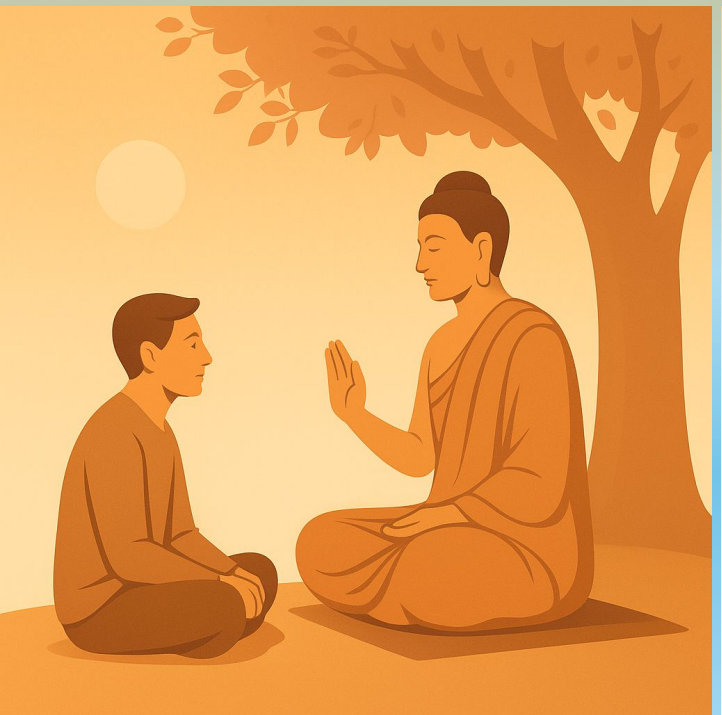
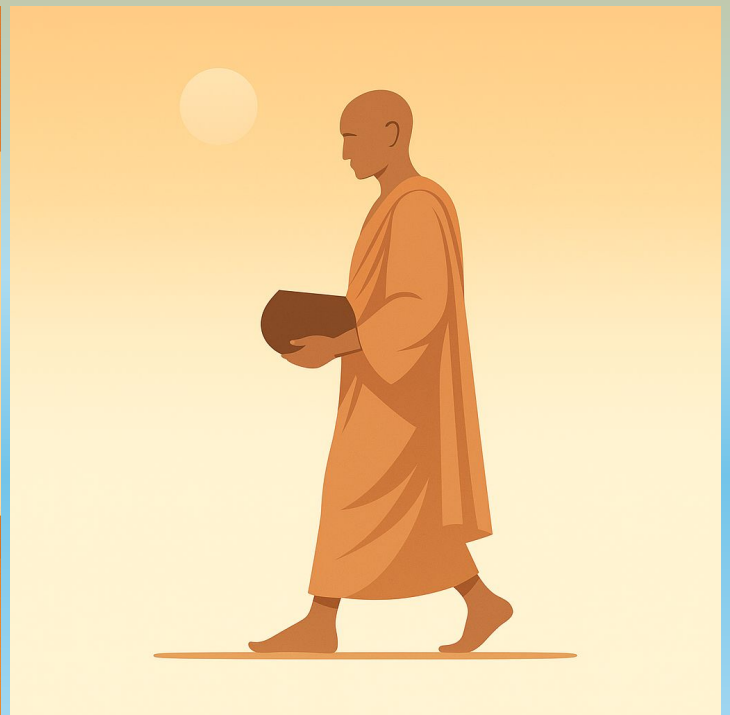
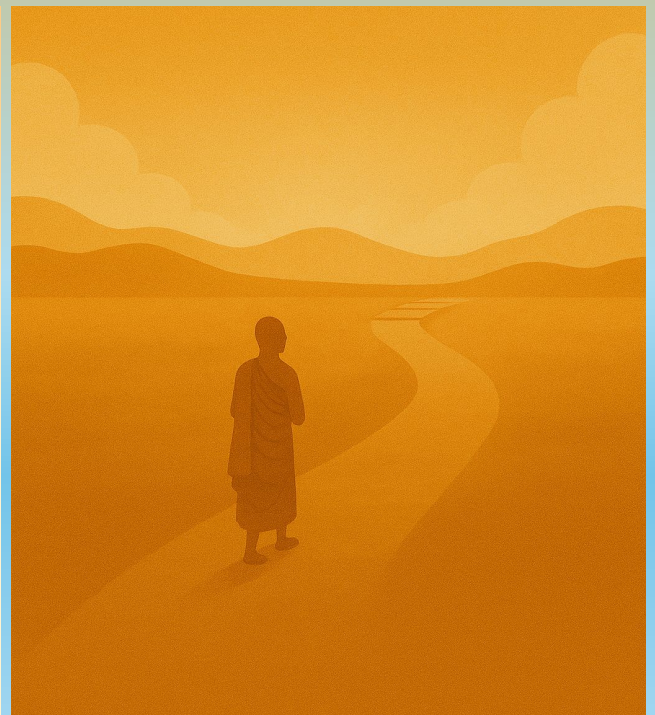
The Gradual Training
in
Early Buddhism

