

The miracle of samādhi

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Samādhi has become a controversial topic in within the Theravāda tradition, where much confusion seems to have resulted from attempting to reconcile multiple contrasting historical frameworks that don't in principle cohere. Yet, the debate persists even among the strict adherents to the authority of the early Buddhist texts (EBT), where contrasting evidence is cited for “strong” or “weak” *jhānas*, and where there is still no consensus about how *Dhammic* insight is even possible in *jhāna*.

In this paper, I develop a neglected perspective in furthering our understanding of *samādhi* in the EBT, by examining the finer details of how *samādhi* integrates cognitively into the finely tuned machine of Buddhist practice. I will focus on the conditions under which it naturally arises, on the spiritual fruits it produces, on how *samādhi* fulfills the functions clearly attributed to it in the early texts. I hope thereby to contribute respectfully to a fuller understanding of this remarkable multifaceted culminating factor of the noble eightfold path.

Samādhi arises spontaneously

Many of us learn, as beginning meditators, a special technique to induce a meditative state: Typically, we pick a meditation “object” (like the sensation of the breath, a *kaṣiṇa* or an imagined sound), fix our attention right there and keep it there for a while. Although this settles the mind and produces profound experiences, there is almost no hint of the employment of such techniques in the early texts.¹

1 The absence of such a mechanism in the early texts has been pointed out by Vetter (1988, xxv), Arbel (2017, especially 46, 156), Polak (2011, 206). I will draw some contrasts between what the early texts tell us and the highly influential *Visuddhimagga* (Buddhaghosa 2003) as we go along, which forms the basis of modern *Vipassanā* meditation, and in which attainment of *samādhi* depends on elaborate specialized method, and even then with great difficulty. It is now widely

Instead, in the early texts we repeatedly find a natural transition into *samādhi* from some underlying condition apparently unassisted.

Monks, for a virtuous person, one whose behavior is virtuous, no volition need be exerted, “Let satisfaction [non-regret] arise in me.” It is natural that satisfaction arises in one who is virtuous, one whose behavior is virtuous.

... It is natural that delight arises in one with satisfaction.

... It is natural that rapture arises in one who is delighted

... It is natural that the body of one with a rapturous mind is tranquil.

... It is natural that one who is tranquil in body feels pleasure.

... It is natural that the mind of one feeling pleasure is composed [in *samādhi*]. (AN 11.2)

The arising of *samādhi* while practicing remembrance of the triple gem is likewise attested in similar terms:

When a noble disciple recollects the Buddha, on that occasion his mind is not obsessed by lust, aversion, or delusion; on that occasion his mind is simply straight, based on the Buddha. A noble disciple whose mind is straight gains inspiration in the meaning, gains inspiration in *Dhamma*, gains delight connected with *Dhamma*. When he is delighted, rapture arises. For one with a rapturous mind, the body becomes tranquil. One tranquil in body feels pleasure. For one feeling pleasure, the mind becomes composed [in *samādhi*]. ... You should develop this recollection of the Buddha while walking, standing, sitting and lying down. You should develop it while engaged in work and while living at home in a house full of children. (AN 11.12)

Notice that in each of these passages we begin with some recognized Buddhist practice, then the same series of antecedent states unfolds before *samādhi* blooms. This series is found often in the *suttas*:²

acknowledged in modern scholarship that the meaning of *samādhi* in this later tradition had become something quite distinct from the early meaning (Shankman 2008, esp. 101-4; Kumāra 2022, 10-22; Thanissaro 1996, 248-51; Polak 2011).

- 2 In addition to the examples above, we have AN 11.1, MN 40, MN 7, SN 54.13, SN 54.14, MN 118, SN 47.10, SN 47.8, SN 42.13, SN 35.246, SN 35.97, AN 11.1,1 AN 6.10, AN 11.15, AN 3.95. These are heavy on ethics, faith and sense restraint,

PRACTICE → delight (*pāmuḍḍa*) → rapture (*pīti*) →
tranquility (*passaddhi*) → pleasure (*sukha*) → *samādhī*.

In some texts only two of these antecedent factors are mentioned:

PRACTICE → rapture → tranquility → *samādhī*.

We find this same stepwise unfolding of *samādhī* in the context of learning *Dhamma* through group or private recitation:

In whatever way ..., he experiences inspiration in the meaning and inspiration in *Dhamma*. As he does so, delight arises in him. When he is delighted, rapture arises. For one with a rapturous mind, the body becomes tranquil. One tranquil in body feels pleasure. For one feeling pleasure, the mind becomes composed [in *samādhī*]. (AN 5.26)

The seven factors of awakening provide the best known example of this same series of antecedent states leading to *samādhī*:

proficiency → investigation of *dhammas* → energy → rapture →
tranquility → *samādhī* → equanimity. (summarized from SN 46.1, etc.)

The “PRACTICE” here is constituted in the first three links, which correspond to the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, contemplation of *dhammas*. It is abundantly clear in the early texts that *satipaṭṭhāna* is practiced almost always in conjunction with *samādhī*.³

These examples show that *samādhī* is conditioned, but none of its conditions is a specific technique for inducing *samādhī*.⁴ At least some practices give rise to *samādhī* as an organic result, but each of the practices is undertaken for its own sake, with its own functions independent of *samādhī*. Likewise, within *samādhī* we proceed from one *jhāna* to the next spontaneously: the mind simply lets go of what it is holding onto in one *jhāna* when it is ready, “you don’t even have to wish” for it.⁵

in addition to wisdom, all leading to *samādhī*.

