

Last week we looked at the Perfection of ‘energy in pursuit of the good’ (*vīrya* in Sanskrit), and how that energy might best be harnessed. This week we turn our attention to the Perfection of **meditative concentration**, which is described in Sanskrit as *samādhi*.

We’ll remember, from the Buddhism Foundation course, that meditation makes up a third of the all-important **Threefold Path**, lying between ethics and wisdom in that model. There’s quite a lot we can say specifically about meditative concentration. One interesting observation Sangharakshita makes is that concentration can be seen as very closely related to happiness (that elusive state of mind that we wish for ourselves and others in the *mettā bhāvanā*!). He suggests that, when we are fully concentrated we are truly happy, and that only when we are happy can we achieve proper concentration. This implies that concentration is vitally important to our lives in general, and doesn’t only apply to our meditation in particular.

The word *samādhi* originally means the fixation of the mind on a single object. Technically, *samādhi* is seen as including both **recalling** our intended purpose and **continuity** of that purpose. However, it would be a big mistake to see this concentration coming about by forced effort. This is a point that is often misunderstood, so it needs stating clearly that *samādhi* simply can’t be achieved by trying harder. In fact, it’s probably more helpful to talk about ‘being concentrated’ than ‘concentrating’. What is needed to achieve this has more to do with deep relaxation, perhaps we might even say ‘surrender’ to the meditation. Sometimes *samādhi* is translated as ‘absorption’, which perhaps better reflects this sense. If we misunderstand this point, and see our meditation practice as just another goal-oriented effort, it’s very unlikely that we’ll make any progress – in fact, even talking about ‘progress’ in this context could itself be unhelpful.

We can say that, when our bodies and minds begin to calm during meditation, our various energies become more **integrated**. This is different from our normal psychological situation, in which our energies are markedly divided between the different ‘compartments’ that, in a sense, make up our lives. To give quite a strong example of this, you might imagine the experience of finding yourself, at your birthday party, with a random selection of people from quite different aspects of your life – for example, a family member, a neighbour and a colleague. We might recognise that, in this situation, we’re used to behaving quite differently in these different contexts – almost, in a sense, being a number of different people. Although this division of our selves is very normal and socially necessary, it can also result in our being uncertain who we actually are. For this reason, integration has a very important place in the Buddhist path – whether through practising meditations like the

mindfulness of breathing, or by various practices outside of meditation that have an integrating effect.

This type of integration is sometimes described as **horizontal**; it begins to loosen the negative effects of the hindrances (which we've already described last week). This involves a release of psychological tension, which is why we may have a strong experience of energy becoming newly available.

The second type of integration is known as **vertical** – this involves 'peeling away the layers' to reveal deeper aspects of ourselves. As Kamalashila says in his book 'Buddhist Meditation', "we are getting into contact with our heights and our depths – we are discovering our heavens and our hells". People who experience this sort of change often describe long-forgotten but significant experiences 'coming up' unexpectedly in their meditation.

Traditionally, Buddhist meditation is sometimes described in terms of two stages or aspects, referred to in Sanskrit, respectively, as *śamatha* and *vipaśyana*. Of these, *śamatha* describes meditative practices that lead to a state of relaxation and openness. An example of this sort of meditation is the familiar Mindfulness of Breathing practice, while another is 'just sitting', a very simple practice in which we relax as profoundly as possible whilst staying aware of, and open to, the full ranges of direct experience that enter our sense organs (including, for this purpose, our mind). *Vipaśyana* is the spontaneous (i.e. not forced) arising of degrees of insight in the space created by *śamatha*. Although the two aspects of meditative concentration aren't really separate we can still say, for practical purposes, that *śamatha* is always the necessary forerunner of *vipaśyana*.

What do we mean when we talk in this way, of insight arising in the space created in our meditation? This, after all, is a very big question! One way we can try to answer it is to say that insight is the opposite of delusion and, as we already know, we're almost always deluded, at least to some extent. We can also say that we're deluded because we're out of touch with reality. We live in a world that's real enough, but are our minds normally fully focused on it? Buddhism would say, far from it – instead we create for ourselves, within our minds, an incredibly complex private world made up of our interpretations of the raw data that enters our awareness, our likes and dislikes, the habitual tendencies that we've built up ever since early childhood, and (of course) our tightly held views about what 'should' and 'shouldn't' be happening. This labyrinthine 'mind-made world' is the very source of our delusion and therefore of our suffering. As Buddhists, we try to find our way out of this mind-made prison. Meditative concentration (in its *śamatha* aspect) has the ability to still the 'noise' of the mind-made world and instead, as we might say, create some precious stillness or space. Within this space, the *vipaśyana* aspect of meditative concentration may then reveal glimpses of the real, 'natural' world, in other words Reality itself. Meditation isn't the only tool available to us to cut through our deep delusion (after all, it's one of six Perfections of the *bodhisattva*!), but it's important to have a clear idea of why it occupies the very important place in Buddhist practice that it does.