



## **Samatha at Home (and elsewhere)**

**A weekly newsletter for the Southern Sangha: 4**

**Thursday April 23rd 2020**

## Samatha at Home 4

Dear friends,

Thank you for your useful comments and contributions this week. It has really helped to keep the variety we hoped for in this newsletter. And it has proved a happy diversion when the news is so grim and unrelenting, to know that we are all trying to keep, as Nai Boonman says, in good heart and 'quite normal'. How exotic and wonderful being 'normal' seems now: the strange wonder of a 'normal' daily life.

As lockdown continues and we cover a spectrum of experience, it seems there is little to say: it is just so hard for many. So it is really inspirational to see the work done by so many people – in Samatha as well as in the world around – to keep us all in good spirits, and in tune with the practice.

We do hope you all keep well and safe, and enjoy reading this.

Particular thanks to Maaïke Blok, Alan Brownlee, Talya Davis, Fusinita van den Ent, Jane Hanford, Peter Harvey, Chris Morray-Jones, Charles Shaw and Roger Tomlin, for their contributions of various kinds.

Thank you! And please send more, as we do enjoy them.

Next week we look at the factor of awakening that is joy. Do contribute if you feel joy at something...

Warm wishes,  
Guy and Sarah

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The bedtime story this week is about Suppārak, a sea captain: Wisdom at Sea (*Jātaka* 70), which is about the 4<sup>th</sup> Perfection, *Paññā* (wisdom).

You can play the video online using this link: <https://player.vimeo.com/video/410282378>

Or you can download the video to your own device and play it directly from there, using this link: <https://vimeo.com/silverbrookfilms/download/410282378/5695558c5a>

And here is a link to the California Samatha Group, and their centre, with a letter for the crisis now:

[https://19c2fbb2-4658-4d79-b29e-84817714a304.filesusr.com/ugd/a94eaa\\_76d79cf5faa945a09910998ae2f082f0.pdf](https://19c2fbb2-4658-4d79-b29e-84817714a304.filesusr.com/ugd/a94eaa_76d79cf5faa945a09910998ae2f082f0.pdf)



## Haiku

So, what is refuge?  
That in which we trust, we *are*;  
We know the rightness

### **The third factor of awakening: vigour (*viriyā*)**

Last week those of us in the UK were diverted and relieved to have a break from bad news by the great achievement of a man aged ninety-nine and three-quarters, who collected over fifteen million pounds for the NHS by announcing his intention to do 100 laps of his own garden, using a walking frame. He had hoped to raise a few thousand pounds, but his heroic and quixotic endeavour inspired us all: it became a kind of emblem for the work and courage of those facing danger in corona wards, or by contact with others. We are inspired by courage and vigour against the odds. Another elderly lady in Scotland decided to climb one of her beloved Scottish peaks in her own house, taking the stairs, over a few days. The third factor of awakening, *viriyā*, describes the achievements of these aspirations well. And we are all inspired and often awe-struck too by the heroism of people who say they are 'ordinary', working in the NHS and at care homes, as carers, cleaners, doctors, surgeons, paramedics, cooks, delivery men and in all kinds of jobs. They do what they feel is needed and do not really have time, or in most cases the interest, in thinking whether they are being heroic or not. They are just doing what they need to do. For some it may be staying up all night with a patient, 'just' turning knobs at the right time, as we heard the patient and dedicated nurses who looked after the prime minister did last week. All they wanted was to make sure he stayed alive: the energy they put in, I suspect, was heroic and courageous, but it probably also meant sitting alertly and quietly too, till the time when they were needed.