Stages of the Gradual Training (MN 27)

- A Buddha arises and reveals the spiritual practice
- Hearing that teaching
- Gaining faith in the Buddha
- Going forth from the lay life to homelessness
- Right action
- Right speech
- Contentment
- Sense restraint
- Situational awareness
- Seclusion
- Giving up hindrances
- Four jhānas
- Three higher knowledges

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- ~~Seclusion~~
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- Four jhānas
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Gradual Training	Noble Eightfold Path	
A Buddha appears Hearing the teaching Gaining faith in the Buddha	Right View	Paññā
Going Forth	Right Intention	
Right Action	Right Speech	Sīla
Right Speech	Right Action	
Contentment	Right livelihood	
Sense restraint Situational awareness	Right Effort	
Seclusion **Giving up Hindrances**	Right Mindfulness	Samādhi
Four *jhānas*	Right Stillness	
Three higher knowledges		

Different terms

Nīvaraṇa — Hindrances

- Block samādhi and insight right now
- Five specific obstacles

Akusala Dhamma — Unwholesome Qualities

Upakkilesa — Impurities

- Subtle stains within samādhi

Āsava — Taints / Outflowings

Underlying currents that keep craving flowing

- Removed only by full liberation (arahantship)

Four Taints:

1. Kāmāsava — sensual desire
2. Bhavāsava — desire for existence
3. *Avijjāsava — ignorance*
4. Diṭṭhāsava — views

MN 2 — Sabbāsava Sutta

Term / List	Function / Impact
Āsava (Taints)	The deepest, core motivating forces (Greed, Hatred, Delusion) that trap beings in suffering (saṃsāra).
Akusala Dhamma (Unwholesome Qualities)	The umbrella category for all mental states and actions that reliably obstruct liberation and cloud clarity.
Upakkilesa (Corruptions)	General defilements affecting character (e.g., jealousy, pride, stinginess).
Nīvaraṇa (Hindrances)	Direct, immediate obstacles to concentration and peace in meditation.

Item \ Classification	Nīvaraṇa (Hindrances)	Kilesa (Defilements)	Āsava (Streams)
Sensual desire (kāmacchanda)	✓	✓	✓
Ill-will (byāpāda)	✓	✓	
Sloth & Torpor (thīna-middha)	✓		
Restlessness & Worry (uddhacca-kukkucca)	✓		
Doubt (vicikicchā)	✓	✓	
Greed / Lobha		✓	✓
Hatred / Dosa		✓	
Delusion / Moha		✓	✓
Conceit (māna)		✓	
Wrong view (micchā-diṭṭhi)			✓
Papañca (conceptual proliferation)			✓

Ajahn Brahm: hindrances (nīvaraṇa) are subtle manifestations of craving and delusion that block deep samādhi and insight.

How do you know the hindrances are absent?

The "Acid Test": The ability to enter *jhāna* is the surest sign the hindrances are absent.

Overcoming hindrances isn't just about suppression but understanding their roots in attachment, leading to nibbidā (revulsion or disenchantment) toward the sensory world.

They are **direct obstructions to liberation.**

They block samādhi, distort perception, and fuel the entire cycle of suffering.

