

## MEDITATION: CONCENTRATION AND WISDOM

### *Samādhi and Pañña*

#### Introduction to the readings for the April 24 class

Suttas 111, 52, 128, 106, 121, (optional 140)

Also 119.18-21, 43.18-20,

That one could perfect wisdom without perfecting *samādhi* – this is impossible.

AN 5.22

For one who is concentrated, there is no need to intend:

“May I know and see things as they really are!”

It is a natural law (*dhammatā*) for one with a concentrated mind to know and see things as they really are.

AN 10.2

Developing *samādhi* – the last limb of the Eightfold Path – is an important part of the practice taught by the Buddha. Over the centuries, a variety of interpretations and teachings on *samādhi* have developed, resulting in controversies over what experiences are needed to fulfill Right Concentration, the final step in the eight fold path. Different points of view also exist as to what role concentration has along the Buddhist path. One result of these controversies is that in much of the contemporary Theravada tradition there is a sharp divide between the practices of concentration and the practices of insight. In this month’s reading we will try to get an understanding of what the Buddha teaches about concentration in the Middle Length Discourses. In reading these suttas it will be particularly useful to notice the relationship between the practice of mindfulness, the arising insight and *samādhi*.

#### *Samādhi*

‘Concentration’ may not be the best translation for *samādhi* if the English word implies a particular mental function, i.e., focusing. *Samādhi* refers less to a particular mental function than it does to one’s overall mental state when the mind is concentrated, collected, composed and unified. Within the various schools of Buddhism many different states are called *samādhis*. In the Pali suttas, *samadhi* is associated with both concentration practices, as one would expect, and with mindfulness practices, which is a surprise to many. So, for example, the insight practice of observing the arising and passing of feelings, cognitions, and thoughts is called a *samādhi*. The same passage also labels the insight of seeing the impermanence of the five aggregates as a *samādhi* (AN II 45). In one passage the four foundations of mindfulness are referred to as forms of *samādhi* (AN IV 300). In MN 43.12 the four foundations of mindfulness are described as the “basis (*nimitta*) for *samadhi* .” In SN 54.13 mindfulness of breathing (*anapanasati*) is referred to as a *samādhi*.

Because so many different states are labeled as *samādhis*, it is difficult to come up with an overall definition of *samādhi* that includes them all. Buddhaghosa recognized this when he wrote,

*Samādhi* is of many sorts and has various aspects. A definition that attempts to cover it all would accomplish neither its intention nor its purpose and would, besides, lead to distraction; so we shall confine ourselves to the kind intended here by calling *samādhi* the ‘**skillful one-pointedness** (*ekaggatā*) of mind.’”

Vissudhimagga III 2

Among the many types of *samādhi*, Buddhaghosa limits himself to a large subset which he describes in detail in the *Vissudhimagga*, his compendium of Buddhist practices. For Buddhaghosa, there are two basic qualities which Buddhist forms of *samādhi* have in common. They are skillfulness and one-pointedness.

Skillfulness implies a goal or value that defines what is skillful. *Samādhi*, in the early Buddhist tradition, was not an end in itself but was clearly part of a path of liberation. At least once in each of the four main *Nikayas* Right Concentration is defined as the one-pointedness of mind supported by the other seven factors of the eightfold path (e.g., MN 117, SN 45.28, AN 7.5.2, DN 18.27). Without Right View and the other path factors, *samādhi* would not be Right *Samādhi*. Right Concentration thus includes understanding and purpose. Someone may have strong concentration but this would not be a path factor unless it included Right View and Right Intention.

In many of the Pali suttas, one-pointedness is so closely associated with being well-concentrated that *ekaggatā* and *samādhi* seem to be synonyms (e.g., MN 40.12). Nowhere in the suttas is *ekaggatā* defined. Furthermore, it is not clear whether “one-pointedness” is even an appropriate translation. The term is sometimes translated in English as ‘unification’ or ‘singleness’. How *ekaggatā* is translated and understood has been the subject of countless debates about what constitutes Right Concentration. This will be discussed in class.

*Samādhi* is most commonly defined in the suttas in terms of the four *jhanas*. For example, *samādhi indriya* or the concentration faculty of the five faculties is defined as the four *jhānas* (SN 48.10). The standard description of the path factor of Right Concentration is also defined in relation to the four *jhānas* (MN 141.31).

In the suttas the *jhānas* are presented as four distinct states of progressively strengthening states of absorption, each being deeper and more subtle than the preceding one. The list of the first four *jhānas* was at some point expanded to include four other even deeper states of concentration. In the suttas these additional four states are called the formless (*ārūpa*) or the formless bases (*arūpa ayatana*). In contrast to these deeper formless absorptions, the first four *jhānas* are called ‘form *jhānas*’ (*rupa jhāna*). In later Theravada Buddhism the formless bases were renamed the formless *jhānas* and so, it is common now-a-days to refer to the eight *jhānas*.

