

Pragmatic Benefits and Concentration through Ānāpānasati Meditation

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1. Introduction

Ordained as a Theravādin nun, I practiced ānāpāna meditation from 4 o'clock morning to 8 o'clock night for one month at a branch of Pa-Auk meditation center in Myanmar, which is well known for its samatha-focused techniques which fundamentally adhered to the Visuddhimagga.

I improved my concentration gradually. One day, while meditating with my closed-eyes, apparently all the people whom I have even seen in my life came up to my mind one by one, tracing my memory back to the past. Hundreds of people seemed to appear there. Some of them were those I liked, did not like, some hurt me, or I hurt; but all appeared as illusions. The inner visions were simply like a movement of a shadow-picture lantern or a film with a distance, not like an actual scene that I saw directly.

Neither anger, sorrow, nor longing arose. I felt I would like to forgive any of those people and let any memory go because I preferred to soak myself into such a peaceful status of mind, rather than disturb myself by such passions. A well-concentrated mind brought extraordinary serenity to my mind - absolutely far from distraction and confusion. The mind reaches the waveless-ocean-like calmness. I grasped the attainment of such a state - that is: one of the great benefits through my own samatha practice.

In the last 50 years or so, however, there has been a large proliferation in groups, largely of Burmese origin, offering and promoting what has come to be called vipassanā meditation - despite the fact that there is little or no mention of such a practice in the canon. At the same time, emphasis on more traditional types of practice, such as samatha and ānāpānasati seem to have declined.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify “Buddhist” meditation and to share importance of concentration (samatha) practice from my direct experience of ānāpānasati and also verifiably with some references of Pāli canon.

2. Problems in the Current Vipassanā-oriented Meditation

The Buddha personally practiced samatha through his life, from the moment of enlightenment to that of death. Jhāna is undoubtedly to complete the entire Buddhist path to help to progress more steadily culminated to a doorway of vipassanā. Practice of ānāpānasati is repeatedly encouraged by the Buddha in a number of suttas throughout his lifetime. Nonetheless, only vipassanā “mindfulness” practice has come to wider prominence today, while samatha appears to gain less attention. There must be misconception about samatha meditation.

Some have suggested that certain individuals feel that the practice of samatha brings with it the danger of becoming obsessed with psychic powers or stuck in blissful states. Others might suggest that samatha was a pre-Buddhist practice and thus not a specifically Buddhist one. A more likely possibility is that these days we live in a busy society which demands instant results by the shortest possible route, and that modern man does not share the same view of time as his Indian predecessor, who saw time as a long drawn out cyclical process, allowing plenty of opportunity for gradual progress.

This is, however, beyond the scope of this paper, whose purpose is to show the central role played by samatha in both the Buddha's own path to enlightenment and that advocated by him to his followers. Moreover, samatha and the practice of jhāna was a constant recourse of the Buddha and his followers whom were told that they should spend their time in the attainment of jhāna.

According to the Buddha's instruction, the purpose of meditation for Buddhists is to attain Nibbāna. The Buddhist meditation consists of samatha and vipassanā. They play individual role. As jhāna states are synonymous to right concentration (sammā-samādhi), samatha practices is further linked to the concepts of eightfold noble path and four noble truths.

The main purpose of samatha is to achieve deep concentration - jhāna states, and begin to discriminate jhāna factors such as joy and happiness. The sequence of the result of regular samatha practice enables to overcome of desires and bring purification of mind. Samatha requires only one meditation subject in each case; therefore, focusing upon only breath in, breath-out (ānāpānasati bhāvanā) is one of the most representative meditations for samatha practitioners. Furthermore, meditation of loving-kindness (mettā bhāvanā) enables them to go up to the third (or fourth in Abhidhamma classification) jhāna state. Therefore the experience of happiness is a highlight of jhāna fruits. On the contrary, vipassanā practice requires seeing things clearly with understanding three lakkhana (anicca, dukkha, anatta). In observance of three lakkhana, vedanā must be neutral feeling (upekkhā). Sati, the key factor of vipassanā means "to be aware" or, "to mind", or "to remember." Different from the jhāna states, there must be no happiness (sukha) in such an observant state of mind.

Originally the term vipassanā represents tevijjā (three knowledge) and samatha represents a specific sort of training and practice for samādhi states. Here knowledge signifies not only general knowledge of secular matters but knowledge superior to them.

Without the strong concentration of jhāna, ordinary people (puthujjana) may know some verbalized concepts such as: "Life is suffering"; "Negative thought is unwholesome kamma"; "Be mindful", and so forth. Those understanding are, however, not associated with tevijjā yet. Such knowledge will not help whatever is suddenly happening and befalling upon them because their knowledge has nothing to do with firm concentration. When they fear and become agitated, their minds are really neither stable nor mindful. It is highly possible to misjudge right decision. Therefore, simple logical understanding is still useless to deal with three lakkhana. Unless holding a calm mind, how can they be aware of the things that really are (satipaṭṭhāna)? An undistracted mind is necessary.

3. Evident Importance of Jhānas through Ānāpānasati in the Canon

Jhāna or samādhi had been already practiced by the Buddha before his enlightenment. When as a young child he slipped into the first jhāna during his father's participation in a ploughing festival.¹ And that later Aḷāra Kālāma taught him up to the seventh jhāna, Uddaka Rāmaputta up to the eighth jhāna. The ascetic Gautama, however, thought there must be still further states to go and he also sought other means.

