



Samatha at Home *(and elsewhere)*

A newsletter for the Samatha Sangha: 14

Thursday 30th July 2020

www.samatha.org

Samatha at Home 14

Dear Friends,

We hope people are enjoying their summer and sunshine, despite the continuing strangeness of things now. Luckily, a byproduct of 'the situation' is that samatha activities have flourished so much, and we hope that people are finding the various groups and talks helpful. The summer talks have been popular: they carry on with Paul Dennison starting his series this Saturday. The series will be on Yogāvacāra, the esoteric traditions of South and Southeast Asia to which our breathing practice is loosely aligned. These traditions give a rich and practical perspective on our form of breathing mindfulness, and demonstrate approaches to meditation which help us see our own method in its natural setting. These talks are every Saturday at 10 am. Veronica Voiels is kindly hosting them, as with the other Saturday talks.

The practice sessions on Wednesday evenings at 7.30 pm and Saturday mornings at 7.30am are continuing. These are friendly and welcoming, so if you have not tried one yet, it will be a great way to feel connected with the practice over the summer! They offer a great chance to practise with other samatha meditators. Thanks to Jo Connelly for organising them.

Greenstreete has also opened up – a tentative move if the virus is contained. All social distancing regulations have been carefully checked with the Welsh council involved. These local councils are taking a very cautious slant on the opening up restaurants and hotels. So a big thank you to the small group of people who have been working so carefully with them to ensure Greenstreete courses are safe and fulfil all the criteria that have been laid down for people's health and protection. Your work is greatly valued!

We are going to take a break for the newsletter until the early Autumn. But you can find all the issues so far on the samatha.org site. Just click on What is Happening Now, then on Samatha at Home, and they are at the bottom of the page. It has meant a great deal to see your contributions, in the form of poems, comments, musings, articles and pictures. So please do continue to send them. We looking forward to starting again in the Autumn and would like the newsletter to become a regular feature – so if anything comes up, do please send it to either of us, as it is contributions from meditators that keep the newsletter going!

Last of all, we would like to wish Boonman Poonyathiro a very happy birthday indeed. He is usually here in the UK at this time of year, Boonman has been attending the Saturday morning practices from Thailand. And warm wishes to everyone for the summer months, until we start again in the Autumn!

Thanks to Peter Harvey for contributing this week.

Guy and Sarah

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**Greetings to Boonman Poonyathiro
on his 88th birthday, August 5th 2020**



When Boonman visited the UK for the first time in twenty years, for the opening of the Greenstreete centre in the nineties, he gave all samatha meditators there a piece of tektite. This is the black rock, found around NE Thailand, that appears to be remnants of meteorites that hit earth thousands of years ago. I remember the particular moment when people received theirs: in all, a puzzled and intrigued smile came up. What was this object? All the pieces were different, and had strange odd shapes and ranges of brittleness and hardness. The small mottled black stones made us appreciative but curious, wanting to find out more. If you pass them through your hands, each piece has solidity and resilience:

something very unusual and quite unlike anything else you find here on Planet Earth. But each felt it was of precious worth. It was interesting to see how in one moment people's faces showed a completely contradictory expression: of surprised bafflement and happy recognition, both at the same time. None of us had a clue what all this was about, but there was something there we liked and wanted to know more about. Since then, lots of people have learnt *samatha* that Boonman has perhaps never even met, but they are still the recipients of the meditations he has taught – in rather the same way he gave us the tektites. People develop in such diverse ways, and have such varied interests in their meditation, but they all share something from the practice he passed on to us. I don't know what it is but it makes me smile in the way we did then, when I think about it. And, practising *samatha* in the variety of ways he has shown us, I see in myself and others that we all continue to find such moments. You can be practising away for a while without obvious effects, and then find you have become the baffled and happily surprised recipient of a strange gift, sometimes at the oddest, most unhappy or just funnily unexpected time. Those who have joined *samatha* since seem to find this too. We search outer space, and sometimes find we have been given something of great, unexpected value. So thank you Boonman, for teaching us and showing us how to find this.

