

WISDOM
WIDE
— *and* —
DEEP

*A Practical Handbook
for Mastering Jhāna
and Vipassanā*

SHAILA CATHERINE

author of *Focused and Fearless*

foreword by Pa-Auk Sayadaw

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Foreword by PĀ-AUK SAYADĀ



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IS IT POSSIBLE for people today to attain the deep absorption states of jhāna? Can modern meditators directly know and see ultimate realities, and personally realize the liberating fruit of vipassanā? Decades of teaching both monastics and laypeople from all over the world have demonstrated to me that the answer is *yes*.

Effective methods for practicing jhāna and vipassanā have been preserved and mastered by generations of dedicated monastic and lay practitioners, but until recently have been little known in the West. Many years ago my teacher asked me to plant the seeds of this approach in the West. Under my guidance, Shaila Catherine, one of my American lay students, has since 2006 thoroughly practiced the detailed methods of both jhāna and vipassanā. I encouraged her to write a book based on her own experience of this training, and I am very pleased with what she has done.

Wisdom Wide and Deep is a beautifully written handbook that describes an effective approach to the path of jhāna and vipassanā. This book introduces meditation practices adapted from the fifth-century meditation manual *The Visuddhimagga*, supported by the philosophical structures of Abhidhamma analysis, and securely rooted in the Buddha's teachings. This method is distinguished by its emphasis on the initial development of the meditative absorptions called jhāna, and the precise discernment of the ultimate realities of mind and matter. Once the mind is concentrated and psychophysical processes are seen clearly, insight practice becomes efficient, transformative, and exceedingly effective for realizing liberating knowledge. *Wisdom Wide and Deep* skillfully guides dedicated meditators to experience the stability of deep concentration, to recognize the subtle nature of material and mental processes, and to realize the exquisite peacefulness that arises from genuine insight knowledge.

This is a handbook that respects both the ancient tradition and the needs of contemporary lay practitioners, without compromising either. Shaila Catherine presents the Buddha's teaching by blending scriptural references, personal examples, and timeless stories with detailed meditation instructions. She writes with an authority that comes from genuine meditation experience, and with clarity that is informed by her own personal experiences of this training. The combination of Shaila's pragmatic style and theoretical knowledge produces a striking invitation for the reader to apply the instructions and master the complete practice for awakening.

I highly recommend *Wisdom Wide and Deep* to any serious meditator who wants to practice what the Buddha discovered and taught.

Pa-Auk Sayada

PA-AUK SAYADAW is the abbot of Pa Auk Forest Monastery in Burma. He has spent his life promoting the teachings of the Buddha through study, practice, and realization. He teaches worldwide and is the author of *The Workings of Karma* and *Knowing and Seeing*.

A DETAILED AND COMPREHENSIVE BOOK of this nature represents the work of many individuals who have each brought their insightful and caring attention to these pages.

I am deeply grateful to the Buddhist tradition, past and present, and the countless unknown individuals who have preserved, translated, and articulated these teachings and trainings. It is remarkable that I can sit in a suburban town thousands of years and thousands of miles removed from the culture of ancient India where the Buddha lived and taught, and find my life deeply touched by his teachings. The rich legacy left by generations of meditators includes detailed records of the Buddha's ministry, instruction manuals, and commentaries that remain remarkably relevant to contemporary explorations of mind.