3 This association is not mentioned in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* itself. However, the suttas repeatedly depict *satipaṭṭhāna* practice in close association with *samādhī* and the *jhānas*, e.g., MN 44 i301, SN 47.8, 47.40, AN 4.94, AN 4.170, Dh 372. AN 8.63 iv 300-1 even refers to each *satipaṭṭhāna* as “a *samādhī*.”

4 Polak (2011, 30, 206).

5 Gunaratana (2009, 142, 149).

This gives us some insight into the meaning of the following statement:

The Buddha awakened to [discovered] *jhāna*.⁶ (SN 2.7 i48)

‘Awakened’ (*bujjhā*) means figuratively ‘discovered’ in some contexts. Either way, it suggests that he did not invent *jhāna*, but appropriated something already present in human cognition, ready to arise under certain circumstances. It required no special technique. In fact, this is exactly what is described when, as a young child, the Bodhisatta entered the first *jhāna* spontaneously while sitting under a rose apple tree.⁷

If *samādhi* is already a natural faculty, what makes the fourfold *jhāna* uniquely Buddhist? I think the answer is that he refined it: he recognized its potential and the processes whereby it could bear fruits, and then developed and cultivated it accordingly. He made it into an art and a science. “Feeding” similarly comes naturally to humans, but through development and cultivation we get *haute cuisine* and table manners.⁸

Right proficiency gives rise to *samādhi*

The first question we hope to answer is, What are the root conditions that gives rise to *samādhi*? ‘PRACTICE,’ as the condition from which *samādhi* unfolds, is broad and vague: All practices? Every time? Can non-Buddhist practices qualify, for instance, could a virtuoso pianist spontaneously enter *samādhi*? What practice might the Bodhisatta have been engaged in under the rose apple tree to give rise to the first *jhāna*? The Buddha gives us a hint for how to answer these questions:

For one of right proficiency, right *samādhi* springs up.
(SN 5.25-6)

6 *Jhānam bujjhā buddho.*

7 MN 36 i246.

8 I would venture to speculate that the meditations in which the Bodhisatta later trained were heavy on technique and that this turned the natural capacity for *samādhi* into something less integrated into other aspects of practice. An analogy might be replacing natural feeding with intravenous feeding. Notice that Sujāto (2012, 155) suggests that the Buddha uniquely discovered deep absorption, which is exactly to opposite of what is suggested here.

Right proficiency (*sammā-sati*)⁹ is the factor of the eightfold path just prior to right *samādhi*. Now, right proficiency is potentially associated with every aspect of Buddhist practice. Consider the following passage:

And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong action as wrong action, and right action as right action. ... One tries to abandon wrong action and to enter into right action: This is one's right effort. One remembers to abandon wrong action and to enter and remain in right action: This is one's right proficiency. Thus these three qualities – right view, right effort, and right proficiency – run and circle around right action.
(MN 117 iii72)

This passage is repeated as for action, also for view, attitude, speech and livelihood. Since right proficiency with its accomplices routinely runs and circles around all of the wisdom and virtue factors, we predict the arising of *samādhi* in a swath of diverse practices in these categories, which we will call the “primary practice” in each case, as distinguished from the “auxiliary practices” of effort, proficiency and *samādhi*.

Let me outline how we might understand what is happening here from a functional perspective. What I describe here is in brief, but is described in more detail in my related paper *The satipaṭṭhāna method*.¹⁰ Right proficiency improves the efficacy of the primary practice. This is why I call it “proficiency.” In particular, it plays an intermediary “executive function” between right view (which is our understanding of *Dhamma* and which provides the parameters of the primary practice) and right effort (which ensures the implementation of the primary practice). Right proficiency is attentive to the relevant present circumstances of the practice situation, as well as to the relevant *Dhamma* teachings.

To see how right proficiency optimizes efficacy through full engagement, we need look no further than the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. In my related paper *The satipaṭṭhāna method*, I point out that the *satipaṭṭhāna* has two levels: method

9 ‘Proficiency’ is here translated as *sati*. I am careful to avoid translating *sati* as ‘mindfulness.’ With ‘proficiency’ I hope to restore something close to Rhys David’s once apt choice of ‘mindfulness’ to refer to memory applied to purposeful activity in the present, primarily “know-how” rather than “know-what.” See my related paper *How “mindfulness” got mislabeled*.

10 See also Cintita (2020, 11-30).

and practice. The method is described as four qualities maintained by the practitioner:

... ardent, comprehending, and proficient, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. (MN 10 i56)

I argue there that this passage describes the basis of right proficiency: proficiency in its executive function defined above combined with utmost attentiveness, the ardent maintenance of fully engaged awareness of whatever aspects of *Dhamma* and situational variables are relevant to the performance of the practice task, while “unhindered” by worldly matters.¹¹

In right proficiency, attention is skillfully managed. Attention for the untutored worldling is typically scattered or engaged in multiple tasks at the same time. However, in Buddhist practice, the “scope of attention” should optimally center around the “know-how” and situational factors relevant to the single primary practice task at hand. To be functionally viable, the scope will be as broad or narrow as the task demands and relatively stable but not necessarily fixed, for different stages of the task or different contingencies may require adjustments to the relevant scope. Under optimal conditions the mind is “shrink-wrapped” around the singular theme of the primary practice. The phrase “having put away covetousness and grief for the world” describes the basic level to which the scope of attention is narrowed in right proficiency. *Samādhi* takes over from there.

