

A HONED AND HEAVY AXE
Samatha and Vipassanā
in Harmony

Ajahn Chandako

To all the beings who have ever been my teacher.

May all beings be free from all suffering.

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Abbreviations:

DN Dīgha Nikāya

MN Majjhima Nikāya

SN Saṃyutta Nikāya

AN Aṅguttara Nikāya

Sn Sutta Nipāta

It Itivuttaka

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The Axe

Imagine you need to chop down a dead tree with an axe. To be successful the axe will have to be both sharp and reasonably heavy. But where does sharpness end and weight begin? It's clear that even with great effort neither using a razorblade nor a baseball bat is going to do the trick.

In the context of Buddhist meditation practice the weight of the axe may be compared to serenity (*samatha*), its sharpness to insight (*vipassanā*). These two aspects of meditation play the crucial roles in awakening beings to the nature of reality and releasing them from suffering. By examining the most ancient texts attributed to the Buddha as well as some popular contemporary approaches, we can take a close look at the mutually supportive relationship between these two pillars of spiritual development.

The word 'vipassanā' has come to be associated with particular meditation techniques or a style of Buddhist practice in the Theravada tradition. What the Buddha originally taught however was 'samatha/vipassanā'. Samatha means the calm and tranquility that result from sustained attention on one object, process or perception. Vipassanā refers to clear seeing. When they are both present, a person's heart and mind are in balance. Samatha is unifying, unconditionally accepting and nondiscriminating. It is still, bright, radiant, internally silent and blissful. The peace of mind it affords is a refined emotion. Vipassanā on the other hand, arises from the discerning side of the mind. It dissects, investigates, compares, contrasts and evaluates. It observes and analyzes the changing, unfulfilling and selfless nature of all conditioned physical and mental phenomena.

While samatha generates energy, vipassanā puts it to work. These two were not originally intended to be different styles of Buddhist meditation with different goals, but merely two interrelated themes of one harmonious path of *Dhamma* practice leading to *Nibbāna*, enlightenment. The combined result is wisdom: a deep perceptual change that aligns our understanding with the truths of nature. The Buddha taught a wide variety of meditation themes in response to the differing needs and inclinations of the individuals involved, but they all incorporated and wove serenity and insight into a strong and flexible fabric of freedom. Together, both samatha and vipassanā work to liberate the mind.

Before proceeding further it may be helpful to clarify some terms. Samatha is virtually synonymous with *samādhi*: peaceful, focused attention or concentration. *Sammā-samādhi*, right or perfected samādhi, is the eighth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. For samādhi to be 'right' and leading to Nibbāna, there must be clear mindful awareness (*sati*) moment by moment. A state of samādhi without clear awareness may also feel peaceful and relaxing but is not part of the Buddhist path. Samādhi that arises from unwholesome states of mind is called 'wrong samādhi' (*micchā samādhi*), because it does not lead to Nibbāna. The perfection of samādhi is called *jhāna*, meditative states of deep mental unification and peace. The Buddha taught four distinct levels of jhāna and four immaterial attainments (together often referred to as the eight jhānas). After the Buddha passed away, the commentaries on the original teachings introduced many new concepts and terms. For example, 'full-absorption' (*appanā*) samādhi refers to jhāna.

‘Threshold’ (*upacāra*) samādhi is concentration which is not as deep as jhāna but on its ‘doorstep’. ‘Momentary’ (*khaṇika*) samādhi refers to the sustained awareness that arises from being mindful of many different objects of attention in succession, rather than focusing on a single meditation object. This last concept effectively redefined samādhi as mindful awareness.

It is unclear precisely when samatha and vipassanā began to be distinguished as different modes of Dhamma practice. It may well have started shortly after the Buddha’s passing away. Certainly, by the time of the commentaries¹ the terms *samathayānika* and *vipassanāyānika* were in use to describe people whose main emphasis (or ‘vehicle’) was either one or the other. It is here that the term ‘dry-insight meditator’ (*sukkhavipassaka*) is first found. This refers to a person who only develops momentary samādhi or practices insight meditation without any samatha whatsoever, maintaining a bare, non-discursive, moment-to-moment observation of the changing process of the body and mind. At this point in history the references to dry-insight were still few and brief. It is only in the subcommentarial literature where *samathayāna* and *vipassanāyāna* are elaborated upon and described as distinctly different paths of practice. These commentarial additions have been the subject of some controversy. In particular the question has often been raised as to whether momentary samādhi fulfils the factor of right samādhi in the Noble Eightfold Path.

¹ The Visuddhimagga and other commentaries were written down in the fifth century AD by Ācariya Buddhaghosa.

Right Samādhi

The Buddha taught that it is impossible to realize Nibbāna without perfecting all eight parts of the Noble Eightfold Path. In the collection of his teachings, the suttas, the definition the Buddha overwhelmingly gives for right samādhi on that Path is the first four jhānas.

