

SĪLA IS SAMĀDHI

by Bhikkhu Anīgha

What exactly is the connection between *sīla* and *samādhi*? Is it that virtue *aids* or *facilitates* the development of mental composure¹, in the way that a suitable diet *contributes* to an athlete's top physical performance—a secondary factor that allows for better results with greater ease, or that prevents setbacks down the line? This is what the relationship is often imagined to be, especially given how modern notions of *samādhi* go together with arbitrary practices that have no direct connection to the abstinence from unwholesome acts, except perhaps in that one cannot move, speak, or (supposedly) think *at all* while one is engaging in them. Because of this, the link between *sīla* and *samādhi* is often rather contrived and tenuous, and is not a central theme within the overall picture.

"A renunciant thus accomplished in virtue sees no danger in any direction with regard to their virtuous restraint. In the same way as a king who has defeated his enemies sees no danger from his foes in any direction, a renunciant thus accomplished in virtue sees no danger in any direction regarding their virtuous restraint. When they are endowed with this noble aggregate of virtue (ariya-sīla-khandha), they experience a blameless happiness internally. That's how a renunciant is accomplished in virtue."

—DN 2

Being *accomplished* in virtue provides one with a form of composure that one can easily fail to recognize due to one's expectations of what *samādhi* is about, and thus even a person who has put in the work into their virtue correctly can end up misapplying their efforts in various directions that do not take that same virtue as foundation, which is what would have not only resulted in greater composure, but also in a comparatively straightforward and seamless manner.² Conversely, one not yet sufficiently accomplished in virtue can be tempted to put the cart before the horse, and thereby end up reaping either frustration, or a sort of *samādhi* that somehow does not seem to be contributing to true knowledge-&-vision, thereby destroying the first five fetters and making them *incapable* of experiencing lust for sensual pleasures and ill-will. Because that is what *sammāsamādhi* would *have to* result in, especially if the person already has plenty of familiarity with the Dhamma and the Four Noble Truths, *and* they've been practicing right composure for years.³

That other sort of *samādhi* would instead provide a person with ecstatic experiences that simply take them away from their problems for a while... until they come back, while also encouraging them to keep the virtue chiefly **in order to** once again experience the meditative ecstasy they

¹ Translating "*samādhi*" as "composure" throughout. It will become apparent how and why "concentration" or "absorption" are highly inaccurate.

² Of course, this is not to say "easy" or "quick", let alone formulaic, methodical, and comprehensible to the masses, but rather that it will be plainly obvious how, to use an analogy, it's all been the growth and development of one and the same plant, without an introduction of alien factors. That growth and development is what is called the "Gradual Training" in the Suttas.

³ And even before reaching freedom from sensuality, it would be clear that that's where one is heading.

can't have enough of, not because they are *truly* disenchanted with sensuality, which is actually a *prerequisite* for the first jhāna.⁴

“For one who is composed **no volition need be exerted**: ‘Let me know and see things as they really are.’ It is natural that one who is composed knows and sees things as they really are.

“For one who knows and sees things as they really are no volition need be exerted: ‘Let me be disenchanted and dispassionate.’ It is natural that one who knows and sees things as they really are is disenchanted and dispassionate.

“For one who is disenchanted and dispassionate no volition need be exerted: ‘Let me realize the knowledge and vision of liberation.’ It is natural that one who is disenchanted and dispassionate realizes the knowledge and vision of liberation.”

—AN 10.2

Now, I should clarify what the expression "aggregate of/accomplishment in virtue" means⁵, since it is obviously not being claimed that mere adherence to a set of rules, be it 5, 10, or 500, is enough to give rise to *samādhi*. *Sīla* or virtue should not be taken—at least by one who aspires to mental purification—as the undertaking of the precepts alone, but rather, using the common phrase of the Suttas, as the avoidance of the *slightest fault*⁶, i.e., any action by body and speech that is motivated by lust, aversion, or distraction. This means that one must start recognizing these unwholesome things *in one's own mind*, rather than determining what is suitable and unsuitable through the details of *what* one did, where, how, at what time, to whom, or for what external reason⁷, or because it simply "feels" nice, wholesome or kind on the surface.⁸ This proper virtue also involves not being content with simply adhering to the external form and standards set by a specific tradition or group.

By gradually learning, first and foremost, to *recognize* one's state of mind⁹ as it is, and then taking *that* as the criterion for the character of all of one's actions, big or small as they may be, one is already working towards the indispensable foundation of all proper *samādhi*—picking up the “hints” of the mind (*cittassa nimitta*)¹⁰. The discernment of those “hints” is what enables one

⁴ cf. AN 6.73. Notice the emphatic expression "seen correctly as it truly is with proper wisdom" (*yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya sudiṭṭham*). This Sutta alone should serve to disprove the idea of "pure *samādhi* without discernment"—a viable notion only when *samādhi* is taken to be the result of a repetitive exercise of attention and “no thinking”, something which is notably absent from the Suttas unless it's being read into them. The standard instruction for abandoning the five hindrances in the Suttas (e.g. DN 2, MN 39, MN 107...) is nothing other than *contemplating* the drawbacks of those very five hindrances, regarding them as debt, illness, imprisonment, slavery and an uncrossed desert. An example of this practice will be given here.

⁵ [Accomplished in Virtue](#)

⁶ [Definition of a Fault](#)

⁷ Hence, falling into excessive clarification of the details of the rules to find out what is a fault is a mistake. The fault is in one's own mind, and no amount of scholarly hair splitting of the texts can reveal that, but only self-honesty.