Latent Tendencies (*Anusaya*—the deep, sleeping roots)

Hindrances (*Nīvaraṇa*—the active surface waves)

1. **Kāmacchanda** — Sensual desire
2. **Byāpāda** — Ill will
3. **Thīna-middha** — Dullness and drowsiness
4. **Uddhacca-kukkucca** — Restlessness and remorse
5. **Vicikicchā** — Doubt

Obstacles

…having given up these five obstacles and hindrances, parasites of the mind that weaken wisdom.
pañca āvaraṇe nīvaraṇe

…It’s quite possible that they would know what’s for their own good, the good of another, or the good of both.

Numbered Discourses 5.51

1. KĀMACCHANDA (Sensory Desire)
Meaning: The wanting of happiness through the five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch).

"Taking out a loan."

"Any pleasure one experiences through these five senses must be repaid through the unpleasantness of separation, loss or hungry emptiness... the pleasure is small compared to the suffering repaid."

Not just "lust," but "buying into" the sensory world.

It is approval, consent, and agreement to let the five senses occupy the mind.

Ajahn Brahm: "Chanda" means approval or consent.

We essentially "give permission" for the world to bother us.

The craving for happiness through the five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch).

In Meditation: Keeps the mind focused on the world of senses.

Antidote: Letting go of concern for the body and senses. Turning the mind inward.

When transcended, the senses "switch off," the body disappears from awareness, and the mind can see its true nature.

Scope: Includes extreme lust, simple comfort-seeking, and merely planning/thinking about the material world.

The Simile of Falling in Love/Divorce:

"When you fall in love, he’s the most beautiful partner...

You exaggerate... ."

You see what you want to see

Later, after a divorce:

"Why did I marry him? He was terrible!" It's the same person, but perception is bent by desire or ill-will.

The Metaphors:

The Bone: Like a bone smeared with blood thrown to a hungry dog—it offers taste but no real sustenance.

The Loan: Pleasure is small, but the repayment (suffering/loss) is high.

The Antidote: *Nibbidā* (Turning Away)

Develop revulsion/turning away from the sensory world.

In Meditation: Let go of concern for the body. If an itch arises, "turn away" rather than scratching.

2. VYĀPĀDA (Ill Will)
Meaning: The desire to punish, hurt, or destroy.
Includes hatred, resentment, and guilt (ill-will towards oneself).

"Being sick."
"Just as sickness denies one the freedom and happiness of health, so ill will denies one the freedom and happiness of peace."

In Meditation: Can manifest as dislike or rejection of the meditation object.

Antidote/Overcoming: Applying Mettā (loving-kindness). Embracing it with caring, delighted attention (like a mother with her child).

Towards others: Seeing their suffering, understanding, compassion.

Towards oneself: Self-forgiveness and learning.

If you hate the meditation object, you will never get peaceful.

Treat the breath like a friend, not an enemy to be captured. (Ajahn Brahm)

3. THĪNA-MIDDHA (Sloth & Torpor)
Meaning: Heaviness of body and dullness of mind, leading to inertia and depression.

"Being imprisoned in a cramped, dark cell."

"Unable to move freely in the bright sunshine outside."

The Cause: Often stems from a lack of joy, negativity, or boredom with the present moment.

In Meditation: Causes weak mindfulness and can lead to nodding off/sleeping.

Overcoming:

Rousing energy.

Setting a reasonable goal.

Developing interest and a "beginner's mind."

Learning to see the beautiful in the ordinary.

Crucial: Calm the "doing" mind but maintain the "knowing" mind.

Notice the dull awareness.

As a young monk in a hot jungle monastery, Ajahn Brahm struggled with sleepiness.

During a trip to Bangkok, with adequate sleep, nutritious food, and an air-conditioned meditation room, sloth and torpor vanished.
The lesson: sometimes the cause is physical (malnutrition, heat, exhaustion).

"**Instead of fighting it, I made peace with it.**"

Wholesome Reflection: Reflect on your generosity (*cāgānussati*) or good deeds to bring up energy.

Don't watch the clock: Sleep when the body is tired, not just because it is "bedtime."

4. UDDHACCA-KUKKUCCA (Restlessness & Remorse)

1. Restlessness: A fault-finding, never-satisfied, monkey-like mind.

"Being a slave."

"Continually having to jump to the orders of a tyrannical boss who always demands perfection and so never lets one stop."

