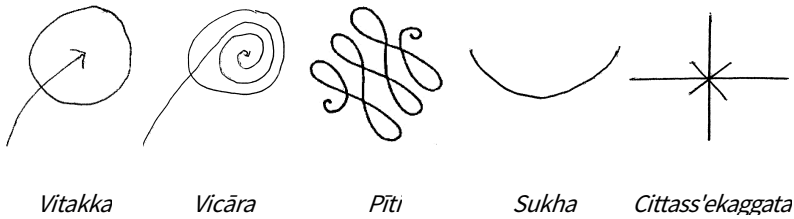
4. *Sukha*, ‘Happiness’: a harmonisation of energy that expresses itself in a more tranquil and calm way than joy, as a deeply contented inner happiness and sense of easeful physical pleasure. 3 and 4 are respectively like what is felt by a thirsty person in a desert when seeing water, and then when coming to taste it and relaxing.

5. *Cittass'ekaggata*, ‘One-pointedness of mind’: unification of the mind and its energies, through being wholly focused on the meditation

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12) Vism. IV, 94-98.

object, coming to remain on this for a long series of mind-moments. Moreover, the concentration is of a wholesome, skilful, positive mind-state.



[Fig.3] The five jhāna-factors

The above is more or less the order in which these factors gradually develop. One needs to apply the mind to the object, and to re-apply, re-engage it each time it wanders off. Once it is engaged, one needs to closely examine the object, with sustained attentiveness, smoothly flowing with it, so as to *get to know it and how it feels*. This requires more gentle but persistent care than the more active engagement of vitakka – vicāra is quiet, almost non-interfering – though the mind needs to stay applied, engaged with the object. Vicāra is particularly developed when one does not count the breath but fully follows the feel of it as it flows back and forth along its path in the body. And the more there is sustained examination of the object, the more joy can arise, strengthen, and flow around the body; this in turn can bring a glow of happiness. This then allows the mind to settle into one-pointed unification, fully attuned to its object.

While vitakka and vicāra are states that the mind has some conscious control over, joy and happiness only arise of themselves when the conditions are right – so only the *conditions* for them are subject to some degree of

(subtle, careful) control, or rather, guidance: for example appreciating the arising of joy but not grasping at it or expecting it to arise. It is a little like setting up the right conditions for observing beautiful forms of wild-life: being too eager is likely to lead to doing something that scares them off.

The five factors can also come into play in mastering any skill, and attentive noticing of aspects of nature can likewise lead to joy.

## Further jhānas

Beyond the first jhāna are the second, third and fourth jhānas:

From the subsiding of mental application and examining, one enters and dwells in the second jhāna, which is joy and happiness born of concentration, without mental application and examining, and with inner confidence and mental unification. One drenches, steep, fills and pervades this very body with the joy and happiness born of concentration, so that there is no part of one's whole body that is untouched by that joy and happiness.

Further, with the fading away of joy, one dwells equanimously and, mindful and clearly comprehending, one experiences with the body the happiness of which the noble ones speak saying 'equanimous and mindful, one dwells happily'; one enters and dwells in the third jhāna. One drenches, steep, fills and pervades this very body with a happiness distinct from joy, so that there is no part of one's whole body that is untouched by that happiness.

From the abandoning of (mental and physical) pleasure and the abandoning of (mental and physical) pain, from the disappearance of the former happiness and unhappiness, one enters and dwells in the fourth jhāna, neither painful nor pleasant, with purity of mindfulness by equanimity. One sits pervading this very body with a mind that is thoroughly purified and cleansed, so that there is no part of one's body that is untouched by that thoroughly purified and



cleansed mind.<sup>13)</sup>

## The formless states

From the fourth jhāna, the process of stilling can go further, to the ‘formless’ states. The jhānas having developed good feeling, then stilled even this, the formless states attune to perception, and then still this. The formless states are the ‘sphere of infinite space’, in which attention is focussed on the spatial framework that the mind automatically uses on what one senses through the physical senses. The next is the ‘sphere of infinite consciousness’, where the focus is on the consciousness that is aware of infinite space, and indeed aware of anything else; it is awareness of awareness, apart from anything it is aware of, like focussing on a mirror's surface, not on what it reflects. The third is the ‘sphere of no-thingness’, where one lets go of any sense that there are ‘things’ that one possesses or are aware of. The fourth is the ‘sphere of neither perception nor non-perception’, where perception is so attenuated, that it is only aware of the falling away of perceptions.

None of the jhānas or formless states are enlightenment, but they train the mind in letting go, and can be used as stepping stones, or doorways, to experiencing the unconditioned, Nirvana, if one sees the subtle limitations of even these refined, subtle states.

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13) DN. I, 73-76.