It is now nearly sixty years since Boonman introduced the Samatha breathing mindfulness form that he teaches to the UK. He perhaps did not realise then what was in store! But it was a great service to us, even those of us who have not met him. So happy birthday, Boonman, and we hope you and Dang continue to be around for many years to come.

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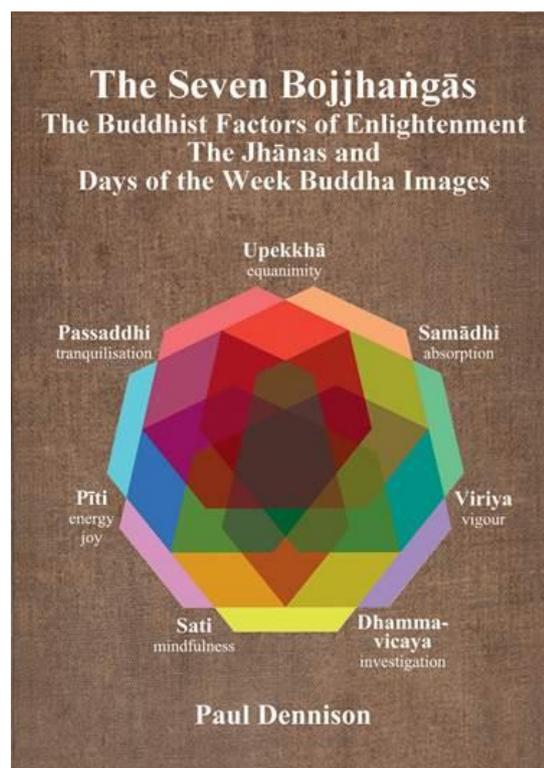
This week's story is about Kisā Gotamī and the Mustard Seed, a famous tale about a young woman overcome with grief who seeks help from the Buddha. It is a tale from the Dhammapada commentary covering the events behind verse 287 and verse 114 of the Dhammapada. You can watch the video via the link below:

<https://player.vimeo.com/video/442787665>

All previous issues of Samatha at Home can be found at: www.samatha.org/samatha-at-home

... And with birthdays in mind

Paul Dennison is offering his new book, on the *bojjhaṅgas* as a free download on Amazon Kindle till Friday 31st July, 2020. This is, he says, to mark his 77th birthday this year. Apparently in Thailand it is customary to give rather than receive presents on your birthday. After the 31st it is still available on the Amazon website, at a low price. Paul is one of the founding members of the Samatha Trust, and has been its chairman too. He has spent a great deal of time in Thailand, visiting temples and seeing the culture from the inside. He spent a long period as a monk, learning about Yogāvacāra, the Southeast Asian meditation system. This is loosely aligned to our samatha breathing mindfulness practice; the various methods used to be widespread and popular throughout Southeast Asia. Modern scholarship has shown that these associated practices are the oldest meditation lineages in Thailand, and were once deeply respected. They were rather neglected as some modern secular movements became popular, but, luckily for us, there were enough practitioners around to pass on this ancient lineage to practitioners now. Paul has spent considerable time learning and practising in these methods with some of them. Our form of breathing mindfulness is a product of the highly diversified and richly various traditions that characterise Yogāvacāra, and we are fortunate that he has brought so much to our practice by wider understanding of them.



I am sure we speak for everyone involved in Samatha when we say thank you for the book! We are looking forward to reading it – the book is based on Paul’s talks on the subject, now available on the samatha.org website too. This is a cheering event in the middle of our summer. It is to mark his 77th birthday later this year. So happy birthday, Paul, as well!

