

THE BARE BONES OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

By Victor Byrd

RIGHT CONCENTRATION (samma samadhi)

One spring in the early 1970's, I was walking my dog Willy in Riverside Park, a lovely strip of green that runs along the Hudson River on the upper Westside of Manhattan. It was one of those perfect Sunday afternoons in New York. In those days, you could let your dog run loose so I watched on the promenade as my beautiful Doberman ran like a black streak on the sloping hillside along the concrete pavement. At some point it began to rain, just a gentle drizzle, and everyone else caught their dogs, snapped leashes back on collars and vamoosed. (One never knows about the rain in New York.) But I opted to stay and continue with my walk. Suddenly, the falling rain looked like a shower of golden dust. Quite literally, the rain no longer seemed to have the property of wetness. I entered a state of awareness that defies description. As impossible as it sounds, I "saw" every person in my life, all in the same moment. They appeared like some architectural grid, more like equations or a kind of mosaic, and stranger still, there was an extraordinary understanding of each person's meaning and karmic task. I have no idea how long this lasted, three seconds or thirty minutes, since there was no time or space in that state of being. Neither was I able to retain any of the profundity of what I had witnessed. When I "returned," the rain had stopped, Willy was still loping along on the hill and life continued on as if nothing unusual had occurred.

In the thirty some years since, I have never written about that experience and very rarely mentioned it. After all, what is there to say? It came and left without my having done one single thing to "deserve" it. Nor could I recall with any specificity what I witnessed, even if I wanted to talk about it. Interestingly, this experience occurred nearly a decade before I started to practice Buddhist meditation. But without a doubt, what I experienced that Sunday afternoon was samadhi.

Samadhi is not an exclusively Buddhist experience any more than it belongs to the Hindu religion. It is a universal "religious," mystical, human experience. In samadhi, some shift of consciousness occurs that

takes us completely out of our normal waking experience of “me watching a world that exists outside of me.” In a state of samadhi, the separation of “me and not me” vanishes and, for a blessed moment, we experience a state of unity with the Vast. For as long as we have walked on this planet, from Stonehenge to Egypt, people have experienced samadhi. I suspect children know it intimately, that is until they are taught to believe in the outside as the only reality, or, as someone told me recently, “before the portal closes.” From then on, we begin a process of “mislaying” ourselves, as Nisargadatta puts it.

Speaking of children, samadhi certainly happened to the Buddha when he was a young boy. Lying on the ground watching his father at a spring plowing festival, he entered a blissful state of silence. It is said that the memory of this experience helped free him from deep despair and discouragement as he looked at his frail, broken body and realized that, after six years of extreme practice, he had not come any closer to the Real. Theravadin Buddhists call the Buddha’s childhood experience “entering the first jhana,” but if it walks and quacks like samadhi, I call it samadhi.

The spiritual journey that began with Right Understanding takes a surprising and sharp turn toward the mystical as it culminates in samadhi. That turn is unexpected because the previous steps of the Eightfold Path have been so eminently logical and tangible, including to a degree, sati. In the previous chapter, I suggested the metaphor of a lighthouse, with sati, the light of awareness, as a tiny light shining at the top. How can such a small lamp produce a beam that has the power to shine out into the darkest harbor? It does so because a set of mirrors catches and amplifies the light into a single concentrated and steady beam. Those reflecting mirrors are how I imagine samadhi.

Another image comes to mind. As the light of sati is purified, “photons” are emitted, and as the photons are “mirrored” by samadhi, they begin to move in a “cascading effect.” The diffuse light becomes more powerful and concentrated, eventually becoming a laser. The merging of sati and samadhi can create a laser that has the potential to penetrate to the very roots of greed, hatred and delusion. That is quite an image and we will return to it at the end of our discussion.

But an odd incongruence occurs as we approach this final spoke in the Dharma Wheel. One feels as if Buddhism, or at least the Theravada

Buddhist tradition, would rather take someone else to the Big Dance, instead of this exotic lady called samadhi. As we mentioned earlier, the Theravadins even have a substitute expression for samadhi, called jhanas. Samadhi seems more compatible with the ancient rhythms of Hindu India or, believe it or not, “born again” Christianity, than the restrained “tasteful” music of early rational Buddhism. She seems almost too mystical, too irrational to fit comfortably into the Buddha’s Eightfold Path.

