

7 Samatha-vipassana variations

7.1 INSIGHT, “DRY” AND “WET”

7.1.1 “Dry” insight

7.1.1.1 We will now look at some ways where samatha and vipassana can work together, or where one can help the other, and so on. Whenever there seems to be some differences between samatha and vipassana, it is, as a rule, really due to emphasis: which method we choose for our practice. Since neither is, as a matter of fact, a meditation “method,” since both of them actually occur during our meditation. In any meditation, we need to initially focus the mind so that it is **calm** (*samatha*); then, it is able to “**see**” (*vipassanā*) the true nature of the meditation object or at true reality [4.1.4].

7.1.1.2 The suttas only mention, metaphorically, **the “dry insight”** (*sukkha, vipassaka*) meditator, who is, when, with an already focused mind, one directs it into seeing the nature of true reality.¹ Although the Commentaries speak of such a “meditator,” there is *no* such category in the suttas. In practical terms, then, such a meditator easily or naturally attains mental focus so that he only needs to direct his mind, or keep directing his mind (attention), to seeing into the true nature of the meditation or its object.

7.1.1.3 The “dry” approach to vipassana feels “dry” in that it is less directed to cultivating feeling. Instead, it is directed more to how we “see” the meditation object or mind objects. It explores the link between name-and-form (*nāma, rūpa*) (how we experience things) and mental formations (*saṅkhāras*) (how we react to these experiences). Insight overcomes our habit of “naming” or labelling things (“forms”) by projecting our past onto it. Insight exposes this process for what it is, thus undermining “I-making,” conceiving of views and being attached to them. Hence, insight empowers us to let go of the delusion projected into our experiences. To “**let go**” means that there is less need for the arising of feelings.

7.1.1.4 Whether it is “samatha” or “vipassana,” these are skilful strategies differently taught and done by different schools and teachers, depending on the meditation situation. When we are learning skills or crafts like singing, music, dancing, gymnastics, even exercising, cooking or knitting, we take for granted that there are rules and safeguards we need to know to ensure that we are doing it with due care and attention, and doing it rightly for the best results.

The same should be said about practising meditation. As part of the meditation instructions, an experienced teacher from any tradition would advise on certain **checks and balances** for the particular practice. What characterizes or defines the meditation is whether the emphasis is on gaining calm or cultivating insight (or both, for more experienced meditators). This emphasis is what gives that meditation its characteristics and effects on us.²

Whether it is “samatha” or “vipassana” is an elusive debate for those who do not meditate. The test of the pudding is in the tasting.

7.1.2 The “wet” approach

7.1.2.1 In modern Buddhist discourse, we sometimes speak of the “opposite” aspect. Technically, there is no such category, but simply a whimsical way of explaining how meditation actually works, that is, the difference between samatha and vipassana, both in theory and technique. This differentiation is, however, clearly described in the suttas, as what we may characterize, in modern lingo, as a “dry” (*suk-kha*) approach to meditation [7.1.1] and a “wet” one.³

¹ SD 50.17 (1.3.1).

² Careful scholars often point this out even in introductory books on Buddhism: Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 1998:79-84; Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 2nd ed, 2013:319-321.

³ For details, see eg Cousins, 1984b:56-68, 1996c:35-58.

Generally, the “wet” (*alla*) approach of samatha may be said to be “intuitive and feeling-based.”⁴ I take this to mean resolving all sense-feelings so that they settle, calm down, freeing the mind to work freely. This also means lessening craving (based on sense-restraint), when the mind is able to focus on the meditation object. When this is properly done, the 5 hindrances [11.6.2 (10)] are overcome, and the mind attains the 1st dhyana.⁵

Samatha, in other words, primes the mind for dhyana or some deep level of samadhi. This calm and clear mind is now a tool for vipassana. Usually, it is directed to seeing *impermanence* in the meditation-object, or any mind-object (thought), or any sense-object. This is where Buddhist meditation is versatile, and different teachers will highlight their often exclusive approaches to cultivating insight so that their “system” may appear uniquely efficacious. The real question is whether the method *works for us*.

