



Samatha at Home (and elsewhere)

**A weekly newsletter for the Southern Sangha: 2
Thursday April 9th 2020**

SAMATHA AT HOME (and elsewhere)

It is curious how varied our experiences are this week. Some, on the front line, are dealing with desperate human suffering, pain and fear, and others are in solitude, appreciating the quiet; there is a whole spectrum in between. But for everyone, feeling a sense of our interconnectedness is so important to us, and feeling stillness and equanimity in the midst of this is such a challenge. At the moment we all feel our connections to others so much more, and how deeply we are all related to one another, at every level. There is a Jātaka story about some tree spirits, the beings who are said to live in clumps of grass, bushes and trees (*Rukkhadhamma Jātaka: Jātaka 74*). In this story, some go and live in solitary trees, because those are ones that often get plenty of offerings. Others stay together in a forest. The ones that go off on their own get their homes knocked over in storms. The trees are too isolated and brittle. The trees that stand together, though, are strong, nourishing one another, so when there is a storm, they can weather it easily. The story says their roots are so interlaced, no wind can blow their forest over. This does seem so true now. Our problem at the moment is that many of the roots we normally have to keep us connected to others, and grounded too, we cannot use: we cannot touch others, go for a swim or a hike, or go and meet friends. Instead, we are having to grow some roots we haven't used much before, and develop new and less familiar ones. We have to isolate, like a tree on its own ground, but we need to acknowledge all the causes that allow us to do this in, the ground underneath, and the forest around us. Our theme this week is mindfulness. The situation really makes one mindful of all the roots of our lives, and the overwhelming generosity of shopkeepers, binmen, policemen, neighbours, and drivers who keep our needs at a basic level going: a network of people who just keep us alive and well, and who show us the values of generosity and compassion. We could not survive without their great *dāna*, and compassion.

Our online discussions, emails, and indeed this newsletter seem like these 'roots' for our meditation. It is so helpful to have a sense of others. Please do not feel shy, and do contribute – photos of where you meditate, letters, comments, or photos of your walk, a drawing, an article, poem, haiku: they would be most welcome. It will make us all feel a bit more forest-like, rather than just a number of solitary trees....

And thank you to Jas Elsner, Chris Gilchrist, Yuppadee Healey, Hugo Shakeshaft and Bill Wexler for contributions to this and the last issue.

Next week our theme is investigation, the second factor of awakening. Can it help us in lockdown? Any contributions on this – and anything else that you would like to offer – are most welcome. Please send to Guy Healey guy.healey@outlook.com and Sarah Shaw sarah99shaw@gmail.com.

Warm wishes,

Guy and Sarah

Contents

The Mindfulness Issue

In this issue, around the theme of the first factor of awakening, mindfulness, we have:

- An article on mindfulness – Page 4
- A Story about a King and a ring – Page 8
- Gift of Randomness: a poem – Page 9
- A guided practice. It is half an hour this time. If you feel in need of a reminder about samatha meditation, go for our shorter practice in last week's newsletter.

<https://vimeo.com/404845152>

- A bedtime Jātaka story:

<https://vimeo.com/404654748>

Please note, these links to the videos also offer the option to download the video to your laptop or desktop, should you wish to do so. The download button can be seen below the title under the video.

At the end of the newsletter, there is some information and an update about the successful new online classes. Do please let anyone you know you might be interested to hear about this. And there are some poems here and there....

Clapping out of doors
cheers, at least, hug in the street:
thanks we cannot show

Sunshine and blue skies. Neighbour gardening. She remembers the war...

Country fox
Short legs
Slinking, gun-shy.
Town fox
Stands tall
Stadtluft macht frei *

* Mediaeval German law: living in a town frees one from serfdom https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stadtluft_macht_frei

The first factor of awakening: Mindfulness

Over the last few weeks, like many others, I have been trying to steer a path through often stormy, and then sometimes oddly tranquil, currents. So, this has made me wonder. What is mindfulness? How does it actually feel in our curious daily life now? How do we know it in practice?

I looked up some of the modern definitions: the secular mindfulness movement has come up with a number of descriptions, which are helpful and seem a really good start. Kabat Zinn's definition from the 1980s, of 'paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally' was adapted later to become:

Broadly conceptualized, mindfulness has been described as a kind of nonlaborative, non-judgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is (Scott R. Bishop et al, 2004, 'Mindfulness: A Proposed Operational Definition', *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 11 (3): 232).

