



48 - Deep Calm as a Support

The glassy sea and the cooling of the system

“There is no happiness higher than peace.” ~ Gotama (The Buddha)

“Calmness of mind does not mean you have no thoughts... It means you are not being held hostage by them.” ~ Anon

The calm after the joy

In this ‘Freedom’ stage of our journey, as our raft glides through the ‘Land of Perpetual Dawn’, we, the Navigator, encounter the fifth of the Seven Supports: ‘Deep Calm’.

Deep Calm often follows uplift. After the mind has brightened, the body and mind tend to settle on their own. We feel less driven and less on edge. The body isn’t bracing so much, and the mind isn’t pushing or scanning in the same way. Thoughts may still arise, but they don’t hook us as quickly, and they pass with less disturbance.

In the early teachings, Deep Calm (tranquillity) has two faces: a settling of the body and a settling of the mind. The body softens out of bracing – jaw, shoulders, belly, breath – and the mind softens out of friction – less push, less resistance, less inner arguing. This is why Deep Calm is placed as the natural follow-on from joy in the awakening-factors sequence: uplift refreshes and brightens, then the system cools and steadies, making it easier for attention to gather. When the mind gets a little brighter and more uplifted, the whole system naturally starts to relax and quiet down. From that relaxation, a steadier sense of ease and wellbeing appears. And when we feel that kind of ease, it becomes much easier for the mind to gather, settle, and stay unified on one thing without strain.

Calm here isn’t a blankness or the absence of emotion; it’s a lowering of arousal – less threat-scanning, less muscle tone, a slower breath – so

whatever is present becomes more workable rather than fought, suppressed, or acted out.

While Energising Joy (Chapter 47) provided the necessary uplift to pull our raft out of the heavy currents of dullness, it possesses a vibration or excitement that can eventually become agitating. Deep Calm is the subsiding of that vibration. It is the profound cooling, stilling, and pacification of both the body and the mind. It's the stretch of the journey where the water smooths out, and the raft runs smoothly.

The glassy sea

If Energising Joy was the exhilarating rush of the wind filling the sails, Deep Calm is the moment the vessel enters a protected harbour or a stretch of glassy water. The chopping motion of the waves ceases. The *engine* of the raft – the 'Creative Powers' (Chapters 20–24) – continues to run, but it runs cool and quiet, without friction. This is not a cessation of movement, but a cessation of *turbulence*. We experience a deep ease, signalling that the struggle against the currents has momentarily ended.

In the heat of craving, aversion and compulsion or the stress of early navigation, the nervous system runs hot – flooded with cortisol and adrenaline. Deep Calm is the activation of the parasympathetic nervous system (the *rest and digest* mode). It is the feeling of the engine cooling down after a long, hard run. It validates that we are safe enough to relax into the peace. When the mind gets a little brighter and more uplifted, the whole system naturally starts to relax and quiet down. From that relaxation, a steadier sense of ease and wellbeing appears. And when we feel that kind of ease, it becomes much easier for the mind to gather, settle, and stay unified on one thing without strain.

Stillness

Stillness here does not refer to a blank or withdrawn state, but to the quieting of reactivity itself. The Secular Buddhist teacher, Stephen Batchelor notes that even the word *seeing* can mislead us, since it subtly reinforces a sense of distance – an observer here, an object there. For this reason, he often prefers the metaphor of *listening*. Listening is not an act of grasping or scrutinising; it is an act of opening. Just as we listen to music by softening, settling, and allowing the sounds to enter us, so meditative

stillness involves an openness in which experience can be received without interference. In this mode, the world is not held at arm's length but allowed to touch us directly. Such listening naturally carries an ethical and relational dimension: to hear is also to be moved. It is no accident that *Avalokiteśvara* – the bodhisattva of compassion – is known in Chinese as *Guanyin*, ‘*the one who hears the cries of the world*.’ Stillness, understood in this way, is not disengagement from life but a receptive presence in which reactivity quiets and empathy becomes possible.

The pivot of Freedom: from stimulation to peace

The pivot that opens the door to Freedom here is the shift in what we value: from *stimulation* to *peace*. For much of our lives, and certainly within the cycle of craving, we may have equated happiness with *high voltage* – intense pleasure, drama, or excitement. We feared silence and stillness as *boring* or *empty*.

