



WISDOM ACADEMY

# Shamatha: Meditation for Balanced Living

B. ALAN WALLACE

Lesson 10:  
Achieving Shamatha

Reading:  
*The Attention Revolution*  
“Stage 10: Shamatha”  
Pages 155–165

*The*  
**Attention  
Revolution**



UNLOCKING  
THE POWER OF  
THE FOCUSED MIND

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foreword by Daniel Goleman



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## STAGE 10: SHAMATHA ● ● ●

Following the realization of the ninth stage of attentional balance, after months or years of continuous, full-time practice, you are primed to achieve shamatha. The nine preceding stages entail many incremental changes, but the actual accomplishment of shamatha involves a radical transition in your body and mind. You will be like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon. This shift is characterized by specific experiences that take place within a discrete, relatively brief period of time.

According to accounts from the Indo-Tibetan tradition of Buddhism, the first sign of the achievement of shamatha is the experience of a sense of heaviness and numbness on the top of the head. This allegedly happens to anyone who experiences this transition, regardless of the specific method followed. It is said to feel as if a palm were being placed on the top of your shaved head. It's not unpleasant or harmful, just unusual.

Something remarkable must be taking place in the cortical region of your brain at this point, but so far, no one has monitored the brain correlates of this shift using magnetic resonance imaging or an electroencephalograph. This physical sensation on the top of the head is symptomatic of a shift in your nervous system (or network of vital energies) that is correlated with gaining freedom from mental *dysfunction* (*daushtulya*), a general state of mental imbalance characterized by stiffness, rigidity, and unwieldiness. Consequently, you achieve a state of mental *pliancy* (*prasrabdhi*), in which your mind is fit and supple like never before.

From a contemplative perspective, when the mind is dysfunctional, or prone to laxity and excitation, it is hard to generate enthusiasm for healing

the afflictions of your mind or for devoting yourself to virtuous mental activity. Once you are free of such mental dysfunction, you can focus your mind without resistance on any meaningful object or task, and such a mind is now said to be fit, or serviceable. This is the key to achieving optimal mental performance.

Following this sense of pressure on the top of your head, you experience the movement of vital energies moving in your body, and when they have coursed everywhere throughout your body, you feel as if you were filled with the power of this dynamic energy. You are now freed of physical dysfunction, so your body feels buoyant and light like never before. Both your body and mind are now imbued with an exceptional degree of pliancy, which makes them remarkably fit for engaging in all kinds of mental training and other meaningful activities.

When physical pliancy initially arises, the vital energies catalyze an extraordinary sense of physical bliss, which then triggers an equally exceptional experience of mental bliss. This rush of physical and mental rapture is transient, which is a good thing, for it so captivates the attention that you can do little else except enjoy it. Gradually it subsides and you are freed from the turbulence caused by this intense joy. Your attention settles down in perfect stability and vividness. You have now achieved shamatha.

Padmasambhava described this state as follows:

Flawless shamatha is like an oil-lamp that is unmoved by the air. Wherever the awareness is placed, it is unwaveringly present; awareness is vividly clear, without being sullied by laxity, lethargy, or dimness; wherever the awareness is directed, it is steady and sharply pointed; and unmoved by adventitious thoughts, it is straight. Thus, a flawless meditative state arises in your mindstream; and until this happens, it is important that you settle the mind in its natural state. Without genuine shamatha arising in your mindstream, even if awareness is pointed out, it becomes nothing more than an object of intellectual understanding. So you are left simply giving lip-service to the view, and there is the danger that you may succumb to dogmatism.

Thus, the root of all meditative states depends upon this, so do not be introduced to pristine awareness too soon, but practice until you have a fine experience of stability.<sup>93</sup>

The Theravada tradition gives this specific description of achieving shamatha by way of mindfulness of the respiration: You begin this practice, as described earlier, by focusing on the tactile sensations of the breath, which are the “sign” for preliminary practice (*parikamma-nimitta*). Eventually you shift your attention to the acquired sign (*uggaha-nimitta*) of the breath, which becomes your meditative object until you achieve shamatha, at which point a third sign appears spontaneously. This is called the counterpart sign (*patibhaga-nimitta*) of the breath, which is a subtle, emblematic representation of the whole quality of the air element.<sup>94</sup> Buddhaghosa described this sign as follows:

The counterpart sign appears as if breaking out from the acquired sign, and a hundred times a thousand times more purified, like a looking-glass disk drawn from its case, like a mother-of-pearl dish well washed, like the moon's disk coming out from behind a cloud, like cranes against a thunder cloud. But it has neither color nor shape...it is born only in the perception in one who has obtained concentration, being a mere model of appearance.<sup>95</sup>

In Buddhism, all ordinary states of human consciousness, while awake or asleep, are said to belong to the *desire realm*, which is so called because this dimension of consciousness is dominated by sensual desires. All the nine stages leading up to the achievement of shamatha also belong to this realm, and it is only with the achievement of the mental and physical pliancy of shamatha that you gain access to the *form realm*. This is a subtle dimension of consciousness that transcends the realm of the physical senses, similar in some respects to the world of pure ideas envisioned by Plato, or the archetypal world hypothesized by Jung. Upon gaining access to the form realm, your consciousness continues to be structured by very subtle concepts that stem from a deeper source than the human psyche. Theravada Buddhists

discuss a variety of counterpart signs that are perceived once you gain access to the form realm. These signs appear to include rarefied, archetypal representations of phenomena experienced in the desire realm, including the elements of solidity, fluidity, heat, motility, the four colors of blue, yellow, red, and white, and light and space.

The initial achievement of shamatha is described as *preliminary* or as *access* to the full realization of the first meditative stabilization (*dhyana*). The Buddha declared that with the achievement of the first meditative stabilization, one is for the first time temporarily freed from five types of obstructions (*avarana*), or hindrances (*nivarana*), that disrupt the balance of the mind.<sup>96</sup> These are (1) sensual craving, (2) malice, (3) lethargy and drowsiness, (4) excitation and anxiety, and (5) uncertainty. Buddhaghosa commented that as soon as the counterpart sign arises, the hindrances are quite suppressed, the defilements subside, and the mind becomes concentrated in access concentration.<sup>97</sup>

When you first gain the mental and physical pliancy associated with the freedom from these hindrances, you experience a rush of bliss that appears to be a symptom of achieving an unprecedented level of mental health. The Buddha was presumably referring to this bliss as a sufficing condition, or immediate catalyst, for the achievement of samadhi.<sup>98</sup> Here is one of his more detailed accounts of this experience:<sup>99</sup>

Separated from pleasures of sense, separated from unwholesome states of mind, one attains to and abides in the first stabilization, which is accompanied by coarse examination and precise investigation, born of seclusion, and is joyful and blissful. And one drenches, fills, completely fills and pervades one's body with joy and bliss, born of seclusion so that there is nowhere in one's body that is not pervaded by it.

With the realization of access to the first stabilization, five mental factors associated with that level of samadhi arise, which directly counteract the five hindrances:

1. The factor of *coarse examination*, which counters the combined hinderances of *lethargy and drowsiness*
2. The factor of *precise investigation*, which counters the hindrance of *uncertainty*
3. The factor of *well-being*, which counters the hindrance of *malice*
4. The factor of *bliss*, which counters the combined hinderances of *excitation and anxiety*
5. The factor of *single-pointed attention*, which counters *sensual craving*

The beauty of this is that those very healing factors that can counter the obstacles to achieving mental balance emerge naturally through the process of stabilizing the mind. The practice of shamatha reveals the profound capacity of the mind to heal itself.

A significant difference between access to the first stabilization and the actual state of that stabilization is that in the former, you gain only a tenuous freedom from the five hindrances, whereas in the latter, your immunity to them is stronger. There is a similar difference in the stability of the five factors of stabilization. There is a corresponding difference in the length of time you can remain immersed in such sublime states of focused attention. With access to the first stabilization, you can effortlessly remain in samadhi for at least four hours at a stretch, without the slightest perturbation from either subtle laxity or excitation. But once you have achieved the actual state of the first stabilization, samadhi can be sustained, according to Buddhaghosa, "for a whole night and a whole day, just as a healthy man, after rising from his seat, could stand a whole day."<sup>100</sup>

Due to deep attentional stability, you may feel as if your sleep is suffused with samadhi and many pure dreams. Your sense of attentional vividness becomes so great that you feel that you could count the atoms of the pillars and walls of your house, and your attention is highly focused throughout all your daily activities. These exceptional degrees of stability and vividness of your awareness carry over, to a considerably degree, in your consciousness after you arise from your meditation practice and engage in your daily affairs, when your mind returns to the desire realm. When your mind disengages from activity, it naturally slips back into a



space-like state of awareness, and physical and mental pliancy arise very swiftly.