Such descriptions – and there are lots now – are useful, and are of course needed for psychologists working clinically. We are dealing with so much information overload at the moment, as well as finding our way to being on our own too. So just being aware of the conditions and the breath now, just as they are, and being comfortable in all the contradictions, is a practical piece of help, and I find it helps one find one's bearings. But, perhaps like other samatha practitioners, I find I need something more to help me: a kind of steadiness that can find awareness of things going on, but knows how to discriminate and select what is helpful too. Samatha meditation, traditionally known as the 'wet' way, just needs in the end a slightly different approach, for right mindfulness finds a way ahead, too.

For the meditator, the truth is that mindfulness also feels discriminatory: mindfulness of feeling when one watches the breath helps one steer a middle way between sentimentality, or excessive excitement, or worry or fear. A sense that one should not get sucked into the latest scare or crisis, but also that one should let some things in, and not 'isolate' in the mind; mindfulness keeps the balance. And in meditation, mindfulness also, for me, needs something else: a particular kind of softness and refinement of attention, for one becomes willing to become aware of new fields, scanning an ever more subtle, or sometimes, widening area. Mindfulness in the practice allow doors to open, and for new experiences to be known in a settled and deeper way. It does not exclude, but it does set a way ahead, and direct attention to what will help.

In samatha breathing mindfulness, in meditation and in daily life, over the past few weeks I have found that developing mindfulness feels like finding this place of balance: a taste of an equilibrium where one can be aware of the breath, the object, the body, the feelings, and the mind, while keeping an alert equipoise there. This does have a touch of the ethical in it too: one does not say the nasty remark, or do the wrong thing, as it just starts to feel wrong, as do judgements without loving kindness. So it also has a touch of the divine abidings too. There is a sense that any event in the mind and body can be known and felt

with mindfulness, and without judging, in order that one feels whole: this needs a kind of friendliness, and sometimes compassion, for oneself and others.

It seems to me this kind of flexible, but soft attention, is needed in all samatha meditations, form and formless. Perhaps even particularly in formless meditation, where, great sensitivity and mindfulness of feeling is so important if the meditation is not to go 'cold'. Boonman often talks about 'being in the middle' and 'middleness' (*tatramajjattatā*). This sense of being able to find the 'middleness' in any meditational experience, and in daily life, really helps get a feel for what mindfulness actually feels like, in practice and in daily life. There are so many paradoxes around at the moment: great unhappiness and fear on the one hand, and, for some, odd moments of real tranquillity and peace in now deserted streets. It is new ground, a bit in the way a new meditation state is new ground. Form meditation and formless meditations are new fields: mindfulness helps us to keep the alertness fully human, and a new stage to be known with good heart. And in dealing with new ground in daily life now, as we all are at the moment, it is needed too.

So for me, the most helpful advice seems to be in the early teachings of the Buddha, who seems to have been the first practitioner in ancient India to use the term *sati/smṛti* to describe an awareness of the present moment. He does define mindfulness once or twice:

And what monks, is the faculty of mindfulness (*sati*)? Here, the noble disciple is mindful, possessing supreme mindfulness and alertness, one who remembers and recollects what was done and said long ago. This is called the faculty of mindfulness. (S V.197)

Memory is still in there somewhere, but there is something else too, an awareness, and a 'remembering' of the present moment. There is often an association with guarding too: mindfulness guards us from getting lost in any one of the senses, and letting our awareness getting clogged up, so that it cannot move on.

One simile that the Buddha uses that I find the most helpful advice. It is an image which to me has a lot more to it than can at first appear. He describes a royal city on the borders, where there could be plenty of trouble:

In this royal outpost city on the borders, there is a gate-keeper—shrewd, experienced, and wise—who refuses entry to those he does not know and admits those he does. . . . Just as, monks, in this royal outpost city on the borders, there is a gatekeeper—shrewd, experienced, and wise—who refuses entry to those he does not know and admits those he does, and it is guarded for the protection of those inside and the exclusion of those outside, just so, monks, the noble disciple is mindful, endowed with the highest degree of mindfulness and care, remembering and recollecting things done long ago and said long ago. With mindfulness the gatekeeper, the noble disciple abandons the unskillful and brings into being the skillful. He abandons the blameworthy and cultivates what is irreproachable. (A IV.107)