⁸ Not that kindness is bad, but merely "feeling good" is an insufficient criterion.

⁹ This alone takes a great deal of work and abandoning of ingrained views.

¹⁰ I've chosen to render *cittassa nimitta* as "hint of the mind" to avoid the connotation of a mystical "sign" or "image" that would appear to one in the way a sight would. This is impossible if that *nimitta* is to be anything central to freedom from suffering, which it absolutely is.

to abandon defilements where they *actually are* starting with one's actions, as opposed to dealing with secondary factors or taking on practices and habits one *assumes* to be always wholesome in themselves:

“Bhikkhus, suppose a foolish, incompetent, unskilful cook were to present a king or a royal minister with various kinds of curries: sour, bitter, pungent, sweet, sharp, mild, salty, bland. That foolish, incompetent, unskilful cook does not pick up the hint of his own master’s preference:

‘Today this curry pleased my master, or he reached for this one, or he took a lot of this one, or he spoke in praise of this one; or the sour curry pleased my master today, or he reached for the sour one, or he took a lot of the sour one, or he spoke in praise of the sour one; or the bitter curry ... or the pungent curry ... or the sweet curry ... or the sharp curry ... or the mild curry ... or the salty curry ... or the bland curry pleased my master ... or he spoke in praise of the bland one.’

“That foolish, incompetent, unskilful cook does not gain [gifts of] clothing, wages, and bonuses. For what reason? Because that foolish, incompetent, unskilful cook does not pick up the hint of his own master’s preference.

*“So too, bhikkhus, here some foolish, incompetent, unskilful bhikkhu dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, recollected, having curbed longing and aversion regarding the world. While he dwells contemplating the body in the body, his mind does not become composed, **the blemishes are not abandoned**, he does not pick up that hint.*

He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings ... mind in mind ... phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending, recollected, having curbed longing and aversion regarding the world. While he dwells contemplating phenomena in phenomena, his mind does not become composed, the blemishes are not abandoned, he does not pick up that hint.

*“That foolish, incompetent, unskilful bhikkhu does not gain pleasant dwellings in this very life, **nor does he gain recollectedness and clear comprehension (sati-sampajañña)**. For what reason? Because, bhikkhus, that foolish, incompetent, unskilful bhikkhu does not pick up the hint of his own mind.*

—SN 47.8¹¹

This Sutta points out how a person would not realize that using the four *satipaṭṭhānas* is not automatically skilful in and of itself, just like any given dish is not guaranteed to please the king, no matter how good the cook or other people think it is, or even how much the king took from it yesterday. The four *satipaṭṭhānas* are skilful **only** if they are being used *for the sake of abandoning the blemishes*. And for that, one needs to **see** "blemish as blemish" clearly *first*, i.e. see the hints of the defilements in one's mind, which practically goes hand-in-hand with stream-entry.¹²

¹¹ This does not mean, as it's sometimes interpreted, that different "skilful means" are necessary at different times or for different people. It rather means that, if *any* approach to the practice from the Suttas is not freeing a person from the defilements, it's because they still haven't learned how to recognize those very defilements, not because "it's not the right approach for them or at this time".

¹² MN 9: *“When, friends, a noble disciple **understands** the unwholesome and the root of the unwholesome, the wholesome and the root of the wholesome, in that way he is one of right view, whose view is straight, who has unwavering confidence in the Dhamma and has arrived at this true Dhamma.”* This is why Right View is necessary for Right Recollectedness, let alone Right Composure.

And this ability to "aim" the four *satipaṭṭhānas* at the right place and thereby achieve all these beneficial results, including *samādhi*, is nothing other than a more refined instance of the same discernment that needs to accompany one's virtue: one needs stop judging good and bad behavior by the external properties of an action, e.g. by the tone of one's speech and the choice of words, or the fact that all Buddhists or those in one's tradition agree that doing or saying this or that is good, and instead *see* whether there is *internal* greed, aversion, or delusion *behind* those superficially "good" actions in one's mind here-&-now. In this way, it becomes obvious how *samādhi* is the *same skill*, just practiced on a much subtler level.

So, if a person fails to grasp the hints of their mind in the coarse context of bodily and verbal actions to the point where the *slightest fault* in any environment circumstance, anywhere in the world can be avoided with certainty, independent of what others or a spiritual tradition may regard as a fault, how will they possibly grasp those hints when it comes to the more refined level of thoughts, in order to *know* the mental blemishes properly and tackle them where they are to be found, instead of misusing the four *satipaṭṭhānas* to address secondary mental phenomena that they take to be blemishes?¹³

It's like saying "I can't reliably land an arrow on the *tree trunk*, but I can definitely shoot down the mangoes."

Not even seeing the value of this higher virtue, it is easy to end up believing that stopping one's thinking is what the first *jhāna* is about. It is the same as believing that it's necessary to lock oneself up in a cell for the rest of one's life and never see another human to never commit unsuitable acts by body and speech again. Failing to see what the root of the problem is, one takes the easy route, trying to throw *everything* away, instead of going through the hard work of refining one's criteria of what really needs to be discarded. This is a task which will initially seem much less "palpable", and instead feel vague, uncertain, and comparatively unsatisfying, especially because there is no obvious "prize" waiting anywhere in the vicinity, unlike with a meditation technique, which may promise one such things within days.