2. Remorse: Agitation and restlessness caused by bad conscience or past misconduct

It is as if "kammic effect" of misdeeds.

Antidote: Purifying one's virtue (Sīla).

Becoming kind, wise, and gentle.

Ajahn Brahm: “Restlessness is usually "fault-finding."

If you are content, you don't need to move

The Antidote to Restlessness: Contentment

Stop finding faults. Tell the mind: "You can run wherever you want, I am completely content."

"Letting go" means being satisfied with *this* moment, even if it's a "rotten old breath."

The Antidote to Remorse: Forgiveness

Admit no one is perfect.
Forgive, learn the lesson, and let it go. (AFL)

5. VICIKICCHĀ (Sceptical doubt)
Meaning: Disturbing, untimely questioning of one's ability, the method, the experience or the meaning.

"Being lost in a desert without a map."

"Not recognising any landmarks."

In Meditation: Intrudes and obscures clarity.

Overcoming:

Getting clear instructions (a good map).

Developing confidence through a good teacher.

Gaining personal experience of the stages of the path.

Key tactic: Postpone assessment.
Gather evidence silently during meditation and review only at the end.

Cultivate trust in the silence.

Disturbing inner questions ("Can I do this?", "Is this right?") asking at the wrong time.

It stops the mind from settling into silence.

Confidence: Trust that the path works.

The only uncertainty is "when," not "if."

Mind free of doubt:
"Like having a good chauffeur, one sits silently on the journey out of trust in the driver."

Diagnostic Tool: Use the Five Hindrances as a checklist when meditation is difficult.

Step 1: Identify the blockage (which hindrance is it?).
Step 2: Apply the specific antidote.

The Goal: Overcoming these allows the "snowball effect" toward *jhāna*.

Wisdom: Standing on the data of a clear mind, you can finally see the nature of the body and mind.

“The whole practice leading to Enlightenment can be well expressed as the effort to overcome the Five Hindrances,

at first suppressing them temporarily in order to experience jhāna and insight,

and then overcoming them permanently through the full development of the Noble Eightfold Path.”

Freedom from Hindrances:

Joy → Rapture → Tranquil body → Bliss → Deep meditation

Outcome:

→ Enter first jhana – Secluded from sensual pleasures & unskillful qualities.

Which rely on seclusion

Restraining and abandoning, developing and maintaining.
(Akusala Dhamma)

These four endeavours were taught by the Buddha.

By these means a diligent meditator in this very life, Can attain the destruction of suffering.
AN 4.14

There are large trees with tiny seeds and big trunks, which grow up and around other trees as parasites. …The trees they engulf break apart, collapse, and fall.

In the same way, take a certain gentleman who has gone forth from the lay life to homelessness, abandoning sensual pleasures. But beset by sensual pleasures that are similar, or even worse, he breaks apart, collapses, and falls.

There are these five obstacles and hindrances, parasites of the mind that weaken wisdom.
…the five obstacles and hindrances, parasites of the mind that weaken wisdom

“When you apply the mind irrationally,
“Ayoniso, bhikkhave, manasikaroto”

(five hindrances arise)

…and once arisen they increase and grow.

Kāmacchanda	**Guarding sense doors**, unattractive elements (asubha), contentment	Reduce fuel, don’t suppress
Byāpāda	**Goodwill (mettā), patience**	Direct heart-training
Thīna-middha	**Energy**, bright perception, recollection of Dhamma	Wake up the mind
Uddhacca-kukkucca	**Calming**, breathing, forgiveness	Ground the mind, don’t scold
Vicikicchā	**Confidence**, remembering results, spiritual friends	Replace confusion with clarity

From Hindrances to Jhāna

Removing the Five Hindrances

→ The mind stops fighting itself.

→ Clear, pliant, bright, and steady

→ **Jhāna naturally becomes possible**

Why We Forget Even Well-Learned Things?

