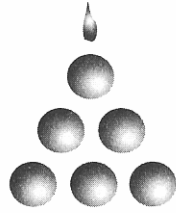


Introducing Samatha Meditation: learning a gentle way to calm and inner strength through mindfulness of breathing

Peter Harvey





THE SAMATHA TRUST

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How to use this guidebook

Read the material in this guide slowly and mindfully, preferably in a quiet place free from distractions. The material is divided into week by week teachings, reflecting the way in which I take a weekly introductory class. Most weekly inputs have teachings that include both a broadly ‘theory’ aspect, on relevant ideas, outlook and attitudes, and specific meditative ‘practices’, which unfold in a sequence characteristic of the Samatha Trust. The relevant theory and practice aspects often, but do not always, have a particular link. But while the theory aspects do not necessarily need to be read sequentially (other than for the first few weeks), the practice ones do need to be read sequentially, and put into practice sequentially, in what will hopefully be a daily meditation practice. There is a series of stages that one gradually practices and masters, usually over about 30 weeks. *It is important not to rush or skimp on the stages, thinking one wants to get quickly onto ‘more advanced’ things.* This is like trying to build a house without first laying down good foundations. However, it may be occasionally OK to add on two stages at once, if you are confident in where you have got to. Also, if you learn the practice on weekend retreats, you may be introduced to the stages quickly, to then work on in a more sustained way at home. On the other hand, if your practice becomes not so regular, you may need to take more than a week to establish a new stage before moving on.

This guide is also divided into several ‘parts’. To receive further parts, you need to get in contact with a Samatha teacher, by visiting a class, attending an introductory weekend retreat, or by phone or email. This will ensure that you have an experienced person with whom you can discuss how your meditation is going, and be able to ask questions and receive advice. It also means that you cannot run ahead of yourself and read or practice material before you are ready for it. See the Samatha Trust website: <http://www.samatha.org> for information on weekend retreats and local classes, with contact details for teachers, click on the ‘Find your nearest class’ tab.

You certainly do not need to be a Buddhist or to have done meditation previously to practise and benefit from practising mindfulness of breathing and the related practices introduced here, though you do need a willingness to try it out! That said, all the teachings given in this guide are Buddhist teachings, from the Theravāda tradition found in countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka and Burma, which preserves teachings close to the ancient tradition established by the Buddha. If you develop greater calm, inner strength and mindfulness as you practise these teachings, you may in time come to wish to further explore Buddhist ideas and practices, and develop commitment in this direction. The invitation is there, though it is of course up to you if you take it. The Buddhist way describes itself as ‘come-see-ish’: inviting investigation.

Please note that this guide is *not* ‘the’ guide to Samatha Trust meditation but *a* guide written by just one of its teachers. Each teacher will have their own personal style of and approach to teaching the practice, though they will all use the series of stages of mindfulness of breathing described in this guide.

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Introduction

The Samatha Trust

The Samatha Trust (<http://www.samatha.org>) is probably the second largest Theravāda Buddhist group in the UK, after the monastically-based Forest Sangha, led by Western monastic pupils of the Thai teacher Achan Chah. The Samatha Trust is a lay organisation, whose root teacher is the Thai layman Boonman Poonyathiro, a one-time Theravāda Buddhist monk who came to the UK in 1962 from India, though from time to time it takes teachings from various Samatha-orientated Theravāda monks, as well as learning Pali chants from various monks.



Boonman Poonyathiro

Samatha practice particularly aims to develop *samatha*, which means ‘calm’, ‘peace’ or ‘tranquillity’. It uses a form of the ancient Buddhist practice of ‘mindfulness of breathing’ (*ānāpāna-sati*): attending carefully to the in and out flow of the breath. The Buddha adapted this from existing yoga techniques, and used it as the basis for his own attainment of awakening or enlightenment. Mindfulness of breathing is taught in a variety of ways in Buddhism, and the specific form taught by the Samatha Trust is a subtle, powerful and carefully structured system particularly devised for laypeople in the West. For example, unlike other ways of doing mindfulness of breathing, our samatha practice system deliberately works with different breath lengths, rather than the unaltered natural breath. Reasons given for this include:

- working with the ordinary breath lets the mind remain in ordinary states more easily; breathing differently from normal helps remind one that the practice is something special and precious.
- working with a variety of breath lengths, in different stages, gives one more things to be mindful of, so helps sustain mental clarity.