The four elements and practice

The world seems new to us all now. One helpful way I have found of keeping balance in this is remembering a sense of the four elements, and a fifth, space. In ancient Indian, the distinction between the 'physical' and the 'mind' was felt to be more permeable, as it was in the west. You could see imbalances in the mind and body in terms of the imbalances in the four elements. If one gets too strong, or goes wrong in some way, the others might be needed to restore the 'golden mean' and the balance of mind and body.

Whatever the physical science of this, this certainly feels true experientially. I have found one of the most helpful things on meditation courses, and generally, is to think about the practice not so much in terms of balancing factors of meditation or faculties, but rather as a balance of the sense of the four elements. For me at any rate this stops me thinking about it all too much, and going to a different way of viewing the mind and body that feels more direct and immediate, without the head getting in the way. At an obvious level 'the elements' seems to be how you experience different events during the day in the mind and body. So experience hardness, support and resistance, in our physical contacts and in our mind. We experience moisture and flow. We know warmth, and a sense of fire and vitality. We breathe and know air, as it moves around us all the time. And we all have a sense of space. These very simple experiences can help us in the practice too.

Earth



There is something very much physically 'there' in a rock, or a stone, or a field of earth. Sometimes we knock against something hard, or feel very much in touch with the ground, as if it is supporting us. Lots of things do this for us. People sometimes say they feel 'earthed' after doing a really hard day's digging, dealing with soil, spades, gritty bits that need dislodging and sometimes knocking against stones. The practice can feel like that too. If the weeds of hindrances are really getting out of hand, sometimes just going to the basic instructions of the practice, particularly the counting, brings the mind back from wherever it has flown or escaped to, and it is a relief to feel more normal and grounded.

The earth of the practice feels to me like getting a good posture, making sure the back is straight and the shoulders relaxed. This is the basis, and it can be like coming home a bit if the mind has felt scattered. The earth feels solid and you start to feel grounded and back to base. A really good stone sums up this sense of the 'earth element' in the meditation. In some samatha practices, the 'earth' is all the hard bits of the body, like the skeleton, the hair and the nails. Some samatha practices, take an area of earth as the meditation object. I find it is just helpful sometimes to go and look at and walk by a newly ploughed field, one of the traditional ways of becoming familiar with the earth element. The sense of richness, fertility and the smell of the soil all help in this sense of the earth element being there, all the time, as our basic support. Procedures, methods, good contact with the breath and a sense of the physical base all seem key to finding the element of earth in the meditation. It is compared to *vitakka*, the basic placing of the mind and body and how we apply our attention to the meditation object. As such it is said to be an antidote to the hindrance of sloth and torpor. Earth revitalises, and when the mind is really engaged in an earthy way, there is no laziness. And if you need to sleep... you just do. Otherwise it is as if the mind has some soil: the mind finds the object in the breath, and the breath acts as a steady contact, supporting us throughout the meditation. Where there is this contact, we feel protected. The earth element is always there, all the time, in the basic contact with the breath and the body.

Water



The water element is taken as a traditional *samatha* practice as a bowl of water, or, in some texts, as a lake or a river or a waterfall. It is quite different in feel from the element of earth, and we can get a sense of its mobility, refreshing quality and the way it seeps everywhere, even down the driest cracks by going for a walk near some water, perhaps after a heavy rainfall: even the sound of water is refreshing. Just as you sometimes need a feeling of solidity and support in meditation, one also feels a sense of moisture in the meditation. Sometimes it is a sense of things flowing and seeping through the mind and body, as if they are being rinsed and transformed by that. I find if I have been working too much, or doing too much detailed intellectual work, being aware of water nearby loosens the mind and the body. It is helpful to practice by a stream or waterfall sometimes for this.