This really showed me something very important about *viriyā*, the third factor of awakening. For, it comes after mindfulness, and then investigation. To take examples many of us are experiencing now, when you have investigated a situation, whether gardening, writing a document, or cleaning the kitchen, you then need to find the energy to do what is needed and you want to do it well. For some things it is a lot of hard physical work; for some a minimal, low key effort. Slowly nursing a sick child or patient requires one kind of effort; being in special care rushing to deal with a cardiac arrest another or change sheets another. The energy needed to run a marathon is paced in quite a different way from a long country walk; the effort and vigour needed to dance a waltz is different from that needed for ballet. In the end it may not be much different, but the body and mind need what is appropriate for the situation. So, some people now are learning to be at home, in quite unfamiliar circumstances, and need to find ways of pacing themselves, keeping themselves healthy and sane, and having enough vitality for the day. This can be hard indeed for parents, who need to time to rest and revive, so they can do what is needed; they need to find ways of finding their natural vitality. This is the quality of *viriyā*,

and, while is sometimes heroic, sometimes it is just more low key and sustained, as the situation requires.

The various ways the word has come over to European languages gives interesting insight into how it works, and perhaps more of a feeling for it than translations like ‘effort’ or ‘vigour’. It is the same root as *vir*, a man in Latin, and so virility. It is also associated, importantly, with the word *vertu* in Mediaeval English. This was the property of a stone, or a flower, or an animal, that gave it its natural power, particularly for magical purposes. So Chaucer starts of the Prologue of *Canterbury Tales*:

When that Aprill with his shoures soote  
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the roote,  
And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour

It looks wonderful in old English, and if you can pronounce it, sounds much more full-blooded than our way of saying things. But here is the translation in our more mundane style:

When April with its sweet-smelling showers,  
Has pierced the drought of March to the root,  
And bathed every vein [of the plants] in such liquid  
By which power the flower is engendered....

It is April now, and we hope a bit of rain is coming along. It does seem as if it is enlivening the flowers, which do look so colourful and vital after they have had a good wash in April showers: their ‘*virtu*’ is allowing them to grow and be what they can be. The point is, though that the word we would now see as ‘power’ was this great old word *vertu*, from which we derive our modern word, ‘virtue’. So when people in old stories want to protect their virtue, it is this they want to keep: their vitality, their sap and colour, and, to a certain extent, their very identity and what they are. And this is what nurses, people who want to raise money, and meditators have when they do what they are doing just because they want to: they somehow find the energy and vigour needed for the job, and are sometimes surprised that there is more there than they thought.

This sense of a resource seems spot on for *viriyā*, the third factor of awakening: it is the kind of effort and vigour that comes naturally from who we are, and what we can be. Another western word derived from the same root is virtuosity. If we think of virtuosity as doing something well, it is somehow has a sense of great heart, and great commitment that comes over too, as well as perhaps, brilliance in technique. Something transforms hard-won work into something that looks effortless, brilliant, flowing and full of panache. Passion accompanies *viriyā*, it seems.

This is certainly how we see our great heroes and heroines in stories. Batman, Superman, Bhima in the *Mahābhārata*, and even David against Goliath: they all beat the odds somehow just by their sticking power and character. As do great heroines. Catwoman certainly, but also Eliza Bennett, Beatrice, Rosalind, and Portia: some vitality, an

exuberance that works around the rules, all mark out them out as having *virīya*, a sense of their own worth and capacity. But it is also there in quieter and less obvious heroes and heroines, and it is also there in simple jobs, if they are done with resourcefulness and care.

‘Heroism’ that arises from what a situation actually needs seems a bit more like the kind of effort meant by *virīya* as a factor of awakening than some of our associations with what is involved with a lot of effort. It needs to be natural, and perhaps enjoyed, too. So, in meditation, *virīya* is also one of the five faculties, along with faith or confidence, mindfulness, stillness or concentration and wisdom. Why do we need it? What is its purpose in meditation? It is said to be a support in the *Milinda’s Questions*, as it sustains us in what we do. But in *samatha* breathing mindfulness this is not the same as slugging away trying to knock down a wall! *Virīya* needs acceptance of limitations and good heart, to give a feeling base for what is needed at the time. In order to allow all the five to work well together, we need to have *virīya* as a kind of basis or support. It was once compared to me to pride. I did not understand what was meant at the time, but it became clear to me that it was like a sense of honour in the practice, without ego. The body needs to be erect, and strong, so that you feel you can exercise control. The meditator is, in Buddhists texts, said to become ‘nobly born’. Sitting crossed legs, in meditation, can just feel a noble thing to do, and the effort comes from that. But it does not need to be forced or strained: *virīya* just gives the support and energy needed. Sometimes chanting helps: the posture makes you upright, but listening to yourself chanting helps to soften that, and find the right note for your effort, so the body and mind relax and become attuned to the meditation. Sometimes, people say that things arise in their meditation when they are not trying so much. The attention relaxes, and is less obviously applied or directed. This is when energy can start to well up, because it is being allowed to flow in the way that is needed, rather than from a feeling of strain. The breath has become a friend, and not an adversary, or an object ‘to be controlled’.

