



Samatha at Home *(and elsewhere)*

A newsletter for the Samatha Sangha: 22

Thursday 6th May 2021

www.samatha.org

Samatha at Home 22

Dear friends,

We hope everyone has been enjoying all the sunshine.

This issue we have a contribution about chanting – what it is, some ways you can work with it, and some different approaches. Thank you to Peter Harvey for providing this and showing how chanting can become a practice that supports and deepens the meditation practice too.

Last weekend we had our online Samatha AGM. At the AGM we heard about all the activities that have been going on in the last year: online groups, online beginners' classes and many new faces. So a big welcome to those who are new. We very much look forward to meeting you in person, if you can come to any of the centres – at Greenstreete, Manchester or Milton Keynes. And we look forward to seeing more of you if you are an online meditator who lives far away from any centres. Jas Elsner explained how the online beginners' groups were going, and there are now many people whose first contact is now through Zoom and Skype. As he pointed out, it is as if we now have a fourth samatha centre: the online community.

We had some discussion about how things would develop over the next few years in this way. We do not know, of course. But some online meetings will continue, as well as events at the various centres. I think we all hope some online meetings continue. Though it is worth remembering that some newcomers have said it felt a bit odd sometimes going to online sessions where old friends are greeting each other – it can feel excluding to those who do not know people. So we hope everyone is mindful of the fact that for many people it could be the first online group they have been to, or the first time they have met some of the people involved. They are not just times to catch up with familiar faces and say hi to your favourite friends. Mindfulness of the group includes everyone! And we now have many new fellow meditators.

The AGM gave us a reminder that *bhāvanā* or practice, can be there in all kinds of things: making sure all the supplies are kept going at Greenstreete, fixing a door, or keeping the trees well maintained. There is some work we do for ourselves, which is good, and some for others, and some just for general wellbeing – they all help the meditation in the long run and all can be *dāna*, generosity. It makes us all aware of this larger group when we hear about them or participate.

There are groups around at the moment studying the ten perfections, the qualities one can develop over many lifetimes as part of the Bodhisatta path. It is just very good to know there are samatha meditators out there who have the sense of service that underlies these perfections. One samatha meditator in her eighties, in a county town, heard a couple of years ago that the local council were closing down the public convenience in the town centre. They said they did not have funds to hire cleaners. So she decided to keep it open, and since that time has gone down there at 6 in the morning to give it a thorough clean. She practises awareness of the breath throughout. Her work has given countless delivery people, medics, emergency workers etc a

place to 'go' when they need to, at a time when their work is so essential. As, she says, it is just a great support for her meditation, as she treats it as a mindfulness exercise every morning! And it is great *dāna*, the foundation of meditation practice, and the first element in the list of the ten perfections.

So thank you, management group post holders, for all the *dāna* you do and for keeping everything going in lockdowns too.

With warm wishes,

Sarah and Guy

sarah99shaw@gmail.com guy.healey@outlook.com



Contents

1. Chanting as Meditation

Page 5



Thanks to Valerie Roebuck for suggesting this month's story from the Dhammapada commentary, which is about *Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesī*. A young woman, Bhaddā, rather impetuously marries a robber and survives an attempt by him on her life, defending herself in spectacular fashion. Despairing of this episode, she renounces the world wanders into the forest and ordains as a Jain nun. She masters their teaching and roams about the country defeating all in debate until she encounters the Elder Sāriputta. From there she meets the Buddha, who answers the question she could not answer. She is famed as the female disciple who most quickly attains full enlightenment.

You can watch the video by clicking on this link: <https://player.vimeo.com/video/542326902>

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

Chanting as meditation

People may see chanting as simply ‘ritual’ or ‘devotion’, but it can also have a meditative quality as it contributes to the systematic nurturing and growing of skilful, wholesome qualities, undermining negative traits which hinder this process, and enabling the arising of insight.

The recorded discourses of the Buddha were originally oral literature, and they had and have a performative quality as well as their meaning. This performative quality is evident when listening to them chanted e.g. in Pali, especially when all the repetitions, that the mind wants to cut out when reading for meaning, are chanted.

One can detect at least three levels in the development of a chant:

- establishing/enacting the form
- developing a momentum
- letting the chant chant itself, in mindfulness.

The elements of chanting

Good chanting involves the whole of a person: body, speech and mind. It builds up a ‘sound body’ whose quality of vibration and tone corresponds to and enhances the emotional centre, which is felt in the heart region in the middle of the chest. Different forms of chant affect this differently: football chants have a somewhat different effect than Buddhist chanting!