The emotions are suggested by water, as their natural medium. Being moved can change a whole meditation, as can tears that arise spontaneously for no reason, or something someone has said, or a piece of music. They seem to allow the watery side of our natures to flow more freely. If the practice has felt dry or mechanical, this sense of water flowing can wash through that. It seems related to the following part of the practice to me. During this stage you start to feel the breath as a flow, and it is as if things which have felt obstructed or hard can melt and be softened, as the attention to the breath changes and becomes more 'watery'. It is compared in some meditation systems to *vicāra*, the quality of exploration, that sustains and nourishes the mind's attention on the object. So, if there is *vicāra*, attention feels like a watering of the meditation object. The mind's attention on the breath feels softer, and more moist, than the stage before, as if water has been sprinkled on dry soil. This, quality of attention, the manuals say, is opposed to the hindrance of doubt. Where there is loving care or interested attention, there is no room for doubt. It just seems to disappear, in life and in meditation.

Fire



The fire element is sometimes difficult for some to feel: it is said to be the sense of warmth, or heat, in the body. But of course the best way to get a sense of it is to look at it: as a single flame, penetrating and bright, or as a fire, moving and flickering and changing all the time. Fire inspires and delights; like other elements, it should not be out of control. But we need its vitality and liveliness, just as we need the animation of people and their laughter. In meditation, it is compared to joy, that burns up the hindrances, and brings sparkle and joie de vivre to what we are doing. Or it just makes us deeply delighted! Finding that in meditation can be tricky, but it can take us by surprise sometimes. Joy can unsettle the practice – apparently. But when it is allowed to happen, it does not matter if the body shakes a bit, or the head moves around, or that there are surprise tears, which sometimes people find. The joy is just finding its way through us, and if there is mindfulness of the breath it will restore health to the mind and make people feel new. This seems like the joy that can be there in the touching stage of the practice. You need a sense of the lightness and fun of the fire element sometimes in this stage, to give it vitality. As a factor, joy is

opposed to hatred. Hatred is hidden, thwarted fire, that eats away inwards, constricted, burning away chances for happiness. Joy is when there is the freedom in the body to allow the sparks to move, and flicker and have fun, in a contained space, warming up everything around. This can happen in the practice sometimes, when there is a moment where you realise you can just let joy happen... it has been waiting for the opportunity and you can just go ahead and enjoy it. And the hindrance hatred, ill-will, grumpiness, nit-picking, and all its various forms, just stops being interesting. Fire is creative, and given a chance in the practice it glows the area around and lights the practice up, and then shows a welcoming light ahead.

Air



The element of air is associated with happiness, and movement, and a different kind of freedom. If you walk into a house with stale air you throw open the windows. Air in the practice does this too. In daily life it feels like being able to do what you feel in the mood for, in a lighthearted way. One cannot take a picture of air in the same way you can water, earth or fire: its medium is in the movement, the freedom and the effects it leaves behind it. We breathe, we can feel it like a breeze in the meditation. It can blow away cobwebs, in the form of hindrances, and lets things breathe that have felt blocked or obstructed. Airiness is something that can be cultivated during the day, by a kind of contented freedom to do what you wish, like a bird. Watching a bird glide and swoop gives some sense of its scope. In the meditation, it feels like a sense of mobility, and willingness to let go and move on as each stage is enjoyed. It is like the settling, as when a bird comes to settle somewhere because it feels it would like to. The settling is when things change and come to develop in the meditation. The air element is a way of understanding how to let the process happen with minimal intervention, and to let the mind breathe. Air is associated with happiness and contentment as a meditation factor. It rids the mind of worry and depression. If there is a happy sense of movement, and the breath as something changing but also offering settled support, the mind does not go off on tangents, or get stuck in unhappy states.

Space

And lastly, space: the ground on which the others can work together and help one another. A sense of space can be inside and outside, and always gives the potential for a resolution of problems and difficulties. In the loving kindness (*mettā*) practice, we are aware of beings in all directions, in infinite space and wish them well, and as we do the elements find their natural expression and balance. We can be aware of the balance of the four elements in ourselves, but also feel a sense of something else, bigger than ourselves. This vastness is where the mind finds it real relief, away from constrictions and boundaries, yet still grounded in the balance of the four elements in the body and mind.

