

Appropriate Concentration

The Eighth Factor of the Eightfold Path

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Of the eight factors of the path, concentration comes last — not because it is least important, but because it depends on everything that precedes it. Appropriate View orients us. Appropriate Intention, Action, Livelihood, Effort, and Mindfulness steady and purify the mind. Concentration is what naturally emerges once that ground has been prepared. It is not a technique bolted onto the rest of practice; it is the natural settling of a mind that has stopped fighting itself. Appropriate concentration is cultivated, not forced. Like all experience, it arises from causes and conditions. As the supporting conditions develop, the mind settles into stability, clarity, and ease.

What Appropriate Concentration Is — and Isn't

Samādhi is usually translated as “concentration,” but the word can mislead. In ordinary usage, concentration suggests strain — narrowing the mind onto an object by force, the way one might grit through a difficult task. That is not what the texts describe. Samādhi means something closer to “unification” or “collectedness” — a gathering of a mind that is ordinarily scattered across competing thoughts, sensations, and reactions into a single, stable, coherent state. The mind does not become narrower; it becomes less divided. Energy that was scattered across countless impulses and distractions begins to work together as a unified whole.

It helps to be equally clear about what concentration is not. It is not suppressing thoughts or willing the mind into blankness. It is not emotional numbing or a retreat from reality. And it is not something you force into being. What actually happens is subtler: the mind, no longer compelled to automatically chase every thought and sensation that arises, settles into a relaxed stability. The settling is the result of conditions, not of effort directed against experience.

The Four Jhānas

The classical description of appropriate concentration in the early texts is the sequence of four jhānas — progressively refined states of absorption. They are worth knowing not because every practitioner needs to attain them, but because they describe, with unusual precision, what happens to a mind as it lets go of its habitual noise. It is also worth knowing that stability within any jhāna is genuinely difficult to sustain. The mind can move fluidly between these states — including backward — and holding steadily in any one of them for an extended period is the work of sustained, mature practice.

First jhāna: The mind, withdrawn from sensual preoccupation and unwholesome states, takes up an object with applied and sustained attention. This effortful attending gives rise to rapture (pīti) and tranquility or ease (sukha). Rapture at this stage is energized and somewhat unstable — it can feel like waves, a kind of brightening or lifting that comes and goes. Tranquility or ease is quieter and steadier: a felt sense of relief and soft pleasure arising simply from the mind no longer being pulled in every direction.

Second jhāna: The effort of applying and sustaining attention falls away. The mind has settled enough that it no longer needs to be steered onto its object; it rests there on its own. Rapture and

tranquility or ease remain, now arising from internal stillness rather than from effort. Rapture may still arise in waves, but they are gentler and less urgent.

Third jhāna: Rapture, being a relatively coarse and energized quality, subsides entirely. What remains is tranquility or ease, now a quieter and more even contentment, accompanied by equanimity and clear awareness. The absence of rapture is not a loss; it is a further settling.

Fourth jhāna: Even tranquility or ease is relinquished. What remains is pure equanimity and mindfulness — neither pleasure nor pain, neither elation nor flatness. The texts describe this as purity of mindfulness through equanimity. The instrument of awareness is as uncolored as it will get.

Read this way, the four jhānas are a map of progressive letting be, not a checklist of mystical attainments. Each stage releases something that the previous stage still depended on, until what remains is unconditioned stability rather than a state propped up by pleasant feeling.

The Five Hindrances

The texts that describe the jhānas also describe what prevents them: five mental states that obstruct concentration. They organize into two poles.

The distraction pole pulls attention outward or forward: sensual desire draws the mind toward pleasant objects; ill will fixes attention on unpleasant ones; restlessness and worry scatter it across what has gone wrong or might go wrong; and doubt destabilizes practice itself by questioning whether this is working at all. All of these are forms of the mind being caught by something it cannot drop.

The dullness pole pulls in the opposite direction: sloth and torpor soften attention until it loses its object entirely. The mind is present but dim, neither absorbed nor agitated — a kind of fog that can feel like peace until you notice you have lost the thread.