Body and breathing

Chanting is done with the hands placed together over the chest area, physically expressing an attitude of respectful devotion and also showing that the impetus of the chant is coming from the seat of the emotions. The back should be straight, which aids good breathing. Chanting is often done kneeling, but in daily practice, I find it best to do it cross-legged, immediately before doing the breathing practice. Some people find that they naturally move the body a little when chanting – back and forth, or in a circular movement – in tune with the rhythm of a chant. I find that this helps bed-down the leg posture.

Breathing is an aspect of chanting. Breathing long enables a good flow of chanted words without too much interruption from frequent in-breaths. If chanting a longish chant in a group, try not to breathe in at the same time as those next to you. And there is no need to breathe in quickly; let the others carry the chant as you breathe in at your own pace.

Good chanting sets up harmonious vibrations in the chest, skull and even stomach regions, from where they permeate the rest of the body, helping to dissolve and dissipate inner tensions and associated negative emotions. To attain this effect, the sound must resonate not just in the vocal cords and top of the chest; chanting at a reasonable volume also enhances this.

In the flower-offering chant (Chant book, p.5), I also find some hand movements helpful:

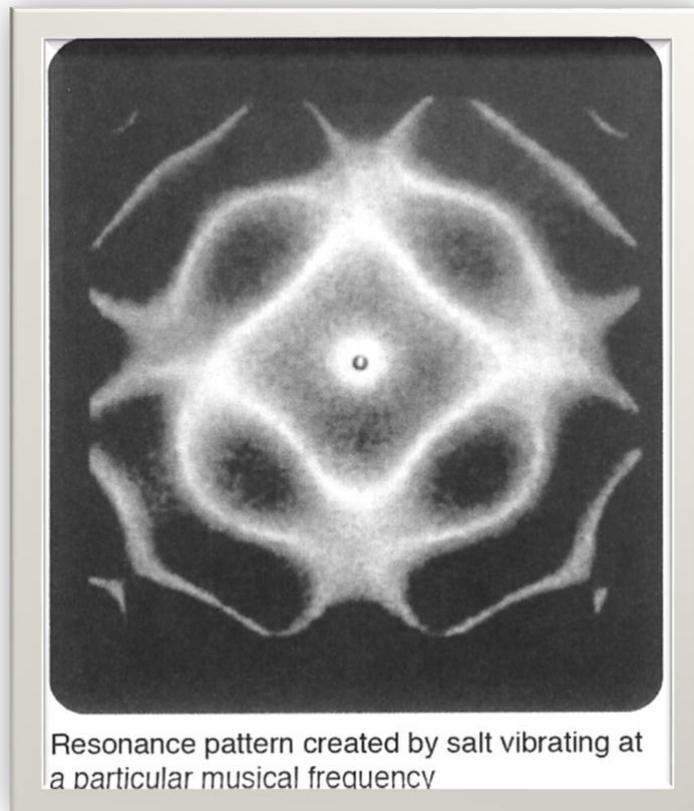
1. *Pūjemi Buddhāṃ [or Dhammāṃ or Saṅghāṃ] kusumen’anena*
(With diverse flowers, the Buddha/Dhamma/Saṅgha I revere.)
2. *Puñña-m-etena ca hotu mokkhaṃ.*
(And through this karmic fruitfulness (‘merit’) may there be release.)

3. *Pupphaṃ milāyāti yathā idaṃ me*
(Just as this flower fades, so my)
4. *Kāyo tathā yāti vināsa-bhavaṃ.*
(body goes towards destruction.)

With line 1, hold the raised hands out together, palms up, edges touching, as if offering something, then lower them so that the palms are together in front of the chest. On line 2, when chanting *m-etenā*, raise your palms-together hands to above your forehead, with the wrists making good contact with the top of your head. If there are good head vibrations from the chant, the wrists and hands may feel this from the skull, and as one chants *mokkhaṃ* ('release', 'liberation'), if one opens out the fingers, these can also be felt to vibrate. With line 4, put your palms on the chest, centre of the body (*kāya*) then let the hands fall down, and the fingers open out, suggesting the decline and fall of the body in death.

Speech and sound

Chanting of course engages speech, in generating a wholesome flow of sound energy, in which one may participate with other co-chanters, chant on one's own, or simply mindfully tune into it as a listener. In engaging speech, one is engaging *vitakka* and *vicāra*, applied thought and examination, qualities which lead up to normal speech, and which when not well-channelled, lead to wandering thoughts, including in meditation.



