

How to direct the mind to samadhi

Excerpt from SD 33.1a Samādhi: the significance of mental stillness in early Buddhism.

The purpose of directed cultivation (*paṇidhāya bhāvanā*) is clearly that of overcoming the 5 mental hindrances. One of the most common and effective ways of freeing the mind from the hindrances is to make it *happy*, or simply to *be* happy. The method recommended by the Buddha here is that of turning the mind to an “inspiring sign” (*pasādaniya nimitta*),¹ as explained in **the Bhikkhuṇī Vāsaka Sutta** (S 47.10), thus:

Here, Ānanda, a monk dwells exertive, clearly comprehending, mindful, observing ... **the 4 satipatthanas**,²...putting away covetousness and displeasure in the world.

While he is observing the body in the body, ...

... observing feelings in the feelings, ...

... observing the mind in the mind, ...

... observing dharmas in the dharmas, there arises in him, based on the body, either a fever in the body or sluggishness in the mind, or the mind is distracted outwardly.³

That monk, Ānanda, should then direct his mind towards some inspiring sign.⁴ When he directs his mind towards an inspiring sign, gladness arises.

When he is gladdened, zest arises.

When the mind is zestful, the body becomes tranquil.

When the body is tranquil, he feels joy [happiness].

The mind of the joyful [happy] becomes concentrated.

He reflects thus: “The purpose for the sake of which I have directed my mind has been achieved. Let me now withdraw it.”⁵

So he withdraws the mind and he neither applies nor sustains thought.⁶

He understands: “Without initial application and sustained application, internally mindful, I am joyful [happy].”⁷

¹ Also called “inspiring meditations.” The 6 inspiring meditation, or 6 bases of recollection (*cha anussati-t,ṭhāna*), are the recollections on (1) the Buddha, (2) the Dharma, (3) the Sangha, (4) moral virtue, (5) charity, and (6) the devas. (A 6.26/3:314 f), SD 15.6. See also **Mental cultivation**, SD 5, & **Nimitta**, SD 19.7 (4.6.3(2)). On cultivation of lovingkindness, see **Karaṇīya Metta S** (Khp 9 = Sn 1.8), SD 38.3.

² Here “satipatthana” is the anglicized form of *sati’paṭṭhāna*. When anglicizing such Pali terms, all diacritics should be omitted. In other words, the new word should appear English, but the reading (the sound) of it should be as native as possible, or should at least be intelligible to the audience.

³ “There arises in him...distracted outwardly,” *tassa kāye kāyānupassino viharato kay’ārammaṇo vā uppajjati kāyasmim̐ pariāho cetaso vā līnattam̐ bahiddhā vā cittam̐ vikkhipati*.

⁴ *Ten’ānanda bhikkhunā kismiñ cid eva pasādaniye nimitte cittam̐ paṇidahitabbar̐m*. Comy: A fever of defilement (*kilesa, pariāha*) arises, having made the body its basis (*ārammaṇa*). When this happens, we should not allow ourselves to be excited by the it but should then direct our minds to some inspiring sign, ie, we should direct the meditating mind (*kammaṭṭhāna, citta*) to some object that inspires faith, such as the Buddha, etc (SA 3:205).

⁵ That is, redirect it to the original meditation object. (SA 3:206)

⁶ Comy explains that ‘without thinking and pondering’ (*na ca vitakketi na ca vicāreti*) means that he is ‘without defiled thinking, without defiled pondering’ (*kilesa, vitakkaṃ na vitakketi kilesa, vicāraṃ na vicāreti*) (SA 3:206). However, as Bodhi has noted, the absence of thinking (*vitakka*) and pondering (*vicāra*) seems to indicate that he has reached the second dhyana (S:B 1922 n147).

⁷ Comy explains this to mean that he is “without defiled initial application, without defiled sustained application” (SA 3:206). However, the forsaking of initial application and sustained application here implies that one

In this way, Ānanda, there is **directed cultivation** (*paṇidhāya bhāvanā*).
(S 47.10,7/5:154-156), SD 24.2⁸

During our meditation, when we are distracted or unable to keep our focus on the meditation object, we should direct our attention to a meditation that inspires and energizes us, such as recollecting the qualities of one of the 3 jewels, or visualizing a joyful time we had keeping the precepts or making offerings to some virtuous or needy persons, or envisioning the wonderful qualities of devas (the moral virtues they accumulated that brought them to their state), or cultivating lovingkindness. As soon as we gain a joyful stillness, stay with it for a while, and then gently return to the main practice.

