

The Path of Śamatha
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The Nine Steps to Attentional Balance

1. Directed attention
 - What is achieved: One is able to direct the attention to the chosen object
 - The power by which that is achieved: Learning the instructions
 - What problems persist: There is no attentional continuity on the object
 - Attentional imbalances: Coarse excitation
 - The type of mental engagement: Focused
 - The quality of the experience: Movement
 - The flow of involuntary thought is like a cascading waterfall

2. Continuous attention
 - What is achieved: Attentional continuity on the chosen object up to a minute
 - The power by which that is achieved: Thinking about the practice
 - What problems persist: Most of the time the attention is not on the object
 - Attentional imbalances: Coarse excitation
 - The type of mental engagement: Focused
 - The quality of the experience: Movement
 - The flow of involuntary thought is like a cascading waterfall

3. Resurgent attention
 - What is achieved: Swift recovery of distracted attention, mostly on the object
 - The power by which that is achieved: Mindfulness
 - What problems persist: One still forgets the object entirely for brief periods
 - Attentional imbalances: Coarse excitation
 - The type of mental engagement: Interrupted
 - The quality of the experience: Movement
 - The flow of involuntary thought is like a cascading waterfall

4. Close attention
 - What is achieved: One no longer completely forgets the chosen object
 - The power by which that is achieved: Mindfulness, which is now strong
 - What problems persist: Some degree of complacency concerning samādhi
 - Attentional imbalances: Coarse laxity and medium excitation
 - The type of mental engagement: Interrupted
 - The quality of the experience: Achievement
 - Involuntary thoughts are like river quickly flowing through a gorge

5. Subdued attention
 - What is achieved: One takes satisfaction in *samādhi*
 - The power by which that is achieved: Introspection
 - What problems persist: Some resistance to *samādhi*
 - Attentional imbalances: Medium laxity and medium excitation
 - The type of mental engagement: Interrupted
 - The quality of the experience: Achievement
 - Involuntary thoughts are like river quickly flowing through a gorge

6. Pacified attention
 - What is achieved: No resistance to training the attention
 - The power by which that is achieved: Introspection
 - What problems persist: Desire, depression, lethargy, and drowsiness
 - Attentional imbalances: Medium laxity and subtle excitation
 - The type of mental engagement: Interrupted
 - The quality of the experience: Achievement
 - Involuntary thoughts are like a river slowly flowing through a valley

7. Fully pacified attention
 - What is achieved: Pacification of attachment, melancholy, and lethargy
 - The power by which that is achieved: Enthusiasm
 - What problems persist: Subtle imbalances of the attention, swiftly rectified
 - Attentional imbalances: Subtle laxity and excitation
 - The type of mental engagement: Interrupted
 - The quality of the experience: Familiarity
 - Involuntary thoughts are like a river slowly flowing through a valley

8. Single-pointed attention
 - What is achieved: *Samādhi* is long sustained without any excitation or laxity
 - The power by which that is achieved: Enthusiasm
 - What problems persist: It still takes effort to ward off excitation and laxity
 - Attentional imbalances: Latent impulses for subtle excitation and laxity
 - The type of mental engagement: Uninterrupted
 - The quality of the experience: Stillness
 - The conceptually discursive mind is calm like an ocean unmoved by waves

9. Attentional balance
 - What is achieved: Flawless *samādhi* is long sustained effortlessly
 - The power by which that is achieved: Familiarity
 - What problems persist: Attentional imbalances may recur in the future
 - Attentional imbalances: The causes of those imbalances are still latent
 - The type of mental engagement: Effortless
 - The quality of the experience: Perfection

