Cultivating Samadhi/Passadhi,

or

Unifying A Dull And Distracted Mind

The cultivation of stable, focused attention and emotional tranquility are key practices on the path to liberating the mind from distress and confusion. The word *samadhi* is typically translated as *concentration*-I prefer the concept of *stability of attention*-it’s actual original meaning is *the unification of mental conditioning functions*. The word *passadhi* translates as internal *tranquility*, a peaceful mind. These two processes are produced by diligent attention to a primary focal point, and the sensations associated with breathing provide that focus for Buddhist meditation practice.

*Samadhi* and *passadhi* are two of the seven factors of awakening. Along with *mindfulness, investigation of mental phenomena, energy/effort, joy/enthusiastic interest* and *equanimity*, they are key components on the path to liberation from distress and confusion.

There are two applications of samadhi-*fixed concentration* and *momentary concentration* (I prefer *moving concentration*). Fixed concentration functions as described—there is an intention to focus on one object to the exclusion of all other objects. Momentary concentration shifts focus with disciplined intention, from one focal point to another, with the intention to investigate whatever that momentary focus reveals, without “wobbling”. The best example I use is that of a lighting tech operating a spotlight. With fixed concentration, the tech focuses on one player on the stage, to the exclusion of other. With momentary concentration, the tech moves the spotlight’s focus from one player to another in a very disciplined, unwavering way, to illuminate the development of the plot played out by the performers. Fixed concentration focuses on the sensation of breathing, while momentary concentration uses breath awareness as a stable focus of attention, then illuminates how the next moment of self-state organization emerges into awareness—this is the practice of vipassana, insight into the transitory, conditioned nature of existence.

Here is a graphic model of samadhi:

Light

Magnifying lens

Broadly focused attention

tightly focused attention

**FOCUSED ATTENTION**

**PERIPHERAL AWARENESS**

**PERIPHERAL AWARENESS**

Diffused light energy enters into the magnifying lens and is coordinated. At the focal point, the energy is highly concentrated and energetic. With broadly focused attention, the energy is still highly concentrated, but the range of stable light coordination is much broader. Focused attention separates a particular aspect of the environment, external and internal, while the remaining aspects of environmental stimuli are still in awareness, but not discriminated by focused attention.

In “The Mind Illuminated”, Culadasa describes the hindrances as degrees of distraction and energy in the mind. He describes *gross distraction/forgetting* (The Buddhist hindrances of sense desire, aversion/ill-will, restlessness/worry or skeptical doubt) and *strong dullness* (The Buddhist hindrance of sloth and torpor). The goals in the early stages mentioned in the book involve the ability to overcome gross distraction/forgetfulness and strong dullness. At more advanced stages, the obstacles are *subtle distraction* and *subtle dullness*.

*Gross distraction* represents: “When some mental or sensory object becomes the primary focus of attention and pushes the meditation object into the background but not out of awareness” (The Mind Illuminated, page 419). When the intention to stay focused on the primary object is sufficiently weakened by the attraction of the distraction, *forgetting* occurs and attention to the primary object is completely out of awareness until the meditator once again becomes “ardent, alert and mindful”, moving focused attention back to the primary object.

*Subtle distraction* represents: “Brief moments of attention to distractions in the background of peripheral awareness, while the meditation object continues as the primary focus” (The Mind Illuminated, page 425).

*Strong dullness* equates with sloth and torpor: “A significant lack of mental energy that often manifests as drowsiness. In meditation, attention still clings to the breath, but the focus is very diffused and weak, and sensations are vaguely perceived…” (The Mind Illuminated, page 425).

*Subtle dullness* is more difficult to identify: “A slight dullness that makes the meditation object less vivid and intense and causes peripheral awareness to fade. This type of dullness has a pleasant quality and is therefore easy to overlook”. (The Mind Illuminated, page 425).

It is easy to misperceive subtle distraction as vipassana practice, particularly when co-occurring with subtle dullness. The antidote for these subtle hindrances is to cultivate the functions in the phrase “ardent, alert and mindful” persistently. (For more information on cultivating these functions, see the previously archived post “[Stages Of Breath Awareness January 18 2017](http://orlandoinsightmeditation.org/2017/stages-of-breath-awareness-january-18-2017/)”).

The result of the skillful overcoming of subtle distraction and subtle dullness is termed by Culadasa as *Samatha* [pronounced shah-mah-tah]: “A very special mental state achieved through the cultivation of stable attention and mindfulness. *Samatha* has five characteristics. The first is effortlessly stable attention (*samadhi*). The second is powerful mindfulness (*sati-sampajanna*), which means being fully conscious not only of the immediate objects of attention, but of everything else happening in the mind moment by moment. The last three characteristics are joy (*piti*), tranquility (*passadhi*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). (The Mind Illuminated, page 424). This is equivalent to the Buddhist term *upacara samadhi*, (*access concentration*). I typically refer to this quality of attention as *samadhi/passadhi*.

Samadhi/passadhi (unification) is a dynamic process during which the “sub-minds” of mental processing are strongly coordinated in conscious awareness. Each sensory process is a sub-mind: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, body sensations and mental processes. In the book “The Mind Illuminated”, Culadasa describes this dynamic process as the *Mind System Model*, with *sub-minds* representing the six sense bases. These sub-minds operate outside of conscious awareness; the emergence of the data into conscious awareness is channeled through the sub-mind associated with the mental processes, which he calls the *discriminating sub-mind*, and it is further subdivided into the *thinking sub-mind*, the *emotional sub-mind* and the *narrating sub-mind*.

The thinking sub-mind perceives the data input and relates the stimuli to stored memories that have similar attributes. The emotional sub-mind evaluates the data input according to the feeling tone. The combined product of the two sub-minds is further processed through the narrating sub-mind, which “blends” the various subordinate processes into an ongoing stream of consciousness that I call the “selfing story”. This emergent, conscious self-state organization feeds back to the various sub-minds; the result is inner turbulence and confusion. The practice of mindfulness of breathing diminishes this turbulence and clarifies what emerges into conscious awareness.

Without unification, the sub-mind product which is most predominant comes into focal attention through craving and clinging. Through the mindfulness of breathing practice, the emerging “competitive” sub-minds are set aside when attention is re-directed back to the breath. Eventually, the turbulent, confused and conflicted reflections back to the unconsciously operating sub-minds diminishes, and the sub-mind operations are dominated by the “top-down” regulatory process generated by ongoing mindfulness. In this way, the sub-minds are unified in their separate functions around the stability, clarity and peacefulness of samadhi/passadhi, which Culadasa terms samatha.