Samādhi and the scope of attention

Etymologically, *samādhi* is derived from *sam* ‘together’ + *ādhi* ‘put,’ and so has to do with gathering or collecting something together. *Samādhi* is the noun form and can be properly translated as ‘collectedness’ or ‘composure.’¹²

Etymologically, *jhāna* is the gerund of the verb *jhāyati*, apparently used before the Buddha to denote almost any contemplative or meditative activity.¹³ The

11 Accordingly, an alternative name for the *satipaṭṭhāna* method is ‘proficiency-attentiveness.’ Even though it commonly refers to the practice itself, the Pali *satipaṭṭhāna* literally means ‘proficiency-attentiveness,’ while the practice itself is *anupassanā* ‘contemplation, watching.’

12 These two translations are recommended by Kumāra (2022). The more common ‘concentration’ is less apt.

13 On the other hand, according to Walshe (1987, 556), Rhys-Davids found that there seems to be no pre-Buddhist precedent for the term *samādhi*.

Buddha also uses this term broadly in the common, informal sense alongside a technical sense of the “fourfold *jhāna*,” which seems to have been novel in his teachings. The Buddha equates the fourfold *jhāna* with *samādhi*,¹⁴ such that there is no *samādhi* independent of the four *jhānas* in the early texts.¹⁵ In this role, *jhāna* is generally untranslated in English.

Samādhi fulfills its function and produces its fruits though narrowing the scope of attention. This begins with “one-centeredness.”

Samādhi is one-centeredness of mind. (MN 34 i301)

What I am translating as ‘one-centered’ *ekagga* is commonly translated as ‘one-pointed’ (*eka* ‘one’ + *agga*), with the presumption that the the mind is thereby willfully fixed on a single object and held there. This is the general principle behind techniques for entering states of deep absorption in a mediation object, which seems to be largely absent in early Buddhist practice.¹⁶ In fact, one-pointedness makes no sense in the present functional account, because reducing attention to a single point would disrupt the scope of attention needed in the primary practice task almost every time, leaving nothing to be proficient about. The scope needs to be narrow or broad according to the needs of the primary practice task. In the *Nikāyas*, *samādhi* cannot principally be one-pointed!

In fact, *agga* does not mean ‘point,’ and *ekagga* does not mean ‘one-pointed.’ Rather *agga* seems to be associated with two semantic “clusters”:¹⁷ one is a salient feature, like a mountain peak or the finest of delicacies, that easily becomes the center of attention.¹⁸ The other is a meeting place, like a meditation center. ‘One-centered,’ my own translation of *ekagga*, is intended to

14 For instance, in SN 45.8.

15 It is often challenging to determine if a given term is being used in its conventional or technical sense in the early texts. However, Arbel (2016, 39) points out that in its technical sense *jhāna* is consistently fourfold and does not appear in verbal form, rather one consistently “enters and abides” (*upasampajja vihāreti*) in *jhāna*.

16 *Ekagga* is analyzed as ‘one-pointed’ in the *Visuddhimagga*. Arbel (2017, 46, 175) finds no evidence in the *Nikāyas* of such deep absorption. Thanissaro (2012, 27) points to the variants of full-body awareness used to describe each of the *jhānas* in MN 119 iii92-4, AN 5.28, etc., and Kumāra (2022, 47) to examples of listening to a *Dhamma* or moving around with an *ekagga* mind in AN 5.151, Iti 111 and AN 4.12.

17 Thanissaro (2016).

18 The point of a needle, its most salient feature, is indeed *agga*, but the meaning of *agga* is far broader.

capture both senses. *Eka* ‘one’ seems to convey that the mind is not trying to occupy more than one mountain peak or jump from one meeting house to the next. *Cittass’ekaggatā* ‘one-centeredness of mind’ is the condition in which there is a single well-defined theme, that is, attention is “collected,” “composed” or “unified” in terms of relevance to the practice task at hand. *Ekodibhāva* ‘unification’ seems to be a common synonym for *ekaggatā*.

The one-centered mind, in terms of skilled performance of Buddhist practice, optimally includes whatever is relevant to the performance of that primary task, but in principle excludes all else. It is easy to appreciate that supplementing right proficiency with one-centeredness of mind will improve performance in the task. However, this transition will only sometimes succeed and may easily regress, because *samādhi* is acutely sensitive to a range of factors, from previous training to external disruptions and responsibilities. For instance, it is most likely to be present, all else being equal, when one is sit cross-legged, secluded under a tree, surrounded by the hushed sounds of nature, contemplating “body in body.”