Having established these points, what the "aggregate of virtue" mentioned above is should be much clearer, as well as how it would seamlessly *become* mental composure when further refined and fortified. The meaning of the simile of the king defeating his enemies in the first Sutta quoted, DN 2, can be seen in light of this. By seeing the hints of your own mind,

¹³ This is an instance where the famous passage from the Kālāmasutta is acutely relevant: "*Come, Kālāmas, do not go by (1) oral tradition, by (2) lineage of teaching, by (3) hearsay, by (4) a collection of scriptures, by (5) logical reasoning, by (6) inferential reasoning, by (7) reasoned cogitation, by (8) the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by (9) the seeming competence [of a speaker], or (10) because you think: 'The ascetic is our guru.' But when, Kālāmas, you **know** for yourselves: 'These things are unwholesome; these things are blameworthy; these things are censured by the wise; these things, if accepted and undertaken, lead to harm and suffering,' then you should abandon them.*" —AN 3.66

If one does not see the hints of the mind, it is *impossible* that one's virtue or meditation practice is based on anything apart from these 10 things. Hence the emphasis above on "take to be blemishes." The actual blemishes of both virtue and mind will not be abandoned *simply because* what is a blemish is being believed, guessed, felt, surmised, reasoned, inferred... instead of *discerned*. Faith, learning and reasoning are indispensable, but success takes more than that.

recognizing those "enemies" *internally* where they truly are, you gain complete certainty that nothing that comes from any direction whatsoever (circumstances, people, accidents, mistakes) can *force you* to commit a fault, a blemish to your virtue. Having defiled motivations in your mind, overlooking them, and acting out of them is what constitutes a fault.¹⁴ This is how you become your own "enemy".

The word "aggregate" (*khandha*) also adds an important nuance. When the Suttas talk about "aggregate of *śīla/samādhi/paññā*" this denotes a level of acquisition of that quality which no longer requires *active effort* or additions to it, but is now just "sitting there" like a heap or pile, the literal meaning of *khandha*. In the context of virtue, it means that one no longer needs to stop and interrogate oneself before every action for 10 minutes like in the beginning¹⁵, but rather every suitable and unsuitable intention within one's mind is clear beyond doubt just by "looking" at it. One has sufficiently learned how to *pick up the hints* of the mind's previously unnoticed motivations. Consequently, rather than needing effort to *keep* one's virtue, effort is now required to *break it*. Using the previous simile, the king would now have to *intentionally* be careless and allow his enemies an opening to strike back and successfully defeat him. It's just too obvious when they're planning to strike back.

And this recognition, as the Sutta goes on to say, is what gives rise to a blameless joy. It's "blameless" because it's not based on something that you *acquired* and will sooner or later be ripped away from you,¹⁶ but on something you would have to, *with full deliberation, choose* to cast aside. Literally, not even death itself can take that aggregate of virtue away, and much less can the lack of an ideal retreat environment do so.

At this point it should be noted that this *aggregate* of higher virtue (not just a *pile* of mere precepts and observances), paired with the instructions of one who sees the Dhamma (*parato ghosa*), should already be enough of a basis for a person to develop the Right View. In fact, in the Suttas, the phrase "one who has fulfilled virtue" is often one of the epithets of a *sotāpanna*.

Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu fulfils virtue, but cultivates composure and wisdom only to a moderate extent. He falls into offenses in regard to the lesser and minor training rules and rehabilitates himself. For what reason? Because I have not said that he is incapable of this. But in regard to those training rules that are fundamental to the spiritual life, in conformity with the spiritual life, his behavior is constant and steadfast. Having undertaken the training rules, he trains in them. With the utter destruction of three fetters, he is a seven-times-at-most attainer who, after roaming and wandering on among devas and humans seven times at most, makes an end of suffering.

¹⁴ And in the case of breaking the five precepts (with complete celibacy as the fifth), the motivation cannot *not* be defiled. Pretty much everything else requires discernment of one's underlying motivation to be categorized.

¹⁵ And yes, it may be like this initially, but that's only because one is still not sufficiently practiced in picking up the hints of where the faults lie internally.

¹⁶ This includes a "meditation experience" in the contemporary sense. Anyone who has gotten one of those can ask themselves if it didn't feel like an *acquisition* that they needed to *protect* and were afraid of losing. And yet the first *jhāna* is the *result* of detachment from all acquisitions. "*Here, owing to withdrawal from acquisitions... a bhikkhu dwells having entered the first jhāna.*" —MN 64

Notice that it is said that such a person might still break minor rules at times (even the Arahant mentioned later in the Sutta could), but that is not what the *fulfilment* of virtue is. It's the fact that they cannot overlook the hints of the unwholesome motivations in their own mind¹⁸, and *because of that*, they do not transgress by acting out of *those* motivations, which is what would compromise the essential training.¹⁹

Therefore, given that composure is a refinement of the same principle as virtue, it is unlikely (but not impossible) that a person would be able to see their own mind to the point necessary to attain the *jhānas* taught by the Buddha and not become a *sotāpanna* first, because they would've already reached the necessary development long before that. The most likely cause of not becoming one is that they haven't heard the Dhamma sufficiently, or at all, but this is hardly possible today if they put in that much work into purifying their mind correctly, given that other spiritual traditions tend not to stress the abandonment of sensuality to the necessary degree.

In light of this—while an unenlightened person should be encouraged to put in the work towards *understanding* the practice of composure, since understanding it correctly to the necessary degree would already constitute seeing the Fourth Noble Truth and thus stream-entry²⁰—they'd be better off not expecting it to culminate in an actual *jhāna* anytime soon, but rather regarding those efforts as one possible avenue to approach the Dhamma, and as a good way to learn how to grasp the hints of the mind and thus of wholesome and unwholesome, which is the condition for stream-entry.