One can see chanting as based on a basic open-throated *aaaaahhh* sound. Actual chanting then adds consonants and other vowels to this unmodified vowel sound, and musically, the sound varies up and down from the basic note, which is generally fairly low, so as to set up more vibrations in the body. This is all perhaps like establishing the basic sound of a Scottish bagpipe, then adding variations to this sound.

An *mmm* sound, with the lips closed, tends to generate vibrations in the skull. One notable feature of Pali chanting is the letter *m*, which sounds roughly like *ng*, but is sounded through the nose, rather than mouth. This is particularly effective in setting up the vibration quality of a chant. The long vowel *ā* also contributes to this.

It is important to end a chant in the right way, so as to let its energy run to earth, so to speak. This is best done by not suddenly stopping the sound, but slowing down the last few syllables, then letting the last one tail off.

Mind

Chanting may be done either with the eyes open or shut. Doing it with the eyes closed helps one develop greater concentration. If chanting with the eyes open, this may be enhanced by directing attention to the features of a Buddha-image that one is chanting before. For example, the legs and lowered hands, chest and head, respectively, for each *Buddham saraṇam gacchāmi*, suggestive of the levels of ethical discipline, meditative cultivation of the heart, and wisdom. For the Dhamma and Sangha refuges, one can also think of these three levels around the Buddha. With the eyes closed, attention may be given to a visualization that one is doing, perhaps as described in the chant, as in the *Buddha-maṅgala-gāthā* on the Buddha surrounded by eight Arahats.

One needs to apply mindfulness to the sound one is producing, to check on its correctness as regards pronunciation or sound quality. Mindfulness is also needed in remembering the upcoming part of the chant – in practice, this means not letting the mind wander onto something else, but leaving a clear mental space into which the words of a learnt chant can emerge without obstruction. In the case of a chant with repetitions in it, though, one needs to be particularly mindful to keep track of where one is in a chant. For example, if a chant has a repeated section at the end of verses three, four and five, the mind may jump from the end of verse three to the start of verse five, rather than the start of verse four. This is because the same stimulus – the end of the repetition – leads up to the start of verses four and five.

Sometimes one can chant a well-known chant in the absence of mindfulness, from habit. This illustrates the principle of non-Self – the conditioned nature of the mind, which often works in an automatic, undirected way. It is also a reason why it is useful to sometimes vary the chants one does, and also to learn new ones, which require particular mindfulness.

Of course, when learning a chant, you will have the written form in front of you, and know the rhythm from having listened to a recording, or from currently following a chant leader. As you practise the chant more, you will need to look at the written form less often. Once you have the chant from memory, you can do it even with eyes closed, and can focus on refining the sound

quality of the chant. Then comes the most important aspect of doing a chant: enjoying doing it, allowing its flow of energy to brighten the mind.

When chanting with others, there is usually a chant leader. As there are different styles of doing the same chant, as well as personal differences that develop, a chant leader may do a chant in a way that is unfamiliar to you. It is important to follow their lead, though, which requires mindful attention to how they are doing the chant, and accordingly modifying your chanting from what you are used to. This is also an opportunity for becoming aware of clinging to your familiar 'right way to do the chant'.

The mental aspect of doing a chant of course involve attending to those aspects of the meaning of the chant which easily come to mind, without having to think about it too much. When one chants in Pali, this of course means that the full details of the meaning may well not be known by a chanter, though it is good to know the basic meaning. While using a special language thus reduces the extent with which the mind may engage with a chant at a cognitive level, it tends to enhance the extent to which it may engage with the chant at the level of the emotions. This is because the very words and sounds used mark them as special, worthy of careful attention, and redolent with prior associations. As the cognitive mind is not fully engaged, it can give way to a deeper, heart level.

The emotions are certainly engaged in chanting. In normal life, emotions are often expressed in one's tone of voice, not just in the content of speech. While chanting usually has cognitive content, it also very much works through the kind of tones which it uses, e.g. soothing and harmonious, yet with energy and discipline. The tone quality helps tune the mind of chanters and listeners to mind states normally associated with such tones. Also, just as songs trigger memory of past experiences and feelings, doing a chant, as it has become associated with meditation, helps trigger meditative qualities.

Qualities developed by chanting

Chanting can work in a variety of ways and at various levels. At the very least, it expresses commitment, rouses energy and directs these into practice. It clears a mental, and in part bodily, 'space' in which one can sit for other meditations more effectively. In this respect, I sometimes think of it as akin to how, in older models of petrol cars, the choke is pulled out on a cold morning, to help the engine start and get it ticking over well.