“And what, friends, is right samādhi? Here, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, having withdrawn from unwholesome states of mind, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by the placing and holding of attention, with rapture and happiness born of seclusion. With the stilling of the placing and holding of attention, he enters upon and abides in the second jhāna, which has self-confidence and singleness of mind without the placing and holding of attention, with rapture and happiness born of concentration. With the fading away of rapture, he abides in equanimity, and mindful and fully aware, still feeling happiness, he enters upon and abides in the third jhāna, on account of which noble ones announce: ‘He has a pleasant abiding who has equanimity and is mindful.’ With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, he enters upon and abides in the fourth jhāna, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity. This is right samādhi.

This is called the Noble Truth of the Path leading to the cessation of suffering.”

DN 22.21
MN 141.31

“‘This Dhamma is for one with samādhi, not for one without samādhi.’ So it was said. For what reason was this said? Here a monk enters and abides in the first jhāna ... second jhāna ... third jhāna ... fourth jhāna.”

AN 8.30

“I say, monks, that the destruction of the mind’s poisons is dependent on the first...second...third...fourth jhāna.”

AN 9.36

What then is the experience of jhāna? The mind’s energy gradually pulls away from its usual dispersion at the various sense doors and gathers internally. Any negative emotions or unwholesome states of mind disappear. The sensation of having a body disappears. One feels light and joyful, and the mind becomes silent without any thinking whatsoever. The mind’s awareness then focuses more and more intently on the mind’s own reflection, usually experienced as radiant brightness, until the subject/object relationship melts away into an experience of oneness. The mind is then unified, immobile and rapturous. There is no awareness of the external world. What remains is the essential ‘knowing’ nature of the mind, boundless and clearly aware. This state can last from a few minutes to many days. Such profound meditative experiences form the basis for mysticism in many spiritual traditions. An all-pervading clarity and purity, a sense of profound unity, and a deeply satisfying bliss—these are the hallmarks of jhāna.

Jhāna and Wisdom

“For someone with both jhāna and wisdom, Nibbāna is near.”

Dhp 372

After the Buddha-to-be (*Bodhisatta*) had taken the path of extreme asceticism and self-denial to its limit and had still failed to attain liberation, he remembered an occasion when he was a young boy sitting in the shade of a rose-apple tree while his father performed a royal ceremony. As he waited there his mind spontaneously calmed to the point of entering the first jhāna, and he experienced a joy more wonderful than he had ever known. It now occurred to the famished Bodhisatta, “Could this be the path to enlightenment?” Intuitively the answer came, “Yes, this is the path. Why am I afraid of the happiness that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures or unwholesome states of mind?” He then ended his torturous fasting and made his way to the Bodhi Tree. There he sat down and directed his focused attention into the deeper and deeper levels of jhāna, and after emerging he was able to contemplate with a clarity that uprooted all of his mental poisons. Thus he fully awakened, and was thereafter known as the Buddha.

When the Buddha later considered teaching, he pondered who would most easily understand. The first people who came to mind were his two former teachers. Having already mastered the immaterial attainments, they had the foundation to understand what he had discovered. If a person has developed samādhi deeply and is well acquainted with the main concepts and contemplations of the Buddha’s Dhamma, enlightening wisdom arises relatively easily. As the Buddha taught,

“For a person with right samādhi there is no need to arouse the wish, ‘May I see things as they truly are.’ It is a natural process, it is in accordance with nature, that someone with right samādhi will see things as they truly are.”

AN 10.3

This in turn is the condition for the turning away from and fading away of passion, for liberation and Nibbāna. Similarly,

“For a person lacking right samādhi, seeing things as they truly are is destroyed...the turning away from and fading away of passion is destroyed...and (the opportunity for) liberation is destroyed.”

AN 5.24

The Buddha said it is impossible to have liberating insight as long as one or more of the five hindrances are infecting the mind (AN 5.51). These mental obstacles are grouped as 1) sensual desire, an attraction to and preoccupation with the world of the five senses, 2) anger, aversion, frustration, disappointment, 3) dullness or drowsiness, 4) restlessness and remorse and 5) doubt. If any of these or related states are present, the heart will be agitated and confused. The five hindrances make the mind rigid, weak and unworkable. Ignorance feeds on the five hindrances. They are the cause and condition for deluded

understanding, and without the inner stillness and silence of samatha it is almost certain that the mind is still being haunted by their influence (MN 68.6).

The sustained absence of the five hindrances is what constitutes threshold samādhi. Here the six senses are functioning, but in a zone of peace. This is wisdom's workshop. This is where investigation and analysis can yield significant results. For a substantial period of time after emerging from jhāna one is fully freed of these deluding hindrances, and the resultant sensitive, flexible and radiant mind is ready for clear seeing. What is seen is seen in accordance with reality.

There is a qualitative difference between threshold samādhi *without* jhāna and threshold samādhi *after* jhāna. The latter is far more energized. It is far less clouded. It is as if the windows of sense consciousness, dirty from desire, anger and delusion, have been suddenly wiped clean, and the forest outside is seen bathed in sparkling sunshine. Normally the mind filters and warps what is experienced through deeply conditioned habits of perception. What we think we see and hear may be very different from reality. Even during periods of relative calm, when it feels as if we are seeing life clearly, fundamentally deluded assumptions still hold tight and distort. Immediately after jhāna however, most of the perverted perceptions that mask basic sense data are temporarily subdued. This is the window where bare awareness is possible.

