

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

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

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### Extracts from 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 Development of Concentration

Concentration can be developed through either of two methods — either as the goal of a system of practice directed expressly towards the attainment of deep concentration at the level of absorption or as the incidental accompaniment of the path intended to generate insight. The former method is called the development of serenity (*samatha-bhavana*), the second the development of insight (*vipassana-bhavana*). Both paths share certain preliminary requirements. For both, moral discipline must be purified, the various impediments must be severed, the meditator must seek out suitable instruction (preferably from a personal teacher), and must resort to a dwelling conducive to practice. Once these preliminaries have been dispensed with, the meditator on the path of serenity has to obtain an object of meditation, something to be used as a focal point for developing concentration.<sup>61</sup>

If the meditator has a qualified teacher, the teacher will probably assign him an object judged to be appropriate for his temperament. If he doesn't have a teacher, he will have to select an object himself, perhaps after some experimentation. The meditation manuals collect the subjects of serenity meditation into a set of forty, called "places of work" (*kammatthana*) since they are the places where the meditator does the work of practice. The forty may be listed as follows:

ten kasinas  
ten unattractive objects (*dasa asubha*)  
ten recollections (*dasa anussatiyo*)  
four sublime states (*cattaro brahmavihara*)  
four immaterial states (*cattaro aruppa*)  
one perception (*eka sañña*)  
one analysis (*eka vavatthana*).

*(...there follows a description of these forty subjects)*

...for practical purposes the beginner in meditation can generally be advised to start with a simple subject that helps reduce discursive thinking. Mental distraction caused by restlessness and scattered thoughts is a common problem faced by persons of all different character types; thus a meditator of any temperament can benefit from a subject which promotes a slowing down and stilling of the thought process. The subject generally recommended for its effectiveness in clearing the mind of stray thoughts is mindfulness of breathing, which can therefore be suggested as the subject most suitable for beginners as well as veterans seeking a direct approach to deep concentration. Once the mind settles down and one's thought patterns become easier to notice, one might then make use of other subjects to deal with special problems that arise: the meditation on loving-kindness may be used to counteract anger and ill will, mindfulness of the bodily parts to weaken sensual lust, the recollection of the Buddha to inspire faith and devotion, the meditation on death to arouse a sense of urgency. The ability to select the subject appropriate to the situation requires skill, but this skill evolves through practice, often through simple trial-and-error experimentation.

## The Stages of Concentration

Concentration is not attained all at once but develops in stages. To enable our exposition to cover all the stages of concentration, we will consider the case of a meditator who follows the entire path of serenity meditation from start to finish, and who will make much faster progress than the typical meditator is likely to make.

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 (unless a kasina or other visual object is used), 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*).

*Initial application of mind* does the work of directing the mind to the object. It takes the mind, lifts it up, and drives it into the object the way one drives a nail through a block of wood. This done, *sustained application of mind* anchors the mind on the object, keeping it there through its function of examination. To clarify the difference between these two factors, initial application is compared to the striking of a bell, sustained application to the bell's reverberations. *Rapture*, the third factor, is the delight and joy that accompany a favourable interest in the object, while *happiness*, the fourth factor, is the pleasant feeling that accompanies successful concentration. Since rapture and happiness share similar qualities they tend to be confused with each other, but the two are not identical. The difference between them is illustrated by comparing rapture to the joy of a weary desert-farer who sees an oasis in the distance, happiness to his pleasure when drinking from the pond and resting in the shade. The fifth and final factor of absorption is *one-pointedness*, which has the pivotal function of unifying the mind on the object.[62](#)

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, and one-pointedness counters sensual desire, the most alluring inducement to distraction. 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.