Thus, again, the work would then be in attempting to *understand* what Right Composure is, being careful not to assume they already know what it is, that they understand the *Noble Eightfold Path*. And certainly, taking any "special meditation experiences" they may've had in the past, which somehow don't seem to have contributed to abandonment of sensuality and ill-will, with a pinch of salt.

¹⁷ Note how this is the *lowest possible stage* for a noble disciple. A case of "fulfils virtue but has no composure" is not mentioned, proving the intimate relationship between the two, also considering that such a disciple with up to 7 lives left would likely not be abiding in *jhānas* yet (cf. MN 13 and AN 3.95). And it will be clear how the virtue described here would eventually take one's composure and discernment to this "moderate extent", even when not dedicating a separate effort to them.

¹⁸ (1) *it is impossible that a bhikkhu who delights in company, who is delighted with company, who is devoted to delight in company; who delights in a group, who is delighted with a group, who is devoted to delight in a group, will find delight in solitude when he is alone.* (2) *It is impossible that one who does not find delight in solitude when he is alone will grasp the hint of the mind.* (3) **It is impossible that one who does not grasp the hint of the mind will fulfil right view.** (4) *It is impossible that one who does not fulfil right view will fulfil right composure.* (5) *It is impossible that one who does not fulfil right composure will abandon the fetters.* (6) *Without having abandoned the fetters, it is impossible that one will realize nibbāna.*—AN 6.68

¹⁹ See SN 8.1 on the utter confidence in their virtue such a person would have, despite still not *fully* seeing the escape from the mental aspect of the unwholesome. That confidence reflects what *sammāsamādhi* is—immovability amidst things that try to move you.

²⁰ The understanding of one truth cannot but bring with it all the others. SN 56.30.

If this is kept in mind, it is possible for a person still without the Right View, but who has developed their virtue to as high of a degree as possible, to derive some benefit from often pursuing the following type of reflections as a "meditation" practice in the proper sense:²¹

Virtue (which includes sense restraint, moderation in eating, and general not acting out of unwholesome states²²) needs to have been developed and understood to a point where you can at least notice some degree of that "blameless joy", which comes from discerning and correctly restraining the degree of unwholesome intentions that you've learned to pick up on so far, without intentionally *trying* to give rise to that joy with the help of secondary mental drills, because that would be done *at the expense* of the abandoning of craving.

Having gone to a solitary place, free from the presence of others and from distractions, thoughts in the form of desires, annoyances, boredom/laziness, anxieties and doubts about various issues will inevitably come to the foreground of attention, and here you can—with the *memory* of your virtue²³ as the central foundation—start trying to see how a different route than the usual two extremes that one is used to (indulgence and denial) could in fact be taken towards those mental states.²⁴

So, *recalling* (*sati*) the past efforts to develop virtue, are there some valuable insights that could be carried over and used to not let the mind get blemished on account of these assailing thoughts which clearly came on their own, *without* wanting to put your hand into what is not yours by trying to get rid of them?

Remember some occasion in the recent past where you were faced with a prospect to break your virtue. What did you do? Did you find a way to stop that annoying fly from doing what it does, or did you simply resolve that you *would not kill it*? Do you smash every bottle of alcohol you come across, or do you simply *not drink* even if you're asked to? Did you prevent all sexually appealing people from existing, or did you simply *restrain* the urge to pursue them? And, most importantly, why is it that you now don't feel a threat to your virtue whenever these temptations and annoyances inevitably knock at your door, much unlike when your virtue was still weak?²⁵

It will be evident that it's because now you're *confident* that you will **not** open that door, no matter how hard or how long it gets knocked on. And *that alone* is what gives rise to the *factual*

²¹ [Abandoning of Sensuality is What Meditation Is](#)

²² See what **precedes**, not **results from**, practicing *sati* and *samādhi* in AN 8.63. Same in every Gradual Training sequence.

²³ *Sīlanussati*: One of the 4 recollections that recur throughout the Suttas, aimed at the abandonment of unwholesome states (cf. SN 9.11). The first of these, recollection of the Buddha, is often taken to be the repetition of the mantra "buddho". Does this mean the 4th, the recollection of virtue, simply entails using the word "sīlam" as mantra instead? I think anyone familiar with the Suttas would agree that what follows below is more likely to be what the Buddha intended with those practices. If it were not, he could have saved a lot of time and simply focused on teaching how to use mantras or similar techniques properly, instead of leaving us with all these thousands of *contemplations*. Also, how exactly a mantra would lead to permanent freedom from *dukkha* is not evident here-&-now, as the Dhamma would always be.

²⁴ [Becoming Imperturbable](#)

²⁵ Note well: This does not mean one should *seek* to have more temptations to break precepts in one's environment—on the contrary. It just means that even after withdrawing as much as possible, temptations are bound to arise.

safety you would be able to recognize, and precisely because it doesn't depend on circumstances anymore does it feel like safety—it cannot be compromised by anyone but yourself.

So, it is more than reasonable to conclude that an even deeper sense of safety could be achieved *while* these thoughts are now knocking at the *mental* door²⁶ when you're in seclusion, if you found a way to be confident that you will *not* open it no matter how much of a racket those thoughts make "outside" of it.

To accomplish this, it will be necessary to be clear on what exactly constitutes "opening the door", and what constitutes "noise outside" because given the subtlety of the distinction, one is guaranteed to confuse the former with the latter and vice versa in the beginning. *The "hints" won't be obvious.*

Let's take arguably the most relevant instance of a "door knocker", which is a thought of a beautiful object:

*"They are not sensuality, the pretty things in the world:
a person's sensuality is volitional lust (saṅkapparāga);
the pretty things remain just as they are in the world,
but the wise remove the desire for them."
—AN 6.63*

But what does the Buddha mean by "the world"? Does he mean "out there in the city"?