The approach presented in *Wisdom Wide and Deep* shares the teachings that I was privileged to receive from Venerable Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw during a 2008 retreat held at the Insight Meditation Society, in the USA. Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw carefully guided me through this training. His mastery of these teachings, his patient and flexible teaching style, his extraordinary devotion to meditation, and the wisdom that he earned during more than seventy years of practice combined to create an astonishing presentation of this profound and systematic approach to direct insight. The Sayadaw's assistant, Venerable U Jāgara, brought a practical clarity that helped to make the traditional methods relevant and accessible for Western practitioners. Anonymous practitioners at Pa-Auk Monastery have devoted countless hours to a careful editing of Sayadaw's teachings and the preparation of detailed English language course material. The publishing team at Wisdom Publications—including Josh Bartok, Laura Cunningham, Eric Shutt, Gopa&Ted2, Joe Evans, Dennis Getz, Tony Lulek, and Megan Anderson—dedicated to a vision that values both contemporary and traditional approaches to Buddhist wisdom, worked diligently to present this book to modern readers. The joy and patience that pervaded each communication, and the respect for the dhamma that I saw reflected in their work, has been an inspiration for me at every stage of this project.

I could not have completed this project without the thoughtful assistance of Theresa Farrah, Aron Smith Dillon, Faith Lindsay, and David Collins who poured over early drafts of the manuscript. Their feedback clarified numerous points, streamlined the presentation, and made rarefied practices more accessible to contemporary readers. Glenn Smith captured the essence of this work when he suggested the title *Wisdom Wide and Deep*. Additionally, more than a dozen friends, students, and teachers provided valuable feedback on one or more sections of this work, including Annie Belt, John Kell, Noa Ronkin, Leslie Knight, Anne Macquarie, Sayalay Anattarā, Sayalay Muditā Vihāri, Susan Larson, Janet Taylor, James Macdonald, Jami Milton, Christopher Titmuss, Lila Kate Wheeler, and anonymous readers at Pa-Auk Monastery.

The tables were composed with material gathered from several sources. I drew on the Pa-Auk course material, worksheets from an Abhidhamma course taught by Andy Olendzki at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, and charts of Buddhist lists that twelve members of Insight Meditation South Bay had collaboratively drafted for our web site (www.imsb.org). Several tables were inspired by the elegant clarity of tables included in Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* and Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw's *The Workings of Kamma*. My respect and appreciation is especially extended to Maureen O'Brien, whose artful and careful attention to each chart transformed

rather mechanical details into a presentation that exposes the refreshing beauty of well-organized systematic thought.

This project has been silently supported by a continuous influx of encouragement and generosity from my meditation community and family. Many volunteers at Insight Meditation South Bay, most notably Lois Gerchman, took on additional duties in order to free up my time for writing. My siblings Lisa and Philip, provide a continuous source of strength in my life. My mother, Elizabeth Tromovitch, has supported every phase of this work with endless love, patience, and encouragement.

I offer copious thanks to the many named and unnamed people who generously contributed their time and wisdom to this project. May they be happy and well.

Approaching Deep Calm and Insight

*One who stops trains of thought
As a shower settles a cloud of dust
With a mind that has quelled thought
Attains in this life the state of peace*

—THE ITIVUTTAKA

THIS BOOK, *Wisdom Wide and Deep*, follows my first, *Focused and Fearless: A Meditator's Guide to States of Deep Joy, Calm, and Clarity*, which contains the initial instructions for developing concentration in daily life, overcoming obstacles such as restlessness and distraction, building conditions for tranquility and calmness, and establishing the deep meditative absorptions called *jhāna*. *Wisdom Wide and Deep* extends the training of concentration and insight by drawing extensively on the wisdom preserved in two traditional sources—*The Visuddhimagga*, a traditional manual for Buddhist practice, and the Abhidhamma, a branch of Buddhist philosophy that emphasizes a systematic and analytical approach to understanding the mind. The structure for these practices and many illustrations are derived directly from the teachings that I received from the meditation master Venerable Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw of Burma (Myanmar). *Wisdom Wide and Deep* is not, however, a strict presentation of Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw's work. Rather, I have infused each topic with related teachings, personal examples, and wisdom gleaned from other Buddhist sources that have all supported my path of practice as a Western lay practitioner.

