Samatha Meditation

Cultivating a Calm and Collected Mind

Prepared by Steve Lovinger • mindfulnessmeditationgroup.com

What Is Samatha?

Samatha is a Pali word meaning calm or tranquility. In the Buddha's teaching, it refers to the gradual settling and steadying of the mind — learning to stay with one thing long enough that the mental chatter quiets and a natural clarity begins to emerge.

The Buddha taught samatha not as a retreat from life, but as training that makes the mind fit for seeing clearly. A scattered, agitated mind is hard to live with and hard to learn from. A calm, collected mind is workable — and wisdom becomes possible.

Why Practice Samatha?

In one of the shorter teachings (AN 2.30), the Buddha says simply: a concentrated mind sees things as they actually are. This is the core rationale. Samatha is not about achieving a special state — it is about making the mind steady enough to see what's actually happening.

Along the way, practitioners typically notice:

- Less being swept away by thoughts and emotions
- A quieter, lighter quality in daily life
- More space between what happens and how you react
- A growing capacity for genuine stillness

What Do You Focus On?

The most common meditation object in the suttas is the breath — not controlled breathing, but simple awareness of breathing as it naturally occurs. The Buddha's full teaching on breath meditation (MN 118) describes a gradual deepening: noticing the length of the breath, then sensing the whole body breathing, then letting the breath become quieter and more refined.

Other meditation objects taught in the suttas include loving-kindness, awareness of the body, and various recollections. All of them work by giving the mind something wholesome to rest in, rather than being pulled around by habit.

For most people beginning this practice, the breath is the most accessible starting point. Many find it helpful to count breaths on the exhale from one to ten and then start over at one. If you lose count, just start over. Focusing on the exhale helps prevent forced breathing.

What Gets in the Way?

The suttas describe five recurring mental states — called the five hindrances — that cloud the mind and obstruct clear seeing. They also offer vivid images for each (from DN 2, the Fruits of the Contemplative Life). Two additional common obstacles are included below, drawn from practical experience rather than the canonical list.

The Five Hindrances (from the suttas):

- **Wanting and craving** — like water dyed with bright colors: you can't see through it. The mind is preoccupied with things it wants, including wanting the experiences of a meditation session to be a certain way or different from what is being experienced.
  - What helps: gently noting the wanting, and returning to the breath.
- **Irritation and ill-will** — like water brought to a boil: agitated, turbulent. The mind keeps going back to what's wrong.
  - What helps: a few moments of goodwill toward yourself, toward others, even toward the irritation itself.
- **Dullness and drowsiness** — like water covered in algae: opaque, heavy. The mind wants to drift or sleep.
  - What helps: opening the eyes slightly, straightening the posture, taking a few deeper breaths.
  - A suggestion from your teacher: try softening your focus and allowing peripheral awareness to open — especially to sound. Rather than identifying or labeling what you hear, just let sounds register at the edge of awareness. This broadening of attention can counteract the narrowing and heaviness of dullness without abandoning the meditation object.
- **Restlessness and worry** — like water whipped by wind: nothing can be reflected clearly. The mind plans, replays, and anticipates.
  - What helps: relaxing the effort, softening the body, lengthening the out-breath.
- **Doubt** — like water in a dark room: you can't see anything. The mind says: this isn't working, I'm doing it wrong, what's the point?
  - What helps: patience. Doubt is a passing mental state, not a verdict on your practice. Doubt is impermanent and the result of causes and conditions like everything else.

Additional Obstacle:

- **Proliferating thought** — the mind doesn't just wander; it builds. One thought leads to a story, a memory, a plan, an argument. Before long you've been gone for minutes. This is distinct from restlessness — the mind isn't agitated, it's simply absorbed in its own content.
  - What helps: counting the breath on the exhale. Count silently from one to ten, then begin again. The count gives the mind just enough to do that thought-chains lose their grip. When you notice you've lost the count, simply return to one — without judgment.
  - This technique is not from the canonical suttas, but it is widely used in traditional practice and works well for beginners and experienced practitioners alike.

The suttas treat working with the hindrances as a central skill — not a sign that something has gone wrong. Their arising and passing away is the practice

What Happens as the Mind Settles?

The suttas don't map meditation onto a rigid set of stages. What they do describe is a natural progression as the hindrances weaken: the mind becomes lighter, a quiet gladness arises, the body relaxes, and attention becomes more effortless. This is not something forced it is what happens when the mind is no longer working against itself. We create the conditions for the mind to settle.

As this deepens, the practice can move into what the suttas call jhāna — states of deep collectedness. These are not exotic or rare; the suttas describe them as arising naturally for a practitioner who has worked patiently with the hindrances and developed sustained attention.

The Four Jhānas (States of Deep Collectedness)

The jhānas are described many times in the suttas in nearly identical language. Rather than technical definitions, the Buddha used physical similes to convey what they feel like from the inside:

- **First Jhāna —** Joy and ease arise from the settling of the mind. Applied attention is still present — you are still gently directing. The simile: a bathman kneading water through a powder until every part is permeated.

- **Second Jhāna —** The effortful directing falls quiet. The mind is unified and still. Joy and ease continue, now arising from the stillness itself. The simile: a cool, spring-fed lake, permeated from within.

- **Third Jhāna —** Even the joy fades, leaving a quieter happiness and deep equanimity. You are fully aware, fully at ease. The simile: lotuses fully immersed in a cool pool.

- **Fourth Jhāna —** Pleasure and pain have settled. What remains is clarity and equanimity — a completely still, bright awareness. The simile: a person sitting wrapped in a white cloth, no part of the body left uncovered.

The jhānas are offered here as a map, not a requirement. Many practitioners find the earlier stages of settling — more ease, less reactivity, a quieter mind — to be profoundly worthwhile in themselves.

Calm and Insight Work Together

One of the clearest teachings on this (AN 4.170) describes people arriving at liberation by three different routes: some develop calm first, then insight; some develop insight first, then calm; some develop them together. None of these is presented as the correct route. What matters is that both qualities are eventually present.

A calm mind sees more clearly. And clear seeing further settles the mind. In practice, these reinforce each other naturally — you don't have to choose between them.

Questions for Discussion

- What most commonly pulls your attention away in meditation — wanting, aversion, dullness, restlessness, or doubt? Does it shift over time?
- Have you tried counting the breath on the exhale to work with thought proliferation? What did you notice?
- Have you noticed times when the mind settled on its own — not forced, but just quieting? What were the conditions?
- How does a calmer, more collected mind show up in daily life — in conversations, decisions, difficult moments?

"Develop concentration. A concentrated mind sees things as they actually are."
— The Buddha, AN 2.30