**The Seven Awakening Factors, Part 3**

This is the last of three reviews of Satta Sambojjhanga, the Seven Awakening Factors. Part 1 provided a review of the first three factors, Mindfulness, Investigation of Mental Phenomena and Energy/Effort/Persistence. Part 2 reviewed the factors of Joy and Tranquility. This part considers the way that the first five factors are unified and integrated in their functions and brought to balance, that is, not too inhibited or too exaggerated in their operations. The functions described below are Concentration/Unification and Equanimity/Balance.

**CONCENTRATION-*SAMADHI BOJJHANGA***

The Pali word *samadhi* (sah-mah-dee)is usually translated as *concentration*, but the more fundamental meaning is “*unification of mental formations”*. A synonymous term is *ekagatta* (eh-kah-gah-tah), typically translated as *one-pointedness of attention*. This characteristic function is ethically malleable, that is, the mind can unify around unwholesome factors or wholesome factors.

There are two sorts of concentration: fixed concentration, *appana samadhi* (ah-pah-nah sah-mah-dee), and momentary concentration *khanika samadhi* (kah-nee-kah sah-mah-dee); for the latter I prefer “moving concentration”. Both applications involve a stable, intentional focus, and both can either be very exclusive, precise and one-pointed, or a more broadly focused inclusive unification without “wobbling”.

I often use a simile to describe this characteristic of attention based on how a how a theatrical spotlight operator functions: With fixed concentration, the lighting tech is directed by the stage manager to keep the spot clearly focused on one player, wherever she or he moves around the stage; with momentary concentration, the tech moves the spot from one player to another, with the intention to illuminate the development in the plot of the scene. In this example, the “script” followed is organized around the Wisdom aggregate of the Eightfold Path. The “stage manager” is mindfulness and investigation of mental phenomena, while energy is the light of the beam and effort is the intentional activity of the tech that directs the focus of the energy. The resulting illumination is vipassana, whether involved with fixed or momentary concentration. The awakening factor of Joy is the ongoing enthusiastic satisfaction of a job well done, while Tranquility is the smoothness and lack of “jitter” in the movement of the spotlight; Equanimity is the resulting balanced coordination of the routine, regardless of whatever emotion is stimulated by an experience.

The history of this factor reveals a transition of Buddhist doctrine from fixed concentration towards momentary concentration. The full development of fixed concentration involves the cultivation of jhana (jah-nah), a progression of highly refined exclusive levels of attention. Momentary concentration finds fulfillment in vipassana (vih-pah-sah-nah) practice, particularly the unification of the seven Awakening Factors. As applied to the factors of Awakening (and noble right concentration, part of the noble eightfold path), the mental conditioning factors are organized through wholesome intentions. This quote establishes the unifying function of concentration and also is applied to the other Awakening Factors:

Now what, monks, is noble right concentration with its supports & requisite conditions? Any singleness of mind equipped with these seven factors—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, & right mindfulness—is called noble right concentration with its supports & requisite conditions—MN 117

The cultivation of jhana involves fixing attention on an exclusive topic, usually the sensation of breathing, particularly in the region around the rim of the nostrils. As focused attention stabilizes enough that the five hindrances are set aside, the quality of attention becomes more vivid mentally, accompanied by piti (pee-tee), an internal exuberance that can be quite pleasurable. The stability of awareness of this phenomenon is fragile, requiring persistent, diligent channeling of attention to experience the first jhana. As the channeling becomes more stable, the second jhana emerges into awareness. The excitement of piti diminishes in the realization of an “undertone” of quiet satisfaction, called sukkha (soo-kah), as a characteristic of the experience, and the effort to channel attention falls away, becoming more sustainable; this is the third jhana. As attention increases in stability, satisfaction becomes more pervasive and all-encompassing, a very soothing flowing of experience, the characteristic of the fourth jhana. As attention progresses through the four jhanas, less and less interest or engagement in any mental phenomena other than what is characteristic of each jhana becomes predominant. The fourth jhana experience is like a very stable, unified, smooth, flowing awareness that is disinterested in anything other than that quality of attention.

Classic Theravadin teachings require jhana experience to prepare the mind for vipassana practice; this is emphasized in the Visuddhimagga, a 5th century A.D. treatise that has guided practice for millennia. The cultivation of jhana is quite difficult to master, requiring long periods of social isolation and dedicated cultivation of ekagatta.