With the arising of *samādhi*, the primary task supported by right proficiency becomes the “theme of *samādhi*” (*samādhi-nimitta*).¹⁹ This is necessary if *samādhi* is to fulfill its function, which is, as we will see, basically to kick proficiency in task performance into high gear. This explains the following:

“One-centeredness of the mind is *samādhi*. The four *satipaṭṭhānas* are the themes of *samādhi*. The four right efforts are the prerequisites for *samādhi*. The pursuit, development, and cultivation of these very same things is the development of *samādhi*. (MN 44 i301)

The “pursuit, development and cultivation” here constitute either the training that results in achieving *samādhi* readily as an inclination of the mind, or the stages of accomplishment of the primary practice enabled by *samādhi*. Sometimes it is desirable to nudge ourselves into *samādhi* in pursuit of its fruits, and this is accomplished by controlling its conditions. If we habituate the entrance into *samādhi* or higher *jhānas*, this will enable us routinely and more quickly to enter them as an inclination of mind. For instance, in

19 The more common ‘object’ is not appropriate, because the theme ranges potentially widely over many actively relevant objects and relations. I adapt the term ‘theme’ from Thanissaro (2012, 31), used in a similar context.

practicing *satipaṭṭhāna* we are told we can develop *samādhi* naturally, undirected, but:

While he is contemplating the body in the body, there arises in him, based on the body, either a fever in the body or sluggishness of mind, or the mind is distracted outwardly. That bhikkhu should then direct his mind towards some inspiring theme [*pasādanīye nimitte*]. ... It is in such a way, Ānanda, that there is development by direction. (SN 47.9 v156)

He chooses a theme conducive to *samādhi* temporarily, then returns to his bodily theme. With familiarity we will find that we, as in all things, learn to control subtle conditions intuitively, much as a child learns (but cannot explain) how to swing higher in a playground. We will find we can move from one *jhāna* to the next simply by wishing it.²⁰

Unfolding of *jhāna*

As we pursue a primary practice task, right proficiency runs and circles around it, and as a result we may spontaneously enter *samādhi*. Beyond this, we are commonly encouraged further to develop and cultivate this practice by making a point of bringing it through the stillness and silence of the series of *jhānas*. From the first *jhāna*, the second *jhāna* unfolds, and so on, at each stage as the currently most energetic mental or bodily quality of the previous stage comes to rest. The Buddha took great care to define what mental qualities are present and what are absent in each of the *jhānas*; he must have felt that it is important for us to be able to navigate them.

Let's consider an example. *Mettā* ('kindness') contemplation is a common practice. It belongs to right attitude, around which right proficiency therefore runs and circles:

When, bhikkhu, your mind is firm and well settled internally, and arisen bad unwholesome states do not obsess your mind, then you should train yourself thus: "I will develop and cultivate the liberation of the mind by *mettā*, make it a vehicle and basis, carry it out, consolidate it, and properly undertake it." Thus should you train yourself. (AN 8.63 iv299)

20 Again, as Gunaratana (2009, 142, 149) puts it.

If we practice right proficiency, attending to the arising of *mettā* in one's own experience while recollecting the teachings about *mettā*, all the while ardent and unhindered, *samādhi* is expected to arise. In the phrase “develop and cultivate,” development (*bhāvanā*) indicates a potential gain in proficiency, and cultivation (*bahulikata*, literally ‘done a lot’) indicates repeated practice, consolidating that gain. The sutta continues:

“When this *samādhi* has been developed and cultivated by you in this way, then you should develop this *samādhi* with thought and deliberation. ... (AN 8.63 iv299-300)

The first *jhāna* is certainly intended, in which we continue to think and deliberate, as the ordinary mind already does almost incessantly. This is a standard description:

(1st *jhāna*) Here, quite separated from sensual pleasures, separated from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first *jhāna*, which is accompanied by thought and deliberation, with rapture and pleasure born of separation.

(MN 141 iii 252)

Being separated (*vivicca*) from sensual pleasures and unwholesome states is certainly highlighted here as the definitive factor in the first *jhāna*. It is elsewhere regarded as equivalent to the elimination of the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*), and to the full attainment of “having put away covetousness and grief for the world” in the *satipaṭṭhāna* method. Entry into the first *jhāna* begins when the mind is “unhindered.”

The *mettā* practice continues:

... you should develop it without thought but with deliberation only;²¹ you should develop it without thought and deliberation. You should develop it with rapture; ... (AN 8.63 iv299-300)

Here we have reached the second *jhāna*. The second *jhāna* arises wherever thought and deliberation are put to rest in favor of some quieter mode of cognition. This is a standard description:

21 The words *vitakka* and *vicāra* almost always occur in combination and it has been suggested that they are synonymous in the early texts (Kuan 2008, 38). If this is the case, the absence of either one might simply indicate a more subdued level of discursive thought.

(2nd *jhāna*) With the stilling of thought and deliberation, he enters upon and abides in the second *jhāna*, which has tranquility and unification [one-centeredness]²² of mind without thought and deliberation, with rapture and pleasure born of *samādhi*.

(MN 141 iii 252)

“Born of *samādhi* entails that one-centeredness was present prior to the onset of the second *jhāna*. Rapture and pleasure would have been, as we have seen, already present as antecedent states prior to entering *samādhi*, and now they remain. Entry into the second *jhāna* begins when the mind becomes “silent.”

The *mettā* practice continues:

... you should develop it without rapture; you should develop it accompanied by comfort. ... (AN 8.63 iv299-300)

Here we are in the third *jhāna*. the antecedent factor of rapture has been shed. This is a standard description:

(3rd *jhāna*) With the fading away as well of rapture, he abides in equanimity, proficient and comprehending, still feeling pleasure with the body, he enters upon and abides in the third *jhāna*, on account of which noble ones announce: “He has a pleasant abiding, who is equanimous and proficient.” (MN 141 iii 252)

The reference to proficiency and comprehension is significant. We will examine it below.

