Unifying A Dull and Distracted Mind

The cultivation of stable, focused attention and emotional tranquility are key practices on the path to liberating the mind from distress and confusion. The word *samadhi* (sah-mah-dee) is typically translated as *concentration*-I prefer to regard it as *stability of attention*-it’s actual original meaning is *the unification of mental conditioning factors*. The word *passadhi* (pah-sah-dee) translates as internal *tranquility*, a peaceful mind. These two processes are produced through intentional and persistent diligent attention to a primary focal point, and the sensations associated with breathing provide that focus for Buddhist meditation practice. The focal point, typically the breath sensations, does not provide samadhi; the intentional application of attention provides the unified and ongoing focus. Realizing that the intention provides samadhi, not the object of attention, is a key insight, as the practice of vipassana (vih-pah-sah-nah) actually uses unified attention to investigate the transient flow of all subjective experience.

*Samadhi* and *passadhi* are two of the seven factors of awakening. Along with *mindfulness, investigation of mental phenomena, energy/effort, joy/enthusiastic interest* and *equipoise*, they are key components for liberating the mind from distress and confusion.

There are two applications of samadhi-*fixed concentration* and *momentary concentration*. Fixed concentration functions as described—there is an intention to focus on one object to the exclusion of all other objects. Momentary concentration provides an unwavering and inclusive focus with disciplined intention, to investigate whatever that momentary focus reveals, without “wobbling”. The example I prefer is that of a lighting tech operating a spotlight. With fixed concentration, the tech intentionally focuses on one player on the stage, to the exclusion of others. With momentary concentration, the spotlight’s focus includes all the players in a very disciplined, unwavering way, to illuminate the development of the plot played out by the performers. Fixed concentration focuses on the sensation of breathing, while momentary concentration uses breath awareness as a stabilizing reference point, illuminating how the next moment of self-state organization emerges into awareness—this is the practice of vipassana, insight into the transitory, conditioned, and impersonal nature of experience.

Here is a graphic model of samadhi:

Light

Magnifying lens

Broadly focused attention

tightly focused attention

Diffused light energy enters into a magnifying lens, which channels the rays of light so they become coordinated. At the focal point, the energy is highly concentrated and energetic--“hot”. With broadly focused attention, the energy of the unified mind is still highly concentrated, but the stability of coordinated wholesome mental factors is much broader and inclusive. Focused attention is organized toward a particular aspect of the environment, either externally (for example, on a sound) or internally (perhaps creating a meaningful interpretation of the sound) while the remaining aspects of environmental stimuli are still in peripheral awareness but not included in the primary field of focused attention.

In “The Mind Illuminated”, Culadasa describes the hindrances as having degrees of distraction and energy in the mind. He describes *gross distraction/forgetting* in the context of the Buddhist hindrances of sense desire, aversion/ill-will, restlessness/worry or skeptical doubt and *strong dullness* as the Buddhist hindrance of sloth and torpor. The goal in the early stages of Awakening involves the ability to overcome gross distraction/forgetfulness and strong dullness. At more advanced stages, the obstacles are *subtle distraction* and *subtle dullness*.

*Gross distraction* occurs “When some mental or sensory object becomes the primary focus of attention and pushes the meditation object into the background but not out of awareness” (The Mind Illuminated, page 419). When the intention to stay focused on the primary object is sufficiently weakened by the attraction of the distraction, *forgetting* occurs and attention to the primary object is completely out of awareness until the meditator once again becomes diligent, mindful, and clearly knowing, moving focused attention back to the primary object—breath awareness.

*Subtle distraction* represents: “Brief moments of attention to distractions in the background of peripheral awareness, while the meditation object continues as the primary focus” (The Mind Illuminated, page 425).

*Strong dullness* equates with sloth and torpor: “A significant lack of mental energy that often manifests as drowsiness. In meditation, attention still clings to the breath, but the focus is very diffused and weak, and sensations are vaguely perceived…” (The Mind Illuminated, page 425).

