



Samatha at Home *(and elsewhere)*

A newsletter for the Samatha Sangha: 23

Thursday 3rd June 2021

www.samatha.org

Samatha at Home 23

Dear friends,

As summer is coming, we hope everyone is out enjoying the new freedoms. We are really appreciating some of them, but are all very aware of uncertain futures. So, it was good to hear last week that some people managed to celebrate Vesak outside. Here we have some pictures of the Oxford Vesak, which was small but had a very happy summer-festival atmosphere: people sat on rugs in a daisy-decked field, with the Buddha figure in the tent. A return to people!



Over the last few months I think we are all absorbing the ways our lives have changed. Online groups have just seemed so popular. They are continuing, lockdowns or not, and have offered a great way for people in different time zones, countries and samatha groups to work together - the various sutta and discussion groups have been particularly helpful. But it seems a good time too to remind people that we now have a terrific archive of talks, discussions and stories on the Samatha Youtube channel.

I recently had a need to look up a particular aspect of theory - and could browse through the topics until I found a very good talk indeed on just the subject I wanted. And then I went back and looked up another one on something quite different...and then I remembered I had noticed another one that appealed...This archive has made a really important library for us all.

Over the last year every Saturday morning has been a time to have your morning coffee and listen to a dhamma talk, and sometimes practice. The talks were very well attended, often with 50 to 100 people 'tuning' in. Topics ranged from the five aggregates, to dependent origination, to the perfections, to alchemy. They focus on interesting, apparently small topics that themselves open up worlds - the fourth hindrance, for instance - or vast vistas that help us to focus right back to our immediate bodily experience - like the various talks on directional aspects of the teachings. It is striking too that areas of self expression like music and art have been addressed. It is often, wrongly, thought that Buddhism does not 'support' enjoyment of the aesthetic arts. But as some of these really interesting talks have shown - and as, indeed Buddhist texts indicate - the arts so often focus and encourage our understanding of ourselves and the world around us, giving us a quite different kind of embodied wisdom. Controversial subjects have come up too, from vegetarianism to fasting, and the ever interesting relationship between calm and insight.

What I particularly like is that there are just so many speakers, all with different 'takes'. And we have all had a chance to air our own views and comments. It is quite a different scale from anything that has gone on in Samatha before. They have been such an interesting, thought-provoking, annoying, calming and enlivening start to the weekend!

Thank you to those involved in organising them. Veronica Voiels has been such a good 'hostess' and Noel Hamill, a sometime host, and the on-hand tech wizard. There has been a great deal of work done by many people behind the scenes - editing, getting the videos ready for sending out etc. So, thank you to them.

And the Samatha at Home newsletter is also going to take a break for a bit now. Our aim was to keep people in contact in lockdowns. We hope that the summer at any rate will give us all a rest from that sort of thing!

But, we will be back sometime in the Autumn. We very much hope we will need a very different title. Samatha at Large, perhaps.... This month we have photos of the Oxford Vesak from Amber Hatch and two articles from Guy. Please do continue to send contributions of whatever kind, pictures, reflections, articles, poems, we will have a publication for them at some point soon.

Warm wishes,
Sarah and Guy

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Correction in Issue 22: There was an error on Page 9 under heading: The seven bojjhangas. The first line was missing. Issue 22 now has the line restored and is available on the Samatha at Home page on the website (see link at the bottom of the contents page).

Contents

1. Buddhist Stories Page 5
2. Dhamma on the Seashore Page 7



Thanks again to Valerie Roebuck for suggesting this month's story, which is about a Weaver's daughter who receives a teaching from the Buddha about a certain meditation subject, and practices it constantly for three years. At the end of three years, she meets the Buddha again and answers four questions he puts to her, at which point he pronounces a verse which leads to her attaining stream entry. This is the story behind verse 174 of the Dhammapada.

You can watch the video by clicking the link below:

<https://player.vimeo.com/video/556851399>

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

Buddhist Stories

The teaching of the Buddha is incredibly diverse when considered as a whole. So much so, it is very easy to dismiss certain aspects as not central to the understanding and development of the practice. However, given the diverse nature and predilections of people, it might be safer to assume that everything has its purpose and place. Moreover, some things that we may not need early in our practice years may be more useful later on. I find it best to keep an open mind about what can support our understanding and development.