2.1.3 “Undirected” cultivation

2.1.3.1 “Undirected” cultivation (*apaṇidhāya bhāvanā*) usually refers to our meditation when the sign (*nimitta*) begins to appear. From this moment onward, there is *nothing to do* except to let samadhi arise. This is the only way that it can sublimate or turn into dhyana.⁹ It is somewhat like boiling water: first, we make sure that the kettle is clean and empty, and then we fill it up just enough with water. Then we put the kettle on a stove, turn on the fire, and leave it there to boil. There is nothing we can do to make the water boil faster, except making sure the fire is not disturbed by any gust or does not go out. In time, the water will boil, as if of its own accord.

When the mind is totally free from bodily and mental distractions, it reaches full concentration. With just a gentle attention or subtle thought (this is “initial application” or *vitakka*), we keep the mind on the beautiful stillness, and just let it be there (this is “sustained application” or *vicāra*). These are our last thoughts, as it were, because zest and bliss (*pīti, sukha*) will pervade our mind that is fully focused in the present moment of the joyful stillness. This is the first dhyana.

2.1.3.2 Even after we have attained this profoundly blissful state of the first dhyana, advises **the Pabbateyya Gāvī Sutta** (A 9.35), we must master it well before going on to the next stage.¹⁰ For this reason, experienced meditation teachers often advise the beginner, on attaining dhyana, to keep it up for a sustained period, and not to spend too much time discerning them.¹¹

In this connection, there are **the fivefold mastery** (*pañca vāsī*) that we must attain, namely:

- (1) mastery in adverting *āvajjanā, vasī* (directing it into dhyana)

has reached the 2nd dhyanas: see **Danta, bhūmi S** (M 126), where the 4 satipatthanas lead to the 1st dhyanas, and the satipatthana is to be practised without initial application or sustained application, leading as such to the 2nd dhyanas (M 126.25/3:136).

⁸ On directed cultivation, further see SD 24.2 (1.2). On satipatthana with dhyana, see **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10), SD 13.1 (4.3b).

⁹ On the practice how to let dhyana arise at this point, see **Nimitta**, SD 19.7 (4).

¹⁰ A 9.35/4:418-422 @ SD 24.3.

¹¹ See eg Pa Auk Sayadaw 1999:18, 2003:55.

- (2) mastery in attaining *samāpajjanā,vasī* (attaining dhyana quickly, whenever we wish to)
 (3) mastery in resolving *adhiṭṭhāna,vasī* (staying in dhyana predetermined duration)
 (4) mastery in emerging *vuṭṭhāna,vasī* (easily emerge at the appointed time)
 (5) mastery in reviewing *paccavekkhaṇā vasī* (discern the dhyana-factors¹² after emerging)

(Pm 1.451-460/1:97-100; Vism 4.131/154, 23.27/704)

2.1.3.3 If we fail to master these skills, we would be mentally stuck, losing what we have attained, and unable to proceed. As such, we should prepare well for this inner journey, and know fully well what *not* to do so that we let the mind naturally blossom into dhyana.¹³ This excerpt from **the Pabbateyya Gāvī Sutta** gives us a good idea regarding how dhyana “effortlessly,” as it were:

[The 1st dhyana] Even so, bhikshus, here, a certain monk,¹⁴ wise, experienced, pasture-wise [knowing the right conditions], skillful, being quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome mental states, reaches and dwells in the **1st dhyana**, accompanied by initial application and sustained application, accompanied by zest and happiness, born of solitude.¹⁵

He enjoys,¹⁶ cultivates, continuously works on the sign, focuses on it, so that it is well focused.¹⁷

[The 2nd dhyana] Then, it occurs to him, “What now, if, with the stilling of initial application and sustained application, by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, I attain and dwell in **the 2nd dhyana**, free from initial application and sustained application, accompanied by zest and happiness born of concentration?”¹⁸

Without distracting himself, by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, he attains and dwells in the second dhyana, free from initial application and sustained application, accompanied by zest and happiness born of concentration.¹⁹

¹² On dhyana-factors (*jhān’āṅga*), see **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (6).

¹³ See “How to attain dhyana,” **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 (8.7).

¹⁴ That is, a meditator.

