**Tranquility and Concentration**

Tranquility and concentration are key elements to be developed during the process of liberation from dukkha, the distress and confusion that we all experience as a result of craving and clinging. This review is intended to review each of these mental phenomena, particularly in the context of the Seven Awakening Factors; Tranquility is the 5th and Concentration is the 6th factor. They are listed sequentially but they function cooperatively, in mutually supportive ways.

**Tranquility:** The Pali word for this condition of the mind is passaddhi (pah-sah-dee) and is understood to represent the experience of calmness and serenity. This can be compared to the stillness of calm water but has a quality of movement. Tranquility represents the absence of restlessness, one of the five hindrances. It is typically experienced as a very stable and relaxed body awareness that remains mentally alert.

Achaan Chah, a well-respected Thai meditation master, used this simile while teaching his students: “Have you ever seen a still river?”—his students replied “Yes, master”. “Have you ever seen a moving river?”—“Yes, master”, was the reply. “Have you ever seen a still, moving river?” “Yes, master”. This simile may be puzzling, but here is a report from one of my meditation teachers on retreat: She was on retreat in a monastery in Myanmar on the Irrawaddy River. The site was perched on a hillside far above the river, and she observed that the river seemed to be a very stable and unrippled body of water, defined by curving riverbanks—it seemed to be still, like a lake. She then saw boats moving around the curve, moving quite fast—the boats were not motorized, so must have been carried along downstream by a swift current—a still, moving river.

Passaddhi is considered to be included in two of the 52 mind conditioning factors called *cetasikas* (cheh-tah-see-kahs), literally translated as *those functions that operate within consciousness*, described in Buddhist psychology. They are among the “six beautiful pairs” of wholesome mind conditioning factors: Tranquility of Mental Factors, kayapassadhi (kah-yah-pah-sah-dee), and Tranquility of Mind, cittapassadhi (chee-tah-pah-sah-dee). The word *kaya* is typically translated as *body,* but not as representing the physical body, but more as *an aggregation of various elements*—in this case, whichever of the other beneficial cetasikas that are co-operating. Cittapassadhi represents the concurrent stability of attention that results when the beneficial cetasikas are coordinated in their functions.

Regarding the simile mentioned above, the unrippled flow of the current in the river occurs because there are no obstacles hindering or disrupting that flow. The boats, which create no waves, can represent the states of mind that are not adversely affected by disturbing internal commentary. The stability of the river’s flow can also represent samadhi.

A term that is synonymous with passadhi is *samatha* (syah-mah-tah), which is understood as *the quality of awareness characterized by stability and serenity*. I find it useful to describe this quality as samadhi/passaddhi.

**SKILLFUL MEANS FOR CULTIVATING TRANQUILITY**

1. Cultivate a simple, healthful lifestyle, including avoiding overly rich foods containing fats, sugars and lots of refined carbohydrates.
2. Be clear about what levels of stress exposure are unavoidable and which can be eliminated or minimized in your lifestyle.
3. Meditate on a regular basis. Concentration practice automatically brings tranquility with it, provided that the practice includes investigation of mental phenomena and mindfulness. Tranquility that is out of balance and unregulated produces the hindrance of sloth and torpor. Using Right Effort, combined with active investigation of each breath cycle, cultivates a wholesome balance of energy and tranquility in awareness.
4. Minimizing exposure to restless and impatient people. We live in a hyperactive, “instant results” culture that fosters excitement and agitation. Take a break from this sort of reinforcement. Take a vacation from the news, which emphasizes issues to worry about or be angry about in order to keep us tuned in.
5. Develop a routine of sweeping attention through the body periodically to notice and release/relax any muscle tension.