Venerable sir, it is said, 'the world, the world.' In what way, venerable sir, might there be the world or the description of the world?"

"Where there is the eye, Samiddhi, where there are forms, eye-consciousness, things to be cognized by eye-consciousness, there the world exists or the description of the world.

*"Where there is the ear ... the mind, where there are mental phenomena, mind-consciousness, things to be cognized by mind-consciousness, there the world exists or the description of the world.
—SN 35.68*

So then, it is *volitional lust towards* that which manifests within the world (the 6 sense bases) that constitutes sensuality. Anything less than this is just a "pretty thing in the world". But how would one pick up the "hint" of that *volitional lust*? Is it by whether the perception of the object is present *at all*? Would it be instead by the intensity of emotional pressure, the feeling that accompanies the thought? Would it be by the *possibilities/intentions (cetanā)* implied in it?²⁷

²⁶ This is really not optional in the way commonly assumed. The intention to stop one's thoughts *before* fully developing the the actual first *jhāna*, let alone before even *having* it, is always underlied by a subtler, peripheral, not *directly* noticeable intention of desire/aversion, which people generally would not see because they can't grasp the hints of such intentions and often aren't trying to. Even if one succeeds in supposedly "not thinking", that "little-yet-large" craving is lurking there and being blissfully ignored the whole time, no matter how much ecstatic pleasure is being felt. The proof is in how one would get even a tiny bit annoyed if the pleasure suddenly ceased, which wouldn't be the case with the pleasure of *utter indifference to all gain and loss* that comes with wholesome *samādhi*.

²⁷ The term "intention" (*cetanā* or *sankhāra*) denotes a *possibility* that a sense experience presents to act in some way. "Volition" is the choice to act upon those possibilities, similar in practice to *kamma*, except in the case of the Arahant. See further explanation on "mental action" below.

Luckily, several Suttas give us the answer in different formulations but with the same meaning. Two examples should suffice:

At Sāvaththī. Sitting to one side, the Venerable Rādha said to the Blessed One: “Venerable sir, it said, ‘Māra, Māra’. What now, venerable sir, is Māra?”

*“Form, Rādha, is Māra. **Feeling ... Perception ... Intentions ... Consciousness is Māra...***
—SN 23.12

*“The eye is mine, ascetic, forms are mine, **the base where eye-pressure is cognized²⁸ is mine. Where can you go, ascetic, to escape from me?***

*The ear is mine, ascetic, sounds are mine ... The nose is mine, ascetic, odours are mine ... The tongue is mine, ascetic, tastes are mine ... The body is mine, ascetic, tactile objects are mine ... The mind is mine, ascetic, mental phenomena are mine, **the base where mind-pressure is cognized is mine. Where can you go, ascetic, to escape from me?”***

—SN 4.19

What these passages imply is that no amount of pressure, feeling or *suggested* actions that a sight, sound, smell, taste, touch or thought brings with it can possibly be what lust is *in and of itself*, because if that were the case, there would be no escape from lust, no escape from Māra. Lust would *have to* arise without fail if certain feelings were to arise.²⁹ But luckily, this is not the case, and thus liberation is possible to begin with.

Rather, as the verse from AN 6.63 says, it is one's **volitional lust**, one's *deliberate choice to accept* the presented possibilities to try to "release" the mental pressure that is the problem. Not the pressure, perceptions, feeling or the *suggestions* to act in and of themselves, no matter how they arise—these are just the "racket outside the door", the door that one can learn how to keep closed and remain safely behind, at ease. Besides:

“Then, engaging further in inward exploration, he explores thus: ‘When this craving arises, where does it arise? When it settles down, upon what does it settle?’

*“As he explores, he understands thus: ‘Whatever in the world has a pleasant and agreeable nature: it is here that this craving arises when it arises; it is here that it settles when it settles down. ‘And what in the world has a pleasant and agreeable nature? **The eye** has a pleasant and agreeable nature in the world: **it is here** that this craving arises when it arises; it is here that it settles when it settles down. So too **the***

²⁸ Translating "*phassa*" as "pressure", a more practically useful rendering. Also note that feelings, perceptions, and intentions (*cetanā*) arise due to the base of *phassa*. Since *phassa* belongs to Māra, these 3 things must do so too.

²⁹ It is not a coincidence that the tendency is to want to stop thinking, and in some cases shut down the 5 senses altogether (see AN 5.113). It is *because* one is too weak to endure the pressure that the objects exert that one wants to remove them, and a weak mind is a mind without *samādhi*. This, or one genuinely believes that the feeling accompanying the thought **is** the lust, which will make the cessation of lust impossible except by becoming a robot with "bare perceptions", a rather popular notion that is actually nonsensical. Note also that *vedanā* are not *sensations*, they are mental phenomena.

*“Feeling, perception, and consciousness, friend—these phenomena are conjoined, not disjointed, and it is **impossible to separate each of these phenomena from the others** in order to describe the difference between them. For what one feels, that one perceives; and what one perceives, that one cognizes.”* —MN 43

ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind have a pleasant and agreeable nature: it is here that this craving arises when it arises; it is here that it settles when it settles down.