Samadhi finds a better fit with the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. Bodhidharma, the First Ch’an Patriarch, said that because the mind of a sage does not give rise to reality, and because reality does not give rise to his mind, “he’s always in samadhi.” Before he spoke to an audience, Hui Neng, the Sixth Patriarch, would light five sticks of incense, each one representing a core part of the practice. One of the five sticks that he lit represented samadhi. But even in the Ch’an and Zen traditions, our exotic lady caused a great deal of controversy. Buddhist masters became alarmed at what they called “intoxication by the wine of absorption,” the tendency of many students to develop samadhi without coming any closer to the end of their attachment to ego. Ch’an teachers knew that freedom is the goal of spiritual practice, not sitting in a state of bliss. So these brilliant masters developed a rigorous and seemingly irrational language to keep their students alert and awake, no matter how deep their samadhi took them

Earlier, I quoted Carl Jung’s statement about subjectivity: “Every psychological theory should be criticized in the first instance as a subjective confession.” His insight is apropos to our discussion on samadhi. For example, I recommend *The Path of Serenity and Insight* by Henepola Gunaratana to anyone who wants to dive more deeply into the subject of samadhi and the jhanas. Unlike his widely read *Mindfulness in Plain English*, which is a wonderful user-friendly introduction to mindfulness meditation, *The Path of Serenity and Insight* is a prodigious work of scholarship on the eighth step of the Eightfold Path. But however brilliant Guneratana’s exposition of samadhi is, it is also a personal confession. First and foremost, Gunaratana is a Theravada monk. He views samadhi through the lens of the early Pali scriptures, a fact that he readily admits by the way, but a very limiting fact in terms of this discussion. Are we to assume that this Apollonian, rational and orderly way of understanding samadhi really captures its essence and mystery? The view of samadhi through the far more mystical Mahayana lens differs dramatically from

Guneratana's perspective but, in truth, samadhi does not belong to any single system.

Another personal confession that must be acknowledged here is my own. My view of samadhi is as biased as Guneratana's. I see samadhi through the lens of the classical system of yoga, as codified by Patanjali two thousand years ago. Thus, I am unable to imagine a thorough discussion of samadhi that excludes Patanjali's elegant and detailed description of the steps leading up to samadhi. Neither am I able to talk about samadhi without some reference to my own personal experience. What I propose to do is to begin this discussion with an event that occurred to me as a teenager, then move on to an exploration of samadhi from the Indian context and finally fold the classical Buddhist description of samadhi into the mix.

When I was sixteen years old, I played the organ in a Methodist church in the small Tennessee mountain town where I grew up. I had already been playing for church since the age of fourteen but this was the first year that I got to play for the big leagues, at our revival. Revivals were (and in some areas of the country still are) yearly events where the congregation brought in a visiting preacher to lead the church in a full week of evening services. It was a time of re-dedication and revival of the spirit. Sometimes a church would hold the revival in a large tent, which could accommodate many more people than the regular sanctuary. That's where our revival was held in the summer of my sixteenth year, in a very big tent.

The preachers were usually well known, at least within a certain region, and then there were the preachers whose fame spread well beyond the county line. They traveled from state to state bringing their message of conviction and renewal to the flock that gathered each night in the heat and passion of that old-time religion. Usually they were dynamic, exciting and charismatic. Still, the preachers needed a little musical help to create the emotional wallop that led people to the altar at the end of each service. This is where I came in. I seemed to be a natural when it came to stoking religious fires through music. As the preacher stood on the makeshift stage and invited people to "come down and get right with the Lord," I would "juice" the music, letting it rise and fall in sync with his hypnotic cadence. "Come home, come home. Ye who are weary come home, come home." The choir sang, the preacher intoned and the organ carried the message

into each listener's heart. One of my favorites was "Have Thine Own Way Lord," which was probably what I was playing the night when a conviction of spirit led me to the altar.

Have thine own way, Lord. Have thine own way.
Thou are the potter, I am the clay.
Mold me and make me, after thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.

These are the words of a yielding heart, willing to surrender to the Vast. Even fifty years later, I sometimes hear these words echoing softly and tenderly in my heart during a Buddhist retreat.

The experience of giving one's heart to Jesus has been replicated by untold numbers of people throughout the history of Christianity. Please remember that I am talking about a "conversion" of spirit that defies all rational explanation. Christians call it being "born again" and we should pause long and hard before casting aspersions on something we know absolutely nothing about. Although that night faded into the mist of memory many decades ago, I can still remember how utterly transforming it was. Truly, there was a sense of having been washed completely clean. That feeling lasted for many weeks and I am not persuaded that it ever completely vanished. According to Christianity, I had been "saved." An Indian master would say that I had experienced the bliss of samadhi.

Thirteen years later, while studying hatha yoga at the Integral Yoga Institute in New York City, I discovered (and devoured) *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, a monumental work covering the life and teaching of the great Indian master Sri Ramakrishna (1836 – 1886). In the *Gospel*, the author "M." describes his first meeting with Ramakrishna:

Sri Ramakrishana was standing still, surrounded by a few devotees, and Narendra was singing. When M. looked at Sri Ramakrishna, he was struck with wonder, for the Master stood motionless, and with eyes transfixed. He seemed not to breathe. A devotee told M. that the Master was in samadhi. M. had never before seen or heard of such a thing. Silent with wonder, he thought, 'Is it possible for a man to be so oblivious of the outer world in the consciousness of God? How deep his faith and devotion must be to bring about such a state!'