## Guidance for the initial stage of mindfulness of breathing

The kind of meditation that I have been teaching since 1977 is that of the Samatha Trust tradition. Its aim is to develop samatha by learning to step back from involvement in the everyday flow of the mind, so as to press the ‘pause’ button and contemplatively observe. From this stance, there can then be a deep calming down, a stilling, and a transformative waking up. The main method it uses is a form of mindfulness of breathing. This is taught in a variety of ways in Buddhism, and the specific form taught by the Samatha Trust is a subtle, powerful and carefully structured system particularly devised for laypeople in the West.

Its approach was developed by the Thai teacher Boonman Poonyathiro, a one-time Theravāda Buddhist monk who came to the UK in 1962 from India and taught a small group of people interested in meditation, so 2022 saw 60 years of his method being taught in the UK.

Samatha practice assumes that every person has the inner resources for developing deep states of calm, but needs tools and advice to help draw on and develop these resources. Experience shows that, beneath the ‘surface’ of the mind, which is full of restless energy, changing thoughts, emotions, worries and fears, there is a source of peace, calm, purity and strength. Samatha practice aims to gradually access, mature and stabilise this at a conscious level. It leads to:

- less mental wandering and unhelpful thought patterns, which makes it easier to concentrate.
- increasingly deep calm, so that one is less buffeted by the ups and

downs of life and one's emotions.

- with calm comes uplifting joy and easeful happiness.
- strength of mind and character increase, so that one is more 'one's own person', more in charge of oneself, more self-confident and able to stand one's own ground.
- yet there is also an increasing openness to and sympathy with other people.
- increasing levels of mental clarity and awareness, which enable one to understand the workings of one's mind and emotions, and respond to life in more skilful, and subtle, ways.

These effects can be reasonably well established after about eight months of practice. The longer term effects go deeper.

Meditation is a practical skill which anyone can develop – provided they are willing to devote a small amount of time and effort to it each day. Practice in time brings many worthwhile fruits. Training the mind is a gradual process that requires patient persistence. One needs to believe that it is possible and worthwhile to change oneself, and that one can, with guidance, do it oneself, through a process of gradual application and cultivation.

Learning meditation is a skill akin to learning to play a musical instrument: it is learning how to 'tune' and 'play' the mind, and regular, patient practice is the means to this. Moreover, just as a well-tuned stringed instrument has strings neither too slack nor too tight, so in meditation the effort must be just right. Here the classical Buddhist idea of the path as a 'middle way' is relevant.

Meditation practice is also like gardening: one cannot force plants to grow, but one can assiduously provide them with the right conditions, so that they develop naturally. For meditation, the ‘right conditions’ are the appropriate, and regular, application of mind and of the specific technique being used.

**The ‘tools’ of meditation include:**

*The breath:* breathing is a particularly good object of meditation as:

- it is something which is always with us, being always there to take note of, be mindful of, carefully feel, and bear in mind. It usually occurs unconsciously, but can be consciously attended to and adjusted; it is at the cross-roads of these two, so to speak.
- it is a neutral object which does not induce like or dislike, desire or anger, or distracting associations, and so can be a subtle, peaceful object.
- it is closely related to one's state of mind, especially emotions; how one feels is reflected in one's breathing (deep or shallow, slow or quick, smooth or jerky), but also how one breathes affects how one feels: as the breathing calms, the body as a whole calms down.
- as the mind calms by focussing on the breath, breathing is itself calmed by this, and so becomes an even more refined, subtle, calming object.

*Energy or rightly applied effort:* any process needs an input or ‘fuel’ for it to work; meditation is no different. It is not a passive thing, but a subtle kind of activity, and one needs to put energy into the process for it to be able

to produce results. The meditation object – the breath and process of breathing – is in fact termed the ‘place of work’, i.e. the focus for patient, gentle, non-forceful, good-humoured work on oneself.

***Concentration or mental unification:*** this is important because the unconcentrated mind flits and wavers about, with scattered attention, chasing about after various objects of passing interest or concern, but lacks calm, depth and stability. It has been likened to a restless monkey, always moving about without stillness. What the mind needs is some gentle discipline as from a kind parent to a wayward child – oneself! This enables it to concentrate, without straining, on a single simple object, such as the breath, so that it will then come to naturally ... calm ... down ... and ... become ... still ... ‘Concentration’ here refers to a state of calm composure, being *concentrated*, focussed, collected, rather than to the activity of *concentrating*. *Concentrating* is more an aspect of right effort.

The aim is to produce a steadily focused state of mental unification and composure, where the mind's energies are centred, and there is no wavering or distraction, so that the mind becomes like a clear, still pool, or a clear flame burning in a windless place.

