

Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta #5 - Collected Mind

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 12/22/13.

In recent weeks, we've been exploring the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha's discourse on the ways of establishing mindfulness. We've looked at the introduction to the sutta, where the Buddha tells us that this is [the direct path](#) to freedom from being caught in the unsatisfactoriness of experience, the direct path to living with ease and equanimity with the ups and downs of this human life. Next, the Buddha talks about contemplating each of the fields of mindfulness (body, feelings, mind-states and certain categories of experience) by being

"ardent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world."¹

So far we have explored the quality of [ardency](#) - a passionate, continual and balanced effort; the quality of [clearly knowing](#) - the ability to recognize and know what is happening in the world of experience in this moment; and we've looked at the quality of being [mindful](#) - which has two interdependent facets. These are remembering to bring, and then bringing, bare attention or lucid awareness to each moment of experience. This is the simple awareness of things as they are in each moment. This facet of mindfulness is combined with remembering to bring our knowledge of the Buddha's teachings, and our own hard-earned wisdom, to what we are seeing or encountering with bare attention.

Today I want to explore the last of these qualities that we are to bring to the fields of mindfulness: "being free of desire and discontent for the world". What this is referring to is the state of samādhi, which is usually translated as "concentration" and sometimes as unification of mind. Other terms that I've actually come to prefer are that the mind is collected, focused, and settled.

The reason that "being free of desire and discontent for the world" is taken to be a reference to concentration is that this is part of the experience of a concentrated, settled, focused or collected mind. By its very nature, when the mind is collected, it

is temporarily free of the fragmentation that comes with distraction, with getting pulled this way and that by greed, discontent, drowsiness, agitation or doubt. In other words, by what are often referred to as the Five Hindrances.

We can certainly know the difference for ourselves between a fragmented mind and a collected one. For myself, that experience of a collected mind is accompanied by a quality of calmness and often a subtle, or maybe more excitable, kind of joy. Having tasted that, the experience of fragmentation, of getting pulled this way and that by "desire and discontent" is much more clear. I generally find the experience of a collected mind is much more pleasant than that of a distracted, agitated, discontented mind.

There are two conditions, that I want to mention today, that help us to collect our minds: living an ethical life, and maintaining a continuity of mindfulness as we go through our daily lives as well as during meditation.

Ethics might seem to be an odd thing to contribute to concentration. But when we act in ways that are unskillful or unethical, our minds are filled with "desire and discontent" as well as agitation, worry and regret. It can be hard to settle the mind when we are stirring it up with all of these unskillful actions. On the other hand, when we engage in skillful or ethical actions, whether in the form of thought, word or deed, this leads to a relaxed and happy state of mind, which is one of the factors that cause concentration to develop.

For lay people, the most common form of ethical or skillful action is to train with what are called the Five Precepts. The precepts are trainings rather than rules we must follow perfectly. These precepts are:

- I undertake the training of not taking the life of any living being.
- I undertake the training of not taking what has not been given.
- I undertake the training of not engaging in sexual misconduct.
- I undertake the training of refraining from false and harmful speech.
- I undertake the training of refraining from intoxicating drink and drugs that lead to heedlessness.

Another reason that training with the precepts leads to concentration is because the training is a constant process of noticing how we are acting right now, remembering whether this is skillful or not and remembering what we should be doing if it isn't skillful. So practicing with the precepts contributes to a continuity of mindfulness in daily life. Continuity of mindfulness is the second condition I mentioned that leads to a collected and focused mind.

When we sit down to meditate, there are two ways that we can collect the mind. We can remember to focus attention again and again on one object. Or we can remember to focus attention on the ever-changing stream of objects that arise and fall within the field of awareness.

By "object" I'm referring to a sight, a sound, a taste, a smell, an experience of hot or cold, hardness or softness, movement or stillness, or a mental event such as a thought, an image or a memory of some sort. Any of these can be a momentary object of attention.

Most of the time when we sit down to meditate our minds are somewhat fragmented. This is often referred to as "monkey mind." Just as a monkey in the forest jumps from branch to branch, reaching for this and for that, a fragmented mind jumps from this object to that one. It is pulled this way and that by our tendency to try to hold on to what is pleasant, to try to push away what is unpleasant and by our hopes to become or be something or someone different than we are in this moment. So whenever we begin to meditate it is usually most helpful to begin by focusing attention on one object until the mind becomes more collected, more settled and focused.

A variety of objects can be used for collecting the mind. One method is repeating a word over and over to ourselves, which is sometimes called mantra practice. A variation on this is repeating a phrase again and again, such as in mettā practice where we might repeat a phrase like "may you be happy and peaceful". Another way of focusing on one object is to focus attention on one location, maybe focusing on a colored disk or a candle flame, or focusing on a location in the body where we give attention to the sensations of breathing. We might collect the mind by engaging in a repetitive activity, such as moving attention from section to section of

the body, again and again — the body scan technique, or giving attention to the sensations in the feet as we raise, move and lower them again and again - the practice of walking meditation.

Whatever the single object we are using, this practice requires us to bring moment after moment of mindfulness to this object. It is this continuity of mindfulness that helps the mind settle and focus.

As the mind becomes more collected, if we are emphasizing the development of insight we can maintain the continuity of mindfulness in a more open and relaxed kind of way. This would be the form of concentration in which attention is focused on just being present with the ever-changing flow of experience. This is sometimes called "choice-less awareness." We're not intentionally choosing to give attention to any particular object. Mindful attention is just spontaneously given to whatever is strong enough to attract attention in any particular moment.

This kind of open relaxed sort of concentration requires strong mindfulness and quite a bit of stability and freedom from distracting tendencies. It can be easy to fall into day-dreaming, stories or planning states of mind while believing one is engaged in this kind of "choiceless" or "unfabricated" sort of mindful concentration. If one awakens to the fact that this has been occurring, it is time to return to focusing on one object in order to collect the mind once again. Then when the mind is collected, we can relax into this open, spacious form of concentration. So when using "choice-less awareness" as part of insight-oriented practice, there is a dynamic movement back and forth between a focus on one object and focusing on the stream of objects.

I'd like to close with this passage from Joseph Goldstein's book *Mindfulness*.

"One of the great gifts of deepening concentration is that it helps keep the various mental hindrances at bay.... By temporarily dampening the force of lust and craving, aversion and restlessness, it opens us to more refined pleasures of the mind. This, in turn, gives us impetus to develop concentration even more. Over time, we see the default level of concentration increase in our minds, which changes how we feel and how we are in the world. We create an inner environment of peace."²

Notes

1. adapted from the translation by Anālayo Bhikkhu, *satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, Birmingham, United Kingdom: Windhorse Publications, 2003, p. 3. (Note: I have substituted "ardent" for "diligent" as a translation of ātāpi.)
2. Goldstein, Joseph. *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*, Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc., 2013, p. 23.