Wisdom Wide and Deep is an extended introduction to an in-depth training that emphasizes the application of concentrated attention to profound and liberating insight. With calm, tranquility, and composure established through a practical experience of *jhāna*, or deep concentration, meditators are able to halt the seemingly endless battle against hindrances, eliminate distraction, and facilitate penetrative insight into the subtle nature of matter and mind. It was for this reason the Buddha frequently exhorted his students, “Develop concentration; one who is concentrated understands things as they really are.”²

The reader will learn how to establish *jhāna* using a host of objects: breath; body; color; elements; immaterial perceptions of infinite space, consciousness, nothingness, and the stilling of perception; heartfelt social attitudes of loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity; as well as recollections of the Buddha, impermanence, and death. Each potential meditation subject has unique qualities that foster a deeper penetration of reality. Each concentration subject can usher the mind into sublime states of blissful absorption and then serve as an effective foundation for the clear perception of reality. This well-structured and time-honored curriculum cultivates a refined and focused attention that is capable of examining subtleties of mind and matter. It is a system of training in concentration and insight that will ultimately lead the meditator to a direct realization of the peace of *nibbāna*.

Some meditators will find jhāna practice easy; they will quickly experience deep levels of absorption and be able to periodically access jhāna during busy lay life. Other meditators may initially find jhāna practice more difficult and will progress slowly, gradually strengthening the spiritual faculties. They may shift back and forth between concentration and mindfulness practices while endeavoring to overcome distraction, selfinterest, and hindrances. The majority of meditators have the capacity to succeed at jhāna practice if they dedicate the time and create the conditions for concentration. The Buddha compared the training of the mind to the taming of a wild horse. Some horses learn quickly, others develop slowly; some horses seem to enjoy the training, other horses resist. Although everyone might hope for pleasant and rapid progress, our rate of development may not conform to our wishes as we each progress with pleasure or pain, quickly or slowly.³ The continuum of pleasant and painful practice experience is determined by how strongly our nature is disposed to lust, hatred, and delusion. And the sluggish-to-quick continuum is determined by the strength of the five controlling faculties of faith, energy and effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. These will be explained and discussed further in [chapter 2](#). But whether your progress is quick or slow, pleasant or painful, is of little importance—a wise practitioner will strive to develop every aspect of the path, both the factors that come easily and those that require arduous effort. You can know for yourself bliss beyond sensory pleasures, directly experience transformative insight, and learn how to sustain deep joy and clarity within the complex dynamic of daily life.

Although it has been widely assumed that jhāna states are difficult to attain, and that even if they are attained in the protected conditions of retreat, they cannot be maintained in daily lay life, please do not allow these misconceptions to thwart your explorations. Even in the Buddha's time, some people denied the existence of the bliss of jhāna concentration, like a person born blind might deny the existence of color, arguing, "I do not know this. I do not see this. Therefore, it does not exist." Yet the Buddha taught jhāna practice to laypeople as well as to renunciates, enabling even busy merchants and political leaders to periodically abide in the bliss of jhāna.⁵ Although it will require effort, attaining and maintaining access to jhāna is a real possibility, even when immersed in a busy lay life.

We do not stop with the development of concentration. We apply this profound stability to the meticulous discernment, analysis, and contemplation of reality as it is actually occurring. You will learn how to sustain an in-depth examination of the nuances of mind and matter to unravel deeply conditioned patterns that perpetuate suffering. Based on the sturdy foundation of deep concentration, pragmatic application of the Buddhist psychology of Abhidhamma, and a careful analysis of causes and effects, this training will culminate in a direct and unmistakable realization of liberation. It is the aim of this book to present a practical guide for applying concentration and insight to the fulfillment of the Buddha's path.

Wisdom Wide and Deep is intended as a practice manual; it is not a scholarly or critical exposition. I have largely ignored the philosophical criticisms commonly levied against Abhidhamma scholasticism and the historical controversies that might keep practitioners from a pragmatic application of this course of training. The trainings contained in these pages illuminate the teachings of the Buddha as preserved in the Discourses of the Buddha, along with elaborations and interpretations offered by the tradition of practitioners who followed after the Buddha. The tradition offers us a remarkably effective training in virtue, meditation, and wisdom, and a direct path for realizing the peace of nibbāna.