Jhāna empowers mindful awareness. Both samatha and vipassanā are based on developing continuous sharp mindfulness in the present moment, but mindfulness alone does not have the ability to enlighten. A moment of mindfulness is not a moment of enlightenment. Mindfulness needs to be focused and directed. Jhāna gives the mind strength, so that when we contemplate something our understanding has the ability to deeply penetrate to its essential nature. What we see sinks in. Samādhi holds our gaze steady, so that we can see an object clearly. It can be compared to a hand holding a mirror still so that we can take a good look at ourselves. While samatha on its own does not have the ability to uproot ignorance, vipassanā on its own tends to merely skim the surface of reality without penetrating. Together the benefits are unlimited.

Deep samādhi offers an experience of true silence, a profound inner solitude. It frees the mind from the inane babble of thoughts, from the tyranny of chattering opinions. True insight does not arise from reasoning. Certainly, pondering Dhamma by mulling it over in the rock-polishing tumbler of disciplined thought can pave the way to insight with smooth stones, but the pondering eventually becomes an obstacle in itself. The thinking mind is not wisdom. The intellect is incapable of directly experiencing reality. It has already been tainted by our basic views of the world. Because our thoughts, views and perceptions so fundamentally shape our reality, it requires a radically different experience to challenge them and shake the unenlightened mind awake. One of the challenges for the highly educated meditator is to renounce indulging in or identifying with fascinating thoughts. It requires a willingness to be simple-minded, as utterly still and quiet as a breezeless mountaintop with no one there.

When samatha reaches its peak of unification and lucid awareness, significant parts of what one had previously assumed to be immutable aspects of oneself cease for some

time. That which forms intentions to act, speak and think disappears in jhāna. The functioning of the five senses also ceases, so one receives no sense impressions from outside. Because while in jhāna the mind is completely focused on only one object of awareness, it is impossible to investigate at that time. Once a person emerges from that state however, the experience of having known a different level of reality cannot help but to change one's view of what the world is and what obstructs greater freedom.

“It is impossible to abandon the fetters (that bind us to saṃsara: saṃyojana) without having perfected samādhi. And without abandoning those fetters it is impossible to realize Nibbāna.”

AN 6.68

Even should we wish to solely develop samatha without any vipassanā whatsoever, as a matter of course we will also develop a non-discursive observation of the body and mind. This dynamic samādhi is aware of the flow of internal and external phenomena, precisely what vipassanā techniques aim to develop. Therefore, in practice, so-called ‘momentary’ samādhi develops naturally alongside samatha meditation.

In the process of making an effort to develop samādhi through repeating a word internally, watching the breath, cultivating loving-kindness or some other pure samatha technique, one inevitably gains much insight into the workings of the mind. At each stage the reason that the mind won't go deeper into samādhi is because of some attachment. It is then necessary to seek out and understand what it is that we are attached to.

The more refined the samādhi becomes, the more subtle and deep are the attachments that we discover that craving and clinging that prevents us from experiencing an even more profound peace and happiness. Without developing meditation it is very difficult to see the defiled motivations and assumptions that usually dictate how we live our lives, and without developing jhāna it may well be impossible to have insight into the most subtle attachments which block enlightenment. Through uncovering, then investigating and finally overcoming the obstacles to peace of mind, we learn much about ourselves as samādhi deepens and becomes increasingly lofty.

“That one could perfect wisdom without perfecting samādhi – this is impossible.”

AN 5.22

Sweet Rapture Born of Detachment

It is natural that the more pure the mind becomes, the more happiness arises. The belief (or unrecognized assumption) that by punishing oneself through not allowing any happiness whatsoever one will become holy was rejected by the Buddha. In outlining the Middle Way he taught that by letting go of both self-punishment and self-indulgence in sensuality a person experiences a refined and satisfying happiness. This organic process is described in many places in the suttas.

“When someone knows that the heart is free of the five hindrances, then joy arises, from joy comes bliss, when there is bliss, the body is tranquil, with tranquility one feels happiness and happiness leads to samādhi. In this way, being detached from sense desires, detached from unwholesome states of mind, one enters and remains in the first jhāna, with the placing and holding of attention, born of detachment, filled with bliss and happiness. One then suffuses, drenches, fills and radiates this bliss and happiness until there is no spot untouched by it.”

DN 2.75

Samādhi offers a blameless, unblemished happiness that arises from within. This makes the path of the Buddha one of joy and contentment. He praised jhāna as ‘a happy abiding here and now’ and ‘Nibbāna here and now’. It is precisely the intensity of this unworldly bliss that is the carrot for enticing the heart away from attachment to the world.

Having experienced a happiness superior to that offered by sense pleasures, it might be reasonable to assume that one would become attached to it. In fact it is impossible to become attached to jhānas in a way that would lead to suffering (*dukkha*). By their very nature jhānas are states of relinquishing attachment. It is possible though to relish their sweetness longer than necessary and thereby delay one’s progress. It is also a normal occurrence that a person skilled in entering jhānas will initially misinterpret them as some level of enlightenment. At this stage the power of samādhi is able to continuously keep mental impurities at bay, whether meditating or not. The roots of the mind’s defilements however, are still lurking below the surface, or they may arise in only extremely subtle ways.

