

## The 2 wings of a flying bird

An excerpt from **SD 60.2 Mindfulness and lovingkindness**: versatility and harmony in early Buddhist mental cultivation, forthcoming © Piya Tan, 2021, 2024.

**1.1.2.1** The suttas do not see *samatha* and *vipassanā* as 2 kinds of meditation, as taught and practised by ethnic Buddhist groups and those who follow or study these groups. In early Buddhism, *samatha* refers to the process and result of calming the mind, clearing it of distractions, especially the 5 mental hindrances: *attachment to sensual pleasures, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt*. When the hindrances are overcome, *dhyana* (*jhāna*) is attained.

What really happens when the hindrances are overcome? Psychologically it means that the mind is free from having to process any sense-data from the 5 physical senses (the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body). In other words, the mind is completely free from being held back by the body and being caught up with processing sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches. The mind is simply by itself: it is free and happy, and it is naturally radiant (in a psychological sense), free from being clouded up by sense-activities and the accompanying thoughts.

In such a free state, the mind, with proper guidance, goes on to minimize thinking to just being aware of itself, like in a lucid dream. It is only aware of what is going on, which is wholesomely calming: this is called **the 1<sup>st</sup> dhyana**. Then, even these rudimentary thoughts settle down, and there is only zest and joy (*pīti, sukha*) due to full concentration: this is **the 2<sup>nd</sup> dhyana**. In due course, the exuberant zest settles down, and there is great equanimity, inner peace: this is **the 3<sup>rd</sup> dhyana**; finally, even the joy is resolved into a radiant peace, an inner equanimity that can be described as being “more joyful” than joy itself (this is a bit of meditation lingo): this is **the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana**.

**1.1.2.2** Once we have mastered the *dhyana* practice just mentioned [1.1.2.1], we are ready for the next stage. This is when, upon emerging from *dhyana* (even just the 1<sup>st</sup> *dhyana*), we direct the calm and clear mind to Dharma practice. Usually this would be to reflect on **impermanence**, such as how the beautiful mental states have all passed away. This direct experience of true reality can only be explained poetically or metaphorically here.

It is like we have climbed a hill or a mountain for the first time, and upon reaching the peak, we can finally see the whole panorama of the valley, trees and landscape before us right to the horizon. Or we have been looking at some amazing painting like the Mona Lisa or some favourite painting of ours in books or social media. Then one day we visit the Louvre or the National Gallery preserving the original work. We can only totally lose ourselves gazing speechless and timeless into the painting.

We may get some poetic idea of *dhyana* when we read William Wordsworth’s *Daffodils* (“I wandered lonely as a cloud ...”) ([1804](#)). For the laity, especially a sensual or family person, who has not attained the path or done deep meditation, the closest they could probably imagine of dhyanic bliss is sexual **ecstasy**—but imagine ecstasy without the body (that is, the body is fully absorbed into the mind)—the mind, as it were is freed from all the physical senses; it is a purely *mental* experience.

Dhyanic bliss, on the other hand, has been called “**enstasy**”—a totally blissful state, neither within nor without—hence far more profound than any worldly ecstasy.<sup>1</sup>

**1.1.2.3** On the other hand, we may have an intellectual person (like a scholar) who may have a deep theoretical understanding of Buddhism, even of dhyana, but lacks any experience or deep feeling for Buddhism or for meditation. One may then *think* one understands Buddhism or such a dhyana experience very well, even in an “exegetically responsible” manner—as Mills puts it [7.2.4.2]—even quoting the suttas with technical accuracy.

Yet when one finally gets into dhyana, then one happily realizes it to be a profound experience so very different from and very much more than all that one has *known* about it: now one *feels* it for the first time. In simple terms, this is when we have cultivated *samatha* with which we attained samādhi, even dhyana. Then, emerging with a profoundly calm and clear mind, we see directly (*vipassati*) into true reality, such as the impermanence of the breath or the mind, and have a direct experience (*vipassanā*) of what we have learned in *theory*: now we experience it in practice, in real life.<sup>2</sup>

**1.1.2.4** Alternatively, we may have become a scholarly expert in our academic field of Buddhism. We have made disciplined and dignified arguments about profound Buddhist teachings and experiences, only to be refuted by other scholars. Suddenly, or slowly, we realize that Buddhism is not our cup of tea or crock of gold at the rainbow’s end. We then renounce Buddhism for greener pastures of a wealthier religion. For, man, it seems, cannot live by faith alone.