If the mind is sleepy or low, a chant can be done in a vigorous way to energize and empower the mind, lifting the spirits and dissolving any low feelings. If the mind is more skittish, it can be done in a gentler way (softer and perhaps slower) to calm the mind. It can also both gently energize and calm the mind; and done with commitment, it can arouse joy. All of this helps to reduce the hindrances.

Right resolve and right speech

One can particularly see it as enacting right resolve (*sammā saṅkappa*), the second factor of the Eight-factored path, which directs thought and emotion in skilful channels. It also rouses right effort and is a form of right speech.

The jhāna factors

One can also see chanting as helping to build up the five *jhāna*-factors, if not taking the mind to actual *jhāna*:

- applied thought and examining, *vitakka* and *vicāra*, are used in working with the words and sound of the chant, rather than in wandering thought,
- joy and tranquil happiness can arise from a mindful, well-flowing chant,
- one-pointedness is developed as the mind remains focussed on the chant.

The four bases of success

One can see chanting as helping to build up the four bases of success, concentration endowed with the forces of endeavour and based on:

- desire-to-act, by rousing aspiration for good qualities
- vigour, as expressed in sound-energy
- mind (*citta*), in naturally being-with the sound of the chant
- investigation of the sound quality and something of its meaning.

The five faculties

One can see chanting as helping to build up the five faculties:

- trustful confidence/faith, in joyful contemplation of qualities of the Buddha, *Dhamma* or *Saṅgha*.
- vigour, in the power that the chant expresses,
- mindfulness: chanting in anything but a distracted, habitual way requires mindfulness, to enable a steady emerging of the words of the chant from the memory and in carefully tracking the sound-flow of chant and bearing in mind aspects of what it expresses,
- concentration/unification, in being calmly well-focussed on the chant,
- wisdom, from mindfulness of the fluid nature of mind in the process of chanting, as in all else, and in times when the chanting is observed to lift to a level where there is chanting but the sense of there being a ‘chanter’ drops away.

The seven bojjhaṅgas

Good chanting can develop a devotional opening of the heart and mind that leads on, in turn (*Dīgha Nikāya* III.241–43) to: gladness, joy (*pīti*), tranquillity (*passaddhi*), happiness and mental unification (*samādhi*) – which thus include some of the seven factors of awakening. One can see chanting as helping to build up the seven factors of awakening thus:

- mindfulness, as above,
- discrimination of *dhammas*, in carefully tracking the words and syllables, and not letting them become distorted or inappropriately run together,
- vigour and joy, the uplifting aspect of chanting,
- tranquillity, concentration and equanimity, the calming aspect.

Good chants to learn:

Chanting book:

<https://samatha.org/sites/default/files/Samatha%20Chanting%20Book%202.1.pdf>

Refuges and precepts: Chanting book p.2

Recollection of the Triple Gem - *Iti pi so...*: Chanting book p.3

Buddha-maṅgala gāthā: Chanting Book p.9

Bojjhaṅga paritta: Chanting Book p.30

Metta Sutta: Chanting Book p.10

Flower-offering verses: Chanting book pp.4-5

Transference of karmic fruitfulness/*puñña* ('merit'): Chanting Book p.6

Blessing chant: Chanting Book p.31

Maṅgala Sutta: Chanting Book p.11

10 Perfections: Chanting Book p.34

Recordings of chants: <https://www.samatha.org/explore-publications/chants> –

- [1 Three Refuges \(1\) 1.mp3](#)
- [2 Five Precepts \(2\) 1.mp3](#)
- [3 Iti Pi So \(3\) 1.mp3](#)
- [7 Mettasutta \(10\) 1.mp3](#)
- [5 Buddhamaṅgalagāthā \(8\) 1.mp3](#)
- [6 Twenty-Eight Buddhas \(9\) 1.mp3](#)
- [21 Bojjhaṅgaparitta \(30\) 1.mp3](#)
- [4 Transference Of Merit \(Ettāvatā\) \(6\) 1.mp3](#)
- [22 Blessing \(Bhavatu Sabba-Maṅgalam\) \(31\) 1.mp3](#)

Some of you may also have the chanting CD.