***Mindfulness:*** this is the most important tool of Buddhist meditation: careful awareness of the qualities of the breath and of the mind. It is possible to be very concentrated on something, but without accompanying awareness and orientation, in which case one might be in a dreamy state, or become ‘captured’ by what one experiences or arises in the mind. Mindfulness is a guard against this. It ‘stands back’ and observes without

reacting for or against; it is a gentle, calming contemplation.

The aim is to be at least as calm as one is in sound sleep, yet *more aware* than one is during normal waking consciousness. Mindfulness guards against forgetfulness, so that one is fully aware of what one is doing, carefully noting the moment-to-moment sensations arising from breathing, or noting when the mind wanders off, so as to help re-establish concentration on it.

In the case of breathing meditation, one needs mindfulness to become properly familiar with the object – the flowing breath –, and the aim is to always retain mindfulness of it, being aware of its length, speed, and whether it is an in or out breath. On the basis of this, *right* concentration then focuses on a particular aspect of the process of breathing. If one thinks of shining a torch on a wall, concentration is like the central area of brightness, while mindfulness is like the surrounding circle of illumination.

### **Working with different breath lengths**

The Samatha Trust method uses various breath lengths that are all different from the normal breath length, starting with the ‘longest comfortable breath without straining’. Whatever the breath length, though, breathing should still be flowing, natural, unstrained. Many other ways of doing mindfulness of breathing say that one should just breathe normally. This may simply be a way of ensuring that the breathing is not forced or strained, but just because it is changed from its normal pattern does not mean it need be forced or strained. Guidance can be gentle, rather than forced. A good pianist's fingers flow around the keyboard in a way that is far from easy or normal, but is also free from strain. In the Buddha's instruction

on mindfulness of breathing in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, he says:

Just as a clever (wood) turner or his apprentice, making a long turn wisely knows, ‘I pull it long’, and making a short turn wisely knows ‘I pull it short’, in the same manner, breathing in long, he wisely knows ‘I breathe in long’; breathing out long, he wisely knows ‘I breathe out long’. Breathing in short he wisely knows, ‘I breathe in short’, and breathing out short he wisely knows ‘I breathe out short’.<sup>14)</sup>

In this simile of a wood-turner working on a piece of wood on a lathe, the actions are deliberate ones, not just unguided spontaneous ones. This suggests that in mindfulness of breathing, one can deliberately use different breath lengths.

Doing so helps avoid some of the ruts of everyday thinking that go with normal breathing. Moreover, the mere fact that one needs to set up a different form of breathing than the normal helps emphasise that one needs a special kind of attention for this activity. This way of working has a proven track record.

### A guided meditation

Before the practice, make sure that you feel fresh, clean, and fully awake, in a quiet place, without any music playing. It should be neither too warm nor too cold, where you feel at ease and at home. It would usually be inside, but could sometimes be done outside. Avoid tight clothing, which can restrict the posture of the legs and/or breathing.

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14) MN. I. 56.

**Posture etc.**

1. Do not lean on anything. Sit with the back straight but not stiff. To get this posture, imagine a thread is attached to the crown of your head, and that it pulls you up a little, straightening the back. Then settle down slightly from this position, so the back is comfortable. Relax the shoulders down and back a little, which helps relax and open the chest. It is also important that the top of the pelvis is a little forward, rather than bulging out backwards.
2. Place the right hand loosely in the left, with the thumbs lightly touching and resting against the right hand index finger, with the hands in the lap, against the tummy; if further forward, this tends to pull the body forward.
3. Lower the chin slightly, so that you can just see the thumbs, if moved, from the bottom of your peripheral vision. Let the tongue touch the top of your mouth, just behind the teeth.
4. Close the eyes, and breathe through the nose (on both the in-breath and out-breath).
5. Avoid moving about once practice has started. However, if you feel an *irresistible* urge to move or scratch, you can do so slowly and mindfully, so as not to break the continuity of the practice.
6. While meditators might start off sitting on a firm chair, so that full attention can be given to breathing well, and attending to this, this then changes to a cross-legged (or perhaps kneeling) position on the floor on a cushion or cushions, or a thick book and a cushion. Once a person is accustomed to this kind of position, it is a stable one which can be used as a good basis for stilling the mind. The body remains still, with the extremities folded in, just as the attention is being centred.



### **Mindful body-scan**

Sitting as above, start with an exercise to start to develop mindfulness. Begin by carefully tuning into whatever sounds you can hear, however slight. Simply note them as sounds, rather than thinking about what they may be sounds of. Do this for two or three minutes ...