The *mettā* practice concludes:

... and you should develop it accompanied by equanimity.
(AN 8.63 iv299-300)

And finally we have arrived at the fourth *jhāna*. This is its standard description:

(4th *jhāna*) With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, he enters and abides in the fourth *jhāna*, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of proficiency due to equanimity. (MN 141 iii252)

22 Recall that ‘unification’ (*ekodibhāva*) is apparently a synonym for ‘one-centeredness’ (*ekaggatā*).

The reference to “purity of proficiency” is also significant, for it entails further growth, development and cultivation of proficiency itself in this fourth *jhāna*, which we will also examine below.

The development of *mettā* benefits somehow from abiding in each of the *jhānas* while centered on this theme. This same process is then repeated as for *mettā* for the three remaining *brahmavihāras* (*karuṇa*, *mudita*, *upekkhā*). It is then repeated for the four *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplations (body, feelings, mind, *dharmas*). These last four practices belong to right view (they are concerned with verifying and internalizing *Dhamma*), around which right proficiency also runs and circles.

The *jhānas* participate in the narrowing of attention that progresses as follows (putting most of the more affective factors aside):

unhindered ► one-centered ► silent ► equanimous

At each stage a distracting factor is stripped away, even while the initial theme of *samādhi* (*mettā*, the other *brahmavihāras* and the themes of the individual exercises within the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in the text just cited) are maintained. Particularly significant for us is the loss of discursive thinking as we enter silence.

Notes on the *jhāna* factors

Once again, the first *jhāna* arises when the mind becomes separated or unhindered: “quite separated from unwholesome states.” An unhindered mind seems to suffice for entrance into the first *jhāna*,²³ as “born of separation” confirms. However, notice that neither one-centeredness nor the equivalent unification is listed as a factor for the first *jhāna*. This has led some to claim that at this point *samādhi* has not yet arisen. Although an alternative description adds one-centeredness as a factor of the first *jhāna*, this is relatively rare:

Friend, in the first *jhāna* five factors are abandoned and five factors are possessed. Here, when a *bhikkhu* has entered upon the first *jhāna*, sensual desire is abandoned, ill will is abandoned, sloth and torpor are abandoned, restlessness and remorse are abandoned, and doubt is abandoned; and there occur thought,

23 DN 2 i73.

deliberation, rapture, pleasure, and one-centeredness of mind.

That is how in the first *jhāna* five factors are abandoned and five factors are possessed. (MN 43 i294-5)

Notice, incidentally, that the hindrances are also explicitly listed in this particular text in lieu of “separation,” indicating the equivalence mentioned above. But there is no necessary reason that the mind must become one-centered as soon as it becomes unhindered. In fact practice experience suggests that, even without unwholesome intentions, the mind might jump for a time from one theme to another. I would suggest that the onset of *samādhi* (as one-centeredness) is actually *within* the first *jhāna*, not necessarily at its onset. This also explains why the second *jhāna* is “born of *samādhi*,” implying a previous state of *samādhi* before entering the second *jhāna*. It would seem that unhinderedness and the onset of the first *jhāna* is actually prior to the onset of *samādhi* (one-centeredness) per se.

Thought and deliberation (*vitakka-vicāra*) constitute everyday discursive thinking.²⁴

Thought and deliberation are the verbal fabrication, one breaks into speech. (MN 44 i301)

The presence of thought and deliberation in the first *jhāna* is particularly important to highlight here. First, it indicates undiminished cognitive faculties in the first *jhāna*. Second, its abandonment in the second *jhāna* indicates a significantly quieter mode of cognitive function. This is not to say that the mind is free in the first *jhāna* to wander into choosing a color for that new addition, plotting revenge or worrying about paying off our credit cards. The separation or unhinderedness constrains the mind from wandering that far.

Nonetheless, attention must often be very broad even as one-centeredness arises, as it must in the famous simile of the man carrying oil past the most beautiful girl of the land.²⁵ Attention must likewise be broad for the kung fu

24 In the *Visuddhimagga* *vitakka-vicāra* is declared to be the initial and sustained application of the mind on a fixed object, associated with one-pointedness and with the techniques for entering the meditative state. There is no support for this technical meaning of what is elsewhere an everyday phrase in the *Nikāyas*; Cousins (1992) identifies forty occurrences of the combination of *vitakka* and *vicāra*, all of which have to do with conventional thought. See also Arbel (2017, 68), Shulman (2014, 22), Polak (2011, 14), Kumāra (2022, 56-60).

25 SN 47.20, discussed in my related paper *The satipaṭṭhāna method*.

master attacked by twenty less adept warriors, or in one engaged in the skilled and wholesome task of cooking a meal. In the latter case, the theme may be limited to what is happening on the cutting board, or alternatively to coordinating and planning the various things happening at the same time on stove, bowl and sink. In either case, discursive thinking might still be necessary for accomplishing the primary task, but listening to music or daydreaming is put aside.

