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## The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

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## Chapter VII - Right Concentration (Samma Samadhi)

The commentaries define *samadhi* as the centering of the mind and mental factors rightly and evenly on an object. *Samadhi*, as wholesome concentration, collects together the ordinarily dispersed and dissipated stream of mental states to induce an inner unification. The two salient features of a concentrated mind are unbroken attentiveness to an object and the consequent tranquillity of the mental functions, qualities which distinguish it from the unconcentrated mind. The mind untrained in concentration moves in a scattered manner which the Buddha compares to the flapping about of a fish taken from the water and thrown onto dry land. It cannot stay fixed but rushes from idea to idea, from thought to thought, without inner control. Such a distracted mind is also a deluded mind. Overwhelmed by worries and concerns, a constant prey to the defilements, it sees things only in fragments, distorted by the ripples of random thoughts. But the mind that has been trained in concentration, in contrast, can remain focused on its object without distraction. This freedom from distraction further induces a softness and serenity which make the mind an effective instrument for penetration. Like a lake unruffled by any breeze, the concentrated mind is a faithful reflector that mirrors whatever is placed before it exactly as it is.

### The Stages of Concentration

Concentration is not attained all at once but develops in stages. Consider the case of a meditator who follows the entire path of serenity meditation from start to finish.

After receiving his meditation subject from a teacher, or selecting it on his own, the meditator retires to a quiet place. There he assumes the correct meditation posture — the legs crossed comfortably, the upper part of the body held straight and erect, hands placed one above the other on the lap, the head kept steady, the mouth and eyes closed, the breath flowing naturally and regularly through the nostrils. He then focuses his mind on the object and tries to keep it there, fixed and alert. If the mind strays, he notices this quickly, catches it, and brings it back gently but firmly to the object, doing this over and over as often as is necessary. This initial stage is called preliminary concentration (*parikkamma-samadhi*) and the object the preliminary sign (*parikkamma-nimitta*).

Once the initial excitement subsides and the mind begins to settle into the practice, the five hindrances are likely to arise, bubbling up from the depths. Sometimes they appear as thoughts, sometimes as images, sometimes as obsessive emotions: surges of desire, anger and resentment, heaviness of mind, agitation, doubts. The hindrances pose a formidable barrier, but with patience and sustained effort they can be overcome. To conquer them the meditator will have to be adroit. At times, when a particular hindrance becomes strong, he may have to lay aside his primary subject of meditation and take up another subject expressly opposed to the hindrance. At other times he will have to persist with his primary subject despite the bumps along the road, bringing his mind back to it again and again.

As he goes on striving along the path of concentration, his exertion activates five mental factors which come to his aid. These factors are intermittently present in ordinary undirected consciousness, but there they lack a unifying bond and thus do not play any special role. However, when activated by the work of meditation, these five factors pick up power, link up with one another, and steer the mind towards *samadhi*, which they will govern as the "jhana

factors," the factors of absorption (*jhananga*). Stated in their usual order the five are: initial application of mind (*vitakka*), sustained application of mind (*vicara*), rapture (*piti*), happiness (*sukha*), and one-pointedness (*ekaggata*).

When concentration is developed, these five factors spring up and counteract the five hindrances. Each absorption factor opposes a particular hindrance.

- Initial application of mind, through its work of lifting the mind up to the object, counters dullness and drowsiness.
- Sustained application, by anchoring the mind on the object, drives away doubt.
- Rapture shuts out ill will,
- Happiness excludes restlessness and worry,
- One-pointedness counters sensual desire.

Thus, with the strengthening of the absorption factors, the hindrances fade out and subside. They are not yet eradicated — eradication can only be effected by wisdom, the third division of the path — but they have been reduced to a state of quiescence where they cannot disrupt the forward movement of concentration.

With further practice the factors of concentration gain in strength and bring the mind to absorption (*appana-samadhi*).