



Forest Samādhi

“Our real home is inner peace.” - Ajahn Chah

From various sources, by Ajahn Kalyāno and Sāmanera Anejo, 2015.

Calmness, bliss and stability are all qualities of *samādhi* – a unified state of mind coming from meditative concentration or wisdom practise. This essential aspect of the Buddhist training path must, however, be handled with care and knowledge in order to proceed in the right direction and not cause confusion or doubt.

In order to not get lost on the way and be sure we do not get sold short it is good to have a framework from which to get guidelines and inspiration. The hope behind this short guide is to present some of the perspective of the greatly respected Thai Forest Teachers. But it must be stressed and underscored that a framework can never replace meeting and talking with a competent teacher.

Calm and stability maps the way

Many Thai teachers emphasize that, although the books are right and it's good to read in order to get the map or route we travel, when we're actually meditating there are no sign-posts or labels that come up in our minds saying “this is *samādhi*”, “this is *jhāna*”. There is nothing which points out all these labels found in the books.

So most of these teachers tend to encourage us to just look at the mind and see whether the mind is peaceful or not, and to start from that very basic observation. If the mind is peaceful, then see if it can be more peaceful, more still or more calm.

We should never be complacent or rest easy but always see if the mind can be a little bit more calm and stable. Having that basic right attitude that we're learning to calm the mind, focusing our attention on the meditation object and seeing if the mind is getting still. At the same time we have the determination to persist – to stick with the meditation object no matter what, dropping all else.

Keep it simple and sustain it

From this approach we can see that it is important not to proliferate or get too hung up on at what named level or stage we are practising. This is because many dangers or side-tracks can come from this: pride and conceit regarding attainments; or thoughts about what stage we are actually in while in it – which destroys the state, and so on.

We should try to keep to the bare minimum of information regarding the theory, but a map is still helpful and can ensure that the meditator knows what depths are available and reachable. It can also be very useful to be able to recognize signs along the way and gain inspiration from that.

Another most important aspect is to protect the *samādhi* we've worked hard to reach. We do this by adapting our livelihood, social habits, taking care of our morality and trying to keep mindfulness in daily life. It can then be sustained over a long period of time.

Formal meditation – The basic framework

1. Preparatory concentration (Parikamma-samādhi) – this level of *samādhi* is present as soon as one directs one's mind consistently at a meditation object of choice with the intention of deepening the unification of mind.

Practice at this stage

First set up a determination that for this period of time only to focus on the formal practice, to stay on the level of body and mind, not to get caught up in the content. Then various meditation practices, like *mettā* or *asubha*, can be used as supports to initially allay the hindrances before focusing on the principal meditation object – perhaps the breath. After that it's just a matter of staying with the principal object. A lot of thoughts and emotions might be present, springing from old *kamma*, and these we must endure. We might realize a change of everyday behaviour or habits (*sīla*) is needed in order to get a calmer mind. Or maybe we realize there is something we need to do to remedy a situation in our life – but this can wait till after the meditation period.

2. Access concentration (Upacāra-samādhi) – if we are doing breath meditation and have not missed any part of any breath for half an hour we could say we are at this level of *samādhi*. Here the object is continuously in mind, even if there are other impressions like thoughts or sounds occurring. This level of concentration is the minimum requirement for deep insight to occur – insight leading to the enlightenment stages.

3. Full absorption (Appanā-samādhi) – is *samādhi* that is subtle, firm, and unwavering, and in which one can remain concentrated for a long time. One may remain concentrated in this state, or withdraw from it as one wishes. Nothing else is happening, no sense impressions are registered (thoughts, sounds etc.), but a completely new sense of the body can be present. This state is self-sustaining – i.e. lasting over time – and the great bliss accompanying it works as a substitute for sense-pleasures. It also empowers the mind and is because of that very useful for later wisdom practices. It comes about if the mind absorbs into pleasant feelings instead of staying mindful of the principal meditation object. Here we can have many different visions and psychic experiences – which may or may not be a part of the path to the end of suffering.

Momentary concentration (Khanika-samādhi) – in which the heart becomes unwaveringly fixed and calm for a short time after which it withdraws. This level can also be reached through using the intellect, by noting experiences for example. The state is not self sustaining, meaning it does not last over time.

Samādhi from concentration or wisdom

Another important distinction regarding *samādhi* is between two kinds which differ in peacefulness and in how they are attained:

If *samādhi* is established through concentration practice only then it could be referred to as “*concentration samādhi*” and is said to be *mundane* because the state is still part of the conditioned world, even though very refined. In such a state there is still a subtle sense of self.

Samādhi established or deepened with the help of body contemplation could be called “*wisdom samādhi*” and states of this kind are referred to as *super-mundane* – going beyond all worldly conditions. Full absorption of this kind is the highest form of *samādhi* and the state arrived at in the different path moments – the enlightenment experiences. Here there is no sense of self at all and this, the Thai Forest Masters say, is the highest happiness.