Our approach to samatha practice was devised and developed by Boonman Poonyathiro, who from 1962 taught a small group of people interested in meditation, so 2012 saw 50 years of his method being taught in the UK. His pupils formed the Samatha Trust, which as of 2014 had around 98 lay teachers (62 men, 36 women), and a residential meditation centre in Wales.

As of 2014, there were Samatha Trust classes in these locations in Great Britain:

- The North-West: [Liverpool](#), [Manchester](#), [Rossendale](#), Southport, [Stockport](#), [Warrington](#), [Wilmslow](#).
- The North-East: [Sunderland](#).
- Yorkshire & Derbyshire: Bakewell, [Hebden Bridge](#), [Huddersfield](#), [Sheffield](#), [York](#).
- The Midlands: [Birmingham](#), [Great Malvern](#), [Ludlow](#), [Shrewsbury](#).
- The South-West: [Bristol](#).

- The South-East: [Cambridge](#), [Kingston-upon-Thames](#), [Harrow](#), [London](#) (Tottenham, University of Westminster), [Oxford](#).
- Wales: [Llanfyllin](#), [Llangunllo](#), [Pembrokeshire](#)
- Scotland: a class is being established in Edinburgh.

Elsewhere there are classes in:

- Ireland: [Belfast](#), Crossgar, Newry, [County Monaghan](#).
- The USA: Alabama, [California](#), [Chicago](#), [New England](#), [Philadelphia](#).

Classes usually involve a talk and perhaps some related discussion, a guided practice, and then the opportunity to discuss practice with the teacher, one-to-one. The talk helps set the tone, in a calming way, and the presence of other meditators, and the discussion, sets up a good feeling of shared endeavour.

The role of a meditation teacher

While this booklet contains extensive guidance, you will get much more from the practice if you can attend a Samatha Trust meditation class or retreat. If you cannot do either of these, you should contact one of the teachers by phone or email (see Samatha website for their contact details under the ‘Find your nearest class’ drop-down menu) so that you can ask questions and get feedback on how your practice is going, as in the process of ‘reporting’ that is part of weekly classes and retreats (and which is confidential). As with learning any set of practical skills, such as learning to play a musical instrument, having a guiding teacher is *very* helpful to the process.

Meditation requires personal guidance, as it is a subtle skill which cannot be fully conveyed by standardized written teachings. The teacher gets to know his or her pupil, guides him or her through difficulties as they occur, and guards against misunderstandings and inept or inappropriate use of the powerful means of self-change that meditation provides. In return, the pupil must apply himself or herself well to the practice and be open to where it leads. The teacher acts as a ‘good friend’ (*kalyāṇa-mitta*): a guide who can draw on his or her experience on the journey of meditation.

The Samatha meditation teacher Sarah Shaw, in her book *Buddhist Meditation: An Anthology of texts from the Pāli Canon* (Routledge, 2007, pp.10 and 12), says:

Finding a teacher or a good friend

... Special emphasis is given in the canon [of early texts], however, to the *kalyāṇamitta*, the ‘good’ or ‘lovely friend’ or ‘the friend in what is lovely’ who may give guidance and encouragement in meditation. The ‘good friend’ is important as someone in whom one can place trust and to whom one can talk openly about the meditation practice and problems connected with it. ... [T]he relationship with the teacher and others following the path needs to have good heart. The teacher should, to a certain extent, be a friend; one’s friends on the path are, to a certain extent, one’s teachers.

A teacher’s ability to listen well (as well as observe body language) is very important. One must listen to what the person *actually* says, and how they say it, not what you think that they are about to say. This is a particular form of mindfulness: mindfulness of the mind-states of others.