The sight of the samadhi, and the divine bliss he had witnessed left an indelible impression on M.'s mind. He returned home deeply moved.

Ramakrishna taught his disciples that samadhi is the goal of yoga – the uniting of the individual soul with cosmic consciousness. In a sense, samadhi was so commonplace to Ramakrishna that it was not a big deal at all. He slipped into altered states of consciousness at the sound of a sacred hymn or chant. To him, samadhi is the key that unlocks the portal to the divine. He believed that “true knowledge is impossible without samadhi” and sang this song to his followers:

Dive deep O mind,
Dive deep in the ocean of God's Beauty;
If you descend to the uttermost depth,
There you will find the gem of Love.

In the Hindi language samadhi also refers to a structure, similar to a mausoleum, and meant to commemorate the dead. Usually samadhies are built to honor a saint or guru and when an Indian Master dies, it is often said that she or he has entered Mahasamadhi, the great union. Interestingly, the Buddha also chose to enter a state of samadhi at the time of his passing, as have many Zen Masters throughout the history of Ch'an and Zen Buddhism. Again, the Pali scriptures prefer to say that the Buddha entered one of the *jhanic* states as he passed into Parinirvana.

Many times Ramakrishna told his followers the story of a salt doll that took a swim in the ocean. What happened to the little doll? It disappeared. The salt doll may have thought that it could take a dip in the sea and come out unscathed but in fact as it touched the Vast, it disappeared. This was Ramakrishna's wonderful way of explaining samadhi and its effect on the ego's deluded sense of individuation.

We turn now to one of the towering classics of Indian sacred literature. I believe that Patanjali's *Yoga-Sutra* is required reading for anyone wanting to understand how concentration, meditation and samadhi interconnect. Patanjali's work is a clear, precise and elegant description of the actual mechanics of the meditation process. Remembering how our eyes tend to glaze over when we hear too many “foreign words,” I hope that you will spend some time with the following material and let it slowly sink in. It is well worth the effort.

We know very little about Patanjali, not even the time period when he lived and taught in India. The years between 100 and 300 A.D seems to be generally accepted. In any case, Patanjali codified yoga into a systematic practice through one hundred and ninety six sutras or observations. One of the best translations of his work is *The Yoga-Sutra of Patanjali*, by Chip Hartranft, a book I highly I recommend. In his introduction, Hartranft says:

With uncommon directness, Patanjali analyzes how we know what we know and why we suffer. He then provides a meditative program through which each of us can fulfill the primary purposes of consciousness: to see things as they are and to achieve freedom from suffering. Weaving the threads of ancient yogic knowledge into a detailed map of human possibility, the *Yoga-Sutra* stands as a testament to heroic self-awareness, defining yoga for all time.

Many people ask the question “What is meditation? How do I know if I am actually meditating? When I close my eyes and watch my breath, is that meditating?” Patanjali addresses and answers this question. With the caveat that his classification belongs to the established orthodox Hindu systems rather than early Buddhism, let us briefly summarize the steps of yoga that lead to what Patanjali calls meditation and then on to the final merger, or union, called samadhi.

There are remarkable similarities between Pantajali’s yoga system and the Eightfold Path. The most obvious is that each system is divided into eight steps. Pantajali’s eight steps (sometimes referred to as limbs) begin with the practices of moral and ethical behavior, and like the moral division of Buddhism, it is founded on the law of ahimsa, nonviolence. Those of us who practice hatha yoga are already familiar with the word *asana*, or yoga posture. Asana is the third limb of yoga and based on the belief that the spiritual seeker must tend to the temple of her soul, this physical body. At this third limb, the body is purified through a series of physical movements, postures and bandhas (physical “locks” that direct the prana into specific areas of the body).

The process of purification continues with the fourth limb of yoga, pranayama, or breath control, which tones and strengthens the nervous system. The human nervous system must undergo significant rewiring, thus increasing the brain’s capacity to process (receive) the powerful

energies that are released in deeper levels of meditation. In other words, through yoga, we trade in the old computer for one with a much more powerful operating system.

The fifth limb of yoga moves to what Hartranft refers to as “interiorization,” which is an excellent translation. Zen teachers speak of “turning inward” or “turning the light inward” or the backward step.” This is *pratyahara*, the fifth limb of yoga, when the attention turns inward.