There are many ways of applying and interpreting the Buddhist path. The approach described in this book is one that I have found to be profoundly effective. With full confidence in the efficacy of this method, I am inspired to present this training in a format accessible to Western lay practitioners. Readers will discover that most chapters include two parallel approaches. First, I have included refined meditation instructions that were derived from the *Visuddhimagga* and the methods taught by Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw. Many of these practices will be difficult to understand if you have not practiced in a retreat context with the guidance of a teacher who is trained in these techniques. Second, these rigorous traditional instructions are complemented by a parallel presentation of contemporary reflections that are set off in graphic boxes. These exercises encourage contemplation of the general concepts and support a broad integration of concentration, mindfulness, and insight into daily lay life. Such reflective exercises will be of benefit to all readers with or without access to retreat conditions, teachers, or jhāna attainments.

A strict adherent of the systematic approach may cringe when coming across casual passages that encourage a comparatively superficial contemplation of general concepts; likewise, the casual reader may skip over the technical instructions that seem like boring literature. This work, straddling two worlds, respects both formal and casual modes of exploration. At times you may sense a tension between the general and specific exercises; at times it is a struggle to maintain both balance and depth in practice. I view this dual approach as an expression of my own dilemma as a Western lay practitioner with a deep love of this traditional training. In straddling these two worlds, I may occasionally offend the more traditional reader or bore the more modern seeker; however, I sincerely aim to provide Western lay practitioners with an accessible and yet challenging gateway to these profound teachings.

I hope *Wisdom Wide and Deep* will inspire you to redouble your efforts in practice. Although people often speak about spiritual endeavors as valuable, important, and rewarding, few talk about the sheer delight and bliss of meditation. Although this path may at times be challenging, it can also be extraordinary fun. Enjoying practice does not imply a trivial pursuit. When supported by the happiness of a concentrated mind, protected by the shelter of virtuous actions, invigorated by direct insight, and fueled by an unwavering commitment to freedom, even difficult practices may not be burdensome.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

There are many ways of approaching the liberating teachings—some students will respond to pithy brief teachings, other students will benefit by methodically detailed approaches. You might acquire a useful overview by reading the book from beginning to end, exploring the reflective exercises contained in each chapter, and maintaining a daily meditation practice that employs the breath as the meditation subject according to instructions outlined in [chapters 1–3](#).

For the sake of presenting a concise and readable overview for the contemporary lay practitioner, I have not included every detail one would study when training with a master, but I hope this work will inspire readers to seek thorough training⁶ and supplement this material with the meticulous referenced and salient writings of the Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw⁷ and primary sources in the Pāli Canon with its commentaries and manuals.⁸

Although the presentation is sequential, some meditators will benefit by undertaking the training

with variations of order or emphasis. Some concentration subjects explained in [section II](#), such as meditations on the body and loving-kindness, can be developed prior to attaining jhāna with the breath. The unique and precise procedures for insight meditation (*vipassanā*) presented in [chapters 11–18](#) require a substantial degree of concentration; however, jhāna is not a requirement. Most readers will need the support of a retreat context to develop sufficient concentration for a stable absorption and to develop mastery in the attainment of jhāna. Many of the highly structured and traditional meditation instructions contained in [sections III and IV](#) could serve as a manual during intensive meditation periods but might not be applicable for beginners who are practicing at home. As you read *Wisdom Wide and Deep*, you will quickly recognize the sections that support your aim, and may choose to skim through the more detailed instructions that might be more suitable for intensive practice periods.