The author of this book

The teachings in this book are based on oral and written teachings that I have given in the introductory meditation classes that I take. They are simply the teachings of *one* Samatha teacher. Different teachers have different teaching styles, and sometimes different ways of interpreting the basic Samatha Trust approach. I have been practising Samatha since 1972, and teaching it since 1977 in Durham and then Durham and Sunderland, in the North-East of England. Over the years, I have taken meditation classes perhaps 1,500 times. I learnt meditation from Lance Cousins in Manchester, and after my Philosophy degree I did a PhD on an aspect of Theravāda Buddhist thought (later published as *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism* (Curzon, 1995)). I became a Religious Studies academic specialising in the study of Buddhism, also publishing, for example, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge University Press, 1990, and 2nd edn. 2012) and *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). From 2002 to my retirement in 2011, I ran an online MA Buddhist Studies at the University of Sunderland; since then, the materials which I wrote have been taken up by the University of South Wales, for their online MA Buddhist Studies.

Most Samatha Trust meditation teachers are not Buddhist Studies academics (though some are, such as Lance Cousins, Rupert Gethin and Sarah Shaw). My academic knowledge of Buddhism has sometimes been drawn on in my meditation teaching. While this can be helpful, it means that I can have a tendency that can lean in a theoretical direction. Other teachers have a more experiential emphasis.

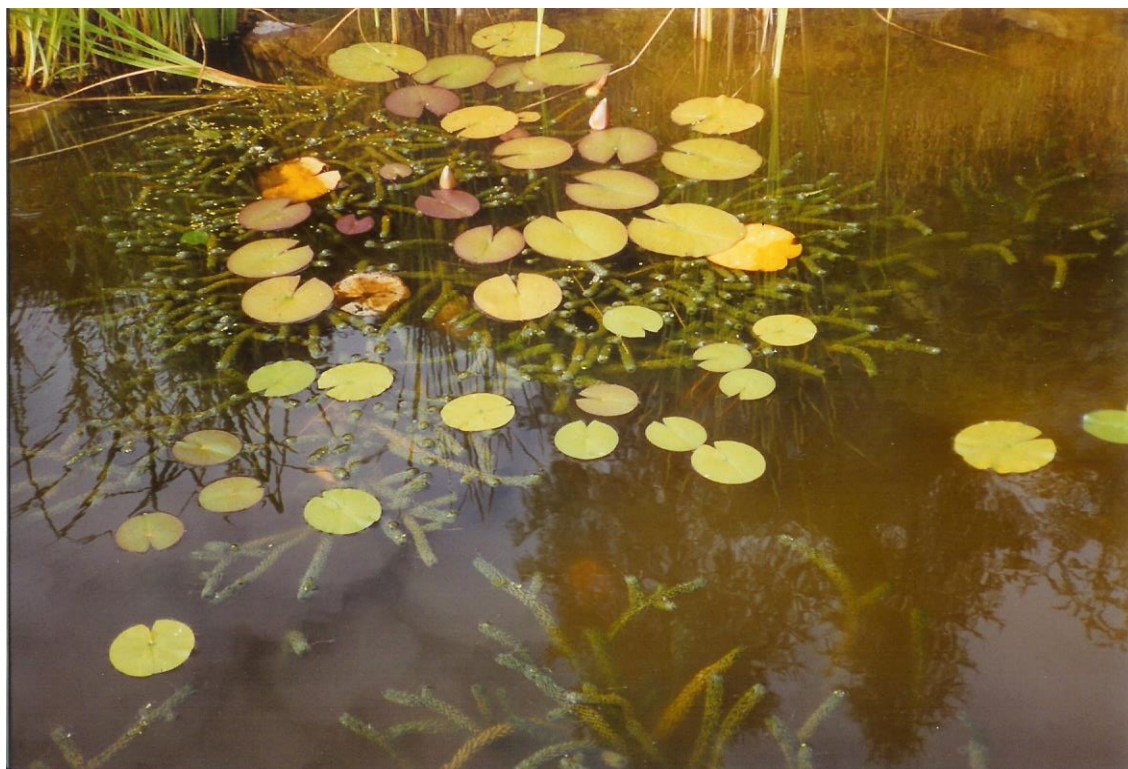
Some quotes from people who have practised Samatha meditation for a couple of years or more

'Meditation is a way of beginning to take control of the mind. It is a way of recognising at the start of the practice, how much of a monkey mind our minds are. By starting to take control of the mind we can begin to gain more control of ourselves and the way we operate in the world'.