But such overestimation of one’s meditative experiences is already an advanced stage of development. Meditators who are proficient in the jhānas have greatly reduced the deeply ingrained deluded inclination to seek gratification through the avenues of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, physical sensations and thinking. If they are familiar with and interested in following the Buddha’s teachings, then they are well on their way to Nibbāna. It’s simply that they have not yet arrived.

“Bhikkhus, just as the Ganges River slants, slopes and inclines towards the ocean, so too a bhikkhu who develops and cultivates the four jhānas slants, slopes and inclines towards Nibbāna.”

SN 53.6

During the Buddha's lifetime there were ascetics from other sects who criticized him and his disciples for indulging in the pleasure of meditation. The Buddha responded:

“There are these four kinds of life devoted to pleasure which are entirely conducive to disenchantment, to the fading away of passion, to cessation, to tranquility, to realization, to enlightenment, and to Nibbāna. What are they? [The Buddha then gives the stock definition of the four jhānas mentioned above.] So if wanderers from other sects should say that the followers of the Sakyan are addicted to these four forms of pleasure-seeking, they should be told: ‘Yes’, for they would be speaking correctly about you. They would not be slandering you with false or untrue statements.

“Then such wanderers might ask: ‘Well then, those who are given to these four forms of pleasure-seeking — what results, what benefits could they hope to achieve?’ And you should reply: ‘They can expect four results, four benefits.’ What are they? The first is when a monk by the destruction of three fetters has become a Stream-Winner (Sotāpanna, the first stage of enlightenment), no more subject to rebirth in lower worlds, firmly established, destined for full enlightenment; the second is when a monk by the complete destruction of three fetters and the reduction of passion, hatred and delusion, has become a Once-Returner, who, after returning once more to this world, will put an end to suffering; the third is when a monk, through the complete destruction of the five lower fetters, is destined to be spontaneously reborn [in the Brahma realm], and will attain Nibbāna without returning from that realm. The fourth is when a monk, in this very life, through the destruction of the mental poisons, through his own understanding and realization, has attained to Arahantship, to the liberation of the heart through wisdom. Such are the four results and the four benefits that one given to these four forms of pleasure-seeking can expect.”

DN 29.24,25

Vipassanā On Its Own

Within the wide spectrum of contemporary Buddhist meditation practices there are some methods which give unique prominence to vipassanā. These ‘vipassanā’ techniques emphasize investigation and downplay the importance of samatha. Dwelling in samādhi is considered optional or discouraged.

Traditionally these schools of Dhamma practice trace their roots to a sutta in the *Anguttara Nikāya* (AN 4.170) where Venerable Ānanda outlines the four ways one may attain enlightenment. The first is the standard pattern of samatha leading to vipassanā, leading to realization. The second (the point in question) is vipassanā leading to samatha, leading to realization. The third is jhāna and vipassanā alternating, which deepens jhāna and then leads to realization. The fourth has to do with recognizing that one has overestimated one’s meditative attainments and consequently correcting the misinterpretation, resulting in realization. There is in fact no path mentioned of vipassanā leading straight to realization. On the contrary, the message seems to be that different meditators will have different inclinations, but only when samatha and vipassanā settle into a healthy balance will realization occur.

The move to marginalize the role of samādhi in the path of practice was not unforeseen by the Buddha. As it says in the suttas,

“There are five detrimental things that lead to the decay and disappearance of the true Dhamma. What are the five? Here, the bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, laymen and laywomen dwell without reverence and deference towards the Teacher (the Buddha), ...the Dhamma, ...the ordained Saṅgha, ...the training and ...samādhi.”

SN 16.13

The commentary defines ‘dwelling without reverence and deference towards samādhi’ as not attaining, or attempting to attain, the eight jhānas.

Nevertheless, vipassanā techniques have been successful in helping large numbers of people bring understanding into their lives and freeing their hearts from pain and suffering. One possible explanation for this is that the success of vipassanā practice depends largely on the degree to which it is practiced in balance with samatha. Some people have a natural gift for samādhi, and it develops without great effort. Also, in pre-modern times it seems that bringing the mind to a silent inner stillness was much easier. In old Burma (presently Myanmar) where the current vipassanā techniques originated, conditions of life were very different than for the modern meditator. Taking a person who grew up in that Buddhist culture, where strong faith in the Dhamma and good morality were normal; where life (especially in the countryside) was very simple; where interest in meditation was widespread; and cloistering them alone in a room for weeks or months doing twelve or more hours of meditation a day, it is easy to imagine that they would generate considerable samādhi – possibly enough to support deep insight.

Even today vipassanā retreats rely on creating special conditions: little or no speaking, reading, eye contact or external distractions. These are conditions which

generate samādhi. Some retreats focus exclusively on mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*) for the initial portion in order to intentionally develop samādhi as a preliminary foundation. Others teach that in the field of awareness of a vipassanā yogi the breath should take preference. Thus in the beginning stages, the difference between that and mindfulness of breathing is minimal. In Western countries especially, vipassanā centers are finding it increasingly beneficial to teach loving-kindness and compassion meditation (*mettā, karuṇā bhāvanā*). The aim is to liberate the heart (albeit temporarily) through boundless, undifferentiating and impartial positive states of mind – precisely what jhāna is. In actual experience it seems that vipassanā techniques offer the optimal benefit when combined with samatha.