Clouded by Hindrance → Memory Fails	**Mind Free → Effortless Recall**
1. Sensual desire — Water dyed with color	1. Free from sensual desire — Water pure & unstained
2. Ill will / anger — Water boiling & bubbling	2. Free from anger — Water cool & still
3. Sloth & torpor — Water with algae & moss	3. Free from dullness — Water clear, no plants
4. Restlessness & remorse — Water rippled by wind	4. Free from restlessness — Water undisturbed
5. Doubt — Water muddy & dark	5. Free from doubt — Water transparent in bright light

When the mind is free → Even unlearned things are recalled

Nibbāna through Ānāpānassati

When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it is of great fruit and great benefit. When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it completes the four focuses of mindfulness. When the four focuses of mindfulness are developed and cultivated, they complete the seven awakening factors. When the seven awakening factors are developed and cultivated, they complete true knowledge and deliverance (awakening).

MN 118

Hearing the Dhamma → Faith (Saddhā)
Confidence arises → This path leads out of suffering.

Living in line with the teachings
→ Virtue strengthens → Confidence deepens.

→ **Giving up the world's pull**
Even small worldly pleasures can bind strongly.
→ Renunciation lightens the heart and frees the mind. **MN 66**

Faith → Virtue → Renunciation
→ A mind ready for deeper training

Restraining the Hindrances First

Ajahn Brahm’s personal discovery from studying the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (the Foundations of Mindfulness).

"Before you even do Satipaṭṭhāna, you'd have to have restrained the five hindrances. Otherwise, meditation won't work."

Sometimes a noble disciple pays attention, applies the mind, concentrates wholeheartedly, and actively listens to the teaching.

At such a time the five hindrances are absent, and the seven awakening factors are fully developed.

Seven factors that help awakening happen.

They are not enlightenment itself.

They are the conditions that make enlightenment possible.

Bojjhaṅga (bodhi-aṅga):

- **bodhi** = awakening, enlightenment
- **aṅga** = limb, part, factor, supporting element

Constituent of enlightenment

When these seven awakening factors are developed and cultivated they fulfil three knowledges

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Core Message:
The Hindrances are "Enemy Number One"

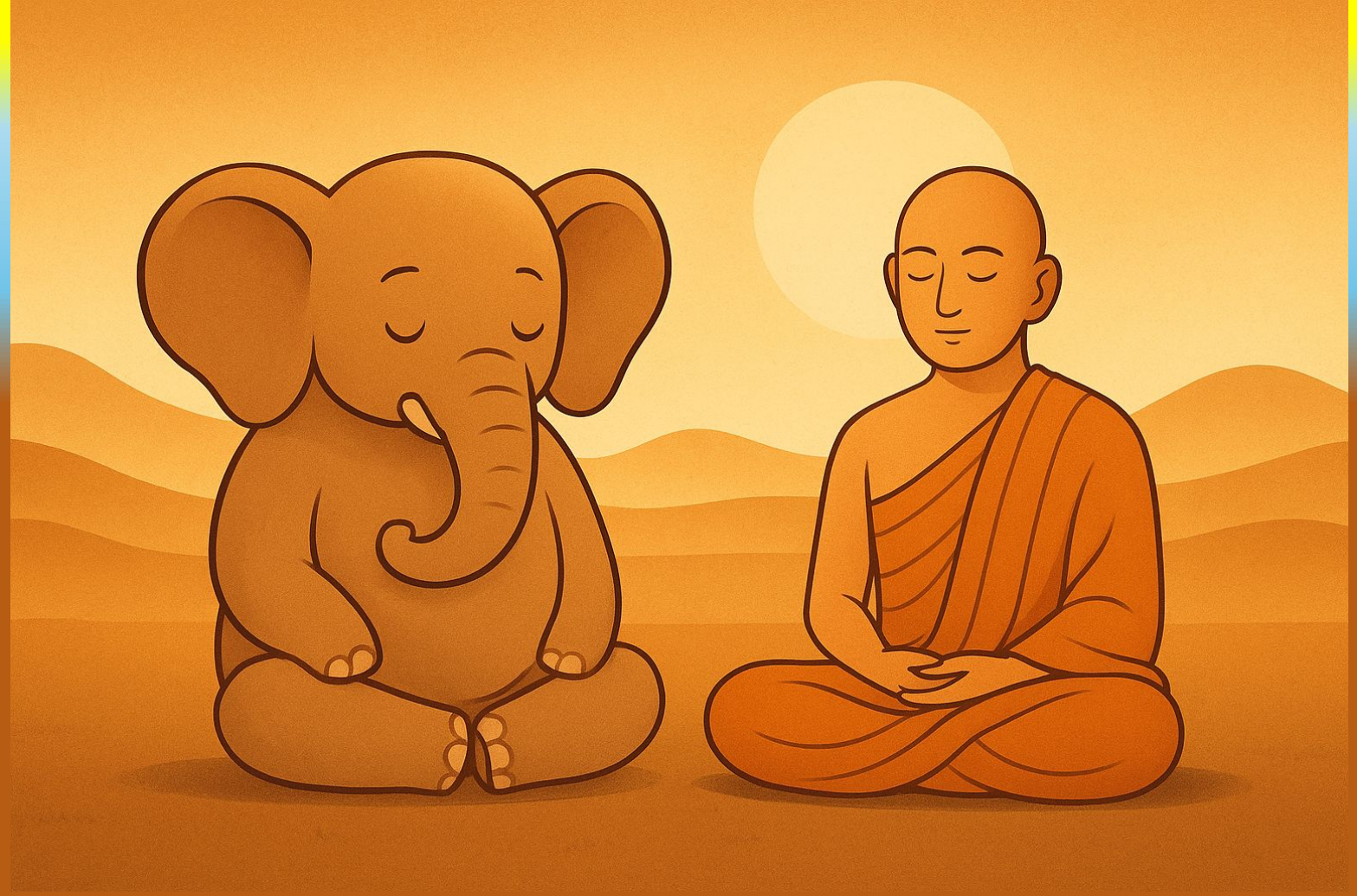
Theoretical Physicist's Perspective: physicist seeking truth, but people often can't see obvious facts because "**we don't want to see it**" — a direct function of the hindrances.