Working with hindrances is not a matter of suppressing them. It is a matter of recognizing them clearly: naming the state, noticing its texture, and allowing attention to return without treating the hindrance as an enemy. Gross distraction and gross dullness are easy to spot. Subtle forms of both — a low hum of desire behind apparent stillness, a mild dimming of alertness that hasn't yet become sleep — are where much of the work actually happens.

Mindfulness and Concentration

Mindfulness and concentration are often mentioned together because they are functionally inseparable, yet they do different things. Mindfulness is what notices — it remembers the present, and it is what catches the moment when attention has wandered. Concentration is what stays — the stability that builds, over time, from returning again and again. Neither is sufficient on its own. Without mindfulness, there is no recognition that the mind has drifted, and so no return; concentration has no ground to develop from. Without concentration, mindfulness remains alert but unstable, easily caught by the next passing thought. Each one makes the other possible.

Why It Belongs on the Path

It would be easy to treat concentration as a pleasant side-effect of meditation, a calm and absorbing state, valuable for its own sake. The early texts resist this. Appropriate concentration is valued because a unified mind is a clear mind, and a clear mind is the necessary condition for insight into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. Concentration steadies the instrument; it does not, by itself, produce liberation. It prepares the mind so insight can arise clearly. A calm mind is not yet a liberated mind. Until calm turns toward investigation, the work of insight remains incomplete. The texts repeatedly pair calming (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) as twin capacities to be cultivated together, neither sufficient alone.

A Phenomenological Note

Setting aside the cosmological language they sometimes acquired in later tradition, it is worth pausing on what is actually being described across these four stages. What the *jhāna* sequence describes is a gradual transformation in the structure of experience itself: first, attention applied to an object; then attention resting in an object without effort; then the dropping away of rapture, the affective charge that still tied attention to something gained; then the dropping away of preference itself. This is not a journey to an exotic destination so much as a successive thinning of the apparatus we ordinarily use to relate to experience — the effort, the seeking, the subtle preference for one feeling-tone over another. What is left at the fourth *jhāna* is not nothing; it is awareness without the usual scaffolding of grasping and aversion. Anyone who has sat with this sequence even briefly will recognize that it describes something observable in direct experience, not a doctrine to be taken on faith.

Bringing It to Practice

Concentration develops naturally whenever we repeatedly return attention to what is happening now without fighting our experience. Many people come to meditation expecting to stop thinking. When thinking continues — as it always does — frustration follows, because the mind has become the enemy of the practice. But concentration does not arise by defeating thought. It is a result of conditions, like everything else: each time we notice the mind has wandered and gently return — to the breath, the body, present experience — we strengthen the capacity for staying. **The return is the practice, not a sign that practice has failed.**

This is also why concentration is not confined to the cushion. Whenever we give complete attention to a simple activity — drinking tea, washing dishes, walking, gardening, listening to another person — we are working with the same faculty. The old Zen saying captures this well: when you chop wood, chop wood; when you carry water, carry water. The activity matters less than the quality of attention we bring to it. Daily life, engaged this way, is not a distraction from practice; it is practice in a different form.

Concentration deepens through progressive letting be, not through additional effort. If a sitting feels effortful and is not settling, the appropriate response is usually not to concentrate harder but to notice what is still being resisted — a thought, a goal, a subtle dissatisfaction with the present state.

A few practical markers to notice in your own sitting this week:

- Is attention landing on the object without being forced there repeatedly? That shift — from applying attention to attention simply resting — is the movement from first to second jhāna in miniature.
- Is there a quality of rapture or relief that arises just from the mind growing quiet, independent of anything pleasant happening? Notice it, and notice when it settles into something steadier and less excitable.
- Is the mind, toward the end of a sit, resting in equanimity — even-keeled, neither chasing pleasant states nor pushing away unpleasant ones? That evenness is the direction the whole sequence points toward, and it is also the ground from which clear insight becomes possible.

For Reflection

Where in your practice does effort still feel necessary? What would it mean to let that effort relax without losing the object of attention?

Have you noticed rapture or tranquility or ease arising simply from stillness, apart from any pleasant circumstance? What happened to it as the sitting continued?

Which of the hindrances is most familiar in your own practice — the distraction pole or the dullness pole? How does it show up in its subtler forms?

Concentration and insight are described as a pair. Where has calm, on its own, started to shade into seeing something clearly about the nature of experience?

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