

Calm and Insight Revisited

As we mentioned in the first week of this course, there are two great stages of Buddhist meditation: calm and insight (or *serenity* and *clarity*).

Samatha meditation

In the first stage we calm the mind, quieten it, bring it to stillness. We do this by concentrating our attention on something, allowing our mind to become *concentrated* or *absorbed*. Another aspect of this stage is the cultivation of positive emotions, specifically of goodwill or friendliness towards oneself and others (as in the *mettā bhāvanā*). With this basis of tranquility, concentration and positive emotion, we reflect on our experience in order to see or understand more clearly.

The two meditations you've learned on this course come under the heading of the first great stage – calm (or *samatha*). You need to have a thorough and deep basis in the first stage before moving on to the second, and for this reason we don't teach classical Buddhist insight meditation on this course.

Insight Meditation (*vipassana*)

However, you can reflect at the end of a meditation session. After a period of the mindfulness of breathing or *mettā bhāvanā*, if you've managed to become fairly absorbed in the practice, you can then call to mind whatever you'd like to understand or become clearer about.

For instance, let's say that you have an important decision to make, something that you've thought about a lot, perhaps discussed with friends, and so on. All the same, you still haven't managed to make a decision. Important life decisions are made at a deeper level than the conscious, conceptual mind – that's why they are hard to make. Perhaps you have a problem that you've been trying to solve for some time, and haven't succeeded. Then again, maybe you are in conflict with someone.

It's important that you reflect on the basis of some degree of tranquility, concentration and positive emotion, otherwise you'll still be merely thinking about the issue in the way you normally do – which you have probably already done many times! We often go round and round in circles when we think about problems in this way. Meditative reflection can give you another way of looking at issues, but only if you are calm, absorbed and emotionally positive.