The pivot turns when we realise that excitement is actually a subtle form of stress. Even the *good* excitement of Joy has a trembling quality. Deep Calm offers a superior pleasure: the pleasure of relief. It is the relief of laying down a heavy burden. When we value the *absence* of agitation more than the *presence* of stimulation, we are no longer vulnerable to the *bait* of craving, aversion or compulsions. The hinge turns when we start preferring the relief of settling over the buzz of being stirred-up.

How to practice: the protocol of release

We cultivate Deep Calm less by adding something new, and more by letting go of what the system is already doing (bracing, pushing, gripping, rushing).

1. **Quick orientation:** We pause and sense the overall tone. Are we dull and low, keyed-up and over-driven, or quietly ready to settle? This helps us choose the right medicine. If we're already edgy, we lean toward settling rather than energising.
2. **Downshift with the exhale:** We let one out-breath lengthen, then another. Nothing fancy – just allowing the breath to slow and deepen on its own. Often the body takes the hint quickly.
3. **Release one place of holding:** We scan gently for the most obvious tension – jaw, eyes, shoulders, hands, belly. We pick one place and soften it by a small amount (even 5%). Then we move to the next. Calm often arrives through a series of tiny releases, not one big letting-go.

4. **Use contrast when we're very braced:** If tension is stuck, we deliberately tense and release a muscle group (hands, arms, shoulders, face, belly, legs) and then rest in the after-sense. This teaches the body, through experience, the difference between holding and release.
5. **Let what's already okay spread:** If there's any ease anywhere – a softer belly, warmth in the hands, a steadier breath – we stay with it for a few extra moments. Not to cling, just to let the nervous system register: *this is possible*. Often calm spreads when we stop rushing past it.
6. **Notice the tremble and stop feeding it:** Sometimes the surface is calmer but there's a jitter underneath – a fear it will end, a subtle “what next?”, a push to move on. When we notice that ripple, we don't fight it. We name it as restlessness and return to the body and the longer exhale.
7. **Micro-resets between tasks:** Between activities, we pause for 20–30 seconds and do nothing. We let the momentum of the last thing drop before picking up the next. This prevents background tension from stacking up over the day.
8. **When calm is present, let it mature:** Deep Calm isn't something we hold. When it comes, we let it do its work – cooling and settling – and we allow it to deepen into ease and steadiness. That's how tranquillity becomes a stable base rather than a passing mood.

Self-reflections

1. When things get quiet, what do I assume will happen next – and what am I protecting myself from by staying slightly tense?
2. Can I tell the difference in my body between calm (soft, open, present) and shut down (blank, distant, numb)?
3. Where does stress live most reliably in me right now (jaw, throat, chest, belly, hands) – and what happens if I soften that place by 5%?
4. When an emotion is strong, do I tighten to control it, or can I let it settle by staying close, breathing, and unclenching?
5. When something pleasant happens, can I enjoy it without getting carried away – and notice how joy can settle into calm ease instead of tipping into restless excitement?
6. What role does busyness play for me: does it energise me, distract me, or keep uncomfortable feelings at a distance?
7. Can I be alert without bracing – and what does *relaxed alertness* actually feel like in my posture, breath, and attention?

Journaling prompts

1. **The tension inventory:** Scan your body slowly from forehead to feet. List three places you find tension you hadn't noticed. For each, write: *What is this area bracing for? What is it trying to prevent?* Then add one line: *What changes if I soften it by 5% rather than forcing it to disappear?*
2. **Redefining boring:** Write about a moment this week that felt boring, flat, or *nothing's happening*. Now rewrite the same moment using the word peace instead of boredom. What shifts in your description – sensations, mood, meaning? What does boredom protect you from noticing?
3. **The cool engine script:** Choose a situation that reliably heats you up (rushing, criticism, conflict, uncertainty). Describe what usually happens in your body and thinking. Then write a *cooling script* you could run next time – two sentences maximum – focused on loosening and slowing (for example: *"This is heat, not truth. Let the body cool first."*). Finish with one practical step you'd take in the first 30 seconds.
4. **Joy versus calm (uplift versus ease):** Recall one memory of strong excitement or uplift and one memory of Deep Calm. Compare them in three lines each: *breath, body, attention*. Which one leaves you clearer afterwards? Which one makes life feel more workable for the next hour?
5. **The safety signal:** List the specific conditions that help your nervous system power down (privacy, warmth, low light, a tidy space, a certain person, silence, time). Then answer: *Which one is easiest to provide for myself today?* Write one tiny way you could signal *safe enough* to your body in under a minute.
6. **Letter from the body:** Write a short letter from your body to your mind beginning: *"Dear Mind, you drive me hard when..."* Let the body name its costs (tightness, fatigue, bracing) and then ask for three concrete changes (pace, breath, breaks, fewer tabs open, softer posture).
7. **The ripple effect:** Describe one interaction today where your steadiness helped, and one where your agitation spread. What did you do with your voice, pace, face, and attention? End with one sentence: *"When I'm calmer, I tend to..."* and one sentence: *"When I'm stressed, I tend to..."*

Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of Deep Calm as a support, the following overview highlights some key connections.