¹⁵ *Evam eva kho bhikkhave idh’ekacco bhikkhu paṇḍito vyatto khettaññū kusalo vivicc’eva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekajaṃ pīti,sukhaṃ paṭhamam jhānam upasampajja viharitum.* Elsewhere, eg **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2.75b/1:73), this line follows: “He permeates and pervades, floods and fills this very body [the mental body, Vism 4.175/169] with the zest and happiness born of solitude,” see SD 8.10. On the omission of “one-pointedness of mind” (*cittassa ek’aggatā*) and “concentration” (*samādhi*) here, see **The layman and dhyana**, SD 8.5.

¹⁶ *Āsevati*, which has a broad sense of “associating,” thus “to visit, frequent; practise; follow (eg *maggam*); repeat, develop; cultivate; enjoy; often used with *bhaveti* and *bahulī, karoti* (CPD). I render *asevati* here as “he enjoys” as it vitally involves *joy* for the meditation to succeed. On the importance of joy in meditation, see **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 (14)3.

¹⁷ *So taṃ nimittam āsevati bhāveti bahulī, karoti svādhiṭṭhitam adhiṭṭhāti.*

¹⁸ The 2nd dhyana is known as “the noble silence” (*ariya, tuñhī, bhāva*) because within it initial application and sustained application (thinking and discursion, *vitakka, vicāra*) cease, and with their cessation, speech cannot occur (S 2:273); cf S 4:293 where *vitakka* and *vicāra* are called verbal formation (*vacī, saṅkhāra*), the mental factors responsible for speech. In *Ariya, pariyesanā S* (M 1:161), the Buddha exhorts the monks when assembled to “either speak on the Dharma or observe the noble silence” (ie either talk Dharma or meditate).

¹⁹ Elsewhere, eg **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2.77/1:74 f), this line follows: “He permeates and pervades, floods and fills this very body with the zest and happiness born of concentration,” see SD 8.10.

*He enjoys, cultivates, continuously works on the sign, focuses on it, so that it is well focused.*²⁰

[The 3rd dhyana] Then, it occurs to him, “What now, if, with the fading away of zest, [420] I remain equanimous, mindful and clearly knowing, and experience happiness with the body, I attain and dwell in **the 3rd dhyana**, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Happily he dwells in equanimity and mindfulness?’”

Without distracting himself, he, with the fading away of zest, remain equanimous, mindful and clearly knowing, and experience happiness with the body, attains and dwells in the third dhyana, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Happily he dwells in equanimity and mindfulness.’²¹

He enjoys, cultivates, continuously works on the sign, focuses on it, so that it is well focused.

[The 4th dhyana] Then it occurs to him, “What now, if, with the letting go of pleasure and of pain—and with the earlier ending of happiness and suffering—I attain and dwell in **the 4th dhyana**, that is neither painful nor pleasant, and with mindfulness fully purified by equanimity?”

Without distracting himself, he, with the letting go of pleasure and of pain, attains and dwells in the fourth dhyana, that is neither painful nor pleasant, and with mindfulness fully purified by equanimity.²²

He enjoys, cultivates, continuously works on the sign, focuses on it, so that it is well focused.

(A 9.35,2.2/4:419), SD 24.3

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²⁰ *Tassa evaṃ hoti ‘yan nūnāhaṃ vitakka,vicāraṃ vūpasamā ajjhataṃ sampasādanṃ cetaso ekodi,bhāvaṃ avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ samādhijaṃ pīti,sukhaṃ dutiyaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja vihareyyan ti, so dutiyaṃ jhānaṃ anabhihiṃsamāno vitakka,vicārānaṃ vūpasamā...pe...dutiyaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati. So taṃ nimittaṃ āsevati bhāveti bahulī,karoti svādhiṭṭhitaṃ adhiṭṭhāti.*

²¹ Elsewhere, eg **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,79/1:75), this line follows: “He permeates and pervades, floods and fills this very body with the happiness free from zest,” see SD 8.10.

²² Elsewhere, eg **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,81/1:75), this line follows: “He sits, pervading the body with a pure, bright mind, so that there is no part of his entire body that is not pervaded by a pure, bright mind,” see SD 8.10. On the “pure, bright mind,” see **Accharā Vagga** (A 1.6.1 f): “Bhikshus, this mind is radiant (*pabhassara*), but it is defiled by defilements from outside. The uninstructed ordinary person does not understand this as it really is. As such, for him there is no personal development” (A 1.6.1 f/1:10). On reaching the 4th dhyana, the practitioner becomes directly aware of the truly and naturally pure nature of the mind. See also A:ÑB 1999 §4.