



## 64 – Skilful Collectedness: the stable platform

### **Gathering the crew**

*“To be everywhere is to be nowhere.” ~ Seneca*

*“The shimmering, quivering mind, hard to guard, hard to check – the wise one straightens it like a fletcher straightens an arrow.” ~ The Dhammapada*

*“There is no collectedness for one without wisdom; no wisdom for one without collectedness. One in whom there are both collectedness and wisdom is near to freedom.” ~ The Dhammapada*

### **The stable platform**

In this Training stage of our journey, we have clarified our Perspective (Chapter 57), set our Intention (Chapter 58), aligned our Speech and Action (Chapters 59 - 60), aligned our Livelihood (Chapter 61), engaged our Application (Chapter 62), and established the Captain’s Memory with Skilful Mindfulness (Chapter 63). Now we arrive at the eighth and final factor of Gotama’s Middle Way Programme – Skilful Collectedness.

The traditional Pāli word *samādhi* can be understood, in plain terms, as collectedness – sometimes translated as composure, concentration, or a gathered mind. It is the capacity of the mind to remain stable rather than scattered. It is not a trance. It is not zoning out. It is not suppressing thought. It is the steady unification of attention, allowing us to remain present without being pulled into fragmentation.

Although this chapter gives particular attention to formal practice, the purpose is not to become calm only on the cushion. We cultivate collectedness so that its steadiness can travel with us into ordinary life – helping us be present for this conversation, this decision, this difficulty, rather than being lost in yesterday’s regret or tomorrow’s fear.

Earlier in our journey – especially in the practice of ‘A Unified Mind’ (Chapter 49) – we experienced moments of unity and flow as a natural support. Here, we

cultivate collectedness deliberately as a skill. Not because calm is impressive, but because stability is necessary. Without composure, insight flickers. Without steadiness, wisdom does not land deeply or stay available under pressure.

Collectedness has matured across our journey. In the Abandoning stage, it was defensive – gathering the mind so we were not hijacked by turbulence (Chapter 32). In the Feel stage, it became unified – the deck running true as agitation reduced (Chapter 49). Now, in this Training stage, it becomes integrated – composure that shows up in speech, decision, conflict, and pressure. What began as protection has become reliability. What began as effort has become steadiness.

Skilful Collectedness provides the stable platform on which discernment can operate. When attention is dispersed across worries, memories, plans, and reactions, it lacks precision. When attention is gently unified, perception sharpens and reactivity softens. This is not narrowing life down. It is gathering ourselves enough that we are not internally divided.

### **Gathering, not suppressing**

There is an important distinction here. Skilful Collectedness is gathering, not suppressing.

Suppressing happens when we try to force the mind into stillness through tension. We clamp down on thought. We strain for silence. We try to manufacture calm through control. This usually produces the opposite of what we want – agitation beneath the surface and subtle aversion toward our own experience.

Gathering is different. It is the patient act of returning attention – again and again – without hostility. When attention wanders, we notice. When it drifts, we gently regather. The focus is steady, not strained. The repetition itself builds continuity.

Over time, this continuity creates coherence. The body settles. The breath smooths. The mind becomes unified enough to stay with one chosen object while still open to the wider field. In that coherence, subtle shifts become visible earlier. We recognise any drift before it takes us off course.

This is composure as training – not an escape from life, but a way of meeting life

without scattering.

### **Unified does not mean narrow**

Collectedness is sometimes described as one-pointedness, but this does not have to mean a hard, narrow stare. A gathered mind can be spacious. The point is not to exclude life, but to stop being pulled apart by every passing stimulus. When the crew is unified, the raft moves as one vessel. In the same way, collectedness gathers body, breath, attention, and intention into a single coherent direction.

### **A note on deep collectedness**

In the early teachings, Skilful Collectedness is often described through the four jhānas – the progressively deeper states of gathered attention. The language varies, but the movement is broadly from joy and ease, into deeper calm, and then into equanimity and clear, steady mindfulness. This chapter does not try to make jhāna into a performance goal. For our purposes, the important principle is simpler: the more scattered the mind is, the harder it is to see clearly; the more gathered it becomes, the more available wisdom becomes. Deep collectedness may come gradually, but the training begins wherever we are: one breath, one body, one return.

### **Everyday collectedness**

Collectedness is not confined to formal sitting. It is strengthened in small intervals throughout the day.

We pause for two minutes between tasks.

We feel three breaths before replying to a message.

We notice the body while walking from one room to another.

These short re-gatherings prevent cumulative fragmentation. They stabilise the system before strain builds. Rather than waiting for collapse and then rebuilding, we maintain steadiness in small, sustainable doses.

### **Collectedness and wisdom**

Collectedness and wisdom support one another. When the mind is scattered, even Skilful Perspective fades under pressure (Chapter 57). When the mind is

composed, we can apply what we already know. This is why the early teachings link collectedness with freedom – not because calm is the goal, but because stability allows insight to deepen and endure.

