

A Review by Christopher Titmuss
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FOCUSED AND FEARLESS

A Meditator's Guide to States of Joy, Calm and Clarity
By Shaila Catherine

Wisdom Publications, Boston, USA. 2008
260 pages. \$17.95

The Buddha made it abundantly clear that there are two types of meditation - samatha (deep calmness) and vipassana (insight). Both have equal validity but there has been a noticeable emphasis on vipassana (insight) meditation in the Buddhist tradition. The Vipassana tradition has its roots in the monastic tradition of Theravada Buddhist countries, where mindfulness, calmness, contentment of mind and faith in the dharma were strong characteristics of Buddhist monks. When certain monks felt the limitations of the daily rituals, chanting and strict adherence to the Vinaya (disciplinary rules), they engaged in sustained meditation practice to arouse insight as outlined by the Buddha in the Satipatthana Sutta (Discourse on the Application of Mindfulness) and numerous other discourses pointing to awakening and full realisation. From monastic beginnings, the influential Vipassana tradition developed in Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

I spent more than three years in Wat Chai Na, Nakornsridhammaraj with Ajahn Dhammadaro, probably the greatest Vipassana teacher in Thailand of that era. I recall asking him once why he didn't teach samatha and the jhanas (deep absorption meditations with happiness, contentment and equanimity). He responded: "The monks are content enough already. They lack insight and realisation." The Ajahn belonged to the hard core school of Vipassana. We started at 4 am and finished after 22.00. He dismissed books. He said books were the primary destroyer of practice. Reading was forbidden. He discouraged talking. We were also discouraged strongly from meditation in our huts so we sat on the balcony of our huts, where he could see us. Like the Buddha, Ajahn Dhammadaro gave equal emphasis to sitting, walking, standing and reclining. Once a week, on the new, quarter and full moon days, we practised all night - outdoors, of course.

Mostly, the West has foolishly neglected samatha meditation even though we would not think of the Western mind as happy and content on a daily basis. The Western heart-mind endures agitation, desire, anxiety, blame, fear and there is huge relief when the various levels of stress dissolve temporarily to reveal some relief from the inner agitations, the outflows and inflows (asavas) of problematic daily life. The Western mind remains vulnerable in and out of retreat to the multiple hindrance attack. The practice of samatha, as taught by the Buddha, requires as much interest and application as Vipassana. Far too many dharma practitioners rely on Vipassana practice to find peace of mind. Samatha is a very direct route towards real peace of mind, not superficially.

In this context, Shaila Catherine's book, *Focused and Fearless*, is groundbreaking. We need as many teachers and centres in the West teaching samatha as vipassana. Shaila is one of the very few dharma teachers fully qualified to point to the depth of samatha meditation and the way to the depth.

She has written a comprehensive and illuminating guide to the practice of the jhanic states of happiness, deep joy and a grounded serenity. As she points out in her first chapter, the practice of meditative concentration (samadhi) is a key to deep inner well being through the four jhanas that cover the different depths, born of samatha practice. Jhana practices point to a shift in inner priority - away from the blind pursuit of pleasure through the senses and the desire to get what we want from the world to realising deeply through our own experience that happiness truly lies within, not externally. If we are clear about this, we lose interest in making demands upon others and the world to get satisfaction while remaining intimate with life in a grounded way.

A respected dharma teacher in the USA, Shaila has been devoted to the exploration of samatha and vipassana for 25 years. She has spent more than seven years in actual retreat, either a group retreat, personal retreat or monastic retreat in the East and West - more than anybody I know whether teacher or otherwise. She draws from her wealth of experience and suitably quotes the Buddha more than 150 times in the course of the book. The combination of first hand experience, practical exercises and the words of the Buddha make for formidable reading. In the depth of samadhi, the hindrances - desire for pleasure, negativity, boredom, restlessness, anxiety, self-doubt and fears - start losing their power over the inner life. The Buddha said "gladness arises in him, from gladness comes delight, from delight in his mind his body is tranquilised, with a tranquil body he feels joy and with joy his mind is concentrated..." (Page 117).

Environmental conditions, outdoors and indoors, serve as very supportive conditions for the development of the four jhanas. Read the book for a comprehensive description of each of the jhanas. There are some general references to supportive conditions, indoors and outdoors, in the book but much detailed advice about specific ally helpful outer conditions would have been helpful whether the meditator is new to samatha or with years of experience of meditation.

Having covered the inner features of the preparatory ground, she then gives a chapter to each of the four jhanas. The jhanas can arise in the course of formal vipassana practice or insights can arise subsequent to jhanas. The remaining chapters of the book then address the movement of consciousness from samatha to vipassana and to liberation. Shaila devotes the last chapter to going beyond practice and realising emptiness - an appropriate conclusion to a remarkable book.

I have known Shaila for more than two decades. We have taught together at Spirit Rock, Woodacre in the Bay area, USA, together to her Sangha in the Bay area and in Sarnath, India. She spent years in practice in India and Thailand in all manner of environments and situations. Her story is the stuff of a woman's legend.

Focussed and Fearless deserves to be on the bookshelf of every meditator. Yet, never forget, that there is no substitute for practice. Hopefully, samatha practices and jhanic absorptions will soon have an equal place as vipassana in the West. Focused and Fearless is a major stepping stone in this direction. Better still, contact Shaila for her teachings.

Christopher Titmuss
Totnes, England
www.insightmeditation.org