When an academic scholar is deeply committed to Buddhism as personal faith and practice, and his scholarship is responsible, critical and experiential, we often learn new and helpful perspectives of seeing even practising Buddhism. After all, we would profoundly benefit and enjoy music, for example, from a great musician, who is a composer, a performer as well as a teacher and lover of music.

**1.1.2.5** One important way to understand how samatha and vipassana work *together* is that they are the “**twin ways**” (rather than “two paths”) of our meditative progress: we experience both the body (sights, sounds, smells, taste and touches) and the mind (feelings, thoughts and emotions). “**The body**” is such a flood and flurry of physical experiences that there are always sense-objects demanding our attention.

In other words, the moment we “know” a **bodily experience**—a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste or a touch—it is already over in the sense that the body (*rūpa*) is first

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<sup>1</sup> On ecstasy and enstasy, see SD 60.1f (4.2.3). On mental correlates of dhyana, see M R Hagerty, J Isaacs, L Brasington, L Shupe, E E Fetz & S C Cramer, “Case study of ecstatic meditation: fMRI and EEG evidence of self-stimulating a reward system,” *Neural Plasticity* art ID 653572 **2013** pp13. [[Hindawi](#)]. Brief survey: N Webb, “The neurobiology of bliss—sacred and profane,” *Scientific American* 12 July **2011**. See also Piya Tan, “Orgasm, ecstasy, enstasy and renunciation,” R645 *Revisioning Buddhism* 251, 2020: <http://dharmafarer.org>. L B Smith, “The distinctive relationship between sexual ecstasy and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered clergy of the Church of England: integrating transpersonal awareness with an interpretative phenomenological analysis,” PhD thesis Liverpool John Moores Univ, **2018**. All ext links 7 Oct 2023.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion, see *Samatha & Vipassanā*, SD 41.1.

“conscious” of it (that is, we “sense” it) (*viñānāti*), and then we feel it (*vedayati*). When we follow it further, we perceive it (*saññānāti*); that is, we relate it to a memory (*sati*) of a past experience: we perceive it as being *pleasant*, *unpleasant* or *neutral*.

At this point, when we are mindful, our **samatha** training will habituate us to take the feeling just as it is, “letting it come, letting it go.” In other words, we stop the cognitive process here: we do not go on to project (*abhisankharoti*) formations of liking, disliking or ignoring our experience: this “stopping” is what samatha does. Then our mind goes on to be *calm and clear*; or, if we are meditating, we direct our attention to the meditation object. When we habitually do this, we learn to be more mentally focused, and in due course attain samadhi (concentration), even dhyana (*jhāna*) when we are fully free from the sense-activities.

For most non-meditators or distracted meditators, we tend to be curious about the feelings that are *pleasant* or that are *unpleasant*. We react to them as we have done in the past: we show *greed* or *lust* for the thought of the pleasant, or show *hatred* or *anger* to the thought of the unpleasant. Notice the word “the thought.” We are reacting to the thought of it; the feeling is already gone but we keep holding it in our memory. This is delusion; we have fallen for something that is not there. This process is karmically potent: we form karma as a result; hence, it is called “formations” (*sankhārā*).

**1.1.2.6** Often we unmindfully follow our thoughts and get caught up with running after the pleasant, hating the unpleasant, and ignoring what seems neither. The first habituates us to be lustful, the second makes us hateful, and the third feeds our ignorance. All this works unconsciously: we have become puppets and robots at the command of our **latent tendencies** (*anusaya*) of lust, aversion and ignorance.

In fact, if we are still unawakened, this is where we are right now, it is still not too late to correct the situation. We **review** our thoughts behind our habitual actions in the manner we have done under the samatha practice [1.1.2.4]. We begin to understand how we are tricked by our delusion and ignorance. By telling ourself about *the true nature* of the sense-objects—the pleasant, the unpleasant and the neutral—we understand how they trick us. This is our **insight knowledge**, which is still rudimentary but will become a great mental tool and source of happiness as we become more skilled in mind-mastering.

We can now see how **samatha** works at “stopping” our reactive habits towards unwholesome sense-objects, and how **vipassanā** works at “seeing” through the tricks of our perception of the past (memory) and the future (desire and hope). We stay in the present and notice how events just move on before us, and live joyfully with this understanding. Now we can see how samatha and vipassana work together to keep our mind calm and clear.

R846 Inspiration 496  
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