I really like this one, as it gives more depth to an understanding of mindfulness. Mindfulness of feeling means that one knows when something has gone wrong, or when it goes right. One does use one's experience – one's inbuilt memory. Because if you develop mindfulness you start to feel intuitively, from memory of what has happened in the past, what things will make the mind go off balance, or make you annoyed, or make you become over-absorbed. Like an old wise gatekeeper, if mindfulness is there you know

when not to let something in: not to watch a programme that always makes you depressed, or watch too much news. Conversely you start to admit friends to your mind: spending an hour doing some gardening or tidying up might make you feel better. Or just flopping and reading a good book! We are all having to be gatekeepers at the moment, particularly those who are going out and dealing with often upsetting conditions. At a simple bodily level we need to guard, and be mindful of personal contact, objects we might touch that might transmit infection, or make us get it. We need to be aware of feeling too, and things and situations that we know will set us off course; but we also need to recognise things that could really lift the mood: perhaps reviving a lost passion, such as music, or doing some dancing to music. I imagine gatekeepers welcome in those who are bringing food and good will and such 'input' is needed! It is not easy as the circumstances are so unfamiliar. But I find this image really helpful – it is like we have to be the wise gatekeeper, who is a bit on the friendly side, but sometimes firm. At the moment, whether we are in isolation, or on the 'front line' helping others, this sense of the gatekeeper, who guards our impressions, but open doors when the time is right too, seems a really helpful image.

And in the sitting practice, we are gatekeepers of the breath. We need to know when the breath is coming in and when it is going out. This involves a very simple kind of kindly watching. The other aspect of the gatekeeper, 'who remembers things heard and said long ago', is that he will bring to mind something that is useful from the past. In meditation, for instance, sometimes one remembers some advice one was given a long time ago at the right moment, when it is needed: it seems mindfulness of feeling involves being able to remember when something useful was told to us, perhaps in a talk or in a report: the tip for how to deal with a particular stage of meditation, when one finds it again, for instance, an experience people say happens to them quite often on meditation weeks. Things you had forgotten completely that help the practice at this stage can just come to mind again, as if they had been waiting until they were needed. If mindfulness is there the gatekeeper of our mind just seems to know the right moment when to remind us of it: it helps to open the doors for us when we reach that stage of meditation again. In *The Questions of King Milinda*, a post-canonical but early text, one comparison made for mindfulness is that it is like the treasurer of a universal monarch, able to assess reserves and find gold whenever it is needed. Such situations seem a good example of this.

There are so many other aspects about mindfulness that have not been so much discussed. For in our tradition of Buddhism, mindfulness means being aware of the consequences of what one does, and so it inevitably involves a kind of discernment, for instance. It does not have to be judgmental, but awareness of the feelings of others is as important as mindfulness of our own – how can we work on that? The Abhidhamma says that when there is mindfulness, there is self-respect, and fear of consequence. Where there is mindfulness, too, it says, there is also one of the divine abidings, of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy or equanimity.

For in Buddhist texts, mindfulness also sometimes has a pro-active quality. In the *Sutta on Loving Kindness, Mettā Sutta* (Sn 151), loving kindness is described as a mindfulness – if one becomes aware of a field of other beings, and wishes them well, that is a mindfulness too. How we are mindful is just as important as whether we are alert to things going on. There

are very alert states that are hard and not really mindful, in that they are a bit forced or cold. I can be in the supermarket ‘mindfully’ being alert to all the things I need and what I have to get – but if I barge ahead in a queue, or snap at the supermarket lady, there is no mindfulness of other people, and their needs. Someone who acts with loving-kindness does have mindfulness of these: one can respect others, and smile at the shopkeeper. And *mettā* is something that can be contagious, and really help other people to find it too. In Jātaka stories you sometimes find that people who have loving-kindness pass it on, just like a ‘contagion’. So, when the Bodhisatta is reborn in a jungle glade, all the animals ‘catch’ his *mettā*, and start behaving more kindly to one another (*Sama Jātaka, Jātaka 540*). That seems to be happening a bit in the area we are in at the moment too, as people here are really trying to help others on the street and check they are ok. The good will has been a bit infectious!