*Subtle dullness* is more difficult to identify: “A slight dullness that makes the meditation object less vivid and intense and causes peripheral awareness to fade. This type of dullness has a pleasant quality and is therefore easy to overlook.” (The Mind Illuminated, page 425).

It is easy to misperceive subtle distraction as vipassana practice, particularly when co-occurring with subtle dullness. The antidote for these subtle hindrances is to cultivate diligence, mindfulness, and clearly knowing persistently.

The result of the skillful overcoming of subtle distraction and subtle dullness is termed by Culadasa as *Samatha* ( shah-mah-tah): “A very special mental state achieved through the cultivation of stable attention and mindfulness. *Samatha* has five characteristics. The first is effortlessly stable attention (*samadhi*). The second is powerful mindfulness (*sati-sampajanna*), which means being fully conscious not only of the immediate objects of attention, but of everything else happening in the mind moment by moment. The last three characteristics are joy (*piti*), tranquility (*passadhi*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). (The Mind Illuminated, page 424). This is equivalent to the Buddhist term *upacara samadhi*, (oo-pah-chah-rah sah-mah-dee), *access concentration,* when the mind is free from the hindrances. I typically refer to this quality of attention as *samadhi/passadhi*.

Access concentration is a gateway—one can either cultivate jhana (jah-nah) or practice vipassana. Jhana practice is quite challenging and is intended to create an extraordinary flow of concentrated attention that excludes any focus other than the characteristics of jhana: unwavering attention that becomes increasingly refined, with no attention to environmental stimuli at all. The intention is to create a “blank slate” of consciousness, preparatory for the cultivation of insight into the impermanent and impersonal nature of subjective experience.

Access concentration can also be a gateway for insight practice without the radical clearing of the “slate” of consciousness that jhana experience creates. This is often called “dry vipassana”, only requiring the ability to set aside the hindrances without the radical “cleansing” provided when experiencing jhana. The interaction between wholesome mind conditioning factors is highly coordinated and more easily applied in an ongoing way.

In either case, the ultimate goal is to develop the full potential of what are called the Seven Awakening Factors: Mindfulness, Investigation of Mental Phenomena, Energy, Joy, Tranquility (passadhi), Unification of Wholesome Mind Conditioners (samadhi), and Equipoise/Balance. Here is a relevant quote from the Satipatthana Sutta (sah-tee-pah-tah-nah soo-tah), the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse, regarding this developmental process:

"Furthermore, the monk remains focused on mental qualities in & of themselves with reference to the *seven factors for Awakening.* And how does he remain focused on mental qualities in & of themselves with reference to the seven factors for Awakening? There is the case where, there being mindfulness as a factor for Awakening present within, he discerns that 'Mindfulness as a factor for Awakening is present within me.' Or, there being no mindfulness as a factor for Awakening present within, he discerns that 'Mindfulness as a factor for Awakening is not present within me.' He discerns how there is the arising of unarisen mindfulness as a factor for Awakening. And he discerns how there is the culmination of the development of mindfulness as a factor for Awakening once it has arisen. (The same formula is repeated for the remaining factors for Awakening: analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, serenity, concentration, & equanimity.)

When these factors are cooperating effectively, highly beneficial mind conditioning factors are increasingly effective. They are called “The Beautiful Pairs”—a coordination of wholesome mind conditioning factors in the context of a mind that is functioning free from the hindrances: tranquility of mind and mental factors, lightness of mind and mental factors, pliancy of mind and mental factors, wieldiness of mind and mental factors, proficiency of mind and mental factors, and uprightness of mind and mental factors.

This quality of diligent mindfulness clearly knows how the selfing process operates. Because the hindrances are not preoccupying one’s attention, the transient and impersonal characteristics of self-state organizations is more evident, and this brings the Awakening process closer to fulfillment.

Consciousness is tranquil, light and buoyant, pliable and easily modified in wholesome ways. The “tools” of the Awakening factors are more wieldy, more skillfully applied. The resulting insights are revealed with proficiency, and the true “upright” nature of a purified mind is more apparent.