In the early 20th century, a prominent Buddhist scholar/monk, Mahasi Sayadaw (Mah-hah-see sah-yah-daw), developed what is called “dry vipassana”, that is, vipassana meditation practice that doesn’t require jhana attainments. This system is now a prominent feature of contemporary Western Buddhist teachings. In the book “In This Very Life” he described what he called *vipassana jhanas*. They are not clearly delineated and numbered as with the traditional jhana states. As the hindrances are set aside, the ability to direct focused attention through the process of vitakka (vee-tah-kah), accompanied by the ability to maintain that focused attention, vicara (vee-cha-rah), cultivates khanika samadhi, with the ability to track the transitory nature of experience. Here is a quote from this book, on page 182:

“Think of this sequence as a causal chain. Seclusion of mind comes about because of the presence of the first two jhanic factors. If the mind is accurately aimed at the object, if it hits it and rubs it, after some time the mind will become secluded. Because this mind is secluded from the hindrances, one becomes happy, joyous and comfortable.

When these first four jhanic factors are present, the mind automatically becomes calm and peaceful, able to concentrate on what is happening without getting scattered or dispersed. This one-pointedness of mind is the fifth jhanic factor, samadhi, or concentration.”

As this quality of attention matures, it becomes possible to clearly distinguish the difference between the physical sensations of experience and the mental meaning-making functions of the mind. This direct “knowing” of subjective experiences in an ongoing way can lead to clearly noting the arising and passing away mental phenomena, the initial formation of craving and clinging, or the impersonal nature of self-forming processes. This represents full realization of the first vipassana jhana, and requires ongoing, persistent application of vitakka and vicara.

The second vipassana jhana no longer requires the effortful attention that manifests as vitakka and vicara. The transitory nature of experience is quite clear as a flowing process of insight that is quite attractive and rewarding, so this level of practice can become an obstacle to further developing insights towards Awakening.

The third vipassana jhana is described in this way on page 200-201 in the book—rapture describes the intense confidence and delight experienced in the second jhana:

“Rapture will gradually fade, but mindfulness and concentration will continue to deepen. Then insight into the true nature of what is happening will become very strong. At this point, the enlightenment factor of upekkha, equanimity, becomes predominant. The mind remains unshaken by pleasant objects as well as unpleasant ones, and a deep sense of comfort arises in the body and mind. Yogis can sit for long hours without pain, and their bodies become pure, light and robust. This is the third vipassana jhana, whose two jhanic factors are comfort and one-pointedness of mind. The third jhana arises at a more mature stage of the insight into arising and passing away.

The transition from the second jhana to the third is a critical turning point in practice. Human beings have a natural attachment to thrills and excitement which agitate the mind. Rapture is one of these agitating pleasures; it creates ripples in the mind.”

The meditator is advised to remain diligent during this stage of practice. It is easy to “settle in and enjoy the ride”, but this interferes with further progress on the path to Awakening. As practice matures, subjective experience begins to collapse cognitively. I experienced this many years ago, and it seemed that thoughts would collapse before they could resolve into a stream of internal narrative. It was like trying to gain traction while walking on ice—my continuity of thoughts kept collapsing, like my feet were slipping out from under me—this experience didn’t last long, perhaps a second or two, but it was quite frightening. This is not universally experienced according to my research but can mark the transition from the third to the fourth vipassana jhana. Others during these levels of practice have reported feelings of despair, discouragement and rejection of ongoing meditation practice. It is recommended that contacting a person who understands the experience and can provide ongoing support while resolving this passage towards Awakening is important. With ongoing diligent application of the unified seven Awakening Factors, the transition to the next level develops.

As is the case with the fourth traditional jhana, the fourth vipassana jhana is characterized by one-pointedness and equanimity. This sets the conditions in the mind that can lead to the experience of Nirvana, a quality of attention that has no self-other functions. The following section that reviews the Equanimity/Balance Awakening Factor will describe those characteristics.

**SKILLFUL MEANS FOR CULTIVATING CONCENTRATION**

1. As with tranquility, organizing a relatively stress-free, uncomplicated lifestyle is quite beneficial. The Buddha said that the supporting factors for cultivating concentration included living in a place that is quiet, protected from the elements, with a moderate temperature and few interruptions. It’s ironic that we live in well-insulated dwellings that quiet, with moderate temperatures, with plenty of conveniently arranged food, water, light and sewage facilities, and yet we can’t find the time to meditate!
2. Balancing attention optimally between energy and tranquility, with steady focus on a simple object like the breath to avoid distracting thoughts (This is the function of equanimity/balance, the next topic for review).
3. This may seem counter to the task, but the more urgently one tries to force the mind to stay on task, the more the associated agitation creates intrusive thoughts and expectations. The most productive practice is to *rest attention* (vitakka-aiming) at the touch sensation around the rim of the nostrils *persistently* (vicara-sustained attention), the more likely it is that concentration will build. It is an “effortless effort” (Thank you Joseph Goldstein!)
4. Associating with people who value simplicity and non-distraction is quite helpful. This is why it is so beneficial for dedicated meditation students to sit in each other’s presence on a regular basis.
5. Of course, one of the best ways to cultivate concentration is during an intensive residential meditation retreat. The focus of the event is to provide the optimal opportunity to dedicate every waking moment to cultivating concentration, as well as the other Awakening factors.