'Benefits of the meditation? Taking responsibility for oneself in the here and now. Pushing the boundaries of pressure, chaos and uncontrol back and away - calming them too, without denying them. Discovering a context of calm, dispassion and clarity within'.

'Buddhism is unique in stressing the importance of mindfulness, a practice that does exactly what it says on the tin. As we become more aware of the mind we are more able to be skilful in how we react to its monkey suggestions. Experience meditators are able to be mindful of the contents of mind and so instead of reacting to the different moods and feelings they are able to pause, reflect and respond in a much more conscious way. As the meditation practice develops this skilfulness carries over into daily life'.

'Regular practice of meditation has primarily contributed to my life by developing a level of focused attention. I am more aware of what I'm doing and where my attention and energy is going and whether that's where I meant for it to go, in a lot of activities. I'm still working on developing the ability to make it go in the direction I want to if it isn't. Meditation has also helped me to be a little more patient about this process, and accept that I'm only human.'



'I meditate early in the morning, and I find this good as it means that I start the day by doing something for myself, which contributes to my own development. This creates a positive feeling that can help to resist negative pressures later in the day. Regular meditation also helps to separate the problems of one day from the next, and set them in perspective as things that will also soon pass by.'

'Good meditation sessions can lead to positive feeling of joy or contentment, that spread out into everyday life - I sometimes find myself noticing the beauty of the light, as I ride my bike to work on a rainy morning, in a way I wouldn't have done before I was meditating.'

'One relatively early change that I noticed was that I was more likely to hear the birds singing in the garden, or to notice the clouds, or the clear sky.'

'As a naturally quiet person, practice has made me more comfortable with my quietness and also more able to speak my mind.'

'One becomes more tolerant of oneself and others.'

'Benefits of practice: not flapping in someone else's wind - not quite as much, anyway! Enjoying better harmony with others and being less judgmental of self and others.'

'Meditation is a simplified attentive space in one's daily life. Whatever the difficulties and challenges of the day you can return to a place of greater mental clarity and balance. More of life's challenges are seen as part of "the path" - opportunities for growth (rather) than as a threat. Along with this is a kind of growing emotional openness - to both positive and negative emotions - and a growing ability to work skilfully with either.'

'Buddhism places a lot of emphasis on the moral life and Buddhist meditators are encouraged to live a skilful life based on the Buddha's teachings. At first this is done because it is part of the practice and so one follows the teaching. But the Buddha is perhaps unique among the leaders of the major world religions in asking his followers not to slavishly follow his teachings but to try them out to see how they work in the meditator's own life.'

'I don't think of Samatha as an organisation in the usual way that one might respond to that word - something "faceless", impersonal - because that is not how I first encountered it. In fact, for a few weeks after I first started attending classes, I didn't know there was such an organisation: it was just a person teaching about the Buddha, what the Buddha said and how to practise.'

I like the way that Samatha is very relaxed - you can come, you can stay or you can go. There's no pressure, no sense of needing to conform to a particular 'brand' of Buddhism. Ideas of religion or faith or belief can seem "uncool" to people these days, but I didn't find the Samatha approach off-putting at all. It's very open, teaches from the heart, presenting the teachings of the Buddha in

a straightforward way which, I feel, preserves the original essence of the teachings and at the same time makes them relevant to modern day life and the struggles we may have.

There's a wonderful sense of connection between people who are drawn to Samatha: a sense that we're all on the same path and that there is someone with experience to guide you. There's also that sense of being connected to an ancient tradition which encompasses the wisdom with the power to illuminate the sometimes dark-seeming 21st century Western life.

I like that Samatha does what it does first and foremost to help people, relying on directions because none is excluded'.

For more quotes from people who practise Samatha, see the Samatha Adventures website: <http://samatha-adventures.org/>