The Buddhist tradition preserves an elegant, efficient, and effective structure for meditation. The path to liberation is open to us, but we must choose to make the journey. When the Buddha was asked why some people have reached nibbāna and others have not, he alluded to a road that connects two local towns.⁹ Although residents might know that the road exists, they will not reach the other town unless they travel the road for themselves. Similarly, although the Buddhist tradition has provided instructions, identified signposts, and showed the way to nibbāna, we must undertake the training in virtue, concentration, and insight. Now the choice is ours. How do we live and practice? Are you aware of this moment's breath? Are you aware of the impermanence of your bodily and mental experience? Do you endeavor to purify your mind of unwholesome states and cultivate wholesome states each and every day?

Just as the radiant flame depends upon the presence of a candle, wax, and a wick, wisdom arises with the support of concentration, discipline, effort, and skillful methodologies. It is the purpose of this book to offer an enduring training guide for meditators that explains, explores, and celebrates the exciting adventure into the depths of reality.

*Establishing Concentration
through Mindfulness with Breathing*

Clearing the Path: Overcoming the Five Hindrances

Whatever states there are that are wholesome, partaking of the wholesome, pertaining to the wholesome, they are all rooted in careful attention, converge upon careful attention, and careful attention is declared to be the chief among them.

—SAMYUTTA NIKĀYA

YOU ARE CLEARING A PATH for concentration and wisdom. Like a trail that provides a clear path through the wilderness, your mindful training opens a pathway to an inner goal that is unhindered by habitual tendencies and the obstruction of desire. It may feel at times that a powerful effort is needed to meditate, like the force of a bulldozer that clears away rubble after a hurricane. At other moments the endeavor may consist in just a light inclination of intention, that abandons doubt as gently as flicking away recently settled dust with a feather duster. Whether it seems as though the sea has parted effortlessly before you, or that you are doggedly carving out a jungle trail, the moment that craving ceases, an unobstructed path opens up.

→ **MEDITATION INSTRUCTION 1.1**

Mindfulness with Breathing plus Counting

This is the initial instruction. Begin the development of concentration by using the breath as the meditation object. The breath is a simple and versatile object with which to learn to establish concentration. You are breathing now. Direct your attention to feel the breath as it enters and exits the nostrils. Focus your attention at the area between the nostrils and upper lip to find the breath. In this meditation you will give your attention exclusively to the knowing of the breath at this location. You do not need to feel the expansion and contraction of the body breathing or observe movement; your object is the breath itself. Every other experience, such as a sound in the room, the hardness of the seat, a memory of the novel read last night, a plan for a conversation you hope to have tomorrow, an emotion of excitement, sadness, frustration, or delight, the scent of flowers wafting in from an open window—all experiences other than the simple knowing of the breath are ignored. Let every experience fall into the background as the breath takes center stage. A traditional analogy suggests that the meditator observes the breath as it enters and exits the nostrils, without concern for any other phenomena, just the way a gatekeeper posted at the city gate observes all that enters and exits through that gate but does not leave his post to follow visitors into the marketplace or to travel out with caravans to the next village.¹¹ Give your attention exclusively and completely to the steady awareness of the whole breath just at the nostril area.

This can be a very challenging exercise at first. You may find that the mind wanders into thought. If it does, simply redirect your attention back to the breath, again and again. You can add mental count to each breath to help maintain the focus. Breathe in knowing the inhalation, breathe out knowing the exhalation, and count “one.” Breathe in knowing the inhalation, breathe out knowing

the exhalation, and count “two.” Continue to know the in-breath and the out-breath, counting up to eight or ten. Then reverse the count. Breathe in knowing the inhalation, breathe out knowing the exhalation, and add the number. When you return to the count of one, progress forward to the count of eight or ten and then backward to the count of one for several cycles. Then observe the breath without adding any numbers. Use the counting method to help direct your attention to the breath, and drop the counting when you no longer need it.¹² Practice mindfulness with breathing like this daily for forty minutes, sixty minutes, or longer as desired. This basic practice of focusing on the breath is the first meditation subject that we shall use to establish concentration and explore jhāna

←

ONE PRIMARY OBSTACLE

You don't need to struggle to overcome a multitude of diverse hindrances or employ an arsenal of antidotes to tackle each specific problem. To develop concentration you can address one primary obstacle—unwise attention. As the Buddha said, “Whatever an enemy might do to an enemy or a hatemonger to those he hates, a wrongly directed mind can do even greater harm than that.”¹³ A deliberate and wise application of attention is the root skill that every meditator cultivates.