Now bring your attention to your body, starting with the soles of your feet. Just note whatever sensations you can detect here, simply observing them as sensations. Now gradually do the same, noting the sensations: in your heels ... round your ankles ... and in your calf muscles; round your knees ... in your thighs ... and in your back-side against what you are sitting on; at the bottom of your back and round your pelvis ... in your hands ... and briefly in each of your fingers and thumbs; in your wrists ... forearms ... upper arms ... and round your shoulder joints; at the top of your back and across your shoulders ... and down to the upper half of your back; then up again, at the back of your neck ... back of your head ... and at the top of your head; in your forehead (the left, middle and right) ... round your eyes ... and in your cheeks; in your jaw muscles ... throat ... mouth ... and tongue.

### **Starting to explore the path of the breath in the Samatha Trust style of practice**

Now start to breathe a little deeper ... and perhaps give a contented sigh ... Start to notice the sensations, around your nostrils, that arise from breathing in and breathing out, then similarly inside the top of your nose ... then into the head, around the top of the throat ... bottom of the throat ... middle of the chest ... and finally in the middle of the tummy.

### **The Longest breath**

Now start to gently breathe more deeply, but nice and slowly, so you can't hear yourself breathe. Breathe your longest/deepest/fullest comfortable breath, but without straining at all. This might be as deep as if you had been running, but *much slower*: slow breathing aids careful attention to it, as well as calming the body, and deep but fast breathing can make you dizzy from too much oxygen.

Try to avoid breathing from the top of your chest – which only allows shallow, strained breathing – or lifting your shoulders; but draw the air down into your tummy area and perhaps sides of your lower back, while letting your lower and middle chest expand a little.

Try to breathe smoothly, not jerkily, and to enjoy the smooth flow of air – a bit like a slowly savoured meal. Trust the breath as good to be with. Perhaps think of the in-breath as bringing freshness and peace, and the out-breath as carrying away any negative feelings. Welcome each new breath like a friend. The aim is to establish a full, but smooth and natural breath (even though it is a different length from your normal breath), which gently fills one's whole breathing capacity, but without straining: the 'Longest' breath. It is good to remember the summary description of this as the '*Longest comfortable breath without straining*'.

Given people's bad breathing habits, it takes a little practice to get the hang of this, and over time, the breath may come to be longer than at first. Just be patient, and it will come. 'Longest' means both longest/deepest comfortable in extent, and longest in time. The same depth of breath might be breathed relatively slowly or relatively quickly. You may find that your current longest/deepest breath can be breathed more slowly. And in time you may find that the depth increases, without any straining, as you relax, and learn to use

more of your breathing capacity than you had previously used. This is a bit like discovering a new room in your house when you have been doing repairs or decorating; once discovered, you have more space to live in!

Now, as you breathe in, count from '1' up to '9'; let the breath gently turn round, then as you breathe out, count from '9' back down to '1'. Do this for around 5 minutes after the body-scan described above (though once you get the practice established, you do not always need to start with the body-scan). Count at a steady pace, adjusting the speed to match your longest comfortable breath; do not force your breath to fit what you think is the 'right' speed of counting; find your longest comfortable breath, then fit the 1 to 9 count to this.

Counting is helpful as it uses the talking part of the mind, giving it a simple task to do, so that it is less liable to generate a distracting conversation in your head. The mind can thus remain more concentrated, focussed, and at peace with a stiller, quieter inner space. The count up to and back down from 9 engages the mind more than simply counting at the end of each breath, as in some other styles of doing mindfulness of breathing. 9 is also used as it divides down conveniently for shorter breath lengths (using the counts 6, 3 and 1) are introduced later in this kind of practice.

Return to normal breathing for a few minutes, and reflect how the above went. Now set up your posture again, and just do the Longest breath, counting 1 to 9, and 9 back to 1, with an overall awareness of the feel of the breath flowing into and out of the body. When doing this:

1. Don't let the counting be too 'loud' in your head or too forceful. It should be gentle, but clear, and done like walking without boots, shoes or socks on, feeling the earth (breath). Also, the counting should not drive your breathing, as this will make it irregular and in spurts. Get the breath flowing smoothly, then gently apply the counting.

2. While most people say the numbers to themselves, some find it easier to visualise them.
3. If you are near the end of your comfortably longest breath, but your count is e.g. only up to '7', don't strain the breath so as to be able to fit in '8' and '9'. Also, at the end of the out-breath, don't breathe out too far. It is normal to leave a reasonable base-level of air in your lungs when you breathe out. Adjust the speed of the count so that 1 to 9 fits your longest comfortable breath.
4. At the end of the in-breath, don't hold your breath, as is done in some forms of yogic breathing, but just let the direction of breathing naturally turn round with just a very slight pause between in- and out-breath. The same applies at the end of the out-breath.

Do this for between 5 and 10 minutes. If your mind wanders – as is perfectly normal – gently bring your attention back to the breath, and to using the count.

After the practice, return to normal breathing and open your eyes. Notice how you feel, and look around a little. Recollect how that practice went.

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