Controversy exists around the necessity and role *jhānas* have on the path of liberation. Among teachers who insist that *jhāna* is important and maybe even essential, there is disagreement over what actually constitutes *jhāna*. In this month’s reading we will

read some of what the Middle Length Discourses teaches about these states of concentration.

Reflection:

1. In reading what the suttas have to say about *jhāna* and in preparing for our class, please reflect on what you have heard, read or been taught about the following issues. Do you have opinions about some of these?
  - ◆ How important is concentration?
  - ◆ How important is *jhāna*?
  - ◆ What is the relationship between mindfulness and *jhāna*?
  - ◆ How does concentration lead to insight and wisdom?
  - ◆ Do you have any hesitation around becoming concentrated or about entering into deep states of absorption?
  
2. Please spend some time reviewing the standard descriptions of *jhāna* (MN119.18-21). As you reread the similes for each *jhāna* use your imagination, visualization and past experiences to feel how these similes are describing physical, embodied states.

I encourage you to memorize the descriptions of the four form *jhānas* either from MN 119.18-21 or the descriptions that lack the similes found at, for example, MN 30.13-16.

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“The cultivation of, samādhi, when developed and expanded, leads to:  
 a pleasant abiding here and now,  
 knowledge and vision,  
 mindfulness and clear-comprehension,  
 the destruction of the taints.”

DN 33.5

“When my concentrated mind was thus **purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability**, I directed it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints.”

MN 4.31

Appendix:

*Ekaggatā* (one-pointedness, unification) is derived from *eka*, which means one, single, or collected into one, and from *agga* which in this context is usually taken to mean point or tip. *Agga* also means the highest, foremost or the most excellent. *Ta* as a suffix turns a word into an abstract noun, i.e., into a state. It is easy to conclude that roots “one” and “point” plus the suffix should lead us to translate the word as ‘one-pointedness’. In the Middle Length discourses Bhikkhu Bodhi translates the word as ‘unification’. Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it sometimes as ‘singleness’ and sometime as ‘unification’.

In the important Theravada commentary called the *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidharma* (*abhidhammattha sangaha*) *ekaggatā* is described as follows,

This is the unification of the mind on its object. ... It functions as the factor which fixes the mind on its object. *Ekaggatā* has non-wandering or non-distraction as its characteristic. Its function is to conglomerate or unite the associated states. It is manifested as peace, and its proximate cause is happiness. CMofA

*II.2*

This *Abhidharma* definition says that *ekaggatā* both fixates the mind and unites it. Because of these two aspects, translating the term as one-pointedness may be misleading by being one-sided.

In some sutta passages *ekaggatā* clearly has other meanings than ‘one-pointedness’. In SN 47.4 *ekaggatā* is used to describe a mode of practicing the four foundations of mindfulness – practices not usually associated with one-pointedness. In Digha Nikaya 18.16 *ekaggatā* means something closer to “agreement”. The passage describes a group of gods who were all in agreement. If agreement means coming together around the same ‘one point’ then perhaps it is the coming together in unity which is the emphasis, not the single point.

In MN 5.32-33 the opposite of *ekaggatā* is described as *vibbhanta* which means straying or wandering. A non-wandering mind is one that is collected and settled and is able to stay focused on something.

It is possible that *ekaggatā* does not have a technically precise meaning in the suttas. As a synonym for concentration, perhaps it means something like being centered in the sense of being gathered around one point. Perhaps ‘centered’ best captures the dual sense of being both one-pointed and unified.

It is in the later Theravada commentaries and meditation manuals that *ekaggatā* came to have a precise technical meaning which reflected the changing understanding of *jhāna* that appeared in the later tradition. This change was formalized in the list of the five *jhānic* factors, the fifth being *ekaggatā*. The list of the five *jhānic* factors appears twice in the suttas (MN 43.19 and MN 111.4-10). Neither occurrence is attributed to the Buddha. And because, additionally, these two occurrences are absent in the Chinese version of the Middle Length Discourses, it is sometimes assumed that the list of *jhānic* factors was a later interpolation into the suttas.

A related word that is also used in relation to concentration practice is *ekodhi* which more closely means to ‘unify’. It comes from *eka*, again meaning one, and *uti*, meaning ‘to weave together.’ Literally, it means ‘woven into one.’ In the suttas *ekaggatā* is often presented as a precursor for *jhāna*. *Ekodhi* comes into play in the second *jhāna*.