7.1.2.2 Most teachers, for example, will teach how **walking meditation** complements or helps sitting practice. Teachers of Burmese Vipassana often stress labelling each stage of *lifting, moving, lowering, and pressing* the foot.⁶ A Samatha school, however, may encourage a sense of feeling and the physical sensation of walking on the ground. Boonman, for example, teaches walking practices linked to those on lovingkindness and the breath.⁷ Broad attention or circumspection is a common aspect of both Samatha and Vipassana, but “how broad” depends on the meditator’s circumstances and needs.⁸

A rule of thumb for safe meditation practice is **moderation**. For beginners, there is no fixed rule about the duration for sitting or practice. We should stop when we feel we are unable to continue. Every little effort we make in sitting, even when distracted, will help us in future sittings. Even 5 minutes of sitting for a beginner is much longer than it takes “to milk a cow by a mere tug at the udder-teat” (*gadduhana, matta*), as recommended by the Buddha.⁹ When we learn how to renounce more of our sense-based distractions and thoughts, the better we learn to meditate. This comes with patience and experience.

7.1.2.3 For the meditation to work, it is vital that we use a method that suits us, not because it is popular or taught by a famous teacher. At the same time, we should avoid any method that has not been well-trying by others (no matter how well marketed or how presumably holy). A “**wrong**” **meditation method** can have serious effects on us, especially when we have underlying psychological problems or some kind of emotional difficulties (not all of which we may be conscious). Our wrong efforts may magnify our underlying tendencies and symptoms, leading to psychological issues, which we mistakenly interpret, in the worst-case scenario, to be some level of attainment, even awakening. [5.11.5]

A **right meditation method** for us is one with check and balances for our temperament and experience. Mixing meditation methods without proper guidance, is like taking a buffet of pills and medicament for oneself without the proper advice from a doctor or qualified carer. For a beginner, an experienced meditation teacher as a “spiritual friend” is vital for our progress and mental safety. [5.7.2.3]

7.2 SAMATHA-BASED VIPASSANA

7.2.1 Vipassana based on the divine abodes

7.2.1.1 Samatha-based vipassana refers to a vipassana practice to cultivate liberating insight for the removal of defilements and for awakening. However, such insight is cultivated with the divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*) [7.2.1.2] as the basis for instilling calm.¹⁰ Historically, this has usually been taken to mean

⁴ Shaw 2021:220 f.

⁵ We can of course work on the dhyana-factors [*jhān’āṅga*, SD 8.4 (6)] to attain higher dhyana (this would be “samatha” practice). But here, it is sufficient to start with the 1st dhyana for vipassana.

⁶ Dhammasāmi, *Mindfulness Meditation Made Easy*, 1999:33-35

⁷ Samatha Centre, Greenstreete, Llangunllo, Wales, August 2012 (Shaw 2021:221).

⁸ Sumedho, *Mindfulness: The path to the deathless*, Amaravati, 1987:39 f.

⁹ **Okkha S** (S 20.4), SD 2.14; **Cūl’accharā S** (A 1.6,5), SD 2.13; **Velāma S** (A 9.20,5.2(10)), SD 16.6.

¹⁰ Cf Shaw, 2014:139-148, where she calls it “samatha within vipassana.”

the practice of attaining dhyana. Most Vipassana schools, such as those of the Burmese movements, place considerable emphasis on the divine abodes from the outset.¹¹

7.2.1.2 It should be noted that the cultivation of **the 4 divine abodes** must be done sequentially, beginning with the 1st abode, that of lovingkindness (*mettā*). This can be done in one of 2 ways. **The first**, the easier method, is to start with **the cultivation of lovingkindness** (*mettā, bhāvanā*) with which we are familiar.¹² Lovingkindness is cultivated until we feel joyful in a boundless way (*appamāṇa*).

For a beginner, it is sufficient to reach a stage where, we feel a deep sense of joy. The moment, we notice this all subverbalization (saying the words under the breath) should stop, so that the joy can grow. This can be helped with **an inner smile** to feel better connected with it. We should stay with this joyful state as long as possible. It helps to be well familiar with this cultivation before going on to the next divine abode.

Once we have learned to stabilize the lovingkindness, we then mentally direct the mind to **the cultivation of compassion** (*karuṇā, bhāvanā*). Here, we again start with cultivating lovingkindness until we reach some level of samadhi. Only then, we go on to fine-tune it (as it were) into compassion. Basically, this is done by first visualizing of some people or beings suffering significant pain or difficulty. We then subverbalize words like: “May they (or this being) be free from suffering!” or something to that effect. We should cultivate this until we feel a deep sense of joy that “silence up” the whole mind. Then, we just keep this state steady for as long as we can (with the inner smile, and so on).