If Skilful Application is the engine (Chapter 62), and Skilful Mindfulness (Chapter 63) is the captain's memory, then Skilful Collectedness is the stable deck beneath our feet. When the deck is steady, the crew can work efficiently. The navigator can consult the map without being thrown off balance. Adjustments can be made precisely. We do not lurch from one side of the vessel to the other. Collectedness does not eliminate the weather. It stabilises the vessel within it.

Over time, composure becomes less an effort and more a baseline. The mind gathers more easily. The platform steadies more quickly. And because of that steadiness, wisdom is no longer occasional. It becomes reliable. That reliability is what carries us toward the safe shore.

### **The clean deck**

Collectedness is easier when the deck is clean. If our speech, actions, and livelihood are generating secrecy, guilt, conflict, or fear, the mind has to keep scanning the horizon. Ethical conduct is therefore not separate from collectedness; it is one of the conditions that makes composure possible. Fewer aftershocks mean fewer disturbances. Fewer disturbances mean the mind can gather without so much resistance.

### **How we practise – the rhythm of collectedness**

When practicing collectedness meditation, we do not force the mind into composure. We invite it.

A helpful rhythm to remember is Gladden – Settle – Gather.

1. **Gladden:** If the mind feels dull, pressured, or resistant, it will not settle willingly. So we begin by brightening it gently. We might recall something wholesome – gratitude, kindness, relief, beauty. We might simply acknowledge, 'Right now, all is well.' We make the present moment hospitable. This is not artificial positivity. It is creating conditions in which the mind is willing to stay.
2. **Settle:** Next, we widen into the body. Rather than narrowing attention immediately to a tiny point, we feel the whole torso breathing. We notice

the weight of the body. The contact with the chair or floor. The hands resting.

The body provides a stable container. When awareness is grounded in embodied presence, the mind is less likely to spin upward into abstraction.

3. **Gather:** Only then do we gently rest attention on a chosen anchor – examples include, the breath, sounds, the body as a whole, or simple presence itself.
  - a. When attention wanders – and it will – we gather it back. Not with criticism. Not with frustration. Just with a friendly and caring repetition.
  - b. If the mind is sleepy, we narrow the focus slightly to sharpen clarity.
  - c. If the mind is restless, we widen the field slightly to include more space.

These small adjustments keep the system balanced. Over time, this repeated gathering builds continuity. Attention becomes less brittle. Presence becomes more stable.

### **A secular dharma perspective – Focus**

In Stephen Batchelor’s practical rendering of the eightfold path, this factor becomes Focus. Where the traditional language often speaks of concentration. Batchelor’s word points to something direct and usable: the capacity to gather attention around what matters. Focus is not a special state removed from ordinary life, and it is not calm as a private achievement. It is the steadiness that allows us to remain available when conditions are uncomfortable, complex, or unclear.

Focus is closely related to composure: the ability to stay gathered enough that practice does not fall apart under pressure. In RAFT language, the crew stops rushing from side to side, the vessel steadies, and the next wise manoeuvre becomes easier to discern. This does not require perfect silence or an impressive inner state. It begins wherever attention can be gently collected again: one breath, one body, one conversation, one choice. The test of Focus is practical rather than mystical: does this steadiness reduce reactivity, make care more available, and help us respond rather than merely repeat ourselves?

### **Self-reflections**

1. When I sit to practise collectedness, do I confuse feeling calm with having a gathered mind.
2. When I cultivate Skilful Collectedness, am I trying to escape what I feel, or steady myself enough to see it clearly?
3. When my mind is scattered, how does that affect my ability to see clearly? What becomes possible when attention is steady?
4. Off the cushion, where do I most often lose collectedness – in conversation, conflict, waiting, rushing, planning, screens, or tiredness?
5. In a difficult conversation, can I stay collected enough to hear the other person, notice my own reactivity, and choose my next words carefully?
6. When I am pulled into regret about the past or fear about the future, what helps me come back to the present moment without forcing or judging myself?
7. What would it mean today to bring a gathered mind into one ordinary activity – making tea, driving, washing up, answering an email, or walking into a room?

### **Journaling prompts**

1. **The distraction map:** During one practice period, note where attention goes – planning, replaying, worrying, imagining. What patterns repeat?
2. **Natural collectedness:** Describe an activity where you felt quietly unified – reading, walking, creating, working. What conditions made that possible?
3. **Carry-over effect:** Practise ten minutes of collectedness, then move into an ordinary task. How does the quality of attention change?
4. **From scattered to gathered:** Describe what it feels like when your mind is dispersed. Then describe what it feels like when it gathers. What shifts in the body, breath, and mind?
5. **The stable platform:** Write about a difficult emotion you are currently facing. How does it look different when viewed from steadiness rather than reactivity?
6. **Gladdeners:** List five simple experiences that reliably brighten and steady your awareness. How could you use them deliberately, not to escape difficulty, but to support a more gathered mind?
7. **Collectedness under pressure:** Recall a recent moment when pressure, irritation, craving, or fear pulled you off centre. What happened in the body and mind? What might have changed if you had paused, gathered yourself, and taken one steady breath before responding?

## Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of ‘Skilful Collectedness’ the following overview highlights some key connections.

★ **Neuroscience:** – Contemporary neuroscience suggests that collectedness is not the mind going blank, and it is not a simple on–off switch between one brain network and another. The Default Mode Network (DMN) is associated with self-referential thinking, autobiographical memory, and mental time travel. It is active when the mind wanders into stories about ‘me’, the past, or the future. But newer research makes clear that this network is not a ‘bad’ system that needs to be shut down. It plays important roles in imagination, planning, and meaning-making. What changes with trained attention is not elimination, but balance. In focused-attention meditation studies, researchers repeatedly observe a cycle: the mind wanders, we recognise the wandering, we shift attention back, and we sustain it again. This process appears to involve dynamic cooperation between the Default Mode Network, the Salience Network (which detects what matters), and Executive Control networks (which help redirect attention). In simple terms, Skilful Collectedness strengthens our ability to notice distraction and regather. It is not switching off the self – it is improving coordination. In RAFT language, this supports ‘steadying and regathering’ rather than ‘tuning out’ or ‘silencing the mind’.

★ **Psychology:** In contemporary psychology, the closest secular analogue to collectedness is the research on flow associated with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Flow is not trance or dissociation. It arises when challenge and skill are well matched, goals are clear, feedback is immediate, and attention is fully engaged. In such states, action and awareness merge, and self-consciousness recedes – not because awareness disappears, but because it is fully used. This helps us understand collectedness as immersion with clarity, not withdrawal from life.

Modern therapies reinforce the same lesson from a clinical angle.

Mindfulness-based approaches reduce rumination and worry partly by lowering cognitive and emotional reactivity. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) strengthens psychological flexibility and present-moment awareness. Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) teaches doing one thing at a time – ‘one-mindfully’. By contrast, decades of research on thought

suppression show that trying to forcibly push thoughts away often produces a rebound effect, especially under stress. The implication is clear: grinding does not work. Gathering does. Skilful Collectedness is not forceful control. It is steady coherence.

★ **Philosophy:** The Stoic tradition adds an essential ethical frame. For Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, attention was not a technique for calmness alone. It was a disciplined way of examining impressions before assenting to them. One paused, tested the judgement, and asked whether it aligned with reason and virtue. Attention served character. It was not a neutral observation for its own sake.

This influence carries directly into modern cognitive therapy. Both Albert Ellis and Aaron T. Beck explicitly acknowledged Stoicism as a philosophical precursor to cognitive-behavioural approaches. As the Stoicism scholar John Sellars has argued, Roman Stoic ‘mindfulness’ was the practice of keeping guiding principles ready to hand so that action could remain deliberate and proportionate. From this perspective, the test of collectedness is not ‘How focused can I become?’ but ‘Does this steadiness help me test impressions, reduce reactivity, and respond with care?’

### **Remember to remember**

Skilful Collectedness is what makes the rest of the training dependable. Perspective may be clear, Intention sincere, Ethics aligned, and Mindfulness alert – but without collectedness, these qualities fragment under pressure. Collectedness is the steadying that allows what we know to remain available when it matters. It is the difference between insight that appears occasionally and wisdom that can be applied reliably. We do not need to be perfectly calm. We need to be gathered enough that attention does not splinter at the first surge of emotion or distraction. Collectedness keeps the training intact. It gives Perspective somewhere to stand, Intention somewhere to hold, and Mindfulness somewhere to land.

On our raft, this is the stable deck beneath our feet. Weather will still come. Currents will still pull. But when the platform is steady, we can respond deliberately rather than react impulsively. We are not thrown from side to side by every shift in the wind. We can adjust the rudder without panic. We can consult the map without losing our balance. Over time, this steadiness becomes less

effortful and more natural. The mind regathers more quickly. Drift is recognised earlier. Reactions shorten. Recovery speeds up. And because of that growing reliability, wisdom is no longer occasional or fragile. It becomes embodied. Collectedness does not remove the waves – it allows us to remain upright within them, steering with clarity toward the Safe Shore.

*“Think of attention as a mental muscle that we can strengthen by a workout.” ~ Daniel Goleman*

*“You have power over your mind — not outside events. Realise this, and you will find strength.” ~ Marcus Aurelius, Meditations*

### **Sutta references:**

#### ★ **Samādhi Sutta (SN 22.5) – Concentration**

- Summary: The Buddha explicitly links concentration to wisdom. He does not say ‘Concentrate to bliss out’; he says ‘Concentrate to know things as they really are.’ This confirms that Collectedness is a tool for insight, not an escape,.

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

- Describes the practice of immersing the mind in the body ‘like a bucket of water filled to the brim.’ It lists the benefits, including the ability to endure pain and conquer dissatisfaction. This is the source of the ‘Whole-Body’ approach,.

#### ★ **Cūḷavedalla Sutta (MN 44) – The Small Set of Questions**

- Summary: The nun Dhammadinnā explains that Samādhi is ‘one-pointedness of mind,’ its signs are the four foundations of mindfulness, and its equipment is Right Effort. This shows the inter-connectedness of the training

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