One of the first lessons dogs must learn in canine obedience class is to pay attention to their owners. There are many distracting sights and smells, as well as other dogs around, and the urge to go sniffing every provocative scent is powerfully ingrained. This first lesson—to pay attention—is paramount. Just as dogs need to inhibit natural impulses in order to be guided by the commands of their owners, you must gain control over your mind and thereby protect yourself, and others, from the tendencies that dwell within. The Buddha said:

Controlled while walking,
Controlled while standing,
Controlled while sitting,
Controlled while reclining,
Controlled in bending and stretching his limbs—
Above, across and below,
As far as the world extends.
A bhikkhu observes how things occur,
The arising and passing of the aggregates.
Living thus ardently,
Of calm and quiet conduct,
Ever mindful, he trains in the course
Of calm tranquility of mind.
Such a bhikkhu is said to be
One who is ever resolute.¹⁴

Nearly every obstruction to concentration can be traced to a root error in how you are applying your attention. So consider, what is your attention occupied by during daily activities and during

meditation session? If your attention is applied carefully it will augment skillful states, and if it strays unwisely it may breed unprofitable ones.

THE CAUSE OF OUR PROBLEMS

Five classic obstacles confront meditators: (1) desire for sense pleasure; (2) aversion and ill will; (3) sloth, torpor, dullness, and boredom; (4) restlessness and worry; and (5) doubt or obstinate skepticism. These are the places where most people get stuck. As you develop meditative skills, you learn how the hindrances function; you investigate them as habitual forces without adopting them as your personal story. Just as a bird protects chicks in her nest by watching for dangers, you guard your mind with proper attention and do not become prey to these hindering forces.

When mindfulness is weak, it is easy to be swept away with desire, aversion, or speculation. Regarding such hindrances, the Buddha taught that we must know five things:¹⁵ (1) the presence of the hindrance, (2) the absence of the hindrance, (3) the cause for its arising, (4) the way of its abandoning, and (5) the way for the nonarising of it in the future. The cause for the arising of a hindrance is unwise attention, the way of its abandoning is wise attention, and the cultivation of concentration, mindfulness, and insight is the way for the nonarising of that hindrance in the future.

Mindfulness-based meditation practices may emphasize a repeated examination of hindrances, for instance, exploring sleepiness, staying with restlessness, or watching a desire arise and pass away. Such mindful investigation of hindrances will produce valuable clarity regarding the qualities unique to each hindrance.

TABLE 1.1
Five Ways to Investigate Hindrances

Recognize when a hindrance is present.
Recognize when a hindrance is absent.
Understand the conditions that cause a hindrance to arise.
Understand the conditions that cause a hindrance to cease.
Explore how to prevent the hindrance from arising again in the future.

During concentration-based practices, however, attention is efficient, precise, and perhaps even more so. When practicing to establish jhāna, it is enough to see a hindrance, let it go quickly, and return to the meditation object without delay. In fact, it is essential to do so, because time spent examining hindrances weakens the single-pointed focus of concentration, postponing absorption. Approach the hindrance sufficiently to understand its rudimentary function and supports; study it just enough to untangle the mind from its grip. You don't deny the hindrance in concentration practice, but simply recognize it primarily as the result of unwise attention and quickly remedy the error. Later, when you discern mentality (chapter 13), you will apply the full strength of the unified mind to meticulously analyze nuances of all wholesome and unwholesome states. However, in order to efficiently lay the foundation for jhāna concentration, please bypass most of this investigation and diligently redirect

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