For **the cultivation of joy** (*muditā, bhāvanā*), we start with cultivating lovingkindness; then, cultivating compassion (as in the previous stage). When we feel a sense of pervasive joy, we visualize someone who has done well, or some happy situation. We subverbalise to the effect: “Be completely happy in every way: you well deserve this!” It should get easier by this time, so that we may not even need to subverbalize: we feel that joy for the subject. We build this up to pervasive joy.

When we have mastered the first 3 abodes, the 4th abode, **the cultivation of equanimity** (*upekkhā, bhāvanā*) should not be difficult. Here, there is the idea that no matter what good we do (including keeping the precepts), there will still be numerous people, countless beings, that will still suffer. This is the nature of samsara! This is the working of karma! When the first 3 stages have been well cultivated, we will feel peace here. There is no sadness, but a deep peace, but profoundly joyful. That much we can say aside from the experience itself.

7.2.1.3 **The 2nd way** of cultivating the 4 divine abodes is to attain at least **the 1st dhyana** with lovingkindness. Then, we progress from there, cultivating each of the other 3 abodes by stages, as we have done before but with dhyana. This will be discussed further in the last part of this study [SD 60.1c].

In either case, once we have attained dhyana, or at least some samadhi, we emerge from it. Our mind then is calm, clear and joyfully “workable” (*kammanīya*). We can easily direct it to see the true nature of impermanence, or even suffering or nonself, depending how well we know the Dharma. This is the insight aspect of the practice.

7.2.1.4 As with most Theravāda meditations, vipassana practitioners, as a rule, recite the 3 refuges and the 5 precepts before beginning their meditation. In traditional Buddhist societies, like those in Myanmar, and Burmese Buddhists overseas, they routinely, recite the Puja, before doing their meditation or other calm recollections, as it is said to arouse peace and happiness in daily life.

Such a Puja (devotion worship) comprises chanting Pali verses, which are used for reflection, for example, on the virtues of the 3 jewels. Other Pali verses may be those reflecting on impermanence or some teachings that the practitioner are drawn to. Although such recollections have a calming effect, they are also used in mindful reflection for insight into the Dharma.

¹¹ Dhammasāmi, 1999:9-19.

¹² On *mettā, bhāvanā*, see **Karaṇīya Metta S** (Khp 9 = Sn 1.8) & SD 38.3 (6).

7.3 VIPASSANA-BASED SAMATHA

7.3.1 Watching rise-and-fall

7.3.1.1 In this variation of the combined samatha-vipassana practice, we focus on the states that relate to insight, such as **the rise and fall** (*uppāda,vaya*),¹³ especially of the body, that is, the breath or the abdomen as we breathe. As we have noted, we may notice this sign of impermanence on any of 3 spots on our body depending on how we naturally breathe: the nostrils, the navel or the solar plexus [5.8.1.6 (2)].

The rise-and-fall process can only be watched for a limited duration, so long as the breath is coarse, or not too fine. Once the breath has become refined or settled, we will not be able to notice any rise-and-fall, and don't need to. The mind has become calm and joyful in a focused manner, and we should keep it that way: switch to feeling the calm, holding it as long as we can, so that it may continue to settle and deepen in samadhi, depending on our ability to concentrate.

7.3.1.2 By this time, the initial Vipassana stage is over, as it were. Notice that up to this point, there is only watching the "rise and fall," that is, the wind element. In Vipassana, in contrast to Samatha practice, the teacher may instruct that we ignore all mental images, but focus on "letting go," that is, observing only the "rise and fall" at one of 3 points on the body [7.3.1.1]. In this way, we will notice, with mindfulness, in an analytical manner, whatever that arises and falls: sense-impressions (sensing) and mental impressions (thinking), that is, ideas and emotions, as they arise, and then pass away. Such an exercise keeps us in touch with true reality, and prepares us to approach closer to the path of awakening.

7.3.2 The 3 characteristics

7.3.2.1 Most Samatha schools use the breath as the meditation-object, which not only brings calm, culminating in dhyana, but can also be used for cultivating insight, depending on how we watch the breath [7.3.1.2]. **Insight** (*vipassanā*) is cultivated, strengthened or refined (depending on our level of experience) by starting with observing **impermanence** (*anicca*), the "rise-and-fall" nature in all things, whether sense-based or mind-made.