Pratyahara

In our sangha in Long Beach, California, quite a number of people have been sitting together for at least ten years. At some point during those ten years something subtle seems to occur with most long-time meditators. It may have happened in the first year of sitting or it could have happened years later, but at some point the sitting became quieter and more still. We just stopped fidgeting. It may have happened so slowly that we never even noticed it, but something inside grew quiet and the resistance to sitting lessened considerably. When our senses (seeing, hearing, feeling, etc.) begin to withdraw from their external objects, the meditator has reached the stage that Patanjali calls *pratyahara*. It is not an event that happens every once in a while when we are surprised that a particular sit was more still than usual. It is an actual shift of consciousness, a stage of interiorization that signals the arrival of *pratyahara*. From that point on, the base line of our sits has changed.

Pratyahara occurs when we are no longer pulled out of our connection to the interior by the senses that rush out to meet the sense object. What an accomplishment! When we are sitting on the cushion and our silence is interrupted by the loud, disruptive noise of people yelling outside the window and our attention is not pulled away from the sitting itself, we have arrived at *pratyahara*.

Does this mean that we are now meditating? Not according to Patanjali. We are getting close, but we’re not quite there yet. Patanjali tells us that we must soldier on to the next level of practice. This stage he called *dharana*.

Dharana

The sixth step or limb of yoga occurs when we are finally able to concentrate on an object. In Zen, a traditional method of developing concentration is to count the breaths starting from one and going to ten. Initially, the meditator may count one on the inhalation and two on the exhalation. As she gains greater concentration, she may breathe in and out on the same count of one. Eventually, when the meditator finds that she can stay with the count of one to ten without forgetting the number, she is ready to drop the count and simply stay with awareness of the breath. Easy? For some of us it seems impossible to get past three! We are doing great up to three and then discover that we are on a cruise to Alaska and have no idea which number is next. It's quite sobering. We bring ourselves back to the breath and start all over, breathing in on a count of one, breathing out on a count of two, etc. Some of us have to do this many months, or dare I say, years.

As with the earlier stage of pratyahara, a meditator realizes, at some point in his practice, that he can finally follow the breath from one to ten with ease. When this occurs, he has reached another stage in the process of interiorization, dharana or concentration. Is this meditation? Believe it or not, we still have not attained actual meditation, according to Patanjali. But we are now standing at the door.

Dhyana

Pantajali's word for meditation is dhyana. Not only does it mean "meditation" to a Hindu or yogi, but this Sanskrit word crosses over into the Buddhist dictionary as well. In China, the word dhayna became Ch'an. The literal meaning of Ch'an Buddhism is "meditation Buddhism." In Japan, Ch'an became Zen. So Zen meditation is actually a redundant expression. Literally, it means "meditation meditation."

Another shift occurs at the seventh stage. The object of concentration begins to arise naturally, as if the meditator no longer needs to force the mind to concentrate on the same object moment by moment. Remember my experience of noting "dipping, dipping" as I dipped the tea bag into a cup during a three month retreat? At some point, the object began to reoccur spontaneously, *without the ego willing it*. At this point of "spontaneous concentration," the mind goes into a state of absorption. This is what Pantajali refers to as dhyana, or meditation. The early Ch'an

teachers clearly had this meaning in mind when they alluded to “Dhyana masters.”

It can be argued that when we “just sit” on our cushion with our eyes closed (or half open, as in Zen), we are meditating. Lord knows sitting still is a tremendous accomplishment in itself. It can also be argued that we are truly meditating only after we settle our bodies and minds. Some people refer to pondering or reflecting on some particular issue as meditating. But in the classical system of yoga, as well as in early Ch’an Buddhism, meditation, or dhyana, is not an “umbrella” word that we use to describe whatever happens during a thirty minute sit. Dhyana, meditation, is a state of consciousness where the mind has begun to look at itself. We may sit for one hour and begin to meditate in the last minute of that hour.

We started with interiorization, with the withdrawal of the senses from outside sense objects, which is called pratyahara. At some point we reached the level of dharana, an ability to maintain concentration on an object for long periods of time. When we become absorbed in the object, the mind enters a state of meditation. In absorption, we are wide-awake but the body is deeply at rest. Sounds do not affect us, thoughts do not move us, body sensations no longer disturb us and inner silence begins to spread throughout the conscious field. Thoughts may come, as well as images or sounds, but in absorption we are unmoved by them. This is dhyana.

One step remains in Patanjali’s eight limbs of yoga. Beyond the state of meditation or dhyana is samadhi, a state of religious ecstasy and union. It is known by different names in all religions, but for certain it involves a radically altered state of consciousness. I want to remind you that samadhi can happen when you are in a state of dhyana (meditation) but it can also happen when you are in a state of dharana or concentration. Samadhi can happen spontaneously when you are taking a walk in the park and it can occur when a charismatic preacher lifts you off the planet through the power of his words. Throughout history men and women have been struck dumb by samadhi’s awesome power. As he traveled on the road to Damascus, Paul fell to the ground utterly and completely transformed. He changed from one who persecuted Christians to the one who became Christianity’s greatest protector. Jung calls this psychological process enantiodromia, a conversion into the exact opposite.