Some other chants, or different ways of doing traditional ones:

Namo tassa Ajahn Kusalo style - in tune with the *bojjhaṅgas*

- *Na-mo tas-sa bhaga-vaaaaa-to-o aaa-ra-ha-to sammaa sam-bud-dha-a-ssa*

As I see it, one can relate this way of doing the chant to the seven awakening factors:

- *Na-mo* (well-rounded o): mindfulness
- *tas-sa* (separate *tas* & *sa*) *dhamma*-discrimination
- *bhaga-* (done with vigour/volume): vigour
- *vaaaaa-to-o* (rising on *vaaaaa*, then gently falling with *to-o*): joy
- *a-ra-ha-to* (gently/softer): tranquillity
- *sam-maaaa* (focussed *aaaa*): concentration
- *sam-bud-dha-a-ssa* (in a balanced way, with *sam-bud* gently rising and *dha-a-ssa* gently falling): equanimity.

Click on link this link to listen to the chant: <https://youtu.be/h15CR8k3od4>

Buddham vande: 'I offer respect to the Buddha ... to the Dhamma ... to the Saṅgha'.

Buddham buddh/a/ṃ/ṃ buddh/a/ṃ van/de
dhamm/a/ṃ/ṃ dhamm/a/ṃ dhamm/a/ṃ/ṃ/ṃ/ṃ van/de
saṅgham saṅgh/a/ṃ/ṃ saṅgh/a/ṃ van/de
buddh/a/ṃ/ṃ dhamm/a/ṃ saṅgh/a/ṃ/ṃ/ṃ/ṃ van/de
(chant three times)

Click on link this link to listen to the chant: <https://youtu.be/jfMda5w38go>

Iti pi so with slow 'longest' in-breaths between phrases (below, ----- _ indicates where to breathe in)

----- Iti pi so bhagavā ----- araham, sammā-sambuddho, ----- vijjā-carāṇa-sampanno
----- sugato, loka-vidū ----- anuttaro purisa-damma-sārathi ----- satthā deva-manussānaṃ
----- buddho, bhagavaaaaaa ... ti. -----

Svākkhāto bhagavatā dhammo ----- sandiṭṭhiko akāliko ehipassiko ----- opanayiko
----- paccattam veditabbo ----- viññūhiiiiiii ... ti. -----

Su-paṭipanno Bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho ----- uju-paṭipanno Bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho -----
ñaya-paṭipanno Bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho ----- sāmīci-paṭipanno Bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho
----- yad idam cattāri purisa-yugāni ----- aṭṭha purisa-puggalā; ----- esa Bhagavato sāvaka-
saṅgho ----- āhuneyyo pāhuneyyo dakkhiṇeyyo ----- añjali-karaṇeyyo, ----- anuttaram
puñña-khettaṃ ----- lokassaaaaa ... ti.

Click on this link to listen to discussion and demonstration of the chant:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Qww5tgOspNNZDJQ4TbpitY_Uev1P3zxC/view?usp=drive_web

For further details on this chant, done this way, see item on it in Samatha at Home issue five.

Ānāpāna-sati

A simple chant that all can do, irrespective of personal belief, is the following, which is a set of revolving variations on the words of ānāpāna-sati:

ānāpāna-sati
apāna-sati-āna
sati-ānāpāna
ti-ānāpāna-sa ... ti

(which can then be repeated as many times as one wishes).

The meaning of each line can be seen as:

- i) be mindful of the in and out breaths
- ii) after being mindful of the out breath, be mindful of the in breath.
- iii) be mindful of both the in and out breaths.

iv) if one loses one's mindfulness – the *sa* of *sati* is lost –, then renew it as soon as possible: put *sa* and *ti* back together again (note *ti* also means 'end quote', so having it at the end of the chant is a kind of pun).

The chant can be done loudly or softly, and faster or slower. The basic rhythm is something like this:

ā-nā-pā-na-sa-ti
a-pāna-sa-ti-ā-na
sati-ā-nā-pā-na
ti-ā-nā-pā-na-sa ... ti

Click on link this link to listen to the chant: <https://youtu.be/goklrsQKrK4>

It can not only be done out loud, but also be whispered unvoiced. While talking in a voiced way can generally only be done on an out-breath, once you are whispering, you can also talk on an in-breath! The same applies to a whispered chant. It sounds a little odd, but once you get used to it, it is fine. Doing the above chant like this allows you to do alternate lines on the in-breath and out-breath, starting with the first line on an in-breath. Doing it this way, with something like the Longest breath, quite slow, is itself very close to doing mindfulness of breathing, and is good to do immediately before the Longest of Counting. Or you can do it instead of the Longest of Counting.