7.3.2.2 Another variation to the Vipassana practice—as in the case of breath meditation— is to start watching the breath, as in the normal practice. Upon attaining some level of focus or samadhi, we stay with it as long as we like (to keep the experience stable). In due course, we emerge from this calm state, to reflect on it as being "mind-made," hence "conditioned, impermanent," and so on.

If we are familiar with the teaching of **the 3 characteristics** (*ti,lakkhaṇa*), we may go on to reflect that the impermanent is also "unsatisfactory" (*dukkha*). No matter how pleasant the state may be, it does not last, and for many, when this pleasant calm is gone, they would miss it, and so have some negative feelings about it. This is the nature of all worldly experiences, whether sense-based or mind-based.

7.3.2.3 When we are more experienced with such a practice, we may go on to reflect on **nonself** (*anattā*), that is, none of these states—impermanent and unsatisfactory, sense-based or mind-based, past, future or present, existing anywhere¹⁴ [8.2.2.2]—have any abiding entity or eternal essence. They are all conditioned (*saṅkhata*) realities. The constant abiding mindfulness of these 3 characteristics leads

¹³ This teaching is given in **Dīgha,jānu S** (A 8.54), SD 5.10.

¹⁴ This is a simplified stating of the "totality formula" regarding any and all the 5 aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness) [SD 17], "whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near" ("the totality formula" (*atītānagata,paccupannaṃ ajjhataṃ vā bahiddhā vā oḷarikaṃ vā sukumaṃ vā hīnaṃ vā paṇītaṃ vā yaṃ dūre santike vā*) as having the 3 characteristics: **(Dve) Khandha S** (S 22.48) + SD 17.1a (3); **Anatta,lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59,17-21), SD 1.2.

us to the path of awakening. Even the constant mindful reflection on impermanence (*anicca,saññā*) is a sure way of attaining the path in this life itself.¹⁵ [8.6.1]

7.4 THE WINGS OF A FLYING BIRD

7.4.1 Space and light

7.4.1.1 Even a casual reading of the preceding section [7.3] on the 2 variations of samatha/vipassana practice, is likely to arouse in us the thought that the 2 terms are actually interchangeable, whether we are describing “samatha-based vipassana” or “vipassana-based samatha.” It is merely a matter of emphasis—whether we are highlighting Samatha or Vipassana—or the sequence of our practice (starting with samatha or with vipassana). In other words, both descriptions refer to the same practice of “samatha-vipassana,” even if omit the titles altogether.

7.4.1.2 The point is that we can talk or write about meditation in different ways, but when we get down to actually *meditating*, we have to decide: Are we able to focus our mind to still the muddy waters of our mind? Are we wisely (rightly) dealing with our sensing and minding (our sense-data and thoughts)?

In other words: Are we practising *samatha* and *vipassana* in the right order and doing each rightly? Samatha creates the peaceful **space** for our mind to grow; vipassana gives us the wisdom that is **the light** we need to grow healthily, and to be free from defilements and suffering; in other words, to become a truly free individual.

7.4.2 The spirit of renunciation

7.4.2.1 A number of key suttas describe the monastic’s life of **renunciation** in these beautiful words, using the imagery of flight and freedom, thus:

“Here, just as a bird, wherever it goes, flies with its wings¹⁶ as its only burden; so, too, is he content with robes to protect his body and with almsfood to sustain his belly, and wherever he goes, he takes only these with him.”¹⁷

This beautiful pericope (template passage) speaks of the simple joys of a monastic life of renunciation as being free of the world and worldliness (like a bird flying freely in the open sky). The monastic life of renunciation provides the ideal **space** for a peaceful life of cultivating **the light** of insight wisdom so that we are free from defilements and suffering.

7.4.2.2 While going forth as a monastic is conventional renunciation (*nekkhamma*), **meditation** in practice is **the true renunciation**. Through *samatha*, we work to free ourselves from the power of the body of sense-experiences by overcoming the 5 hindrances [4.1.3.1]. Through *vipassana*, we work our way out of the gravity field of self-view, of craving and of ignorance in stages by attaining streamwinning or once-returning, non-returning and arhathood respectively. We need both samatha and vipassana to gain mental freedom and attain spiritual awakening.

7.4.2.3 The imagery of **the 2 wings of a flying bird** [Dh 372] also resonates with the 2 wings of the early Buddhist practice of *samatha-vipassanā*. **Samatha** is the wing of the space of peace and joy that

¹⁵ See esp (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

¹⁶ This famous imagery describes the life of a true renunciant: SD 8.10 (3; 6.2.3.5; 7.4).