The great Advaita Vedanta master, Ramana Maharshi, fell to the floor as if dead when he was sixteen years old. From that moment on, he remained in an altered state of consciousness, the living example of a sage, as described by Bodhidharma fifteen hundred years earlier. Like the salt doll, his ego never returned after merging in the Vast. Hildegard of Bingen said this:

...when I was 42 years and 7 months old, the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my brain. And so it kindled my whole heart and breast like a flame, not burning but warming...

Some incomprehensible power exists within the mind. Ramakrishna believed that this power is only activated by grace, a belief in an external force that is similar to the Christian faith, but others, such as Buddhists, believe that this ability resides solely within us and can only be activated through our own effort.

Samadhi

In absorption (dhyana), the mind becomes completely “fixed” on the object. As the subject remains deeply concentrated on the object, *and in the presence of sufficient power or energy*, a unification begins to occur in which the subject and object become one. Body and mind begin to drop away. What is left is essence, or “suchness.” By the way, one cannot overestimate the importance of power and energy in this process, which, again, is the reason why the system needs a careful “rewiring” through yoga. Consider the effects of a “surge” such as the one Hildegard of Bingen experienced and how vital it would be to have a system strong enough to bear it. Ta Hui, stresses the importance of a “burst of power.” He once wrote an elderly student, praising him for his discipline and careful attention to the Dharma. All this old man lacked was a final burst of power to break through the iron wall of delusion that kept him separated from Truth. I believe that samadhi is a burst of power that has the potential to wake us up.

When a rocket is fired from earth it needs enormous power to escape earth’s gravitational pull. This is exactly the challenge each of us faces as we try to grow either psychologically or spiritually. The unconscious force of the five hindrances -- greed, ill will, restlessness, sloth and torpor and

doubt -- has the same “drag” on our ability to do any type of inner work as the earth’s gravitational pull has on a rocket. We also have to consider the condition of the rocket itself: We have bodies that are affected by various physical hindrances such as low energy from years of poor diet and exercise, lack of energy, illness or perhaps our bodies are just plain worn out. Without energy, we are dead in the water. The lethal mix of the five hindrances, combined with the natural loss of physical energy (heat) as we age, prevents us from achieving meditational orbit.

When a rocket has been so well designed that it can generate, maintain (and withstand) sufficient power to lift it beyond the earth’s pull, it can reach an altitude sufficient to allow it to slip into orbit around the planet. This is analogous to a meditation practice that has progressed from interiorization to concentration to absorption. I think it is also analogous to Jung’s individuation process. The craft is able to escape the gravitational pull of the unconscious and achieve orbit. The mind rests in a state of absorption and the hindrances are temporarily held at bay.

We know that the orbiting spacecraft will eventually fall back into earth’s atmosphere and come crashing down. The hindrances do not disappear any more than does earth’s gravity. As the ship loses altitude, the hindrances inevitably regain power and eventually the mind will once again be bombarded by greed, hatred, delusion, etc. If our rocket aims not for orbit around the earth, but toward a distant star, another burst of power is needed. There must be a second explosion that frees our spacecraft from earth’s gravitational pull. This is samadhi, the state that lies beyond dhyana.

Samadhi comes in two basic flavors: savikalpa samadhi and nirvikalpa samadhi. These are the basic divisions as described by Patanjali in his *Yoga-Sutras*. To put it in layman’s terms (as if I had any other option!), in savikalpa samadhi the meditator has finally escaped the gravitational pull of the hindrances and entered into a world where time and space no longer exist. Although the meditator has entered a state of non-duality, a “seed” still exists. The ego (our salt doll) seems to have vanished completely, but after the meditator comes down from salvikalpa samadhi, the ego is able to reconstitutes itself. “I’m Back!” It proudly announces.

Savikalpa samadhi (samadhi with seed) mirrors the origins of consciousness before the Twelve Nidanas were able to form the iron chain that binds us to the eternal wheel of samsara. The seed of ego that lies dormant in savikalpa samadhi is none other than avijja, or ignorance. When the meditator comes down from samadhi, that seed will sprout again into the Twelve Nidanas.

The second kind of samadhi, nirvikalpa samadhi, is seedless. Ramakrishana taught that in nirvikalpa samadhi, the seed of avijja is burned out through contact with the divine fire of the Absolute. Referring to this ultimate experience of samadhi, he said:

True knowledge is impossible without samadhi. In samadhi man becomes one with God. Then he can have no egoism.

Do you know what it is like? Just at noon the sun is directly overhead. If you look around then, you do not see your shadow. Likewise, you will not find the 'shadow' of ego after attaining Knowledge, samadhi.

When God, the Divine, the Vast, "a power greater than myself," remains as an object of worship, no matter how amazing the samadhi, the meditator is in savikalpa samadhi. If all duality ceases and only the Absolute remains, one is in nirvikalpa samadhi.