The disappearance of thought and deliberation in the second *jhāna* is the shutting off of this discursive, otherwise pervasive function. The Buddha accordingly calls the second *jhāna* “noble silence” (*ariya tuṅhībhāva*),²⁶ and that silence continues in the third and fourth *jhānas* as well. “Silence” here is best understood as “whisper quiet” rather than as the complete disappearance of subjective experience, for cognition is subjectively apparent at some level. For instance, we find that the Buddha praises Sāriputta for his talents for tracking *dhammas* notably in all *jhānas*, including the silent ones:

Whatever qualities there are in the first *jhāna* ... he ferrets them out one by one. Known to him they remain, known to him they subside... (MN 111)

This passage is repeated as for first *jhāna*, also for the silent second, third and fourth. The entrance into the second *jhāna* is thereby marked by a transition from a discursive to an *almost* effortless, silent mode of cognition. Pondering may be ponderous, but perception is achieved quite imperceptibly. Many cognitive processes are altogether unconscious.²⁷

Many have puzzled over the question of how the knowledge and vision repeatedly attributed to *samādhi*, the highest attainments of wisdom, can possibly arise when cognition is restricted in this way.²⁸ In fact, we tend to sell silence short, for it is silent – not discursive – cognition that is most directly

26 E.g., SN 21.1 ii273.

27 Noble silence cannot be purely silent. The citation about Sāriputta indicates that conceptual percepts must at least bubble up from the silence. I suggest that perception (*saññā*), silent until the percept appears, as well as a degree of conscious oversight, is possible in silence, but not the fabrication (*sankhāra*) needed for deliberation. The following, for instance describes a point at which we’ve already progressed through all four *jhānas*.

... a bhikkhu has grasped well the theme of reviewing, [*paccavekkhaṇa-nimittaṃ*] attended to it well, sustained it well, and penetrated it well with wisdom. (AN 5.28)

28 Shulman (2014) is concerned with addressing this issue.

associated with the highest levels of expertise in task performance. For instance, neophytes in any particular skill – say in playing the saxophone or in driving a car – are those who have to think and deliberate, while virtuosos are those who simply step out of the way to let the skill play itself out through them ... and in fact commonly choke up if they even try to think about what they are doing. The purpose of “training” is to turn discursive know-what and know-how, into a much more effective silent know-how in order to avoid the clumsy effort and slow pace of thought and deliberation in skilled performance.

The dichotomy between “silent vs. discursive” cognition has a natural correlate in our modern understanding of human cognition that has emerged in recent decades. Proposed terms for this dichotomy are “effortless vs. effortful,” “unconscious vs. conscious,” “system 1 vs. system 2” and “fast thinking vs. slow thinking” and “blink and think.”²⁹ Discursive/effortful cognition is certainly relatively recent in evolutionary terms, and largely involves agency, choice and explicit reasoning.³⁰ Silent/effortless cognition occurs spontaneously, immediately responsive to its conditioning factors. Moreover, discursive/effortful thought seems to center in specialized regions of the brain, it runs much slower, it actually actually consumes glucose in the brain at a far higher rate, and it tires more easily (a condition tellingly suggestively called “ego-depletion), than silent/effortless cognition.”³¹

By far most of human cognition is handled effortlessly/silently. Consider that recognizing the face of a friend occurs immediately and requires subjectively no effort at all, yet is on examination an extremely sophisticated task by any conceptual standard. Through repetition and familiarity, that is, “training,” what starts out as effortful/discursive tends to become “internalized” as effortless/silent.

At critical junctures (when the diamond is cut, when the winning basket is thrown, when the shot is fired, or in cases in which an immediate response is urgently required), nature is known spontaneously and unannounced to shut down discursive/effortful thought and rely entirely on silent/effortless cognition. The higher-cost faculties would otherwise be a burden to immediacy of response. This condition is experienced, according to the psychological

29 Bruya (2010).

30 Kahneman (2011, 20-4).

31 Kahneman (2011, 41-4).

literature, as “flow.”³² Moreover, this silent/effortless mode can often comprehend a broader and more subtle range factors than the discursive mind, as when expert first impressions (intuitive hunches or a gut feelings) made in the blink of an eye turn out to be more reliable than later discursive/effortful analysis.³³

I will suggest later that this natural shutting down has its counterpart in the transition from the first to the second *jhāna*, and that it is through the continuation of silent cognition in the higher *jhānas* that *samādhi* bears its juiciest fruits, that *samādhi* would produce neither insight nor knowledge and vision without noble silence.

Noteworthy in the descriptions of the third and fourth *jhānas* is the reference to proficiency and comprehension. Recall that the satipaṭṭhāna method that underlies right proficiency involves four factors, two of which are proficiency and comprehension. These are commonly compounded as ‘proficiency-comprehension’ (*sati-sampajaññā*), referring to the inner dynamics of right proficiency, in which relevant know-how informs the interpretation of the practice situation and this interpretation further develops and cultivates proficiency.³⁴ Proficiency and attentiveness are certainly already present in the first and second *jhānas*, since right proficiency initiated the sequence of states resulting in *samādhi* in the first place. Their reintroduction in the third *jhāna* reminds us that it continues to operate on behalf of a primary practice task, even in silent cognition, and to maintain an ongoing attentiveness to the theme of *samādhi*.

Moreover, “purity of proficiency” in the fourth *jhāna* suggests this new or further development of proficiency. Proficiency is something that is not only applied in practice, but is also, through training, developed, cultivated and ultimately perfected in practice to produce virtuosity. Proficiency is memory and it is here, particularly in the fourth *jhāna*, that the fruits of *samādhi* must be retained.