Interpretation of Teachings: There are so many conflicting interpretations of the Buddha's teachings: the hindrances distort our cognitive process. "**We see what we want to see... we bend it.**“

Ajahn Brahm

Overcoming hindrances isn't just about suppression

…but understanding their roots in attachment, leading to nibbidā (revulsion or disenchantment) toward the sensory world.

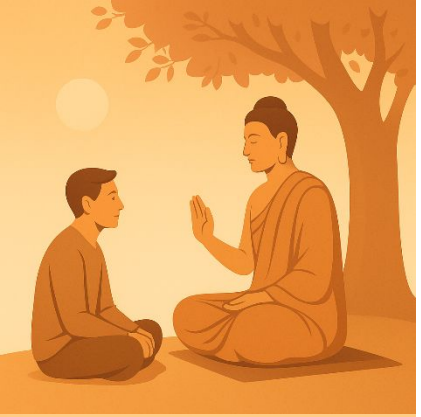


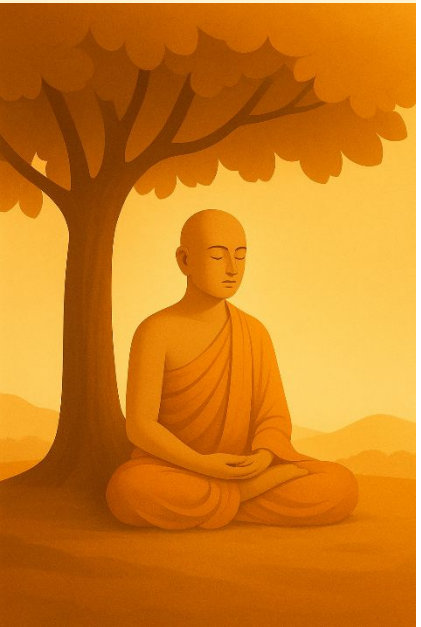
Good luck training your elephant-mind.

See you next year for more!

gradual training …

but what for ?!





A Buddha arises and reveals the spiritual practice

Hearing that teaching

Gaining faith in the Buddha

Going forth from the lay life to homelessness

Right action

Right speech

Contentment

Sense restraint

Situational awareness

Seclusion

Giving up hindrances

Four jhānas

Three higher knowledges

gradual training (in Samaññāphala Sutta, DN 2)

- hearing the Dhamma
- …
- giving up hindrances & attaining jhānas
- 8 special knowledges
  - insight into body and mind
  - astral projection
  - supernormal powers
  - divine hearing
  - mind reading
  - past life memories
  - divine eye (insight into karma)
  - ending the defilements

} 3-fold knowledge

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3-fold knowledge

insight & samādhi

“Develop unification of mind (*samādhi*). If your mind gets unified you will understand things in line with reality.”

