**SAMMA SAMADHI**

**RIGHT CONCENTRATION**

The seventh category or function of the Noble Eightfold Path is Samma Samadhi, translated as Right Concentration. The word *samadhi* is derived from two other terms: the prefix *sam,* “together, coherently organized” and a root word, *dha,* “to put or place”. Samma signifies the appropriateness of this form of unification, that is, organized through the intentions of virtue—Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. The function of samadhi is to stabilize attention, to be undistracted. Samadhi is found in other conceptual organizations in Buddhist doctrine: it is the sixth of the Seven Factors of Awakening (as *samadhi bojjhanga)* and represents one of the Five Powers (*panca bala*).

Another term that is almost synonymous with samadhi is *citass’ekagatta,* one-pointed mental focus. In this function, a useful analogy is what happens when sunlight passes through a magnifying glass:

**LIGHT**

**MAGNIFYING LEN**S

**BROAD UNIFIED FOCUS**

**Useful for vipassana**

**SHARP UNIFIED FOCUS**

**Useful for jhana**

As illustrated in this graphic, the passage of light and heat through the lens concentrates the energy; the coherent flow of light energy is more broadly focused with less heat in the middle of the cone and sharpened to a single point at the very hot and bright tip of the cone. Sometimes the most beneficial focus is precise, organized around a particular object, such as the sensation of one hair vibrating at the rim of the nostrils. This singular focus develops into a *nimitta*, the organizing “seed” from which the intensified level of concentration called jhana emerges. A nimitta operates in a persistently prominent manner and eventually seems to “solidify”, analogous to how brightly a lighthouse beacon shines in the dark. Ultimately, the most beneficial focus is broadened to be openly aware of a range of sensory input in a broader scope of awareness, such as in the practice of vipassana. The goal of stabilized attention associated with vipassana is to observe the arising and passing away of self-state organizations in a detached, non-reactive way to realize impermanence and non-self.

The cultivation of mental stability grows with repeated practice of vitakka (initiating focus on the breath) and vicara (sustained focus on the breath). As the practice matures, the frequency and potency of distraction diminishes and the appropriate balance of energy (not too agitated or too sedated) is accessible. Breath awareness is preferable, but one can supplement this process with intentional attention to other sensations in the body or environmental sounds (complex sounds like insects or mechanical devices). The more neutral the feeling tone of the focal area is, the better it is because there is an active commitment to vitakka and vicara involved in maintaining ongoing breath awareness. However, it is sometimes useful to direct attention to a mildly irritating sensation to cultivate samadhi, deliberately disregarding any aversion that the mind creates to the sensation.

There is a process the can be misperceived as samadhi. Culadasa, in “The Mind Illuminated”, calls this *subtle dullness*. There is little evidence of distraction, and the flow of experience is quietly soothing. One ways to notice this is a lack of clarity in awareness and a low level of investigative interest. When this is noted, intentionally investigate the breath more thoroughly to open the mind to increased energy.

When the mind doesn’t pay attention exclusively to the breath sensation, that is termed *subtle distraction*. Becoming increasingly aware of subtle distraction while maintaining present moment mindfulness supports vipassana practice, which doesn’t exclude peripheral distraction, but perceives it differently.

In my experience, a quality of awareness called *passadhi* accompanies Samadhi. Passadhi is translated as tranquility, serenity, calmness and absence of agitation. Samadhi is the stability of focused attention, while passadhi is the smoothness of the flow. Because I regard the combination of the two functions to be important for the practice of vipassana, I often use the term samadhi/passadhi.

I used Richard Shankman’s excellent book *The Experience Of Samadhi-An In-depth Exploration of Buddhist Meditation,* published in 2008, as a resource for this paper. It can be downloaded as a free .pdf e-book at this URL: <http://ahandfulofleaves.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/experience-of-samadhi_shankman.pdf>

In the book, he mentions several attributes or conditions from the suttas and commentaries that support the cultivation of Samadhi:

* **Cultivation of virtue**. This is the application of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood in daily life routines. In this regard, virtue promotes a clear conscience and supportive relationships, which supports psychological ease and reduced confusion.
* **Setting aside the five hindrances**. The hindrances of sense desire, aversion and ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and skeptical doubt are self-states that represent mental confusion, emotional turmoil, and dysregulation of energy in the body/mind process. I call them “energy dumps”, in that the available physical and mental energy that is bound up in the enchantment of the hindrances interferes with mental clarity and emotional balance. Mental clarity and emotional balance are strongly woven into the fabric of Samadhi-passadhi.
* **Occupying a suitable dwelling.** The recommendation is to find a place that is quiet, with a comfortable environment, free from intrusion, free from insects and other annoying creatures, with sufficient time for practice, conducted daily
* **Avoiding distracting people and associating with serene, focused people.** So much of what defines us as people involves interactions with others. The more we engage with turbulent, unstable personalities, the more agitation is stirred in the mind. The more we engage with serene, stable personalities, the less agitation is stirred. This is one of the values of committed participation in a sangha, with others who have similar values and goals.
* **Maintaining a healthy body.** It is well known that being physically fit is a useful strategy for stress management. Being free from illness allows the most internal resource for cultivating Samadhi-passadhi.
* **Simplifying lifestyle organization.** The more obligations a person has, the less opportunity to meditate. Additionally, the stress of “multitasking” that is so normal in our culture is problematic. One of the most common complaints is “I’m too busy. When I get home, I just want to chill out. Even then I have to deal with \_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and then I’m too tired to meditate!” This is a common and plausible argument. What is interesting to me, after more than 30 years of meditation practice, is that my priorities were skewed. I would spend a lot of my daily “energy allotment” fretting at work, committing to projects that were not particularly important (I thought they were at the time!), and then, at home, spent my time distracting myself with tv, books, etc. After a number of years of practice, I realized that my attempts to manage my life were often counter to my best interests. Simply dedicating a period of time during the day for mindfulness of breathing or loving-kindness meditation made it easier to be more efficient/less stressed at work and while commuting. When I got home, because my mind wasn’t so stressed, I could be more clear about what my values are and whether what I was doing was beneficial or necessary. I began to make cultivating serenity a priority, and that didn’t mean spacing out or distracting with various entertainments primarily. The benefits are still being appreciated by me (and by my wife!).
* **Attending residential retreats.** People often plan their vacation time around a favorite hobby or craft. Musicians will go to immerse themselves in the craft of musicianship. Tennis players will go spend a week learning how to improve their game. It’s important to realize that meditation is a craft, and requires immersive experience to cultivate. Neuroscience reveals that the parts of the brain that are associated with playing a musical instrument are significantly changed in beneficial ways by the hours of practice applied. Tennis pros often have much stronger arms on the side of the body that swings the racket. Neuroscientists have performed much research on the “before and after” effects of intensive, 3 month meditation retreats, and note significant positive changes in the parts of the brain associated with internal awareness and emotional self-regulation.

There has been disagreement over the centuries of Buddhist practice as to how much Samadhi is required for the process of awakening. Some commentators point out that the suttas and the visuddhimagga require the mastery of very concentrated states called jhana. More current commentaries and teachers suggest that the ability to set aside the hindrances, creating what is called *upacara Samadhi,* access concentration, is sufficient to advance the process of Awakening. The assumption of the “jhana school” is that the characteristics of the 4th jhana, during which the qualities of one-pointed attention and equanimity are highly developed is first necessary. Then allowing the re-emergence of upacara Samadhi to occur, providing the optimal application of vipassana.

Access concentration “blends” vitakka and vicara, forming dhamma vicaya, the awakening factor investigation of mental phenomena. This provides a key function for sorting through arising phenomena to realize the three characteristics of impermanence, the distress arising through craving and clinging and the absence of an enduring and autonomous self.

My inclination is to become familiar with the process of acquiring and sustaining upacara Samadhi, and then to notice the transient and insubstantial nature of experience, with emphasis on noting impermanence and the way self-states reorganize depending on circumstances. In this process, it is very beneficial to also notice how craving and clinging create stress and confusion. Functionally, this sort of process reveals that when circumstances change, self-states change, often contrary to my best interest! If there was a sole, reliable “self” running the show, then how does it come to be that impatience occurs, or thoughtless behaviors happen? If there is an enduring “me” involved, how does it come to be that I can’t sleep at night sometimes?—I certainly can’t will sleep to occur!”

I hope these notes are beneficial on your path to awakening. I wish you well. Peter