So one thing also needs to be said about *virīya* too. I was told that it was often the people who are convinced they haven’t got enough, and that they aren’t putting enough effort in, who are often actually doing too much. There is a story about a young man called Soṇa, who was of this type. He worked so hard his sandals wore out with all the hours of walking practice he was putting in! The Buddha reminded him of a time when he used to play the lute – for young people then a bit like the guitar now, I suppose. If the strings were too tight, did it produce good music? No, it did not. If the strings are too loose, does the music sound good? No, it does not. What about if the strings are evenly balanced (*sama gūṇa*)? Then that produces good music. This seems like effort in the practice. The music becomes more important than the effort, and so produces the kind of response and effort the song needs for the time and place, not what the singer feels they should put in or make happen. And sometimes, in meditation, as we see in ‘ordinary’ people in daily life too, this has a touch of beauty and heroism about it too.

## Right Effort, Right Touch

Very shortly after starting, the need to apply effort is apparent when we take up the practice of meditation. Then, after some time, we learn that not all effort produces desirable results. Clearly there are some efforts that are wrong effort and so there must be some efforts that are right efforts. The teaching tells us there are four right efforts:

1. The effort to prevent and avoid the arising of unskilful states that have not yet arisen.
2. The effort to overcome and abandon unskilful states that have already arisen.
3. The effort to cultivate and develop skilful states that have not yet arisen.
4. The effort to maintain and perfect skilful states that have already arisen.

These are clearly stated and inspiring. They provide a focus for us in the arousing of the energy necessary to practice regularly and enthusiastically. However, experience shows applying the right amount of effort is something of an art. It often can be too much or too little, and rarely just right. I remember early on in my practice I attended a talk by a forest monk at the Manchester Centre, and he said that what he found was that he had varying degrees of wrong effort in his practice (either too much or too little) rather than right effort. The practice seemed to be about going back and forth to get the right amount. And this brought to mind the experience we can have in a sport such as cricket or tennis or golf, when you can strike the ball just so – where it is hit at the sweet spot – the effort seems effortless and yet the ball goes further and faster than ever. This is like right effort, it is just right, not too much, not too little, and applied in the right way. And this comes from practice, again and again, until it just comes together, and with experience, this right effort becomes more and more available, as we become increasingly skilled and accomplished in the practice over time.



## Buddhist Jokes

Remember, today is the tomorrow you worried about yesterday.

Dukkha, Anicca and Anatta walk into a bar.  
Dukkha says, "Life sucks!"  
Anicca says, "This will pass!"  
Anatta says, "You talkin' to ME?!"



Do you know: the Buddhist vacuum cleaner... comes with no attachments (works for emails too)

Four monks were meditating in a monastery. All of a sudden the prayer flag on the roof started flapping.

The younger monk came out of his meditation and said: "Flag is flapping"  
A more experienced monk said: "Wind is flapping"  
A third monk who had been there for more than 20 years said: "Mind is flapping."  
The fourth monk who was the eldest said: "Mouths are flapping!"

What do you get when you cross a Jehovah's Witness with a Zen Buddhist?  
Someone who knocks on your door for no reason at all.

What is mind? No matter.  
What is matter? Never mind.

How many Buddhists does it take to change a lightbulb?  
None. Its nature is change.

