

Dedicated Practitioners Program
Reading and Homework for October 2002
Theme: Wise Concentration

Concentration is a translation of the Pali term *samadhi*. In many ways, this is not an accurate translation, as it has the limited sense in English of focusing on one thing to the exclusion of everything else. Though *samadhi* can have this quality, a better description of this mental factor is unification of mind, non-distractedness or steadiness. In the texts wise concentration is usually associated with the *jhanas*, states of deep absorption. Though we do need some level of concentration to develop our meditation practice, it is true for most of us that attaining *jhana* is not necessary for insight and deepening to occur. In some *vipassana* techniques such as open attention, we practice what is known as moment-to-moment concentration, paying attention to the changing nature of our experience. (Some people, however, do consider that the attainment of *jhana* is necessary to truly practice *vipassana*.) The development of concentration is also beneficial in our daily lives, allowing us to be present and steady in challenging situations as we work, communicate or make decisions. Increasing levels of concentration also help to reduce anxiety and fear in the mind. In this month's homework, we will look at different aspects of concentration, both from the canonical framework to the role concentration plays in our own practice and lives.

Readings: *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom* by Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, pp 70 - 72 (section on concentration as a Factor of Enlightenment.)- available on the DPP website. *Majjhima Nikaya* 43 (The Greater Series of Questions and Answers), particularly section 18, and *Majjhima Nikaya* 77 (The Greater Discourse to Sakuludayin), particularly section 25. For more on *jhanas* and their factors, you could read *The Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation* by Bhikkhu Henepola Gunaratana, particularly the chapter on "The First *Jhana* and Its Factors", available on the DPP website or on-line at <http://www.budsas.org/ebud/jhanas/jhanas03.htm>.

Homework Assignment: As an aid to developing concentration, for this month please commit to memory the short version of the metta chant in Pali. A copy of the chant will be posted on the DPP website, and we are hoping to have a downloadable audio file of the chant there as well. There will also be a recorded version of the chant on the DPP Spirit Rock phone line at (415) 488-0164 x 375.

Reflections:

1. Concentration appears in a number of Buddhist lists. Write down as many names of these lists as you can. Do you think that *samadhi* has different qualities in these different contexts?
2. What are the proximate causes for concentration? Traditionally, what factors lead to / precede the development of concentration? (You can refer to above lists.) Is this true in your experience?

3. In the Commentaries, it is said that the five jhanic factors balance the five hindrances. What are these pairings? Does this seem true – or relevant - to you in your experience? (Hint: Bhante Gunaratana talks about this in the chapter on the first jhana.)
1. How important do you feel concentration is in your practice / life? Have you ever practiced specifically to increase concentration? What was the result?
2. What has been the deepest experience of concentration you have had? What qualities were present then?
3. Has your level of concentration changed over your years of practice? If so, how do you experience this in your practice and your life?
4. How do you experience the state of concentration in your practice? That is, what aspects of your experience tell you that you are in a concentrated state of mind?
5. In the DPP April homework, this question was asked: “Most Western practitioners haven’t developed concentration to the level of jhana. What level of concentration do you think you should work toward in your practice?” Have you thought about this since then? Has your answer changed?

Practices

To develop concentration requires a lot of effort. Make a whole hearted effort to develop concentration this month, and to let go of *any* distracting thoughts, however seductive. (Some groups will have five weeks between meetings. If you only have four, combine two of the weeks.)

Week	Practice
1	To develop concentration this month, focus mainly on your breath. Use the noting practice or counting from 10 – 1, beginning at 10 again, to maintain connection to the breath.
2	Note “in, out” or “rising, falling” and add a touch point in the space between breaths if there is one - either the touch of the lips, or the pressure on the hands or buttocks.
3	Another practice to aid concentration is the four part practice of noticing, and noting, each of four experiences in turn: seeing (even though the eyes are closed), hearing (turn attention to the ear door), touching (become aware of a touch point – hands, lips, buttocks, etc), sitting (become aware of the whole body as you sit.) Cycle through these four areas at a speed which helps you to maintain continuity.
4	As well as breath meditation, metta practice is the other practice that we teach to develop concentration. Spend a week doing metta practice, focusing on the concentration aspect of the practice (keeping the phrases and the image steady) rather than emphasizing the cultivation of the metta feeling.
5	See how many breaths you can count without getting distracted. (If you find yourself thinking, but are able to return immediately to the breath without losing track of where you are, keep going. If you find you have been completely lost, begin at one again.)

Please schedule a time to connect with your dharma buddy for a discussion of this month's reflections and practices, and for an interview with your mentor if you are receiving monthly interviews.