



# ***Samatha* meditation in Theravada Buddhism**

*Samatha* meditation (in Pali, or *shamatha* in Sanskrit) develops mental concentration and focus and brings about peace of mind. The word means ‘calm abiding’ and so *samatha* is sometimes called ‘tranquillity meditation’; it allows all our busy thoughts to settle of their own accord until we are able to rest spaciously, peacefully and at ease with ourselves.

The first step in *samatha* meditation is the cultivation of ‘mindfulness’, by which is meant awareness of ourselves and our state of mind. There are four main types of mindfulness practice: mindfulness of body, feelings and sensations, mind, and mental states. One simply focuses on one of these four for a short while and becomes aware of it and of how it feels. Focusing the mind in this manner has the effect of calming both the mind and the body and is a useful preliminary to other meditation practices.

One of the very first methods often taught to beginners is breathing meditation, which can be part of the mindfulness of body. The idea is to rest the mind solely on the breath and not let it get carried away by distracting thoughts and emotions. We can either just notice the breath go in and out, or count the breaths from one to ten, on the out-breath, several times over; or focus on the sensation of the air moving in and out of the nostrils. As soon as we notice that we are daydreaming, that our mind has wandered off and is thinking about something else entirely, we simply bring our focus back to the breathing and begin again.

One can replace the breath with other objects of focus: a candle flame, a flower, a picture, or a statue of the Buddha, for example. The object simply acts as a support for concentration. Gradually, thoughts slow down and we become less distracted and more centred. Imagine leaving a glass of muddy water on a table; if you don’t stir the water, the mud will gradually settle to the bottom quite naturally and the water will become clear. *Samatha* is like this: our thoughts and emotions slowly settle and the mind naturally becomes clear and undisturbed.

*Samatha* meditation can be pursued to reach much higher states of consciousness; this occurs in four stages or *jhanas* (Sanskrit *dhyanas*).

- The first *jhana* brings detachment, clarity and concentration
- In the second *jhana* one remains in stillness, rapture and joy
- The third *jhana* brings a more rarefied joy
- The fourth *jhana* is a state of clear, calm consciousness, totally peaceful and undisturbed.

*Samatha* can then lead on to various mystical states, such as the ‘Sphere of Nothingness’ and the ‘Sphere of Neither Perception nor Non-perception’. However, the Buddha was not satisfied with these states because he found that they do not lead to liberation from samsara. That is why *samatha* is always taught together with *vipassana*.

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