“And what, bhikkhus, is the path leading to the unconditioned? Samatha and vipassanā.”
SN 43.2

References From the Pāli Canon

As far as we know the Buddha never taught a way of Dhamma practice that would correspond with what we think of today as vipassanā meditation. It seems that there was originally no path of dry-insight. In the entire collection of teachings there is hardly a single reference to vipassanā where it is not conjoined with either samatha or jhāna.

Consider the following examples. Right view is assisted by five factors in order for it to mature in liberation of the heart by wisdom: virtue, learning, discussion, samatha and vipassanā (MN 43.14). Also, for one who has brought the Noble Eightfold Path to fulfillment, “samatha and vipassanā occur yoked evenly together” (MN 49.10). Venerable Sariputta’s method of attaining arahantship is described (MN 111.2) as “insight into states one by one as they occurred.”² It sounds like insight only, but the states that he was contemplating were the factors of the four jhānas and four immaterial attainments. Finally, in the sutta on Mindfulness of Breathing (MN 118) the instructions given for meditating on the breath are a step by step process that includes both calm and insight and culminates in enlightenment.

The definition of right mindfulness of the Noble Eightfold Path is the four focuses of mindfulness (*satipatthāna*). Although there is no support in the suttas for equating vipassanā with the four focuses of mindfulness, the vipassanā schools tend to look to these suttas for inspiration and justification. The Mahā Satipatthāna Sutta (DN 22) however, defines right samādhi as the jhānas. The suttas also state that satipatthāna should be undertaken *after* the mind is freed from ‘covetousness and grief for the world.’³ This phrase is a synonym for the five hindrances. For the mind to be purified of the five hindrances for long periods of time requires stable samādhi. The Buddha also taught (MN 125.23-25) that one purpose of the four focuses of mindfulness is to subdue a monk’s or nun’s memories and motivations concerned with lay life in order to enter jhāna. This then leads to purification of the mind and complete enlightenment. So the four focuses of mindfulness were intended either to be taken up after samādhi had already been established or as tools for developing samādhi.

The main scholastic justification for considering samatha optional is found not in the suttas, but in the commentaries and sub-commentaries. The commentarial tradition does hold that the stages of enlightenment must occur at a mental level of jhānic intensity in order to fulfill the factor of right samādhi. They however maintain that a single mind moment of jhāna is sufficient. Practically speaking, it seems that it is precisely the sustaining of focused energy for long periods of time that creates the power necessary to cut through delusion and realize enlightenment.

² anupada dhamma vipassanā

³ abhijjhā-domanassa

This realization of full enlightenment has two aspects: liberation of mind⁴, which refers to jhāna, and liberation through wisdom.⁵ So intimately intertwined are calm and insight that the peak of vipassanā, the insight into and realization of Nibbāna, is described by the Buddha in many places as:

“This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is, ‘sabbe sankhāra samatha’, the complete ‘calming’ of all conditioned phenomena.”

The peak of samatha meanwhile, a state known as the cessation of perception and feeling⁶, inevitably leads to the insight resulting in the third stage of enlightenment⁷. The Buddha even likened jhānas to final enlightenment⁸, indicating the profundity of the cessation involved. These examples all make a clear and important point: samatha and vipassanā are fundamentally inseparable.

⁴ cetovimutti

⁵ paññāvimutti

⁶ saññavedayitanirodha or nirodha samāpatti

⁷ anāgāmī

⁸ parinibbāna, AN 4.453,4

Sutta Quotes

“Sariputta, a bhikkhu should consider: ‘Are samatha and vipassanā developed in me?’ If by reflecting he knows, ‘Samatha and vipassanā are not developed in me,’ then he should make an effort to develop them. But if upon reflection he knows, ‘Samatha and vipassanā are developed in me,’ then he can abide happy and glad, training day and night in wholesome states of mind.”

MN 151.19

“And what, bhikkhus, is the path leading to the unconditioned? Samādhi with the placing and holding of attention (first jhāna)

SN 43.3

“And what, bhikkhus, is the path leading to the unconditioned? Emptiness samādhi (suññatā samādhi).”

SN 43.4

“Whoever develops loving-kindness to the level of boundlessness [jhāna] and aims their mind toward seeing the end of birth, their fetters are worn thin.”

AN 8.1

“If a bhikkhu should wish: ‘May I abide in the liberation of mind and liberation through wisdom’ ...let him fulfill the precepts, be devoted to internal serenity of mind, not neglect jhāna, be possessed of insight and dwell in empty huts.”

MN 6.19

“Bhikkhus, develop samādhi. A bhikkhu who has developed samādhi understands things as they truly are.”

SN 22.5

“Live enjoying seclusion, bhikkhus. Live delighting in seclusion. Engage in developing the mind in samatha, not neglecting the jhānas; practicing vipassanā and frequenting empty places.”