The most important effect of shamatha that lingers on between meditation sessions is a temporary, relative freedom from afflictive thoughts and emotions. It's not that they don't arise at all anymore, but they occur less frequently, with less intensity, and for shorter periods. In particular, you are mostly free of the five hindrances—as long as you don't lose your attentional balance. Between meditation sessions, you retain an exceptional degree of both kinds of pliancy and fitness, which causes you to be naturally inclined to acting virtuously. Shamatha adepts report that due to bodily fitness, you have no feelings of physical heaviness or discomfort, your spine becomes "straight like a golden pillar," and your body feels blissful, as if it were bathed with warm milk. Due to mental fitness, you are now fully in control of the mind, virtually free of sadness and grief and continuously experiencing a state of well-being. As the Buddha declared, those who have achieved any state of meditative stabilization abide in happiness here and now.<sup>101</sup>

### THE PRACTICE: RESTING IN LUMINOUS VACUITY

As described earlier, the achievement of shamatha by way of mindfulness of breathing is marked by the first appearance of the counterpart sign of the air element. But because the five factors of stabilization (coarse examination, precise investigation, well-being, bliss, and single-pointed attention) are not strong in access concentration, you will find it very difficult to sustain your attention on this very subtle mental image. Your mind will slip into the *bhavanga*, or the ground of becoming, which is a relative vacuum state of consciousness, voided of all thoughts, mental imagery, and sense perceptions. Buddhaghosa likens this to a young child who is lifted up and stood on its feet, but repeatedly falls down on the ground.<sup>102</sup> If you wish to proceed beyond access concentration to the actual state of the first stabilization, you steadfastly focus on the counterpart sign until you can maintain your attention on it for a whole day and night. But if you are content with this level of access concentration and wish to use it as a basis for your

practice of vipashyana, or contemplative insight, then you release the counterpart sign and rest for a time in the ground of becoming.

It is common for contemplatives to settle for access concentration. Asanga advised that as soon as this state of shamatha is achieved, the entire continuum and flow of one's attention should be single-pointedly focused inward on the mind. In this practice, divest your consciousness of all signs and thoughts, and allow it to remain in a state of tranquillity. If you have achieved shamatha by focusing on a mental image, you should now release that image and rest in a state of consciousness free of appearances. At this point, with the entirety of your awareness withdrawn from your physical senses, and with consciousness disengaged from all discursive thought and imagery, you experience a nondual awareness of consciousness itself. In that way, the relative nature of consciousness is directly perceived, and yet it is ungraspable and undemonstrable.

Once you have achieved shamatha, you can enter it at will. While abiding in this state, the whole of your attention is focused single-pointedly, withdrawn from the physical senses, discursive thoughts, and mental imagery, and is immersed in the substrate consciousness. In this state, no "signs" appear to the mind, or if they do on rare occasions due to a temporary lapse of mindfulness, they quickly disappear by themselves, as your mind rests in the luminous vacuity of the substrate consciousness. No appearances of your own body or anything else arise, so you feel as if the mind has become indivisible with space. Your mind has become so still and divorced from discursive thoughts that you feel you could remain in meditation uninterruptedly for months or even years, with no awareness of the passage of time. While your mind is immersed in this state, it is suffused with an inner sense of well-being, in which it is impossible for unwholesome thoughts or any kind of discomfort to arise. Dūdjom Lingpa describes this experience as follows:

Eventually all coarse and subtle thoughts will be calmed in the empty expanse of the essential nature of your mind. You will become still in an unfluctuating state, in which you will experience joy like the warmth of a fire, clarity like the dawn, and non-conceptuality like an ocean unmoved by waves.<sup>103</sup>

While abiding in shamatha, you may have little or no experience of the passage of time, for the sense of time requires memory, which is activated through conceptualization; so in the absence of conceptualization, you dwell in a state of consciousness that feels timeless. Nevertheless, before entering meditative equipoise, you can cue yourself to emerge from meditation after a designated period, or you can prepare your mind to be aroused from samadhi by a specific sound or other sensory stimulus. When you do emerge from meditation in which your awareness was removed from all sensory experience, you feel as if your body is suddenly coming into being.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE PRACTICE

### **How Long Does It Take?**

How long does it take to achieve shamatha if one is well prepared and practices diligently and continuously in a conducive environment, with good companions and under the skillful guidance of an experienced mentor? As mentioned in the introduction, the Tibetan oral tradition states that under such optimal conditions, a person of "sharp faculties" may achieve shamatha in three months, one of "medium faculties" in six months, and a person of "dull faculties" may achieve it in nine months. This may well be true for monks and nuns who begin their shamatha practice after years of study and training in ethics. But in the modern world, this appears to be an overly optimistic forecast. Consider that five thousand hours of training, at a rate of fifty hours each week for fifty weeks of the year, is the amount of time commonly required to achieve expertise in a high-level skill. To reach an exceptionally high level of mastery, ten thousand hours may be required. If we place shamatha training in this context, it may give us some idea about the degree of commitment needed to achieve such attentional skills.