We are now ready to return to the Eightfold Path and samadhi, as it is understood through Theravada Buddhism. Here is Goddard's translation of the Buddha's discourse on samadhi (from *A Buddhist Bible*):

What now is Right Concentration? Fixation of the mind to a single object (literally, One-pointedness of mind); this is concentration.

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness; --- these are the object of concentration.

The Four Great Efforts; --- these are the requisites for concentration.

The practicing, development and cultivating of these things; --- this is the Development of concentration.

The Buddha says a great deal in these few words. He defines samadhi as “one pointedness of mind” and ties it securely to the two preceding steps of the Eightfold Path. There are four objects of concentration: sati of the body, sati of the feelings, sati of the mind and sati of the mind objects. The prerequisite to merging sati with samadhi is Right Effort. Let us repeat the Buddha’s words with one alteration.

What now is Right *Samadhi*? Fixation of the mind to a single object (literally, One-pointedness of mind); this is *samadhi*.

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness; --- these are the object of *samadhi*.

The Four Great Efforts; ---these are the requisites for *samadhi*.

The practicing, development and cultivating of these things; ---this is the Development of *samadhi*.

There is a world of difference here. One feels the tension and discomfort of not knowing as we listen to the Buddha’s question, “What now is Right Samadhi?” We know that we do *not* know what samadhi is and that it can only be experienced. But when we “dumb” the word down by calling it concentration, samadhi’s aura of mystery is quickly dispelled. Can you feel the difference? The air just escapes from the balloon. The early Pali version encourages us to “demystify” samadhi as the Buddha answers his own question. We are told that samadhi is fixation of the mind to a single object. But, at best, this is an inadequate definition. It is like defining a skyscraper as a building that is more the two stories tall. Concentration may be similar to a building that is more than two stories tall but a skyscraper is a towering structure that seems to pierce the sky. This is samadhi.

We learned from Patanjali that concentration is *not* the same as meditation. I love his clarity and simplicity. Needless to say, if concentration is not to be equated with meditation, it most definitely must not be confused with samadhi, a state that lies even beyond meditation. We know that the Buddha studied meditation with two of the greatest Indian masters of his day and we know that he was able to attain the highest states of samadhi, both savikalpa and nivakalpa. So what are we to believe? That he forgot what samadhi is? This makes absolutely no sense

to me. A far more likely answer to this strange mixing of the word concentration with samadhi is that the scholars who transcribed the Pali scriptures from the oral teaching had a dog in the hunt. They had an agenda of creating a highly rational philosophical system, which I suspect had a great deal to do with a need to distinguish the Buddhist system from the prevailing Hindu systems. The early scholars presented a Buddha to the world who was entirely scientific, dry as sand, and completely “non religious.” Samadhi disappeared from the Theravada lexicon and was replaced by words such as concentration and jhana.

From the day that I started the practice of Vipassana in 1981, I do not recall ever hearing the word samadhi from one meditation teacher, Asian or American. Concentration was the accepted word and it certainly is an easy word for us to swallow. In the West, we love concentration. We even have a diagnosis and treatment (with medication rather than meditation) for children who cannot concentrate. There is nothing mystical about concentration and it fits very nicely and politely into the Eightfold Path. Never mind the fact that samadhi and concentration are entirely different animals.

The Pali commentaries divide the process of meditation into three stages: preliminary concentration, access concentration and the stage of entering the jhanas. But preliminary concentration is nothing but another way of describing the stage of dharana, or concentration. Access concentration is none other than dhyana, or meditation. Entering the jhanas is the same as entering samadhi. In *The Path of Serenity and Insight*, Henepola Guneratanta goes to great lengths to explain how samadhi is different from the jhanas, but he is simply putting old wine into a new bottle.

If this discussion seems a bit confusing, hold on to your hats. We are now ready to discuss the most bewildering subject of all. Not only are we asked to believe that samadhi is not samadhi - it is nothing but a high state of concentration - we are also asked to believe that when we do enter an altered state of consciousness this is not samadhi either. It's a jhana state. And where did our intrepid Buddhist scholars dig up that word jhana? They took the Sanskrit word for meditation (dhyana) and turned it into the Pali word jhana. But they did more than that. They changed the meaning too. Jhana became a series of trance-like states that mimic the yogic states

of samadhi. Essentially, the Theravadins combined dhyana with samadhi, took this new amalgamation and called it jhana. Go figure!

The following is an excellent translation of the Buddha's discourse on the jhanas that appeared in a recent article in *Tricycle*. It begins with the title "What is Right Concentration?" (Clearly, I am on the losing side of this argument.)