I first came across Buddhist stories when a study group was formed to look at the Dhammapada. This was just a few years into my own practice, and although I was already familiar with the Dhammapada, I was curious to learn that the commentary was a collection of stories that covered the events behind one or more of the verses of the Dhammapada. On first reading, the stories, some very short, some very long, appeared to be folk tales with Buddhist themes and teaching woven into them. One thing was immediately clear, many had themes that were not meant for children, so they were addressed to adults.

Reading story after story, immersing oneself in that world as we do when reading stories, the themes such as kamma and rebirth begin to sink in to the heart at a deep level. What struck me when I first read the stories was the casual attitude to death and rebirth. In the vast scheme of things, it was presented as a simple fact, unalterable except for the attainment of complete enlightenment.

The cast of characters that populate these stories often possess very recognisable human traits. One such example is of the little novice who following a monk breaks into a daydream of how, when he grows up, he will have a wife, and walking along in such a manner, he will berate her for some misdemeanour, swinging a stick that hits the monk. (The monk, having the power to read minds, tells him not to lash out at his imaginary wife, for fear of hitting him.) The little boy is recognisable to us although from a distant time and place.

I also find little touches in certain stories come to mind after the reading; such as the woman, a goddess in her previous life, who spends every day administering to the monks with such care and attention, the local people ask her to present their offerings on their behalf. It evokes the sense of a being of exceptional refinement. Not only that, she continues to accumulate merit and practice heedfulness to the point where she acquires at one and the same time “the fifty-six qualities of goodness”. I don’t think it matters whether you know what they are, it has a wondrous quality. Personally, I find the depiction of persistent dedication to gradual development reassuring and inspiring in a quiet, gentle way.

Another example is the story of the elephant that gets stuck in the mud. It is a very short story, but is a wonderful example of the Buddha using an episode to provide a simile for a teaching. An old warrior elephant gets stuck in the mud of a lake and cannot get free. The king orders the elephant trainer to sound the battle drum which

rouses the elephant by recalling the exceptional strength it had in battle and thus it breaks free and rises from the lake. The Buddha urges monks to call on their exceptional strength to break free of the round of rebirth. I find the story inspiring for any meditator to invoke super effort as and when the time requires – when we find ourselves stuck in the mud, we can recall the elephant who broke free.

There are the *Jātaka* stories as well, tales of the Buddha's previous lives. The first I came across was the epic tale of Prince Vessantara, the life in which the *Bodhisatta* completes the perfection of generosity (*dāna*). The heroic qualities that are portrayed are quite extreme, but they make a point about the lengths that the *Bodhisatta* went to and the challenges he faced in order to complete a perfection.

The story of Sumana the 'Spade Sage' provides a different type of example. The story is about a poor gardener who owns just one spade, but who renounces the world six times, each time returning to his spade, until he is finally free from his attachment. The story seems so simple on first reading, but it seems to resonate very deeply: any attachment, no matter how apparently innocuous, can be the thing that binds us. Over time I have found it very stirring, when it comes to mind. Again, there is a wondrous quality about the moment when he is free and cries "I've conquered it". The wonder is what it must be like to reach that stage, to be free from even the simplest attachment.

I remember our teacher saying that we should read and accept the stories in the same way children read and accept fairy tales. We know that not everything is literally true, but by accepting the events of the story in the world that is portrayed, the dhamma elements can then begin to come through and speak directly to the heart and this has an awakening quality. It is yet another way to help our development of the practice, to open the mind and to relax rigid thoughts about how the world works.



Dhamma on the Seashore

In the late '80s I saw a documentary about a photographer who had begun to notice how beautiful the patterns in the sand were after the tide on a certain beach went out. He decided to take some pictures and then he noticed how varied the patterns were. So, he embarked on a project to capture the patterns on the beach left after every tide over 365 days. To do this he created a square wooden frame and set up his camera in the same way after every tide. I recall this was on a tropical island with few if any other people.

After 365 days he had two photographs, one for each tide, by day or night, every day of the year. Every pattern that he captured was beautiful and unique. He concluded that every day the tide went out it left a different pattern on the beach and this would continue on indefinitely into the future and stretched back to the beginnings of beaches and tides.

I do not remember the name of the photographer or the documentary but I found this revelation resonated deeply with the teaching on impermanence (*anicca*). The continuing ebb and flow of the tides, the passing of the seasons, the rise and fall of the breath, on close inspection there is continuous change.