32 Csikszentmihalyi (1990).

33 Gladwell (2005).

34 See my related paper *The satipṭhāna method*.

The fruits of samādhi

In summary, right *samādhi* arises when we are engaged in a primary practice, around which right proficiency runs and circles to produce optimal effectiveness. In right proficiency, seclusion produces an unhindered mind. Unhindered and sufficiently ardent, the mind then settles into one-centeredness or composure, a strict but flexible narrowing of attention around the theme of relevance to the primary practice. If feasible, discursive thoughts then fall away and the mind becomes silent, or at least whisper quiet and highly responsive. The mind in *samādhi* continues to attend to its theme, and is in this sense an extension of right proficiency, ready to contribute its fruits to practice.

The fruits of practice address the soteriological goals of Buddhism. The following are declared in the *suttas* to be the fruits developed in *samādhi*:

Bhikkhus, there are these four developments of *samādhi*. What four?

- (1) There is a development of *samādhi* that developed and cultivated leads to dwelling happily in this very life.
- (2) There is a development of *samādhi* that developed and cultivated leads to obtaining knowledge and vision.
- (3) There is a development of *samādhi* that developed and cultivated leads to proficiency-comprehension.
- (4) There is a development of *samādhi* that developed and cultivated leads to the destruction of the taints. (AN 4.41)

Let's look at each development of *samādhi* in turn.

Dwelling happily in this very life

The Bodhisatta recognized that there are pleasures that transcend mundane sensual pleasures, when he recalled that, as a boy sitting under a rose apple tree, he had spontaneously entered the first *jhāna* and found there,

... that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality, nothing to do with unskillful mental qualities. (MN 36 i247).

In fact, recognizing this distinction played a role in the *Bodhisatta's* subsequent development of the middle way, followed by his awakening.³⁵

³⁵ See Cintita (2017, 8-9).

Mundane or everyday pleasure is based in sensuality, such as food, sex, money in the bank, adventure movies, bungee jumping and booze. Such pleasures tend to be problematic, fraught and unsatisfying, because they are fleeting and get entwined with craving and appropriation (*upādāna*). In contrast, spiritual, immaterial or non-carnal (*nirāmisa*) pleasure arises spontaneously in the states antecedent to *samādhi*, and self-concern (and with it the allure of sensuality) dissolves as the mind becomes progressively unhindered, one-centered, silent and equanimous. Once one experiences spiritual pleasure, one is eager to upgrade from one's more problematic sensual pleasures. Spiritual pleasure, aside from being valuable in itself, is thereby an incentive for Buddhist practice in general as a substitute for the pursuit of mundane pleasures that keep us locked in *samsāra*.

Obtaining knowledge and vision

Samādhi is an insight factory and right proficiency in *Dhamma* provides its raw materials. Accordingly, we should note that *jhāna* is discussed in the early texts *mainly* in association with attainments approaching awakening.³⁶

When right *samādhi* does not exist, for one failing right *samādhi*, the proximate cause is destroyed for knowledge and vision of things as they really are. (AN 10.3)

Knowledge and vision are factors of wisdom attributed to *samādhi* repeatedly in the early texts, where they represent a stage close to final liberation, at which it might be said that we see what the Buddha saw.

There is no *jhāna* for one with no wisdom, no wisdom for one without *jhāna*. But one with both *jhāna* and wisdom, he's on the verge of *nibbāna*. (Dhp 372)

In sum, we seem to see things in *samādhi* that we otherwise miss. Why might that be? I can think of five reasons:

First, bringing practice into silence might serve internalization of proficiency by pushing the neophyte to abandon more quickly reliance on the costly discursive mode. This is much as a soldier learns to disassemble and reassemble his rifle in five minutes, then to do the same blindfolded. "OK, private, now let's see it in the third *jhāna*!"

36 Arbel (2017, 4).

Second, our worst presumptions, such as of the existence of a substantial self, are immediately unsustainable in the absence of discursive cognition. Discursive thought tends toward the most problematic forms of overthinking. At least temporarily we abide in, and familiarize ourselves with, a reality in which ingrained presumptions are absent. Our narratives shut down.

Third, generalizing the last point, a change in mode of cognition entails a shift in what we experience as “reality.” This is a clear demonstration of the across-the-board mental constructedness of what we take to be real and substantial.

Fourth, silent cognition clears away abstractions in favor of attunement to factors experienced more directly in sensorimotor experience, grounded “in the body.” It supports crystal clarity unobscured by loud higher-order conceptualizations and narratives.³⁷ Consider the way virtuoso musicians develop very refined musical sensitivities in the midst of effortless performance. While the development of virtuosity represents a shift away from discursive thinking in favor of silent cognition, *samādhi* anticipates virtuosity in following that same trajectory.

Fifth, silence encourages those “aha” moments when we finally “get it” in a deeper way.³⁸ Such an insight typically begins with thought and deliberation about a challenging problem, that then reaches an impasse. This is followed by an “incubation period,” during which there is little or no discernible process of analysis concerning the problem, but out of which the solution suddenly erupts spontaneously.³⁹ Silent cognition provides the incubation period, along with maintaining the theme (*nimitta*) of *samādhi* in a quiescent but activated state so that cognition can remain silently engaged with the problem at hand below the radar until that “aha” moment.