**EQUANIMITY-*UPEKKHA* OR *TATRAMAJJHATTATA BOJJHANGA***

The final factor of the seven factors of Awakening is *upekkha,* which is translated as *equanimity or non-preference*. This is synonymous with *tatramajjhattata* (tah-trah-mah-jah-tah-tah), which is translated as *that which is found in the middle*. Upekkha conveys a characteristic of detachment, while tatramajjhattata conveys a moderation of emotional reactivity.

“The Pāli term *Upekkhā* is composed of *upa,* which means justly, impartially or rightly *(yuttito)* and *ikkha,* to see, discern or view. The etymological meaning of the term is discerning rightly, viewing justly, or looking impartially, that is, without attachment or aversion, without favour or disfavor.” *From “The Buddha And His Teachings”, pp. 606-607, Narada Maha Thera*

It is a mental factor, that is, it only refers to how the mind processes physical experience and shouldn’t be confused with a physically neutral feeling.

“Equanimity has the characteristic of evolving the mode of neutrality as regards beings; its function is seeing equality in beings; its manifestation is quieting both aversion and attachment; its proximate cause is seeing the

heritage of the occurring kamma as ‘beings are the property of their kamma’. By its influence they will attain to pleasure, or be free from pain, or not fall from the prosperity already acquired. Its consummation is the

quieting of aversion and of attachment; its failure is the production of an unintelligent indifference which is based on the home life.” *From “The Perfections Leading to Enlightenment” by Sujin Boriharnwanaket*

*Page 174, Translated by Nina van Gorkom 2007 First Edition*

Referring to the Awakening factor of upekkha, here is how the characteristics of the fourth vipassana jhana are described by U Pandita on page 203 of his book:

“With a mind that is neither please nor displeased, comfortable nor uncomfortable, upekkha or equanimity arises. Upekkha has a tremendous power to balance the mind. In this particular aspect, it is known as tatramajjhattata. In the environment of balance, mindfulness can become perfectly pure, keen and sharp. Subtle aspects of phenomena can be seen with incredible and uninterrupted clarity as particle and tiny vibrations. In fact, tatramajjhattata is present in each of the jhanas from the beginning. Yet in the first, second and third jhanas, it is hidden by more assertive qualities, like the moon in daylight which cannot compete with the sun.”

Here’s  how Gil Fronsdal describes tatramajjhattata related to “The eight worldly winds”:

“The second word often translated as equanimity is *tatramajjhattata*, a compound made of simple Pali words. Tatra, meaning “there,” sometimes refers to “all these things.” Majjha means “middle,” and tata means “to stand or to pose.” Put together, the word becomes “to stand in the middle of all this.” As a form of equanimity, “being in the middle” refers to balance, to remaining centered in the middle of whatever is happening. This balance comes from inner strength or stability. The strong presence of inner calm, well-being, confidence, vitality, or integrity can keep us upright, like a ballast keeps a ship upright in strong winds. As inner strength develops, equanimity follows.”

“Equanimity is a protection from the “eight worldly winds”: praise and blame, success and failure, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute. Becoming attached to or excessively elated with success, praise, fame or pleasure can be a set-up for suffering when the winds of life change direction. For example, success can be wonderful, but if it leads to arrogance, we have more to lose in future challenges. Becoming personally invested in praise can tend toward conceit. Identifying with failure, we may feel incompetent or inadequate. Reacting to pain, we may become discouraged. If we understand or feel that our sense of inner well-being is independent of the eight winds, we are more likely to remain on an even keel in their midst.” From an article downloaded from the Insight Meditation Center on October 7, 2014. The URL is: <http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/articles/equanimity/>

The function of tatramajjhattata can be illustrated in the graphic illustration below. It uses mindfulness, investigation and Right Effort to balance two “vectors” of the selfing process. The horizontal line represents the function of perception and identification, and the vertical line represents the balancing dynamic between the sympathetic (arousing) and parasympathetic (sedating) systems:

**ENERGY**

**(SYMPATHETIC SYSTEM)**

**Too much generates agitation**

**MINDFULNESS**

**+ JOY/INTEREST**

**CONTINUALLY MONITORS**

**THE FOUR FACTORS**

**WISDOM**

**CONTINUALLY MOTIVATES THOUGHTS & ACTIONS**

**INVESTIGATION of MENTAL PHENOMENA**

**Too much generates skeptical doubt**

**CONFIDENCE**

**Too much generates attachment to views**

***TATRAMAJJHATTATA***

***IS THE OPTIMAL, DYNAMICALLY VARIABLE BALANCE OF ENERGY/TRANQUILITY & CONFIDENCE/INVESTIGATION***

**TRANQUILITY**

**(PARASYMPATHETIC SYSTEM)**

**Too much generates sluggishness**

This graphic shows the dynamic balancing act to be managed regarding the interaction between two different