Given the many profound psychological, societal, and environmental differences between people living in industrialized nations and in traditional societies such as rural Tibet, it is impossible to predict with accuracy how long it may take people living in our modern world to achieve shamatha. But there are some encouraging signs that significant progress can be made. At the end of the one-year shamatha retreat led by Gen

Lamrimpa in 1988, one meditator sat four sessions each day, each one lasting three hours. Another sat for just two sessions, each more than seven hours long. Neither one, according to Gen Lamrimpa, had achieved shamatha at that point, but both had made very good progress. When they arose from their meditations after so many hours, it felt to them as if no time had passed at all, and their bodies and minds were filled with blissful and relaxed sensations.

### The Threefold Training

The “threefold training” of ethical discipline, concentration, and wisdom comprises the essential framework of the Buddhist path of liberation. The first training, in ethical discipline, consists of the three factors of *right speech*, *right action*, and *right livelihood*. The primary purpose of this first level of training is to support the cultivation of focused attention, which has the function of balancing the mind, thereby elevating it to higher, more serene, blissful, and radiant states of consciousness. Such purification is not possible without ethical discipline, in which mental imbalances are reduced through restraint from unwholesome physical, verbal, and mental behavior. As a result of training in ethical discipline, the mind is imbued with self-confidence, absence of remorse, fearlessness, and inward purity and serenity, which makes it suitable for the second training, in concentration. Similarly, the achievement of an exceptional degree of concentration and mental balance (through the cultivation of shamatha) is necessary to progress fully in the third training, in wisdom.

The training in concentration consists of *right effort*, *right mindfulness*, and *right concentration*. Within this training, right effort and right mindfulness fulfill an essentially supportive role, the former by exerting the mind, the latter balancing it. Together they support the achievement of right concentration, which is defined by the Buddha in terms of the attainment of states of meditative stabilization. Such degrees of mental balance (concentration), the Buddha declared, are a necessary prerequisite for gaining experiential knowledge and vision of things as they really are (wisdom).<sup>104</sup> This view is shared by the entire Indian Mahayana tradition, as expressed by Shantideva: “Realizing that one who is well endowed with vipashyana by

way of shamatha eradicates mental afflictions, one should first seek shamatha."<sup>105</sup> Tsongkhapa illustrated the relation between shamatha and vipashyana with the following metaphor:

When examining a tapestry in a dark room, if you illuminate it with a radiant, steady lamp, you can vividly examine the images. If the lamp is dim, or, though bright, flickers in the wind, your observation will be impaired. Likewise, when analyzing the nature of any phenomenon, support penetrating intelligence with unwavering, sustained, voluntary attention, and you can clearly observe the real nature of the phenomenon under investigation.<sup>106</sup>

The primary reason such an exceptional degree of concentration, or samadhi, is needed is that only with the achievement of access to the first stabilization are you freed from the five hindrances. Until such freedom is achieved, the Buddha stated, "One considers himself as indebted, sick, in bonds, enslaved, and lost in a desert track,"<sup>107</sup> and it is not possible to know one's own "welfare, another's welfare, or the welfare of both, and realize the excellence of knowledge and vision befitting the noble ones, transcending the human state."<sup>108</sup> The achievement of shamatha provides the necessary foundation in mental and physical pliancy and fitness to be able to fully develop contemplative insight into the ultimate nature of the mind and other phenomena. The Buddha likened shamatha to a great warrior who is needed to protect the wise minister of vipashyana.<sup>109</sup> After experimenting with various kinds of ascetic disciplines, this was a profound discovery made by the Buddha that swiftly led to his enlightenment. He later described this insight as follows:

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 meditative stabilization, 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.<sup>110</sup>