Space is compared to one-pointedness, or unification (*ekaggatā*) in meditation. It is opposed to the hindrance of longing for senses and sensory gratification. Where there is great peace in the meditation, there is space, and a sense of acceptance that does not chase after other things.

The elements have always felt to me a really helpful way of understanding how the practice works, without a great deal of theory coming in. Sensing them, in the mind and body, helps to find balance. There is one sutta that for me sums this up. It is given by the Buddha to his son Rāhula, the *Mahārāhulovāda-sutta* (M.62). (The one before is mentioned, by chance, in another article in this newsletter!). As he is unable to get on with other meditations, he is taken to the Buddha. The Buddha gives his son kindly advice on the five elements: he should just try to be like each one in turn. So, he should let his mind and body be like the element of earth, that accepts whatever comes at it, whatever it is, good or bad. He should be like water, washing through everything that happens in the mind and body. He should be like fire, that burns and purifies what is not good. He should be like air, as it blows on everything, good and bad. And he should be like space, as it is not established anywhere: so nothing can settle or get stuck. With awareness of each one of these in turn, 'agreeable or disagreeable' elements in the mind and body will not invade. It is after that, when Rāhula is ready, that he is taught the four divine abidings of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity, awareness of the foul, and of impermanence, and then – breathing mindfulness. It is with this practice that the Buddha finishes his teaching to his son. He tells him that if he practise this, even as he approaches death he will be mindful. I do not always find suttas easy or useful to read just on their own, but there is something about that one that really shows how a sense of the five elements can provide such a good basis for understanding breathing mindfulness and appreciating the meditation. Just getting a sense of each one in turn, sometimes helps: does the practice feel 'cold'? So can it be warmed up? Does it feel a bit dry, or too static? Does it feel grounded... maybe some earth is needed. They are useful ways of being less focused on things 'wrong', and finding a way ahead.

The breath, and what it is like

Breath is like...

As one attunes to the calming flow of the breath, it can be helpful to notice, and bring to mind, out of meditation and occasionally within it, similar things in the world around one. This helps one to be more open to the rich and open nature of the flowing breath.

In Longest of Counting, the breath is like:

An inflow of refreshing energy

In Following, the breath is like:

A wave moving up a beach and retreating

A ripple spreading out and then being reflected back in a pool

It flows, like water

A cat's tummy moving up and down as it breathes

What is felt as one strokes a cat (it might even purr with joy!)

A revolving column of air.

In Touching, it is like:

A curtain being gently wafted by a breeze

A leaf moving in a breeze

A spider's web trembling in a breeze

A breeze rippling water

Water lapping at feet dangled in a lake

A fresh breeze when a window is opened

Standing at an open front door

Wind against one's face

A tickle

The touch of silk

A nostril

A horse's nostril breathing (I was once at our Greenstreete meditation centre, meditating outside my tent one

morning, when a young horse that lived in the field spied me and wondered about this still figure. It came up to me and gently touched my leg with its hoof, sussing me out, investigating if I was alive. At the time, its nose was next to mine. I was doing the Touching stage at the time, so could do it on both the breath in my nostril and in its nostril!)

An elephant breathing through its trunk

Flow from a tube
A cave mouth

Incense smoke drifting up
Steam rising from a kettle

Steamed up cold glass when blown on

A clear stream flowing between rocks
A slowly moving cloud
A wafted dandelion seed

And in Settling:

Blowing on embers, so that they glow and brighten

A glow of light
A circle of warm light

Joy flowing into one, from the *nimitta*, with the in-breath

... Other things may come to mind.

Breath, air

To stay alive, we continually take in and expel instances of the four primary elemental processes of materiality – earth/solidity, water/fluidity, fire/temperature, and wind/air: food and excrement, water and urine, warmth and sweating, in-breath and out-breath. A person can survive for three weeks or more without food, around four days without water, a few hours without some warmth, and a few minutes without air. These four contribute to the dance of physical and mental energies and processes that is a living human.