- The conceptually discursive mind is still like Mount Meru, King of Mountains
- Coarse excitation: The attention completely disengages from the meditative object. Medium excitation: Involuntary thoughts occupy the center of attention, while the meditative object is displaced to the periphery. Subtle excitation: The meditative object remains at the center of attention, but involuntary thoughts emerge at the periphery of attention.
- Coarse laxity: The attention mostly disengages from the object due to insufficient vividness. Medium laxity: The object appears, but not with much vividness. Subtle laxity: The object appears vividly, but the attention is slightly slack.
- The terms for the nine attentional states are listed as a set of nine verbs in the Tibetan version of the *Mahāsūnyatā Mahāsūtra*, which is considered to be a Mūlasarvāstivāda redaction parallel to the Pāli *Mahāsuññatā Sutta*. This list of nine verbs is likely the source for the nine attentional states as a developmental stage model for śamatha as it's found in the Yogācāra commentarial literature. Cf. Peter Skilling, *Mahāsūtras: Great Discourses of the Buddha*, Volume II. (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1997), p. 381.
 - Nine stages in *Mahāsūnyatā Mahāsūtra*
 1. Attention directed solely inwards (*sems nang kho nar bzhag*)
 2. Authentic attention (*yang dag par bzhag*)
 3. Concerted attention (*bsdus te bzhag*)
 4. Close attention (*nye bar bzhag*)
 5. Subdued attention (*dul bar byas*)
 6. Pacified attention (*zhi bar byas*)
 7. Fully pacified attention (*nye bar zhi bar byas*)
 8. Single-pointed attention (*rgyud gcig tu byas*)
 9. Concentrated attention (*ting nge 'dzin du byas*)
 - Four stages in *Mahāsuññatā Sutta*
 1. Attention directed solely inwards
 2. Pacified attention
 3. Single-pointed attention
 4. Concentrated attention

Prerequisites for achieving Śamatha

- A supportive environment
 - food, clothing and so on are easily obtained, i.e. with no problem
 - you are not disturbed by people, carnivorous animals and so on
 - the location is pleasant, that is, it is not inhabited by enemies, etc.
 - the land is good, that is, it does not make you ill
 - you have good companions, i.e. their ethical discipline and views are similar to your own
 - a location having few people around during the daytime and little noise at night

- Having few desires
- Contentment
- Having few concerns and activities
- Pure ethical discipline
- Completely dispensing with rumination involving desire and so on

The Achievement of Śamatha (Threshold to the First Dhyāna)

- Buddha: “When one perceives the disappearance of the five obscurations in oneself, it is as if one were freed from debt, from sickness, from bonds, from slavery, from the perils of the desert. And when one knows that these five obscurations have left one, gladness arises in one, from gladness comes delight, from the delight in the mind one’s body is tranquilized, with the tranquil body one feels well-being, and with well-being one’s mind is concentrated. Being thus detached from hedonic craving, detached from unwholesome states, one enters and remains in the first jhāna, which is imbued with coarse investigation and subtle analysis, born of detachment, filled with joy and well-being. And with this joy and well-being born of detachment, one so suffuses, drenches, fills, and irradiates one’s body that there is no spot in one’s entire body that is untouched by this joy and well-being born of detachment.” *Dīgha Nikāya* I 74-75.
- *Mahāsūnyatā-nama-mahāsūtra*: “Ānanda, when a bhikṣu directs his mind solely inwards, truly places it, concertedly places it, closely places it, subdues it, pacifies it, fully pacifies it, focuses it in a single flow, and places it in samādhi, for that bhikṣu joy and well-being arising from solitude manifestly moisten, thoroughly moisten, totally satisfy, and totally permeate the body. There is nowhere in his entire body that is not pervaded by the joy and well-being arising from solitude, not even the slightest bit.”
- Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*:
 - “Now, concentration is of two kinds, that is to say, access concentration and absorption concentration: the mind becomes concentrated in two ways, that is, on the plane of access and on the plane of obtainment. Herein, the mind becomes concentrated on the plane of access by the abandonment of the obscurations, and on the plane of obtainment by the manifestation of the jhāna factors.” IV, 32
 - “The difference between the two kinds of concentration is this. The factors are not strong in access. It is because they are not strong that when access has arisen, the mind now makes the sign its object and now re-enters the bhavaṅga, just as when a young child is lifted up and stood on its feet, it repeatedly falls down on the ground. But the factors are strong in absorption. It is because they are strong that when absorption concentration has arisen, the mind, having once interrupted the flow of the bhavaṅga, carries on with a stream of wholesome impulsion for a whole night and a whole day, just as a healthy man, after rising from his seat,