The distinction between access and the actual states of meditative stabilization is not made in the discourses of the Buddha as recorded in the Pali language, but first appears in the commentaries. Some Theravada Buddhists have claimed that *momentary* concentration (*khanika samadhi*) provides a sufficient basis in concentration for the perfection of vipashyana.<sup>111</sup> In the 1960s, a series of debates was held among Theravada Buddhist scholars, with one side arguing that the achievement of the first meditative stabilization is required to achieve liberation, and the other side arguing that momentary concentration is sufficient for vipashyana practice to fully liberate the mind.<sup>112</sup>

The contemporary Burmese meditation master Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw has concluded with considerable authority that access to the first meditative stabilization is a necessary and sufficient basis in samadhi for the perfect cultivation of contemplative insight. And he adds that the achievement of even the first meditative stabilization is very, very rare in today's world.<sup>113</sup> This assertion reflects the mainstream view of the Indian Mahayana tradition as well, namely that access concentration to the first meditative stabilization is the minimal degree of samadhi needed for vipashyana to be fully effective. This view is widely held among Tibetan Buddhists to this day.

The question of what degree of concentration is needed to liberate the mind irreversibly from its afflictive tendencies is best approached experientially, perhaps even scientifically. Both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions declare that the mind is irreversibly freed from mental afflictions only through the union of shamatha and vipashyana. Cognitive scientists may now be able to investigate these claims empirically, identifying the practices that result in such radical purification. Such an approach truly accords with the spirit of empiricism and pragmatism that has inspired the Buddhist tradition from its beginning.

APPENDIX:  
SYNOPSIS OF THE NINE STAGES ● ● ●

|   | Step                     | What is achieved   | The power by which that is achieved | What problems persist                                    |
|---|--------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Directed Attention       | One is able to direct the attention to the chosen object     | Learning the instructions           | There is no attentional continuity on the object         |
| 2 | Continuous Attention     | Attentional continuity on the chosen object up to a minute   | Thinking about the practice         | Most of the time the attention is not on the object      |
| 3 | Resurgent Attention      | Swift recovery of distracted attention; mostly on the object | Mindfulness                         | One still forgets the object entirely for brief periods. |
| 4 | Close Attention          | One no longer completely forgets the chosen object           | Mindfulness, which is now strong    | Some degree of complacency concerning samadhi            |
| 5 | Tamed Attention          | One takes satisfaction in samadhi                            | Introspection                       | Some resistance to samadhi                               |
| 6 | Pacified Attention       | No resistance to training the attention                      | Introspection                       | Desire, depression, lethargy, and drowsiness             |
| 7 | Fully Pacified Attention | Pacification of attachment, melancholy, and lethargy         | Enthusiasm                          | Subtle imbalances of the attention, swiftly rectified    |
| 8 | Single-pointed Attention | Samadhi is long, sustained without any excitation or laxity  | Enthusiasm                          | It still takes effort to ward off excitation and laxity  |
| 9 | Attentional balance      | Flawless samadhi is long, sustained effortlessly             | Familiarity                         | Attentional Imbalances may recur in the future           |

**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.

|  | <b>Attentional imbalances</b>                    | <b>The type of mental engagement</b> | <b>The quality of the experience</b> | <b>Involuntary thoughts</b>   |
|--|--|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
|  | Coarse excitation                                | Focused                              | Movement                             | The flow of involuntary thought is like a cascading waterfall.                |
|  | Coarse excitation                                | Focused                              | Movement                             | The flow of involuntary thought is like a cascading waterfall.                |
|  | Coarse excitation                                | Interrupted                          | Movement                             | The flow of involuntary thought is like a cascading waterfall.                |
|  | Coarse laxity and medium excitation              | Interrupted                          | Achievement                          | Involuntary thoughts are like a river quickly flowing through a gorge.        |
|  | Medium laxity and medium excitation              | Interrupted                          | Achievement                          | Involuntary thoughts are like a river quickly flowing through a gorge.        |
|  | Medium laxity and subtle excitation              | Interrupted                          | Achievement                          | Involuntary thoughts are like a river slowly flowing through a valley.        |
|  | Subtle laxity and excitation                     | Interrupted                          | Familiarity                          | Involuntary thoughts are like a river slowly flowing through a valley.        |
|  | Latent impulses for subtle excitation and laxity | Uninterrupted                        | Stillness                            | The conceptually discursive mind is calm like an ocean with no waves.         |
|  | The causes of those imbalances are still latent  | Effortless                           | Perfection                           | The conceptually discursive mind is still like Mount Meru, king of mountains. |

**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.