SN 56.1

“Without right unification of mind, if you lack right unification of mind, you lack a necessary condition for knowing and seeing things in line with reality (*yathābhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*).”

AN 10.3

insight into body and mind (*vipassana-ñāṇa*)

“When your mind has been unified (*samādhi-ed*) in this way—cleansed and purified, freed from blemishes and impurities—it becomes wieldy and workable, still and undisturbable.

Then you direct it to knowledge and insight, reflecting:

‘This is my body which is made of form, made up of the four elements, … of an impermanent nature, of the nature to deteriorate and degenerate, to decay and fall apart.

And this is my mind / consciousness which is bound and tied to it.’ …

Samaññāphala Sutta, DN 2

insight into body and mind (*vipassana-ñāṇa*)

… Imagine a beryl gem that has all good qualities, being naturally beautiful, eight-faceted, well-worked, transparent, clear, and unclouded. And it is strung with a blue, yellow, red, white, or brown thread.

Someone with good eyesight would take it in their hand and examine it, thinking:

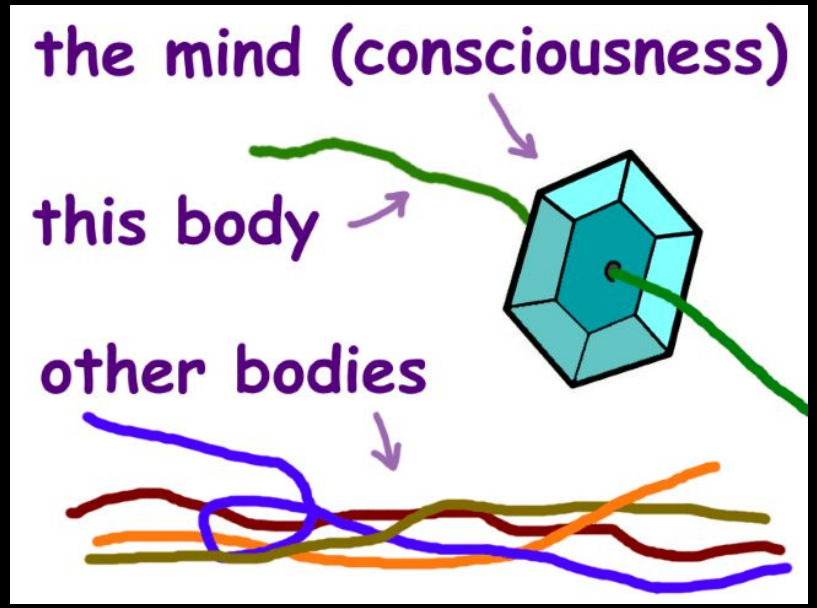
‘This beryl gem has all good qualities … And it is strung with a blue, yellow, red, white, or brown thread.’ …

Samaññāphala Sutta, DN 2

insight into body and mind (*vipassana-ñāṇa*)

… Likewise, when your mind has been unified in this way […] you direct it to knowledge and insight, reflecting:

‘This is my body … And this is my mind / consciousness which is bound and tied to it.’”



Samaññāphala Sutta, DN 2

insight into origination and cessation

“As a faithful, energetic, and mindful noble disciple whose mind has been unified, you can be expected to understand this:

‘Transmigration (*saṁsāra*) has no discernible beginning. You can find no beginning to the transmigration of beings who roam around obstructed by ignorance and chained by craving.

But the total fading away and cessation of this dark mass of ignorance is what is peaceful and sublime. That is to say: the stilling of all willful actions, the giving up of all acquisition, the ending of craving, fading away, cessation, extinguishment (*nirvāna/nibbāna*).’”

Āpaṇa Sutta, SN

insight into origination and cessation

“Kaccāna, the world mostly relies on a duality: the notion of survival (lit. “existence”) and the notion of nonsurvival [after death].

But if you see the ***origin*** of the ‘world’ [of the 5 aggregates / 6 senses] by understanding it in line with reality, then you won’t have the notion of nonsurvival with respect to it.