It 45

“One who is vigilantly mindful with clear comprehension, who has well developed concentration, who finds joy in the success of others and is calm; by correctly contemplating all things with a unified heart, will in due time, destroy the darkness of ignorance. Therefore be devoted to vigilance; an ardent, discerning and jhāna-realizing bhikkhu.”

It 47

“The essence of well-spoken words is understanding. The essence of learning and understanding is samādhi.”

Sn 329

“Intent on jhāna, firmly resolute, delighting in a forest grove, one should meditate at the foot of a tree: joyful...In the discipline of living alone, in the service of hermits, it is the silence of solitude that is wisdom.”

Sn 709,718

“As long as one has not yet realized the bliss and happiness that is secluded from sensual pleasures and secluded from unwholesome states of mind [referring to the first or second jhāna] or something more peaceful than that, then the five hindrances together with discontent and weariness invade the mind and remain.”

MN 68.6

“One trains in the higher virtue, the higher mind, and the higher wisdom ... What is the training in the higher mind? Here a monk... enters and abides in the first jhāna ... second jhāna ... third jhāna ... fourth jhāna.”

AN 3.84, 88, 89

“Samādhi is the path. No samādhi is a bad path.”

AN 6.64

The Thai Forest Tradition and Venerable Ajahn Chah

One of the most vibrant of today's contemplative traditions emerged out of the forests, mountains and caves of North-east Thailand. In these circles of Dhamma practice samatha and vipassanā are taught hand in hand. Probably the most renowned of these Thai Forest Masters is Venerable Ajahn Chah.

Ajahn Chah's down-to-earth style of teaching was characterized by the use of numerous metaphors drawn from the natural world, including many illustrating the relationship between serenity and insight.

“Meditation is like a single stick of wood. Vipassanā is one end of the stick and samatha the other. If we pick it up, does only one end come up or do both? Insight has to develop out of peace and tranquility. The entire process will happen naturally of its own accord. We can't force it.”⁹

Ajahn Chah compared these two facets of mental cultivation to the biting and tasting of an apple. They are different, but how can we taste the apple without taking a bite? Referring to samādhi and wisdom he asks, “Is a mango when it's unripe and when it's ripe the same or different?” It's the same mango, yet samādhi is continually ripening into wisdom.

“Samādhi forms the foundation for contemplation and vipassanā. Everything experienced with a peaceful mind confers greater understanding.”¹⁰

Ajahn Chah taught that vipassanā is like striking a match. It brings forth light, but the flame only lasts for a flash. Developing samatha is like dipping a wick in hot wax to make a candle. The more you dip it, the stronger it gets. By itself a candle doesn't give off any light, but it has much potential. If you then use the match to light the candle, you have a source of sustained light that dispels darkness and makes vision possible.

The Buddha often compared the range of mental states to water in its various forms, be it muddy, boiling or crystal clear. Ajahn Chah vividly illustrated the relationship between samatha and vipassanā with his simile ‘still, flowing water’.

“I've often taught that tranquility is stillness; flowing is wisdom. We practice meditation to calm the mind and make it still; then it can flow. In the beginning we learn what still water is like and what flowing water is like. After practicing for a while we will see how these two support each other. We have to make the mind calm, like still water. Then it flows. Both being still and flowing: this is not easy to contemplate.

We can understand that still water doesn't flow. We can understand that flowing water isn't still. But when we practice we take hold of both of these. The mind of a true

⁹ Unshakeable Peace, Venerable Ajahn Chah

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

practitioner is like still water that flows, or flowing water that's still...This is something we've never seen...

If you have reached the Dhamma, then at all times you will have this experience. Being tranquil and having wisdom: flowing, yet still. Still, yet flowing."¹¹

It is perhaps a significant observation that all of the relatively large numbers of Thai Forest monks, nuns and laypeople of the past and present century reputed to be enlightened seem to have had the ability to enter jhāna¹². Although Ajahn Chah is better known for his teachings emphasizing the development of wisdom, he himself mastered samādhi to the degree that he apparently could enter jhāna on one in-breath. With such a solid foundation, sense contact can be a fount of wisdom. As he advised,

“These days there are many people teaching vipassanā. I will say this: doing vipassanā is not an easy matter. We can't simply jump straight into it. As I see it, if we attempt to skip straight to vipassanā, we will find it impossible to successfully complete the journey.”¹³

¹¹ Everything is Teaching Us, Venerable Ajahn Chah

¹² In the Thai Forest Tradition the deepest levels of samādhi are usually referred to by the term appanā rather than jhāna.

¹³ Unshakeable Peace, Venerable Ajahn Chah

A Mind of Harmony

The question of the role of samatha is so significant precisely because it begins to define an entire way of approaching life. Hundreds of minor decisions made throughout the day may hinge on the degree to which we value serenity. Not being drawn into the currents of distraction takes conscious effort. Although integrating awareness into a busy, materialistic lifestyle can certainly yield wonderful results in terms of stress reduction, harmonious relationships and even greater enjoyment of life's pleasures, it is unrealistic to think that this will one day lead to enlightenment.