Therefore, on the night of his enlightenment he returned to practice of the jhānas after partaking of Sujāta's milk-rice.² Having resolved not to move without attaining the goal he was seeking, he entered jhānas 1-2-3-4 through ānāpānasati. Then with his mind purified³, he directed his mind to knowledge of his own former dwelling (pubbe-nivāsānussatiñāṇā), the births of others (dibbacakkhuñāṇa), and destruction of the āsavas

¹ Ja I 58

² Ja I 68

³ M I 21-23f

(āsavakkhayañānā). Here it is remarkable this is no mention of the term “vipassanā,” but actually after the jhāna, the Buddha attained “tevijjā.” Anyway it is not same as the currently practiced vipassanā techniques.

Similarly during parinibbāna,⁴ the Buddha ascended until the attainment of jhānas 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8, and descended jhānas 8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1, again ascended jhānas 1-2-3-4, and leaving the fourth jhāna, and finally entered Mahāparinibbāna.⁵

For instance, about anupubbikathā in the progressive talk of Udāna⁶, people gained the dhammacakkhu or became sotāpannas by the Buddha raising their state of consciousness into the fourth jhāna whereupon they became enlightened. It is, therefore, clear that the traditional path both for the Buddha and his sāvakas to enlightenment was by way of the jhānas. We don't know which arahant became enlightened by either vipassanā or jhāna.

It is quite curious why modern practitioners should have abandoned this procedure and replaced it with vipassanā which seems to lack proven cases. Probably the only possible role for vipassanā in the Pāli canon might be the one to argue that the Buddha, on the night of the enlightenment after attaining the fourth jhāna emerged from there as he did prior to attaining saupādisesanibbāna and then turned his mind to the tevijjā.

The tevijjā were in fact a consequence of post-jhānic vipassanā but even if this could be shown, there seems no evidence for this either canonical or commentarial. This would be still a far cry from vipassanā as it is practiced today and still depends on prior practice of samatha in the form of the various jhānas.

“Tisso vijjā – pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇaṃ vijjā, sattānaṃ cutūpapāteñāṇaṃ vijjā, āsavānaṃ khayeñāṇaṃ vijjā.”⁷

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Originally vipassanā means no more and no less to see things separately and clearly. When a meditator observes and differentiates minute things, it must also need the support of well-sharpened and well-deepened concentration. Indeed, such careful concentration is based on and developed through samatha.

4. Benefits of Ānāpānasati in Samatha Practice

As describe above, there were no specific usage of term such as “vipassanā” and “samatha” but merely “tevijjā” and “jhāna” in the Pāli canon. What the Buddha did for Nibbāna of was fulfill the sequence of jhāna to tevijjā. Currently said, samatha and vipassanā are actually a unit of mutually complementary path. They are intertwined and

⁴ D II 156f

⁵ catutthajjhānā vuṭṭhahitvā taṃ samanantarā bhagavā parinibbāyi

⁶ Ud 49 F

⁷ D. III, 220

⁸ D A II 594, 24 are: asubha (10), 32 kāra (1), kasiṇa (8), mettā, karuṇā, muditā (3), ānāpāna (1), paricchedākāsa (1).

⁹ 13: kasiṇa (8), mettā, karuṇā, muditā (3), ānāpāna (1), paricchedākāsa (1).

¹⁰ kasiṇa (8), upekkhā (1), ānāpāna (1), paricchedākāsa (1), arūpājhāna (4)

support one another¹¹ as parallel paths. Therefore it is essential to make their balance and practice both.

From my personal experience, I realized that samatha practice offer individual and unique practical benefits for our everyday life.

Firstly: ānāpānasati meditation is recommendable for everyone with a busy life because it requires no external material to practice. Everyone has a nose and then can start it; and it requires no particular posture: either sitting, walking, lying down. So you can practice ānāpānasati anytime, anywhere. Or, you can think of how the Buddha tried ānāpānasati hard throughout his life as well as you do, it can arouse your sympathy and motivation.

Secondly: for the benefit of samatha or jhāna, when absorption is successful, there is no room for confusion and distractions that other disturbances perform [induce]. You are surrounded by numerous head-aching miscellaneous problems of business, family, economy, and so forth. It can trap you in a nervous mental-state, easily. Whenever your mind becomes unstable, it originates from worrying, disturbing and capturing your mind and taking somewhere else unsuitable where the mind should stay. In fact, achievement of deep concentration is not facile task. The power of concentration can resist such agitation and enables to run away from such dangers, just as I felt when the people whom I have seen from a distance during the meditation experience.

You can experience true serenity solely inside of your mind. It feels a soundless mirror-like surface of the transparent ocean. What is different from vipassanā is that you cannot feel such happiness during practicing vipassanā but after doing, you can reflect how happy you were in such state; but during samatha, you can feel bliss and purification in your mind at the very moment of meditation.

“Life is suffering,” of course - every Buddhist knows and remembers this truth verbally. Well-sharpened and stable concentration will first make you experience happiness. The bliss and purification of mind will encourage and motivate you to practice so that you can prolong this blissful state more and more through meditation improvement. The happiness from samatha never escapes from the realities of the world. After you maintain the stable and undistracted mind deepened through samādhi, finally the mind will be ready to see suffering and two other lakkhanas culminate to the final liberation. Therefore, the practice of samatha through ānāpānasati meditation offers a sequence of progressive improvements in our daily life in parallel with vipassanā training.

¹¹ Bhante Henepola Gnaratana, *Beyond Mindfulness In Plain English*, (Wisdom Publication, Boston), 2009

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