And if you see the ***cessation*** of the ‘world’ by understanding it in line with reality, you won’t have the notion of survival with respect to it.

[If you] don’t assume that you have a self, then you know without question or doubt that it is only suffering which arises and only suffering which ceases. Your knowledge about this does not depend on others. That is what constitutes right view.”

Kaccānagotta Sutta, SN 12.15

insight into origination and cessation

[Narada]: “Venerable Savittha, apart from faith, personal preference, tradition, reasoning, or accepting the view after pondering it,
I *know and see* that [full] extinguishment is the cessation of existence (*bhava-nirodha*).”

“Then are you enlightened (*arahant*), without defilements (*āsavas*)?”

“Although by understanding it in line with reality, I have seen clearly that extinguishment is the cessation of existence, I am not yet enlightened, without defilements.

Imagine along a desert road there was a well without a rope and bucket. A man came along who was oppressed and scorched by the heat, tired and thirsty. When he looked down in the well he would knew that there was water in it, but he would not yet physically have it.”

Kosambi Sutta, SN 12.68

gradual training

- hearing the Dhamma
- …
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3-fold knowledge

ending the defilements

"When your mind has been unified in this way—cleansed and purified, free from blemishes and impurities—it becomes wieldy and workable, still and undisturbable. Then you direct it to the ending of the defilements (*āsavas*).

You [fully] know suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the practice leading to its cessation in line with reality.

You know the defilements, their origin, their cessation, and the practice leading to their cessation in line with reality.

When you know and see this, your mind will be liberated from the defilements of sensual desire, desire for existence, and ignorance (*kāma-āsava, bhava-āsava, avijjā-āsava*). You will understand that the spiritual life is finished, that the work is done, that rebirth has ended, so there will be no hereafter."

Samaññāphala Sutta, DN 2

ending the defilements

“You understand that when your body falls apart after death, when life comes to an end, all that is experienced, not being enjoyed, will cool off right then.

If you possess this understanding, you possess the supreme establishment of understanding. Because this is the supreme noble understanding: namely, the knowledge of the ending of all suffering. …

Dhātuvibhanga Sutta, MN 140

ending the defilements

… When you were ignorant, you used to have longing, wanting, and desire. You used have malice, ill will, and hate. You used to have ignorance and delusion.

Now you abandoned them, cut off their roots, made them like a palm stump, put an end to them so that they will not rearise in the future.

If you possess this peace, you possess the supreme establishment of peace. Because this is the supreme noble peace: namely, the subsiding of desire, anger, and delusion. …

Dhātuvibhanga Sutta, MN 140

ending the defilements

… When you have this [understanding and peace] the currents of imagination won't flow in you.

And when the currents (*āsavas*) of imagination (or 'conceiving', *maññita*) don't flow in you, you are called a peaceful sage.

What did I mean by that?

'I am' is an imagination. […] Imagination is a disease, a tumor, an arrow. If you overcome all imagination, you are called a peaceful sage. …

Dhātuvibhanga Sutta, MN 140

ending the defilements

… The peaceful sage will not be born, will not age, and will not die. They will not be agitated and will not long.

Since there is nothing in them by which they could be reborn, not being born, how could they age?

Not aging, how could they die?

Not dying, how could they be agitated?

Not agitated, what would they long for?”

Dhātuvibhanga Sutta, MN 140

gradual training …

but what for ?!

extra: on āsavas and "flowing"

"Imagine a house with a badly thatched roof. Its roof, rafters, and walls will all be unprotected. They will get rained on (*avassuta*) and become rotten. Likewise, if your mind is left unprotected, your physical, verbal, and mental deeds are unprotected. If you do not protect your deeds, they become defiled (*avassuta*). If your deeds are defiled, they become rotten. If your deeds are rotten, you will not have a good death. […]

Imagine a house with a well-thatched roof. Its roof, rafters, and walls will all be protected. They will not get rained on nor become rotten. Likewise, if your mind is protected, your physical, verbal, and mental deeds are protected. If you protect your deeds, they will not become defiled. If your deeds are not defiled, they will not become rotten. If your deeds are not rotten, you will have a good death."

AN 3.109, compare AN 4.195 (with Vappa the Jain)