So mindfulness in practice, for me, is a way of opening up in a discerning way. It does not block things out completely; it does filter, though, and helps steer a way ahead through often stormy currents in the mind, by offering balance, and a sense of perspective. It also helps us to be kinder and to find things that can give us good heart, if we let it.

Anyway, I found it helpful to consider these things when I considered the factors of awakening. They set mindfulness as the very first thing we need to establish. It comes and goes, doesn’t it? So, I find just remembering the image of the gatekeeper, steady in his or her post is what works for me. The gatekeeper notices the breath going in and out, and remembers to smile sometimes at hindrances, the more unwelcome visitors. It is a helpful way of ‘staying in the middle’.

Our worlds are so odd:
Stillness calls... a home inside
Friendship on one’s own

The King's Request for a Ring

This is a story from long ago, but still it has something to teach us all. Once there was a King who lived a very serene and contented life. On one occasion he heard his courtiers talking about a ring that had the power to make a sad person happy and a happy person sad. The King was very curious about this tale, and asked his courtiers where the ring could be found. They each looked at each other in turn and shrugged, expressing their inability to provide any further information, but each insisted they had heard of such a ring and was sure that some where it could be found.

The King's curiosity would not abate, and so he ordered his Chief Minister to find the ring and bring it to him. The Chief Minister went to the Chief of the Palace Guard and ordered him to find the ring and bring it to him so that he could present it to the King. The Chief of the Palace Guard went to the Head of the Royal Household and said this was clearly a matter for the Household and ordered her to find the ring and bring it to him so he could present it to the King. The Head of the Royal Household, somewhat frustrated by this, stormed off, then she saw a young man, newly entered into service and instructed him to go out and find the ring, and not return until he had done so. Each having acquitted themselves of their obligation returned to their normal duties and forgot about the ring.

But the King had not forgotten, nor had the young man who had been given the task. He was immensely proud he had been given a chance to distinguish himself for the King so early in his life. Having talked to the courtiers, it seemed that this ring had been spoken of by passing travellers from other lands. So, he set off on his quest and passed through many lands, questioning many a trader and many a prince, many a princess and many a servant, about the whereabouts of the ring.

It was nearly a year later that the young man began to feel despair that his task would never be completed. He decided to return and throw himself on the mercy of the King and beg forgiveness for his failure.

On approaching the palace, the young man had to pass through a market. As he was walking through the market, he saw a stall laden with many trinkets, some bracelets, some necklaces, and some rings. He found himself drawn to the stall and his eyes swept over the rings and there he saw it: the ring. His despair lifted and he was filled with joy.

He gave the market trader his asking price and hurried to the palace declaring he had found the ring that the King had requested so long ago. He was immediately presented to the King.

“Great King”, he said, “I found it, the ring that you requested: the ring that makes a sad person happy and a happy person sad.”

The King sat up and leaned forward eagerly: “You have found it? Then let me see it.”

And so, the young man respectfully handed over the ring and presented it to the King. And the King took it in his hands and examined it, and upon examining it his demeanour

changed from one of contentment to concern. And he passed the ring on to his courtiers, and each one in turn examined the ring, and depending on the courtier's mood, when they examined the ring, those that were happy would change to become sad, and those that were sad would change to become happy, for on the ring were engraved the following words:

“This too shall pass”

Gift of randomness

black flutter and swirl
finds sudden stillness here:
a blackbird smiles orange bright
and poised on present's dance
hops, stops, gives time
some secret happiness
to make this moment shine
in colours sung to chance,
praising the gifts of life's
embroidered randomness.



Online Beginners Classes

In these times when we are forced to retreat into our homes and risk retreating into ourselves, the Samatha Trust has thrown our practice open online to offer its benefits to anyone who wants to try it. Three weeks ago we went 'live' in a softly-softly approach to publicity and have had some 50 applications for either weekly or daily beginners meditations classes. At time of writing 4 groups have begun, two on a daily basis, two on a weekly bases, as well as one directed to people in Asia (on a very different set of time zones). As the person collating applicants and sending them on to teachers, it has been immensely heartening to feel we can offer something from the great store developed by our practice at a time of real need. If anyone reading this knows of someone who might like to join an online beginners class at this time, or might benefit from one, please do send them the application link below: sending links looks like the new 'word of mouth'!

The link is: www.samatha.org/apply-to-learn-at-home

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