- could stand a whole day.” IV, 33
- When a bhikkhu enters meditation without [first] completely suppressing lust by reviewing the dangers in sense desires, etc., and without [first] completely calming bodily dysfunction by calming the body, and without [first] completely removing laxity and dullness by bringing to mind the elements of initiative, etc., and without [first] completely abolishing excitation and anxiety by bringing to mind the sign of samatha, etc., and without [first] completely purifying his mind of other states that obstruct concentration, then that bhikkhu soon comes out of that meditation again, like a bee that has gone into an unpurified hive, like a king who has gone into an unclean park. IV, 124
 - But when he enters upon meditation after [first] completely purifying his mind of states that obstruct concentration, then he remains in the attainment even for a whole day, like a bee that has gone into a completely purified hive, like a king who has gone into a perfectly clean park. IV, 125
 - *Samādhinirmocanasūtra*: “Lord, when a Bodhisattva directs his attention inwards, with the mind focused upon the mind, as long as physical pliancy (*praśrabdhi*) and mental pliancy are not achieved, what is that mental activity called? Maitreya, this is not śamatha. It is said to be associated with an aspiration that is a facsimile of śamatha.”
 - Asaṅga (*Śrāvakabhūmi*):
 - “The portent of the proximate occurrence of gross, easily discernible single-pointedness of mind and of mental and physical pliancy is a sensation of heaviness on the top of the head; but this is not a harmful symptom. As soon as this happens, mental dysfunction, which is included among the mental afflictions that obstruct delight in eliminating [the afflictions], is itself eliminated; and mental fitness and mental pliancy arise due to this antidote. Due to its occurrence, vital energies of the great elements that are conducive to the arising of physical pliancy course through the body. Because of their movement, one is freed of physical dysfunction affiliated with mental afflictions that obstruct delight in meditation; and it seems as if the entire body were filled with physical pliancy as the antidote for that. When that first arises, having taken delight in the extraordinary mental joy in superb mental engagement, there is supreme mental pleasure in accompanying the meditative object. At that time that is called the mind. That which arises first immediately thereafter is the force of pliancy, which incrementally becomes subtler. Pliancy occurs in the body, following it like a shadow. The extraordinary mental joy is relinquished, the mind having a serene aspect becomes stabilized with *śamatha* with respect to the meditative object.”
 - Mahāsiddha Ratnākaraśānti (c. 1000 CE) (*Prajñāpāramitopadeśa*): “Here, the Bodhisattva, dwelling alone in a solitary place, brings to mind his intended object. Ridding himself of mental conversation, he repeatedly brings to mind the actual

- nature of the mind as it appears in that way. So long as physical and mental pliancy do not arise, this is a mental engagement that is a facsimile of *śamatha*; but when they do arise, that is *śamatha*.
- Asaṅga (*Śrāvakabhūmi*): “The entire continuum and flow of your attention, focused in single-pointedness and internally focused in the *śamatha* of the mind, should sequentially be signless, devoid of ideation, and calm. Direct your attention in that way.... due to the absence of mindfulness and of mentation, when that object is dissolved and removed, the mind is placed in the absence of appearances.”
 - Tsongkhapa (*Medium Exposition of the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*): “Here, *signs* refer to the ten signs of the five objects including visual form, of the three poisons, of male and of female. This is the way they vanish: at first a variety of signs of the objects such as visual forms appear, and as soon as they appear they naturally subside and are purified. Finally, when you settle in meditative equipoise, only the aspects of the sheer awareness, clarity, and vivid joy of the mind appear, without the appearance of the signs of visual form, sound, and so on.”
 - Wangchuk Dorjé, the Ninth Karmapa (1556–1603) (*The Ocean of Definitive Meaning*): “The best indicator of having firm *śamatha* is that one cannot sense
 - Tsongkhapa (*The Medium Exposition of the Stages of the Path*):
 - “Well then, what plane incorporates the *samādhi* in which pliancy has not yet arisen? That *samādhi* is included in the plane of the desire realm.”
 - “All *samādhis* prior to the achievement of the *samādhi* of the threshold [to the first dhyāna] are single-pointed attention of the desire realm. So judging by the great treatises, there seem to be very few who achieve even *śamatha*.”
 - Asaṅga (*Abhidharmasamuccaya*): “What is pliancy? Due to the cessation of the continuum of dysfunctions of the body and mind, this is a fitness of the body and mind, having the function of dispelling all obstructions. The dysfunctions of the body and mind are the unfitness of the body and mind for voluntarily pursuing virtuous deeds.”
 - “Thus, the master Sthiramati (6th c.) states: ‘The fitness of the body is that from which buoyancy and lightness arise in one’s physical actions. The fitness of the mind is the cause of the cheerfulness and lightness of the mind that participates in genuine mental engagement. If one is endowed with this transformative quality that arises from the mind, one engages with the meditative object without resistance. Therefore, this is called the *fitness of the mind*.’”
 - Wangchuk Dorjé, the Ninth Karmapa (1556–1603) (*The Ocean of Definitive Meaning*): “Thus, due to the experiences of bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality, craving for the allures of the desire realm subsides, there is no need to eat food, and the movements of the respiration are not sensed. Great joy arises with the thought, ‘Now *this* is what the Buddha had in mind,’ and there