—SN 12.66

Thus, it'd be wrong to think that abandonment and replacement of *sense objects*, including thoughts that arose on their own, is abandonment of craving.³⁰

Now, continuing from where we left off, you are in seclusion now, away from people and distractions, plus you keep your virtue and sense restraint well and see the danger in the slightest fault, so you don't *do* anything lustful with your body and speech, and yet evidently the mind is still not free from lust. This is where "mental action" is taking place, the choice to "open the door" for the bandits waiting outside, which is still being overlooked.

The reason why the door is still "open" is because the mind (*citta*) still *values* the possibility of experiencing the pleasure that is being offered by the mind (*mano*)³¹. Thus, you are not *certain* in your internal renunciation of that *offered* pleasure, unlike in the domains of body and speech. This means that, even though you have developed restraint and are not specifically *planning* to pursue the pleasure through actions, the *citta* still holds, to some vague degree, that it would be "nice" to experience with the body this offer that *mano* is presenting. And that value of "nice" is where the unwholesome is, *not* in what is being presented. This is what the Suttas mean by "welcoming, delighting in, entertaining agreeable objects". The only proper solution to this is to abandon that *value*, that notion of "nice to get this", right where it is, without trying to prevent the *offer* and its pressuring feeling from being there—that feeling is *utterly inseparable from that perception*, as said above. Both the feeling and perception clearly have come, and will likely come again in the future, as a "bait" placed by Māra, and their presence is thus not in your ultimate control.

That "value" can be abandoned not by *choosing* to stop valuing the pleasure directly, but by clarifying and reflecting on the drawbacks of *accepting* the bait that is being presented to you.³² One does not need supramundane discernment to realize that *stepping into a trap* is never in one's best interests, no matter how good the bait in it is. Even if once you're inside, the hunter is nice enough to give you a few more treats, the fact is that *now you're in his control*, so if he ever feels like doing something bad to you, you have no way to stop it. And deep down you know, he *will* do so ultimately, at the latest when your sense bases, which you have been doubling down in regarding as yours and as dear by valuing their pleasures, begin to break apart.³³

³⁰ This applies even if one is not fully trying to "stop thinking" or "concentrate", but still misusing Dhamma reflections to *prevent* thoughts arising on their own from exerting their respective pressure—still blaming the *hook* for the issue, not one's biting of it.

³¹ In brief: *citta* (sometimes rendered "heart") is responsible for actions and all unwholesome states and is what needs to be purified, while *mano* (intellect), which is responsible for *dhammas* (thoughts/images), is Māra's property and is where he sets up his "bait". "Hint of the mind" refers to *citta*, not *mano*.

³² [The Danger Contemplation](#)

³³ Incidentally, people in the Suttas often became *sotāpannas* as a result of the Buddha expounding the danger of sensuality, with the sort of reflections exemplified here, which freed their mind from hindrances, and *then* the Noble Truths. It was not because they had been doing "concentration" practices before.

“Bhikkhus, in the Himalayas, the king of mountains, there are rugged and uneven zones where neither monkeys nor human beings can go; there are rugged and uneven zones where monkeys can go but not human beings; there are even and delightful regions where both monkeys and human beings can go. There, along the monkey trails, hunters set out traps of pitch for catching monkeys.

“Those monkeys who are not foolish and frivolous, when they see the pitch, avoid it from afar. But a monkey who is foolish and frivolous approaches the pitch and seizes it with his hand; he gets caught there. Thinking, ‘I will free my hand,’ he seizes it with his other hand; he gets caught there. Thinking, ‘I will free both hands,’ he seizes it with his foot; he gets caught there. Thinking, ‘I will free both hands and my foot,’ he seizes it with his other foot; he gets caught there.’ Thinking, ‘I will free both hands and feet,’ he applies his muzzle to it; he gets caught there.

“Thus, bhikkhus, that monkey, trapped at five points, lies there screeching. He has met with calamity and disaster and the hunter can do with him as he wishes. The hunter spears him, fastens him to that same block of wood, and goes off where he wants. So it is, bhikkhus, when one strays outside one’s own resort into the domain of others.

“Therefore, bhikkhus, do not stray outside your own resort into the domain of others. Māra will gain access to those who stray outside their own resort into the domain of others; Māra will get a hold on them.

*“And what is not a bhikkhu’s own resort but **the domain of others?** It is the five cords of sensuality. This is what is not a bhikkhu’s own resort but the domain of others.”*

—SN 47.7³⁴

At Sāvathī. “Bhikkhus, when one dwells contemplating gratification in things that can fetter, craving increases. With craving, assumption is; with assumption, being is; with being, birth is; with birth, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair exist. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

“Suppose, bhikkhus, an oil lamp was burning in dependence on oil and a wick, and a man would pour oil into it and adjust the wick from time to time. Thus, sustained by that oil, fuelled by it, that oil lamp would burn for a very long time. So too, when one lives contemplating gratification in things that can fetter, craving increases.... Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

“Bhikkhus, when one dwells contemplating danger in things that can fetter, craving ceases. Without craving, there is no assumption; without assumption, there is no being... no birth ... aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair do not exist. Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.

“Suppose, bhikkhus, an oil lamp was burning in dependence on oil and a wick, and the man would not pour oil into it or adjust the wick from time to time. Thus, when the former supply of fuel is exhausted, that oil lamp, not being fed with any more fuel, lacking sustenance, would be extinguished. So too, when one lives contemplating danger in things that can fetter, craving ceases.... Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.”