And what, monks, is Right Concentration? Here, a monk, detached from sense-desires, detached from unwholesome mental states, enters and remains in the first jhana [meditative absorption], which is with thinking and pondering, born of detachment, filled with delight and joy. And with the subsiding of thinking and pondering, by gaining inner tranquility and oneness of mind, he enters and remains in the second jhana, which is without thinking and pondering, born of concentration, filled with delight and joy. And with the fading away of delight, remaining imperturbable, mindful and clearly aware, he experiences in himself the joy of which the Noble Ones say: 'Happy is he who dwells with equanimity and mindfulness,' he enters the third jhana. And, having given up pleasure and pain, and with the disappearance of former gladness and sadness, he enters and remains in the fourth jhana, which is beyond pleasure and pain, and purified by equanimity and mindfulness. This is called Right Concentration. That monks, is called the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering.

Mahasatipatthana Sutta: The Greater Discourse of the Foundations of Mindfulness in *Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, translated by Maurice Walshe.

Whoa Nelly! Some general comments before we jump into this bewildering maze of words. When I first started practicing Vipassana meditation, some twenty-five years ago, one never heard a word about the jhanas. It was all sati, sati, sati with a little dose of concentration thrown in. Probably this follows a very natural curve of development in the early years of Vipassana practice in America. We simply were not ready for the deeper stuff. But in the past ten years, the jhanas have slowly moved to the front lines and now it is not at all unusual to read articles about the jhanas or even read about meditation retreats that emphasize the jhanas. At the time of writing this, I discover that none other than Henepola Guneratana

will soon be leading a retreat at Barre focusing on what else, but the jhanas. An esteemed friend who happens to be an accomplished meditator said to me, "It's relatively easy for me to move through the first three jhanas, but I find it hard to enter the fourth one." This lingo would not have occurred among American students much longer than a decade ago.

Shinzen Young's statement that "Subtle is significant" and our suggestion that the four foundations of sati are a process of refinement or purification, from gross to subtle to causal, is the template that I suggest we use as we study the jhanas. In the previous chapter, we were not suggesting that sati needs to be refined; it is our capacity to *process* sati that needs refinement. A similar process happens with the jhanic states. As consciousness becomes increasingly refined, a sort of "energy barrier" is established that completely holds the five hindrances at bay. In the Theravada tradition, this stage is called access concentration and in yoga it is simply the meditative stage, dhyana. Literally, greed, ill will, doubt, restless mind, sleepiness are "outside" the field of consciousness. At this point, the meditator can enter the first jhana (samadhi) and experience a kind of rapture or bliss. Interestingly, she also experiences "happiness" which is a mental state as opposed to the physical sensation of rapture. Verbal and "sustained" thought (pondering) still occur in this state, so the meditator has not achieved inner Noble Silence. She knows that this could not possibly be a lasting state and that it is inherently unstable. In comparison to a state where verbal and sustained thought have disappeared, this first jhana is "unrefined." The meditator knows that, if she can succeed in "dropping" the thinking process (verbal thought and pondering) and *if there is sufficient power and energy*, she can enter a far deeper state, the second jhana. The second jhana is described as having, in addition to rapture and happiness, tranquility and one pointedness of mind.

Suppose the meditator knows that even this state is unstable and that there is a deeper place, a place that is even closer to the Real. She already dropped verbal and sustained thought in order to enter the second jhana, so what must she let go of in order to move into a state of greater subtlety and purity of consciousness? She has to let go of the rapture. Anyone who has struggled for years and years simply to have a "good" sit can easily imagine what it would be like to willingly let go of a feeling of rapture. How about, "not a chance!" But this is the price of admission into the third jhana: letting go of one more attachment. If one can do this, and *if there is*

sufficient power and energy, the meditator will automatically enter the third jhana. The process of refinement and abandonment of grosser aspects of consciousness continues. If the meditator can surrender all attachment to pleasure or pain, happiness or sorrow, she can enter the fourth jhana. In the fourth jhana, she abides in equanimity and mindfulness.

Seen through the lens of samadhi, all that we have done in describing the four jhanas is to describe four different levels of savikalpa samadhi, or samadhi with seed. Indeed, it may be that the first jhana isn't even a samadhi state. Even the Buddhist scriptures acknowledge that the four jhanas, however extraordinary, are within the realm of form. This is why they are called "fine material" states. It is just another way of saying that these meditative absorptions are with seed. No matter how profound the fourth jhana may be, even if you are beyond pleasure and pain, you still are attached to the unconscious conviction that you have a name and form – that there is "somebody" all this is happening to.

Beyond the realm of form lies what the Buddhists call the formless realm. In this realm, name and form disappear. The process of subtlety and refinement continues with four higher jhanic states: the base of boundless space, the base of boundless consciousness, the base of nothingness, and the base of neither perception nor non-perception. Clearly, we have left Kansas. The only point that I wish to add here is that the four higher jhanic states correspond to nirvakalpa samadhi, meditative states where the sense of being a body and mind has entirely disappeared.