comes great certainty in thinking of your guru as a buddha. While tainted extrasensory perception, paranormal abilities and so on may also come up, do not obsess over them. If this experience of single-pointedness is cultivated for a year, afterwards, realization will be gained, and it will stabilize. The best indicator of having firm *śamatha* is that one cannot sense movements of the breath or body, and cannot even sense whether they are there; the middling indicator is that they are sensed only if examined; and the lowest indicator is that one is not bothered by the movements of the breath or the weight of the body.”

- *The Vajra Essence*: “If you get caught up in bliss, this will cast you into the desire realm; if you get caught up in luminosity, this will propel you into the form realm; and if you get caught up in nonconceptuality, this will launch you to the peak of mundane existence. Therefore, understand that while these are indispensable signs of progress for individuals entering the path, it is a mistake to get caught up in them indefinitely.

“This is called ordinary *śamatha* of the path, and if you achieve stability in it for a long time, you will have achieved the critical feature of stability in your mindstream. However, know that among unrefined people in this degenerate era, very few appear to achieve more than fleeting stability.”

Trait Effects of Having Achieved Śamatha

- Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) (*The Medium Exposition of the Stages of the Path*):
 - “Moreover, in post-meditative experience the occurrence of the ideation of afflictions such as hatred is also utterly different than before, being feeble and incapable of being very prolonged. That phase is called *the phase of complete pacification*. The sense of clarity is so great that you feel that you could count the atoms of the pillars and walls of your house; and due to deep attentional stability, sleep does not occur as it did prior to achieving *samādhi*. Rather, you feel as if your sleep was suffused with *samādhi*, and many pure dream appearances take place.”
 - “For the most part, the five obscurations, including hedonic craving and dullness, do not occur.”
 - “When one rises from meditative equipoise, one still possesses some degree of physical and mental pliancy.”
- Karma Chagmé (1613-1678) (*Naked Awareness*): “By cultivating that meditation for a long while, your mind will turn away from the eight mundane concerns, you will get rid of outer and inner parasites, and you will be able to display supernormal powers such as meditative manipulation and domination of the elements and so forth. When that happens, the qualities of [the yoga of] single-pointedness have arisen.”
- Due to bodily fitness, there is no feeling of physical heaviness or discomfort, the spine becomes straight like a golden pillar, and the body feels blissful as if it were bathed with warm milk.

- Due to mental fitness, you are now fully in control of the mind, so you are virtually free of sadness and grief and continuously experience a state of wellbeing.
- The fitness of the body and mind is coarse at first, but then becomes subtle, which is superior, for you are now perfectly prepared for more advanced levels of contemplative training.

The Importance of Achieving Śamatha

- Buddha: “I thought of a time when my Sakyan father was working and I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree: quite secluded from sensual desires, disengaged from unwholesome things I had entered upon and abode in the first *dhyāna*, which is accompanied by coarse and precise investigation, with well-being and bliss born of seclusion. I thought: ‘Might that be the way to enlightenment?’ Then, following that memory, there came the recognition that this was the way to enlightenment.”
- *Samḍhinirmocanasūtra*: “Maitreya, know that all mundane and supramundane virtuous qualities of Śrāvakas, or of Bodhisattvas, or Tathāgatas, are the result of śamatha and vipaśyanā.”
- Aśvaghōṣa (c. 80 – c. 150 CE) (*Praise in Honor of One Worthy of Honor*) (*Varṇāhavarṇa*): “Those opposed to your teaching are blinded by delusion. Even after venturing to the peak of cyclic existence, suffering occurs again and again, and samsāra is maintained. Those who follow your Dharma—even if they do not achieve the actual state of dhyāna—turn away from mundane existence, while under the steady gaze of the eyes of Māra.”
- Atīśa (982 - 1054 CE) (*Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*):