Proficiency and comprehension

Proficiency-comprehension is the central function of right proficiency. The isolated insights it produces as knowledge and vision are matters of discovery. The *Caṅki Sutta* tells us about discovery:

37 Shulman (2014, 36).

38 In the later tradition, largely informed by the *Visuddhimagga*, insight is attributed to *sati* and considered incompatible with *samādhi*, strikingly contrary to the early texts.

39 Slingerland (2015, 147).

“... when he examines their meaning, he gains a reflective acceptance of those teachings; ..., zeal springs up; ..., he applies his will; having applied his will, he scrutinizes; ..., he strives; ..., he realizes with the body the supreme truth and sees it by penetrating it with wisdom. In this way, Bhāradvāja, there is the discovery of truth [*saccānubodho*]; ... But as yet there is no final arrival at truth [*saccānupatti*].” (MN 95 ii173)

This encompasses *Dhamma* study, *satipaṭṭhāna* practice and abiding in *samādhi*.⁴⁰ Notice the phrase “realizes with the body,” which may well refer to silent cognition. Nonetheless, discovery falls short of arrival:

“The final arrival at truth, Bhāradvāja, lies in the pursuit, development, and cultivation of those same things. In this way, Bhāradvāja, there is the final arrival at truth; ...”
(MN 95 ii173-4)

Even as proficiency guides comprehension, comprehension teaches proficiency, just as driving a car depends on, but also further improves, one’s skill as a driver. This is “the pursuit, development, and cultivation” of proficiency-comprehension that serve to fix in memory the isolated gains in knowledge and vision. *Samādhi* there facilitates internalization of the *Dhamma* and that makes the *Dhamma* transformative.⁴¹

Discovery is driven by pursuit through application of proficiency-comprehension, yet at the same time the insights and discoveries of comprehension feed back to develop proficiency further as our practice is cultivated relentlessly to internalize them. This is the general basis of skill acquisition. Without learning in this way, we could not progress in our spiritual development, nor in our ability to drive a car, we would begin each practice opportunity anew, having forgotten the previous connections we have made and our previous insights. By learning this way, our proficiency grows and migrates from discursive know-what and know-how, to internalized know-how integrated into the sensorimotor body.

A single insight is momentary and, though remarkable, is only a glimpse of what the Buddha saw routinely. Through repetition, what we at first only

40 The Buddha does not mention these teachings here, but this may be because Caṅki is not a disciple (until the end of the *sutta*) and is unlikely to be familiar with the jargon.

41 Shulman (2011, 50).

glimpse becomes integrated as a matter of spontaneous perception, and we begin to see as if through the eyes of the Buddha. The internalized content of proficiency weaves it into the very structure of perception.⁴²

This pursuit, development and cultivation of proficiency-comprehension is reflected in the standard descriptions of the third and fourth *jhānas* given above, here abbreviated:

(3rd *jhāna*) ... he abides in equanimity, proficient and comprehending, ... “He has a pleasant abiding, who is equanimous and proficient.”

We entered *samādhi* on the basis of proficiency and comprehension. The reappearance of proficiency here either serves as a reminder that we are still engaged in the primary skillful practice, or it indicates some significant further development of proficiency itself in the higher stages of *samādhi*.

(4th *jhāna*) ... purity of proficiency due to equanimity.

“Purity of proficiency” speaks of the further development of proficiency as a higher attainment rather than as an application of existing proficiency, presumably as the integration of what comprehension has been discovered into virtuosity.

The destruction of the taints

The taints (*āsava*) are sensuality (*kāma*), becoming (*bhava*) and ignorance (*avijjā*), the fundamental misguided tendencies of the mind. “The destruction of the taints” (*āsavakkhāya*) is a common reference to final liberation. Progress toward awakening is progress in the development of proficiency in the practice of *Dhamma*. Liberation is the perfection of this proficiency, effectively virtuosity in the skill of life. In the silence of *samādhi* the taints are destroyed.

Conclusions

Right *samādhi* springs forth from right proficiency in the practice of *Dhamma*. Seeing and internalizing things as they are manifests in right *samādhi*.

42 As Shulman (2014, 106-7) puts it.

This account is motivated in terms of its coherence in light of the early Buddhist texts, in terms of its cognitive and psychological viability, and I daresay in terms of meditative experience. This paper accounts for the distinctive features attested in the early texts, as the conditions under which it arises of itself, as the stages through which it unfolds, and as the fruits it produces for practice and for the goals of practice. I have attempted here to develop an understanding of the natural basis of *samādhi* as a functional aspect of human cognition involved in the development and application of virtuosity, the refinement of this natural basis in Buddhist practice, and functions of *samādhi* in developing *Dhammic* skills and producing *Dhammic* insights, that ultimately lead to liberation.

In summary, the meditative state that is described in the early Buddhist texts, is almost too good to be true. It is depicted there as a state associated with delight, rapture, serenity and contentment that settles in four stages, the *jhānas*, through which the cognitive and affective functions of the mind are progressively narrowed. Yet it produces, through the guidance of *Dhamma*, the fruits of clarity, insight, knowledge and vision of things as they are, that lead ultimately to liberation. Moreover, *samādhi* makes its appearance often, spontaneously, naturally and effortlessly. The early texts tell us this. *Samādhi* is almost too good to be true.

This paper is part of a series on *Rethinking Satipaṭṭhāna*. Please go to <http://sitagu.org/cintita/satipatthana/> for references and for access to other papers in the series.