This graphic shows the dynamic balancing act to be managed regarding the interaction between two different processes in our experience. It also reflects what is called *panca bala,* the *five powers* of Buddhist psychology. Classically, the five powers are: (copied from Wikipedia):

1. **Confidence** ([saddha](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saddha)) - counters doubt
2. **Energy/Effort/Persistence** ([viriya](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viriya" \o "Viriya)) – counters laziness
3. **Mindfulness** ([sati](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness_%28Buddhism%29)); - counters heedlessness
4. **Concentration** ([samādhi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samadhi_%28Buddhism%29" \o "Samadhi (Buddhism))) - counters distraction
5. **Wisdom/Discernment** ([pañña,](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prajna" \o "Prajna) ) – counters ignorance

I have substituted confidence for faith, and investigation of phenomena for wisdom/discernment. I understand this in the context of the seven awakening factors in this way:

**Mindfulness** is the quality of self-awareness, alert for either too much energy (restlessness and worry plus the reactivity of sense desire and aversion/ill will) or too little energy (sloth and torpor or the absence of commitment, which is skeptical doubt).

**Faith** is a degree of confidence, contradicting doubt, avoiding attachment to views. It can be associated with Joy.

**Energy/Effort/Persistence** is the skillful management of the flow of experiential energy so that the manifestation of it isn’t “jittery” or overpoweringly impulsive.

**Concentration** is the ability to maintain steady attention to a focal point without becoming attached to a view and thereby inattentive to new information arriving through the senses.

**Wisdom/discernment** is the capacity to investigate how the mind makes meaning out of the new information that comes through the senses. When discernment isn’t monitored by mindfulness, it can become incoherent and too skeptical.

**SKILLFUL MEANS FOR CULTIVATING EQUANIMITY**

1. Make it a regular practice to not take yours or other’s beliefs and behaviors personally. The classical suggestion for this is to realize that that there is no person to take things personally! The Dalai Lama, who was ejected with many of his people from his homeland, has said “If something happens and you can do something about it, don’t worry! If something happens and you can’t do anything about it, don’t worry!” This doesn’t mean to not think things through and take effective action when possible--it means to realize that all plans and expectations are provisional, and to invest our self-worth and self-identity on the outcome is an example of craving and clinging.
2. Our culture is very involved in attitudes and behaviors that foster self-absorption. Practice noticing how this plays out mindfully, without judgment, how often people crave things that aren’t really necessary, or take offense to setbacks or others’ thoughtless behaviors that aren’t all that important (such as when someone interrupts or cuts you off in traffic).
3. Practice sitting meditation for extended periods of time with the intention to cultivate ongoing tolerance of physical discomfort, investigating the mental resistance to the discomfort while releasing muscle tension. Keep relaxing into the next breath, the next moment.
4. Practice intentionally performing an act of compassion, generosity or patience in a situation that you would ordinarily avoid, using the same strategies as in #3 to learn how to reduce reactivity in adverse situations. Provide a service to someone whether they show gratitude or not. Willingly do a messy job that you find repulsive or boring to explore and release mental and physical resistance.

It is said that cultivating concentration is like going into a yard and chopping all the weeds off at ground level (the weeds are the five hindrances); soon they will regrow. Cultivating the seven factors of awakening can be compared to starving the roots to the extent that they don’t regrow (Starving involves removing the basic attachments to the false view of an enduring, separate self).

One of the benefits of developing the awakening factors is the manifestation of the “six beautiful pairs” of *cetasikas* (cheh-tah-see-kahs), *wholesome mind conditioners*. The pairing represents the maximal cooperation between the receptivity of the mind and the functionality of the constituent conditioning factors reflected on the mind:

**TRANQUILITY OF MENTAL FACTORS, TRANQUILITY OF MIND**

**LIGHTNESS OF MENTAL FACTORS, LIGHTNESS OF MIND**

**PLIANCY OF MENTAL FACTORS, PLIANCY OF MIND**

**WIELDINESS OF MENTAL FACTORS, WIELDINESS OF MIND**

**PROFICIENCY OF MENTAL FACTORS, PROFICIENCY OF MIND**

**UPRIGHTNESS OF MENTAL FACTORS, UPRIGHTNESS OF MIND**

These function to optimize mental alertness and cognitive “competency” in discerning the elements within emerging self-state organizations. Subjectively, consciousness is calm, buoyant, flexible, workable, effective and realistic.