“Just as a bird with undeveloped wings
Cannot fly in the sky,
Those without the power of extrasensory perception
Cannot work for the good of living beings.” (vs. 35)

The merit gained in a single day
By someone with extrasensory perception
Cannot be gained even in a hundred lifetimes
By one without extrasensory perception. (vs. 36)

Without the achievement of *śamatha*
Extrasensory perception will not arise.
Therefore, make repeated effort
To accomplish *śamatha*. (vs. 38)

As long as the conditions for *śamatha* are incomplete,
Samādhi will not be accomplished
Even if you meditate diligently

For a thousand years. (vs. 39)

When a contemplative has achieved *śamatha*
 Extrasensory perception will also be realized.
 But if one does not cultivate the Perfection of Wisdom,
 One's obscurations will not come to an end." (vs. 41)

- The Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorjé (1284–1339) (*The Great Instructions*)
 - Single-pointedness occurs when a contemplative focuses his experience, without scattering away from the immaculate, vivid clarity and non-conceptuality of the mind, and remains single-pointedly in the stream of unified *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*.
 - The small stage of the yoga of single-pointedness correlates with the Mahāyana Path of Accumulation, the first of the five paths culminating in perfect enlightenment.
- Tsongkhapa (*The Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path*):
 - “Therefore, the *śamatha* that serves as the basis for *vipaśyanā* by which one achieves the ārya paths of all stream-enterers and once-returners...is the threshold to the first *dhyāna*.”
 - “Furthermore, yogis of either the Mahāyāna or the Hīnayāna must also achieve this *śamādhī*; and even among the Mahāyāna practitioners, all yogis of both the Mantrayāna and Paramitāyāna must also achieve *śamatha*. So this *śamatha* is extremely important as the basis for proceeding along the paths of all yogis.”
- Tselé Natsok Rangdröl (b. 1608) (*The Lamp of Mahāmudrā*): “One-pointedness, the first yoga of Mahāmudrā, has three levels: small, medium and great. One-pointedness, for the most part, consists of *śamatha* and the gradual progression through the stages of *śamatha* with support, without support, and finally to the *śamatha* that delights the tathāgatas. During that process, grasping gradually diminishes.”
- From the Autobiography of *Shabkar* Tsokdruk Rangdröl (1781-1851):

“The distance covered by a great ship
 Pulled on land by a hundred men for a hundred days
 Can be covered in a day when it is put to sea.
 In the same way, a single day of meditation
 Performed with real stability of mind
 Brings more progress than a hundred days
 Practicing development and completion stages
 Before stability of mind has been attained.”

- *The Vajra Essence*: “O Bhagavān, if all meditative experiences, whether pleasant or rough, are far from being the path to omniscience and bring no such benefit, why should we practice meditation? Teacher, please explain!” The Bhagavān replied, “O

Vajra of Mind, when individuals with coarse, dysfunctional minds agitated by discursive thoughts enter this path, by reducing the power of their compulsive thinking, their minds become increasingly still, and they achieve unwavering stability. On the other hand, even if people identify conscious awareness but do not continue practicing, they will succumb to the faults of spiritual sloth and distraction. Then, even if they do practice, due to absent-mindedness they will become lost in endless delusion. The mind—which is like a cripple—and vital energy—which is like a blind, wild stallion—are subdued by fastening them with the rope of meditative experience and firmly maintained attention. Once people of dull faculties have recognized the mind, they control it with the cords of mindfulness and introspection. Consequently, as a result of their experience and meditation, they have the sense that all subtle and coarse thoughts have vanished. Finally, they experience a state of unstructured consciousness devoid of anything on which to meditate. Then when their awareness reaches the state of great non-meditation, their guru points that out, so they do not go astray. For that to occur, first one undergoes great struggles in seeking the path, one takes the movement of thoughts as the path, and finally when consciousness settles upon itself, that is identified as the path. Until unstructured, path awareness, or consciousness, manifests and rests in itself, because of the perturbations of one's afflicted mind, one has to gradually go through rough experiences like the ones discussed.”