¹⁷ The flying bird parable: **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,66/1:71), SD 8.10; **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 38,34/1:268), SD 7.10; **Kandaraka S**(M 51,15/1:346), SD 32.9; **Cha-b,bisodhana S** (M 112,14/3:35), SD 59.7; (**Catukka**) **Attan Tapa S** (A 4.198,10/2:209 f), SD 56.7.

conduces to the cultivation of the light of liberating insight wisdom. With these 2 wings of meditation, we fly freely in the sky of happiness here and now, and to the awakening that awaits us.¹⁸

7.4.3 The 2 hands of meditation

7.4.3.1 The Samatha Trust founding teacher Boonman Poonyathiro, in July 2016, at a *samatha* meditation course at the Greemstreete ST Centre, Greenstreete in Wales, compared the beneficial effect of the 2 kinds of meditation to that of **cleaning a water-tank**: calm practice and the cultivation of loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity are like a flow of clean water passing through to remove the bulk of the dirt; but we also need some careful scrubbing to get rid of the ingrained stains, which is the work of insight.

If we miss out the scrubbing of the sides, the tank is not completely clean. If the tank is not refreshed and sluiced with clean water, it does not get washed thoroughly either. The sequence of watering, scrubbing, refreshing and sluicing may differ with different cleaners, or we ourselves (as cleaners) may vary these processes, but they all have to be done properly for a clean tank to contain clean water.¹⁹

7.4.3.2 Ajahn Chah, in his teachings to newly ordained monk during the rains-retreat in 1978, gives a very simple and practical way of practising samatha (calm and focus) and vipassanā (insight or wisdom). He starts explaining **vipassanā** first, by saying that whenever we are mindful (*sati*) (inside or outside of meditation), there is also clear understanding (*sampajañña*). However, when we are not mindful enough, we don't see with this clear knowing. When there are both, we also have wisdom. But this can be just for a brief moment; thus, we need to be mindful.

Be mindful of how we **feel**: sometimes we feel happy, sometimes sad. What we like, we regard as "good"; what we dislike, we regard as "bad." This only keeps us further and further away from Dharma. We should recognize this simply as desire; we don't see this because our mind is all delusion. Yet, all these states are impermanent. This means that we only have to see them as they are, and accept them as they are. This is **wisdom**. [7.4.2.3]

7.4.3.3 Moving on to **samatha**, Ajahn Chah explains that we each need to choose the right kind of meditation that will help still our minds. Some of us can calm our minds by simply reflecting on the fact that we comprise "*head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin.*"²⁰ Others, with a lot of lust (or even strong hate or delusion), can try the meditation on *death*. Good or bad, we must die: this is a powerful reflection to arouse dispassion.

Chah then speaks of seeing the breath as "food." When we do not take food for a few minutes, even a few hours, we may be able to endure it. But when we do *not* breathe for a few minutes, we will suffocate and die! When we are mindful of our breath, we thus become mindful of death, too, and become dispassionate. We become so connected with the breath that other things start going farther away.

What is remarkable in his teaching is that neither samatha nor vipassana is taken as a "method" of meditation, but simply as states that free the mind from defilements so that it gains wisdom. Mindfulness needs both of them so that we grow in the Dharma.²¹

7.4.3.4 There is nothing innovative or modernist in Ajahn Chah's presentation of samatha-vipassana. If anything, it reflects the spirit of early Buddhism. The dynamic yet harmonious balance in cultivating *samatha* and *vipassanā* is that of wisely calming the mind so that the *calm* brings us liberating wisdom:

¹⁸ See SD 41.1 (1.4.2).

¹⁹ Qu in Shaw 2021:219 f.

²⁰ This is the 1st meditation, called "the nail pentad" (*taca,pañcaka kammaṭṭhāna*), formally taught to newly ordained monks: **Mahā Rāhu'ovāda S** (M 61,8/1:421), SD 3.11.

²¹ "Reading the natural mind," in *The Teachings of Ajahn Chah*, 2007:58-75. See also Cousins 1984b.

*N'atthi jhānaṃ apaññassa
paññā n'atthi ajhāyato
yamhi jhānaṃ ca paññā ca
sa ve nibbāna,santike*

There is no (true) meditation without wisdom;
there is no (true) wisdom without meditation.
In whom there are both meditation and wisdom,
he is indeed in nirvana's presence. (Dh 372)