In the Buddha-dharma, one frequently encounters the expression "the Triple World." We now are in a position to understand its meaning. The first world is the "realm of desire" where sentient beings are caught in the five hindrances and ruled by lust and anger. This realm corresponds to the "gross realm" in yoga. The second world in Buddhist philosophy is the realm of form, the world of meditative states and deep inner peace. Most of us know someone who lives in this state. They seem to be truly at home the moment they close their eyes. A smile spreads across their face as they begin to meditate. The four jhanas make up this second world. People in this realm have succeeded in detaching from the lower desires but they still cling to their own views and perceptions. Their suffering may be subtle, but it is still suffering. This realm corresponds to the subtle level in yoga. The third and last world is the formless realm. In terms of humans, this is the world of beings who have reached the highest state possible, while still

maintaining an attachment to the most subtle level of personality. The four higher meditative jhanas make up the third world and it corresponds to the causal level in yoga.

I have not minced words in this discussion and hope that I have not gone overboard in my criticism of the use of the word concentration to describe samadhi. Could it be that there is an unconscious agenda in the ubiquitous use of this English word for something so utterly impossible to understand? Are we comfortable with concentration because the ego can control it? One gets the impression from reading descriptions of the levels of jhanic states that it is really not such a big deal. You just have to learn how to pilot the spacecraft skillfully. "I think I'll take a ride up to the base of neither perception nor non perception this morning." There is a Chinese adage that says that a moth can land anywhere but on a flame. One wonders how safe the ego can possibly be as it nears the flame of truth?

In a similar vein, I see no advantage to this fine distinction Theravada scholars make between the jhanas and samadhi, other than making it seem that a Buddhist altered state of consciousness is different from a Hindu, Christian, Jewish or Islamic altered state. It is not a useful distinction.

At the beginning of this discussion, we said that the merging of sati and samadhi could create a laser that has the potential to penetrate to the very roots of greed, hatred and delusion. Permit me to repeat Hildegard of Bingen's description of one blinding moment that changed her life forever:

...when I was 42 years and 7 months old, the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my brain. And so it kindled my whole heart and breast like a flame, not burning but warming...

Something entirely alien to our world of science and reason caused her mind to focus itself into a brilliant beam of light. This beam became a laser that not only penetrated down into the deepest part of her unconscious, to the very roots of greed, hatred and delusion, *it burned them out.*

The possibility of a merger between sati and samadhi is the insight that lifts the Buddha's Eightfold Path to the highest pinnacle of spiritual practice. I am convinced that Patanjali's description of the steps of interiorization, concentration, meditation and finally samadhi, cannot be

improved upon and the need of Buddhist scholars to try to do so has been unfortunate. But the story does not end here. What the Buddha saw, through his own extraordinary journey to the Real, was a fatal flaw in Patanjali's elevation of samadhi as the key that leads to the end suffering. We are told that the Buddha experienced nirvikalpa samadhi to its most subtle level but to his amazement and complete discouragement, he discovered that even in the flame of truth, the seed of ego did not burn out. He saw that only wisdom can burn out avijja. He realized that wisdom couldn't be gained nor developed through samadhi alone.

The Buddha added one crucial element to Patanjali's yoga steps. Other than this addition, there really is no difference between the two paths. Remember that while the classical system of yoga begins with the steps of moral and ethical development, the Eightfold Path places those steps in the middle: steps three, four and five. The Buddha-dharma *begins* with wisdom. Where Ramakrishna says that we gain wisdom through samadhi, the Buddha said something entirely different and of towering brilliance. Wisdom is gained through the light of sati, not the power of samadhi. Some connection to wisdom must be there before we enter samadhi. Ramakrishna's salt doll never entirely disappears even if she dives to the deepest part of the vast ocean. When she comes back to the world, she may be transformed forever, as was Paul on the road to Damascus. But anyone who reads Paul will see that his ego survived the experience in fine form.

I quoted Shinzen Young's statement that the five skhandas are the single most brilliant insight of the Buddha and I certainly lean in that direction as well. But in the end, I would put my money on sati. This is the one element missing from Patanjali (although he mentions sati) and from the teaching of Ramakrishna as well. The Buddha places sati *before* samadhi in the Eightfold Path and this makes all the difference. Samadhi may be the powerful set of mirrors that can propel the light of wisdom into the darkest roots of ignorance. But sati is the light.

One final image comes to mind. We picture a lighthouse shining its light into the dark harbor, but the Eightfold Path imagines something quite different. The light shines not outward but towards some interior center that is impossible to conceptualize. Where is this center? Where do we shine the light? In the merger of sati and samadhi, the light is magnified

and the interior lights up. The lighthouse radiates outward, in all directions, only because it has become illuminated from within.