As we breathe in, we borrow from the pool of air, and then return it. Think of the many people, animals and insects that have breathed it previously, and will breathe it in future. It is a shared, un-owned resource, provided by plants and the phyto-plankton of the oceans. And if you were to try to hold on to the air one breathes in, without ever returning it to the shared pool, one would die ...

Just as fish live in water, and take it for granted so much that they may not be aware of it, so we live a sea of air, a few miles thick. When we see a bird fly, we can bring to mind the air that it moves through and holds it aloft.

In the Pali wording of the first precept, against killing living beings, a living being is a *pāṇa*, literally a breather.

The Buddha's skillful means teaching Rāhula, his son.

There are a number of suttas in the middle length sayings (*Majjhima Nikāya*) which relate to the Buddha teaching his son Rāhula. Rāhula was born on the day that Gautama left his palace to seek the way to end suffering, and when he returned as the Buddha, seven years later, Rāhula ordained.

The first sutta is M. 61 'Advice to Rāhula at Ambalaṭṭhikā', when Rāhula was newly ordained, so just seven years old. The main theme of the sutta is to reflect on every bodily, verbal and mental action, before, during and after the action as to whether it is harmful or not. King Asoka included this sutta in his selection of suttas that should be studied and reflected upon by every Buddhist. It is a wonderful teaching. But the main theme is not what I wanted to write about for this article. Rather it is the opening section where the Buddha first approaches Rāhula. Rāhula prepares a seat and water for washing the feet. When the Buddha finished washing his feet the Sutta then outlines the following words and actions of the Buddha:



'Then the Blessed One left a little water in the water vessel and asked the venerable Rāhula: "Rāhula, do you see this little water left in the water vessel?" – "Yes, venerable sir." – "Even so little, Rāhula, is the recluseship of those who are not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie.'

'Then the Blessed One threw away the little water that was left and asked venerable Rāhula: "Rāhula, do you see that little water that was thrown away?" – "Yes, venerable sir." – "Even so, Rāhula, those who are not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie have thrown away their recluseship.'

“Then the Buddha turned the water vessel upside down and asked the venerable Rāhula: “Rāhula, do you see this water vessel turned upside down?” – “Yes, venerable sir.” – “Even so, Rāhula, those who are not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie have turned their recluseship upside down.”

‘Then the Blessed One turned the water vessel right way up again and asked venerable Rāhula: “Rāhula, do you see this hollow, empty water vessel?” – “Yes, venerable sir.” – “Even so, hollow and empty, Rāhula, is the recluseship of those who are not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie.”’

(Translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom publications)

When I first read this passage, I was deeply impressed by this depiction of the Buddha teaching. The use of the water vessel and the water; the way he directs Rāhula’s attention to each stage; the sudden changes in the imagery and the dexterity and economy of the movements – there is extraordinary power in this depiction. When I read it, I feel as though I am sitting behind Rāhula, looking over his shoulder, as it were, and seeing the Buddha teaching. I have re-read this passage many times and still find it quite remarkable. It feels to me that this is exactly how it happened, that this is a succinct and precise description of the Buddha using skill in means to teach. I thought I would share this with you, the readers, in case any of you have not read this before; and if you too find it striking in the way I have done, then I will be very happy to have introduced it to you.

I recently discovered the background story of the sutta is that the young Rāhula had deliberately misled visiting monks, mischievously sending them off in the wrong direction when they asked where the Buddha was. This could explain the emphatic nature of the short discourse, one after another four examples of the waste of recluseship, pressing home the point about lying. Having impressed upon Rāhula the importance of truthfulness, the Buddha then begins his teaching on the reflection of all bodily, verbal and mental actions. When he received higher ordination, Rāhula did become an arahant (M. 147) and one of the ten most distinguished in the Buddha’s sangha. He was said to be the foremost in those desirous of training.