- ★ **Neuroscience:** Deep Calm is what happens when the nervous system shifts out of threat-mode and into safety-mode. When we're stressed or compulsive, the sympathetic system (fight/flight/freeze) tends to dominate: the body braces, breathing gets shallow, attention narrows, and the mind becomes reactive. Tranquillity practices work in the opposite direction. Slow, longer exhalations, softening the eyes and jaw, and relaxing the belly are small signals of safety that help the parasympathetic brake engage – especially the ventral vagal system linked with settling and social ease. As the body cools, stress chemistry drops and the prefrontal cortex regains influence: we're more able to pause, reflect, and choose rather than react.
- ★ **Psychology:** In psychological terms, Deep Calm is less about *getting rid* of emotion and more about reducing arousal so emotion becomes workable. When arousal is high, the mind tends to catastrophise, ruminate, or chase relief; when arousal drops, we can feel the same emotion with less struggle and less urgency. Many therapies aim for this kind of settling: grounding and paced breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and *bottom-up* nervous-system regulation used in trauma-informed approaches; distress-tolerance skills in DBT; and acceptance-based practices in ACT that stop the secondary fight with experience. The practical point is simple: a calmer baseline makes impulses less convincing and makes wise action more available.
- ★ **Philosophy:** The Greek Sceptics and Epicureans used the word *ataraxia* for a mind that is untroubled – not because life is perfect, but because the inner argument has eased. They observed that much disturbance comes from rigidly holding views about how things *should* be and then fighting reality when it isn't. Deep Calm echoes this insight. As we stop tightening around experience – stop insisting, resisting, rehearsing – the body loosens and the mind becomes less perturbed. Calm is not passivity; it's the clarity that comes when we're no longer compelled to win an inner debate with the moment.

Remember to remember

Resting in ‘Deep Calm’ is the point in the crossing where we’re no longer bracing against experience. The struggle softens: the body isn’t as clenched, the mind isn’t as jumpy, and the urge to push, fix, or rush eases. This is what it feels like when the *internal war* is winding down – not because life is perfect, but because we’re not adding extra friction. We begin to recognise calm as a real form of strength: a nervous system that can downshift, a mind that can stay present without needing intensity to feel alive.

The key is learning to value this *cooling* rather than mistrusting it. Stillness isn’t stagnation; it’s recovery and readiness. When the body is soothed and the mind is settled, attention gathers more easily and steadiness becomes natural – which is exactly what prepares the way for ‘A Unified Mind’ (Chapter 49). Calm is what makes things visible: like still water reflecting the moon, a quieter mind can see more clearly what’s happening, what’s changing, and what matters next.

“The more tranquil a mind becomes, the greater is its influence, its power for good, its success.” ~ James Allen

“It’s only through stopping, through pausing, through stillness, through quiet, that we’re able to... fully inhabit the world.” ~ Stephen Batchelor

Sutta References

★ Bojjhaṅga Saṃyutta (SN 46): Connected Discourses on the Factors of Awakening

- *Summary:* This collection defines Tranquillity (*passaddhi*) as the factor that arises from Joy (*pīti*) and leads to Concentration (*samādhi*). It emphasises that a tranquil body leads to a tranquil mind. It identifies tranquillity as the essential bridge between the *Energising Triad* and the deep stability of concentration.

★ Upanisā Sutta (SN 12.23): The Causal Sequence

- *Summary:* Details the specific causal link: "From joy comes tranquillity; from tranquillity comes happiness (*sukha*); from happiness, the mind becomes concentrated." This confirms

Deep Calm as the necessary prerequisite for reaching the safe shore of liberation.

★ **Kāyagatāsati Sutta (MN 119): Mindfulness of the Body**

- *Summary:* Describes how mindfulness of the body leads to the *stilling of thoughts* and the experience of *bodily tranquillity*, which are prerequisites for the higher stages of meditative absorption.

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