

Samma Samadhi: The Right Concentration

By Bhante Anuttara

In this article, I would like to reflect on the last component of the Noble Eightfold Path: **Samma Samadhi**, or Right Concentration.

The term *Samadhi* is ancient and is found in several spiritual traditions such as Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism. While its etymology has various interpretations, a commonly accepted breakdown is *sam* (togetherness, collection) + *adhi* (to place or put on), suggesting a state of mental unification. Similarly, the English word *concentration*—from *con* (together) and *centration* (act of centring)—shares this sense of bringing the mind to a unified focus.

So, what is **Samma Samadhi**, or Right Concentration, in the Buddha's teaching? According to the Buddha, Samma Samadhi refers specifically to the **Four Jhanas**.

Understanding the Jhanas

Jhana is a specialised, refined state of Samadhi, often translated as “absorption.”

While *Samadhi* broadly refers to mental unification, *Jhana* refers to distinct meditative states, each marked by specific mental factors.

The mental factors associated with Jhana are:

- **Applied attention (vitakka)**
- **Sustained attention (vicara)**
- **Rapture (piti)**
- **Happiness or bliss (sukha)**
- **One-pointedness (ekaggata)**

These factors are present in different combinations throughout the four Jhanas:

- **First Jhana:** Applied attention, sustained attention, rapture, happiness
- **Second Jhana:** Rapture, happiness, one-pointedness
- **Third Jhana:** Happiness, one-pointedness, equanimity
- **Fourth Jhana:** One-pointedness, equanimity

Equanimity (*upekkha*) becomes increasingly prominent in the third and fourth Jhanas. The culminating qualities of deep concentration are *one-pointedness* and *equanimity*.

The etymology of Pali term *ekaggata* (one-pointedness) also carries a significant implication. *Ekaggata* derived from *ek*(one) + *agga*(summit). It can be seen as the “summit” or “peak” of a mountain. When we reach the Fourth Jhana, it is as though we are standing at the summit, able to view everything with a 360-degree awareness—steady, clear, and equanimous.

Climbing the Mountain of Samadhi

Having explored the path of Jhana and its landmarks, how do we actually begin this ascent? Is there a single path, or are there many? What is the safest and most effective way?

To enter Jhana and experience the signs of each stage, one must develop the quality of Samadhi through meditation. The most well-known and widely recommended method is **mindfulness of breathing (Anapanasati)**, directly taught by the Buddha. However, many other meditation techniques are also valid.

The key is to maintain focused attention on a single object until the mind becomes absorbed. This initial absorption is accompanied by rapture and happiness. The Buddha gave a powerful simile: creating fire by rubbing a wooden stick against a log. You must apply the stick at a single point and continue rubbing without distraction until fire arises.

In this simile, the fire represents absorption. But more importantly, the Buddha emphasised **morality (sila)**. A wet log will not ignite—similarly, a mind burdened by moral impurities cannot enter Jhana. A well-cultivated moral life is like a well-dried log—ready to catch fire. Thus, both persistently focused attention and strong morality are essential for Right Samadhi.

Overcoming Hindrances

To deepen concentration, we must also be aware of the **five hindrances** that obstruct the mind:

1. Sensual desire
2. Ill-will
3. Sloth and torpor
4. Restlessness and worry
5. Doubt

With continued meditation, these hindrances gradually weaken. In the Jhanic state, they are temporarily subdued, though not fully eradicated. Our spiritual journey often involves this ongoing interplay—a kind of zero-sum game—between concentration and hindrance.

The Importance of Samadhi and Jhana in Buddhist Practice

In the Pali Canon, the Buddha frequently emphasises the importance of Samadhi and Jhana. Describing his own enlightenment, he always highlights the Four Jhanas as foundational steps to purifying the mind and gaining profound insight. He repeatedly encouraged his disciples to cultivate Jhana as a gateway to seeing things as they truly are.

Here are a few direct quotes from the Buddha:

- “The four Jhanas constitute the higher mind and are a pleasant dwelling in this very life.” (*AN 4.423*)
- “The Jhanas are all directly visible forms of Nibbana in a provisional sense, and in the highest case, in a non-provisional sense.” (*AN 4.453*)
- “With the placing of the mind and keeping it connected, they enter the first absorption ... second ... third ... fourth.
This is called the pleasure of renunciation, the pleasure of seclusion, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of awakening.
Such pleasure should be cultivated and developed, and should not be feared, I say.” (*MN 139*)
- “Entering Jhana is the path to awakening.” (*MN 36*)

Therefore, we can say with confidence that practicing Jhana, as taught by the Buddha, is vital—not only as a foundation for supreme wisdom, but also as a profound and wholesome way to dwell in this life.

A Balanced Path

As we conclude, let us remember the importance of a balanced practice. True progress on the Noble Eightfold Path requires the harmonious development of **morality (sila), meditation (samadhi), and wisdom (pañña)**. These three pillars are inseparable, and their integration is the true operating system of the Eightfold Path.

Through your ongoing daily footsteps along the Path,
May you swiftly attain the highest bliss of Nibbana.
With metta,
Bhante Anuttara