—SN 12.53

³⁴[The Monkey Trap Sutta](#)

It must be emphasized that the purpose of this contemplation of danger is not to get rid of the arisen *thought*, but to address one's inability to remain *internally* unmoved by its alluring nature. It is because you are *emotionally bothered* by that "itch" that you relish the prospect of getting it "scratched". But in and of itself, no amount of itch *requires* scratching. One's mind not being free from lust, infected with distorted notions, is what *assumes* that scratching is "necessary". Also, notice how in the above Sutta, the man simply *refrains* from doing what would cause the lamp to burn longer than it should on its own. He doesn't *manually* try to get the oil out or put out the fire. This is the only way to abandon an unwholesome state without generating another.

If you were to maintain this context of "danger" on the *right level* long enough, where that "scratch" is being *desired* instead of where the "itch" is³⁵, you would at some point realize that the *same itch* is no longer unpleasant³⁶ because you no longer *feel a need* to scratch it, not because you got rid of it by force. Rather than being a threat, the "itch", which is not bothering you at all anymore, will now serve to remind you of your state of safety from the *need* to scratch, as if you're now free from debt, illness, imprisonment, slavery or managed to cross a desert. That sense of safety is a wholesome joy (and notice that you haven't stopped thinking). Because, how can you say "I am safe" unless you're safe *from something*? What's more, how can that safety and the joy arising from it become the central theme of your experience, your *abiding* as said in the Suttas, unless that which was a threat before is still being equally *recognized*? Forgetting about the threat would mean forgetting about the safety, even in mundane terms. This is why one who succeeds in this practice fully and disengages from sensuality correctly has "blindfolded" Māra:

“And where is it that Māra and his following cannot go? Here, having fully disengaged from sensuality, fully disengaged from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu dwells having entered the first jhāna, which is accompanied by thinking and pondering, with joy and pleasure born of disengagement. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra³⁷, to have become invisible to the Evil One by depriving Māra’s eye of its opportunity.

—MN 25

It is precisely because you **don't** prevent Māra from setting up his bait (which is none other than the pressure of the six sense bases) that he is confused and at a loss. Before this point, it had always been a *guaranteed* catch every time he set up the trap, given that even when you

³⁵ Compare with the simile given in SN 12.66: The problem is *never* that the poisonous drink is tasty and agreeable, nor that it's being offered— the problem is when *you* lose perspective and want to drink it.

³⁶ But you must also not be *anticipating* that result and getting anxious to get it, because this would be a subtler form of still craving for pleasure and against pain. Wanting is to be completely abandoned *beforehand*, and the "itch" must be endured without expecting a reward at the end. *Samādhi* will not take care of your own craving for you, as is often hoped. *Samādhi* is the *result* of not acting out of craving, expectations and worries on any level.

³⁷ Isn't it strange that "meditation" tends to involve "blindfolding" *oneself* by going into a trance, rather than blindfolding Māra? Note that indeed, the second jhāna is the cessation of thinking and pondering, but that is something that is *built upon the basis* of the pristine clarity of thinking of the first *jhāna*. So it's not "blindfolding" oneself at all, but developing *even more* clarity of the nature of Māra's traps. It's then even harder to foolishly overlook and fall for them in the future.

tried to avoid it before, you went overboard and attempted to *get rid* of the trap, by trying to get rid of the mental pressure—stop thinking, concentrate twice as hard on your abdomen or tip of your nose, etc.³⁸ Therefore, you always *touched* the trap either to eat the bait or to throw it away, and that's all the hunter needed to get you. But now, you are learning to not *take* the bait, nor try to *remove* it either. This is, contrary to one's distorted gut-feeling, is the only way to stay safe:

“How, dear sir, did you cross the flood?”

“By not halting, friend, and by not struggling I crossed the flood.”

“But how is it, dear sir, that by not halting and by not straining you crossed the flood?”

“When I halted, friend, then I sank; but when I struggled, then I got swept away. It is in this way, friend, that by not halting and by not struggling I crossed the flood.”

—SN 1.1

That same reflection and attitude is to be applied to any other hindrance, irrespective of its peculiarities. This is because they all share the same nature of that "itch" or pressure, that "trap" which one will *automatically* fall for if unclear about where the line is and how to not cross it. Lack of clarity and perspective means *already* being trapped within a hindrance. Displeasure and annoyance are the second kind of "trap", which one must learn to "see through" and contemplate so as to see that the problem is one's subtle need to *act out of it*, which is what ill-will is. Same for the other 3 hindrances. All of them are actually different symptoms of the *same thing*³⁹.

For this reason, if one simply learns to see "mental pressure" or "impulses" in the most general sense, even without classifying it into a particular hindrance, and learns to *neither act out of* that impulse *nor* prevent it from being where it is (a subtler way of acting out of it), then the entire *domain* of unwholesome, the domain of *kamma* and thus all suffering and adversity, can be surmounted one day. And this is the same principle that virtue is based upon—one does not accept the impulse to act out, nor does one prevent it from arising.

This “enduring” of mental pressure (*with the right perspective*, not just “mindless bearing”) that is required to abandon the five hindrances is the common thread to *jhāna* and Nibbāna, which would have to culminate in the latter eventually when paired with correct views and instructions. This is how Right Composure *factually* inclines the mind towards Nibbāna.⁴⁰ Nibbāna is not about discovering a hidden experiential truth through an esoteric revelation or experience, but about perfect immovability, and thus *peace*, in the face of anything that can arise in one’s experience. And with this, lust, aversion and delusion, and the fetters of self-view, conceit and ignorance are destroyed, because their *raison d’être* is gone—the constant, futile attempt to outrun the pressure of the senses.