Liberation, as the Buddha defined it, entails a fundamental change in how we relate to the physical and mental aspects of our experience. The Dhamma practice leading to this liberation requires not merely a technique but a supportive way of life, a significant deceleration of the hectic pace that these days is considered normal. If enlightenment is what we are interested in, we are going to have to slow down and simplify. Rather than trying to change the Buddha's teaching to fit our lifestyle, we should try to change our lifestyle to fit the Buddha's teaching.

It has often been observed that we of the current generation, generally highly educated and full of information, living in fast-paced and complex societies, raised with media stimulation and nourished with sensory overload, are losing touch with serenity. Most of us are out of balance on the side of a samatha deficiency. The analytical sides of our minds are usually well developed due to our cultural up-bringing, but without the focused energy of sustained samādhi the 'insights' don't have much power to transform our lives.

Whatever Buddhist tradition we follow, all meditators are ultimately aiming at the same thing: liberating insight that awakens, arising from an uninterrupted awareness of the changing flow of phenomena with none of the five hindrances present. The question is: is this possible without jhāna?

To maintain this degree of purity of mind for long stretches of time while investigating the body and mind is already an exalted achievement. For the average meditator, subtle forms of the five hindrances will sneak into the mind and remain undetected.

Is experiencing jhāna a realistic possibility for modern meditators? One thing is for certain: if we don't try, it will never happen. And if we believe that it is impossible for us, then we kill our chances even before we begin. Dhamma functions according to natural laws. If the causes and conditions leading to jhāna are developed, then the results will begin to happen as a matter of course. We can then know for ourselves, independent of what others say, what deep samādhi is and what effects it has.

In this busy age there are still laypeople as well as monks and nuns who can attain jhāna. It is not as if they were all born with that ability. It had to be developed. Of course, even if we agree that cultivating samatha plays an indispensable role in healthy mental development, this in no way guarantees success in stilling the heart's delinquent ways.

But without first having the idea that peace of mind is truly important, it cannot be expected that we would devote the time and effort necessary to bring it about. If the conditions conducive to realizing samādhi do not yet exist in our lives, there are steps we can take to create them.

An essential foundation for meditation is to maintain a high level of virtue, living in a compassionate and responsible way towards ourselves and others by upholding the basic five Buddhist precepts. This involves 1) living non-violently by not intentionally harming any living being, 2) developing honesty through not stealing or cheating, 3) being sexually responsible by refraining from infidelity or sexually abusive behavior, 4) speaking truthfully and 5) cultivating clarity by abstaining from alcohol and intoxicating substances. Valuing goodness and manifesting loving-kindness in our lives can greatly reduce the hindrances we experience while on the meditation cushion or walking path.

For sustaining and integrating the benefits of meditation, the composure of sense restraint is highly effective. The Buddha repeatedly emphasized the importance of establishing mindfulness at the doors of the senses in order to curtail self-indulgence. The bliss that arises in jhāna is completely independent of sensual pleasures. Thrills and excitement are in fact an obstruction to deep meditation. When we take our refuge in external stimulation and our hearts are preoccupied with the search for it, jhāna cannot happen. Look inwards for real and reliable happiness.

Success in meditation also requires consistent practice and diligent training. How often do we meditate? For how long? We have to be willing to invest energy and time without looking for non-existent shortcuts. Jhāna is most often experienced in retreat situations, where it is quiet, there are a minimum of external concerns, people are keeping silence, a teacher is encouraging them and they are meditating many hours a day. So in addition to a steady daily practice, periodically offering ourselves the gift of a meditation retreat can make a profound difference in calming a turbulent mind.

Once we have taken the steps to live virtuously and composed and are meditating daily, we will probably begin to experience the happiness of a calm mind. An obstacle that might arise at this point is the fear of attachment to that happiness. As we have already discussed, such worries are unfounded. The fear of attachment to the pleasure of samādhi will actually prevent a person from entering jhāna, denying them the pure joy praised by the Buddha and his great disciples. It is vital to willingly embrace the pleasure of peace and allow it to grow. The Buddha described jhānas as,

“The bliss of renunciation, the bliss of seclusion, the bliss of peace, the bliss of enlightenment. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should be pursued, that it should be developed, that it should be cultivated, that it should not be feared.”

MN 66.21

With such positive encouragement to cultivate the pleasure of meditation, it is hard to justify the view that jhānas should be feared or avoided. It is crucial that we allow the heart time to rest and give ourselves permission to enjoy spiritual delight without feeling

guilty. If we are used to suffering, or if on some level we feel we need to punish ourselves, we may think we don't deserve to be that happy. We all deserve it.

Worried about attachment to jhānas? The worst that can happen is that we will be reborn in a heavenly realm for up to 84 thousand eons of celestial bliss. Considering the range of possible rebirths within samsara that's still not a bad option. The best that can happen is that we realize enlightenment. Virtue and states of samādhi are like rungs of a ladder. We have to hold onto higher and higher rungs in order to pull ourselves up. If we have already heard the wisdom teachings of the Buddha and are sincere about liberating the heart, then reaching the top of the ladder should be within our ability. As we go up, the attachment to the lower rungs is relinquished. But we have to first hold on firmly to each rung. If we let go too soon, we fall.