**Concentration**: The Pali word for this condition is *samadhi* (sah-mah-dee). This term has several different connotations, depending upon how the practice of stabilizing attention is developed. Ridhard Shankman, in his book "The Experience of Samadhi”, describes this quality of attention on page 4:

“This key feature of samadhi, undistracted singleness of mind, is understood in at least a couple of different ways. Some view it as an exclusive focus on a single object, while others as a broader state of awareness in which the mind remains steady and unmoving, yet aware of a wide range of phenomena around the meditation object. The Pali term usually rendered as “one-pointedness of mind”, *citass’ ekaggata*, can be alternatively translated as “unification of mind”. These two terms, “one-pointedness” and “unification of mind”, are often used synonymously, but can also have different connotations. A one-pointed mind rests firmly and steadily fixed on the object of its attention. Practices such as focusing on the breath, gazing at colored disks, saying mantras, and visualizing build mental stability and calm and undistracted awareness. Concentration can ultimately be strengthened so that it will not waver from the object of its attention at all, to the point that no awareness of another experience can arise. A mind concentrated in this way is called “one-pointed” because it is totally focused and fixed at one point on a single object.

A unified mind is also settled and undistracted, although not necessarily firmly focused on a single point. Rather than fixing the attention solely on one object or experience, the mind itself becomes still. All its faculties are brought together and integrated, remaining settled, unwavering, and clearly aware as a wide range of changing experiences unfold. In this case the mind itself is unmoving, but not the flow of experience.”

The image below can convey visually the characteristics of samadhi:

**CONE OF CONCENTRATION**



**Unified, Inclusive Awareness**

**Sharply Focused, Exclusive Awareness**

This graphic describes how any visual object is focused by a lens. The lens provides an image related to light, but there could be a “lens” that channels the energy of attention towards anything that arises in awareness. Sharply focused attention can target a primary object, such as breath sensations. When this focused attention is maintained for extended periods of time, a phenomenon called a nimitta (nih-mih-tah) can appear; the traditional nimitta is a coherent internal “light” with eyes closed, comparable to looking at a flashlight in the dark at a long distance. When this is persistently contemplated, the experience of jhana (jah-nah) can occur. The cultivation of jhana states is part of early Buddhist meditative training, but some contemporary teachers also suggest jhana experience is not necessary during the process of Awakening. The development of jhana states is called *appanasamadhi* (ah-pah-nah-sah-mah-dee), translated as *fixed concentration*.

An alternative characteristic of samadhi represents the unified and cooperative functioning of attention that is all-inclusively aware of the flow of experience. This is represented in the graphic as the dotted line in the middle of the cone—the energy is still coherently focused and includes the elements of the incoming light stimulation in a very stable way, perceiving all of the stimuli in an aggregated way without preferring any section of the stimuli. This form of concentration is called *khanikasamadhi* (kah-nee-kah-dah-mah-dee) and is translated as *momentary concentration*. It represents a stable and non-reactive quality of awareness that is not “personalized”, that is, the mental phenomena are in awareness with minimal or no craving/clinging occurring. This sort of concentration is essential for the practice of vipassana (vih-pah-sah-nah). Vipassana, also called insight, is most fully realized through the cultivation of the Seven Awakening Factors which are to be developed to their ultimate potential for seeing the *impermanent* and *impersonal* nature of subjective experience—*anicca* (ah-nee-chah) and *anatta* (ah-nah-tah).

Both forms of samadhi involve a stable, intentional focus, and both can either be very precise and one-pointed, or more broadly focused without “wobbling”, managed by Mindfulness, Investigation of Mental Phenomena and Energy/Right Effort, the first three of the Seven Awakening Factors.

To describe how this works I often use a simile based on the skillful way 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 plot of the scene. In this example, the “script” is organized around the Wisdom aggregate of the Eightfold Path, manifesting wholesome karmic consequences.

This simile can include all seven of the Awakening Factors: The stage manager is *Mindfulness* and *Investigation of Mental Phenomena*, while *Energy* is the light of the beam and *Right Effort* is the intentional activity of the tech. The resulting illumination is vipassana, whether involved with Fixed or Momentary *Concentration*. The Awakening Factor of *Joy* is the ongoing enthusiastic engagement of the tech, along with the satisfaction of a job well done. *Tranquility* is the smoothness and lack of “jitter” in the movement of the spot. *Equanimity* is the result of the balanced coordination of the routine, regardless of whatever emotion is revealed through the plot.

**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 (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 optimally between energy and tranquility, with steady focus on a simple object like the breath to avoid distracting thoughts.
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) on the touch sensation at 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.