³⁸ *Asubha* contemplation also tends to be misused to *get rid of the bait*, not to simply make sure to not eat it. Another way of grabbing it and being caught. [On Asubha](#)

³⁹[The Truth About the Five Hindrances](#)

⁴⁰ SN 53.1

*“The eye, bhikkhus, is the ocean for a person; its current consists of forms
One who **endures (sahati)** that impulse (vega) consisting of forms is said to have crossed the ocean of
the eye with its waves, whirlpools, sharks, and demons. Crossed over, gone beyond, **the brahmin
stands on high ground.***

*“The ear, bhikkhus, is the ocean for a person.... The mind is the ocean for a person; its current consists of
mental phenomena. One who **endures** that impulse of mental phenomena is said to have crossed the
ocean of the mind with its waves, whirlpools, sharks and demons. Crossed over, gone beyond, **the
brahmin stands on high ground.**”*

—SN 35.228 (cf. AN 6.55)

*Patient **endurance (khanti)** is the highest austerity*

Nibbāna is the highest, say the Buddhas

For one gone forth does not hurt another;

Disturbing another, one is not a samaṇa.⁴¹

—Dhammapada 184

"It is said, friend, 'nibbāna, nibbāna' In what way has the Blessed One spoken of nibbāna?"

"Here, friend, having fully disengaged from sensuality... a bhikkhu dwells having entered the first jhāna

*.... To this extent, too, the Blessed One has spoken of nibbāna **in a certain sense** ...*

—AN 9.48 (see the other Suttas in this chapter)⁴²

“I’m not afraid of fear.

*Our teacher is skilled in **the deathless;***

Monks proceed by the path

Where fear cannot land on.”

—Theragāthā 21

It should now be evident that abandoning these subtle mental attitudes and escaping Māra's traps in the right way would never be possible if a person is still falling for the obvious traps with their body and speech. No amount of effort in meditation would be able to make up for the fact that their *actions* are still infected with lust, aversion, and distraction.

Māra doesn't care how well you can perform a mechanical mental exercise and how much pleasure it provides you with. All that matters to him is, you still *could* bite the hook. For as long

⁴¹ It's not a coincidence that “patient endurance” appears in the first line and Nibbāna in the second. It's not *just* talking about everyday “patience” and resilience. Also, one “does not disturb”, or argue even with Māra, trying to get him to stop putting up his traps in the six sense base that is rightly his. In this way, one can truly abandon all craving:

*“Friend, I assert and proclaim [my teaching] in such a way that one does not quarrel with **anyone** in the world with its gods, its **Māras**, and its Brahmās, in this generation with its recluses and brahmins, its princes and its people; in such a way that perceptions no more underlie that brahmin who abides **detached from sensual pleasures**, without perplexity, devoid of worry, free from craving for any kind of being.”— MN 18*

⁴²This goes to show how even the first *jhāna* is something **way** more profound than it is usually given credit for temporarily, often by putting too much weight on how *jhāna* is *technically* still not completely outside the realm of being (bhava). This is true from an *Arahant's* point of view, but for the ordinary person who is not even accomplished in virtue and still relishes sensual pleasures, the first *jhāna* taught by the Buddha is, for all intents and purposes, close to Nibbāna—an *extinguishment* of their deeply rooted *sensual being (kāma bhava)*. To illustrate, a 60 year old has all the right to call a 30 year old a “kid”, but for a 6 year old child, both of the adults deserve almost the same respect. And indeed, there are cases in the Suttas such as that of Devadatta who had *jhānas*, but such people make history for a reason.

as that's the case, he's got you already. This is why *actions* by body, speech and mind are what enables the five hindrances, and thus ignorance, to thrive, and not one's lack of skill in repetitive techniques, “energy blockages” in one’s body or mind, lack of merit from past lives, or anything else that distracts one away from starting to restrain those actions.

*Just as, when it is raining and the rain pours down in thick droplets on a mountaintop, the water flows down along the slope and fills the clefts, gullies, and creeks; and these then fill up the pools; these fill up the lakes ... streams ... rivers; and these then fill up the great ocean; thus there is nutriment for the great ocean, and in this way it becomes full. So too, not associating with superior persons fills up not hearing the true Dhamma; not hearing the true Dhamma fills up lack of faith... lack of *ayoniso manasikāra* ... lack of recollection and clear comprehension... non-restraint of the senses... the three kinds of misconduct... **the three kinds of misconduct fill up the five hindrances**; the five hindrances fill up ignorance. Thus there is nutriment for ignorance, and in this way it becomes full.*

—AN 10.61

To sum up, the right kind of composure is in having the mental strength to not take Māra's bait without needing to shun it either, and developing the right kind of unwavering virtue is the first, indispensable step in that same direction.

Some more teachings on this proper practice of virtue and how it develops the mind:

- [Essay: Intentions Behind One's](#)
- [Essay: The Necessity of Celibacy](#)
- [Purpose of the Precepts](#)
- [Importance of the Precepts – Looking for a Bigger Picture](#)
- [How Virtue Leads to Effortless Samādhi](#)
- [Relieving the Pressure of Restraint](#)
- [Jhāna is Virtue](#)
- [Forsaking the pleasure of "meditation"](#)
- [Making the World a Better Place](#)
- [Right Speech, Right Samādhi](#)
- [Sense Restraint is not Just for Monks](#)
- [Nibbāna, Right Speech, Virtuous Behavior](#)
- [Sense Restraint](#)
- [Responsibility can free you from suffering](#)
- [Q&A on Jhāna, Anxiety, Precepts](#)
- [Gateway to Nibbāna](#)
- [BOOK: The Only Way to Jhāna](#)