As the heart becomes increasingly peaceful it can feel as if we are entering uncharted territory. Fear of the unknown can sometimes be an obstacle. Having faith and trust in the Buddha can help to give us the confidence needed to forge ahead. Sometimes the mind will create inner visions, exciting light shows or unusual sensations. No matter how fascinating, frightening or funny they are, they are distractions from the meditation and should be ignored. If anything very strange occurs and we are unsure if we are proceeding correctly, then we can simply stop for the time being or go back to amore familiar level of meditation. When we later have the opportunity we can consult with a qualified teacher. At times the fear of losing control may arise. At subtle levels, attempting to control the meditation becomes an obstacle and must be let go of. The desire to control with attraction and aversion is a basic source of self-identity, and letting go of this control may result in fear of losing who we think we are. This notion of being in control is pure delusion in the first place. Relaxing the will to control and getting our 'selves' out of the way will lighten the heart and allow the process of meditation to deepen.

Having the right attitude is also essential for success in meditation. Although it is necessary to motivate ourselves to meditate, samādhi will not arise from ego-based craving for altered states of consciousness or for the repetition of previously experienced peaceful states. This craving will actually increase stress. There is too much desire and sense of self. The quickest way to make progress in meditation is to be perfectly content, putting energy into being mindful in the present moment, and not hoping for or expecting anything.

Allow nature to take its course. Pushing too hard, being impatient for quick results or trying to force specific experiences will be counterproductive. We can be grateful for whatever degree of serenity is experienced. We will not always have the occasion to live in peaceful surroundings, be in good health or have the environmental conditions favorable for developing samādhi. We can see these times as valuable opportunities to grow in tolerance and acceptance. In cultivating the right attitude it is good to remember that all the great Buddhist Masters encourage us to develop meditation not in order to achieve status, praise or fame, but in order to be humble, kind and wise.

When the heart begins to settle down into samādhi, it is important to allow it to be still for as long as possible. It is not recommended to intentionally pull the heart out of a state of calm in order to ‘do’ vipassanā.

When the momentum of mental energy that holds the heart still begins to wane, thoughts will gradually form. At this point we should consciously turn our attention towards investigation.

We then analyze our bodies, minds and external phenomena as dependent on causes and conditions, impermanent, un-fulfilling and nonself. This is how to make the most efficient use of the power of samādhi. Contemplation at this time has the potential to cut deeply at the roots of the mind’s defilements. If we do not engage the mind in this way after experiencing samādhi, we will continue to feel peaceful and happy for a while. There will be some clarity and increased understanding due to the absence of the five hindrances, but when the peace eventually wears off, the defilements will once again appear with much the same strength as they had previously. When the heart is given the opportunity to fully rest in samatha and is then activated to probe life, vipassanā happens naturally.

Ideally, serenity and insight assist each other from the very beginning of Dhamma practice to the end. We need to have some wisdom in order to sit down and meditate in the first place. We then discover a measure of calm that helps us see life more clearly. The clarity leads to living a wiser, more virtuous life that offers greater serenity. The serenity then supports contemplation. Focusing attention on the inherent defects and unreliability of the external world leads to letting go, and as the heart increasingly looks inward for happiness, serenity deepens and more insight is awakened. Samatha and vipassanā gradually get stronger, proceeding like the feet of a mountaineer, until one day, one lifetime, they reach the summit of unshakeable peace and wisdom.

Ascending the heights of meditation might very well be the most meaningful thing we could do with our lives. But it requires patience, vast patience. The endeavor takes devotion, solitude and the courage to face, accept and release the obstacles that originate in our own hearts. It takes putting in the hours. It takes the persistence not to give up when the face of the mountain looks so hard and cold, and the valley below smiles so sweetly. Jhāna is no park bench on a casual stroll. It’s a base camp at the foot of an 8,000 meter peak, a place to gather strength for the final assault.

It is a warm and quiet refuge to temporarily shield mountaineers from skin-cracking winds and nights that freeze water bottles solid. But it’s no easy matter to establish a base camp within reach of the summit. A series of camps may be required to gradually gain altitude. From the initial step onwards, the expedition demands a steady gaze on the trail ahead. As the satisfaction from the intrinsic value of the effort motivates our feet and samādhi provides nourishment along the route, we are rewarded with increasingly lofty views. If it is truly the peak of freedom that is held within sight, that is cherished and repeatedly reaffirmed as our distant aspiration, we will consciously and automatically begin making choices in life that lead in that direction. Samatha and vipassanā then unite in their original harmonious relationship on the journey to Nibbāna.

*“...Therefore, bhikkhus, ever delighting in jhāna,
well concentrated,
with ardent energy in order to see the end of birth,
conquer Mara and his armies.”*

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For a more in-depth and comprehensive examination of samatha and vipassanā see:

- The Path of Serenity and Insight, Bhante Gunaratana
- The Basic Method of Meditation, Ajahn Brahmavamso
- The Jhānas, Ajahn Brahmavamso
- How Buddhism Began, Chapter IV, Richard Gombrich

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