## The Five Hindrances – the Buddha’s Similes from the Sāmaññaphala Sutta

The development of viriya, particularly the four right efforts, is essential to the overcoming of the five hindrances in samatha practice. Those of us who are familiar with the teaching in the Suttas will know of the extraordinary use of similes by the Buddha to help the understanding of those whom he was teaching. The similes are invariably deep and subtle. In the second sutta of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*, the Buddha gives five similes for each of the five hindrances.



He compares sense desire to someone in debt, ill-will to someone who is sick, sloth and torpor to someone in jail, restlessness and worry to someone who is a slave, and doubt to someone who has to cross a wilderness.

When I first came across these similes, for me, the only intuitively obvious one was the comparison of ill-will to being sick. The other comparisons seemed much more elusive.

When I first read these similes, I pondered over them for quite a while and in time the reason the Buddha provided these various comparisons became increasingly clear. With closer examination the more apt they appear, and they provide us with a fresh perspective of each hindrance.

In the sutta, the emphasis is on overcoming the hindrances, so that the comparison for the first hindrance, for instance, is when a man takes out a loan to engage in trade, is successful and pays off the loan, and has a surplus to marry etc. and is glad at that. The emphasis is on the freedom achieved from being rid of the debt and the other similes are in relation to being free from sickness, released from prison, freed from slavery and crossing over a wilderness to a place of safety.

The commentary to the sutta expands upon the meaning of each simile in some depth.

### **Sense Desire and Debt**

The first hindrance specifically refers to a man who has taken out a loan and then finds himself unable to repay it, and so when the creditors speak roughly to him, and insult him, he has to endure it, and it is the debt that causes his forbearance. In the same way, the commentary says, when a man is filled with sensual desire for a certain person, when that person speaks roughly, insults him and even beats him, he endures it because of the sense desire.

I think the interesting thing about this simile is the fact that the state in which the person finds themselves is devoid of pleasure of any kind. The condition is one of enthrallment

(that is, enslaved). The commentary later provides an expansion of the simile for one free of sensual desire. When their former creditors come to them, they choose whether or not to receive them, and in the same way, one freed from sensual desire will no longer be bound to the object of desire; "... even if he sees divine forms, passions will not assail him."

### **Ill-Will and Sickness**

The second simile was, on first encounter, more immediately apparent. The unpleasant nature of ill will and its comparison to sickness appeared straight forward, to me at least. But it is worth reflecting on how ill-will compares in every respect to the given simile. The commentary expands on the simile showing how someone who is sick with a bilious disease can receive honey and sugar and reject it, complaining "It is bitter, bitter!" In the same way, when we have an angry temperament, any attempt to help us is rejected, even when the help and guidance is in our best interests. It is because of the hindrance of ill will that we respond in this way. Regarding the abandoning of ill-will the commentary goes on: "Just as the cured patient partaking of honey and sugar appreciates the taste, so also this monk receives with reverence the rules of training, and observes them with appreciation (of their value)".

### **Sloth and Torpor and Imprisonment**

The third simile seemed to me yet another unusual comparison at first encounter. The commentary expands on the original simile by relating the story of a person who is jailed during a festival day, and when they are freed the following day they hear others talk about how delightful the festival was, "the dances, the songs!" but this person can share nothing of the experience because he did not enjoy the festival himself. The commentary continues it is like someone who is overcome by sloth and torpor during a Dhamma talk and misses the essence of the teaching given and therefore loses the benefit. Having been presented with this comparison, I began to look at the experience of sloth and torpor more and more. If you have ever had the experience of being overcome with sleepiness on any occasion it is remarkable how closely this resembles the effect of being absent during those moments of sleepiness – we are not present and we may just as well have been in jail.

### **Restlessness and Worry and Slavery**

The simile of slavery is used for restlessness and worry. The image is of a person who has no discretion in their daily actions, but is totally dependent on another's whims. Rather than go to the place they will enjoy, they are ordered to go elsewhere on urgent work. The person who has not understood their instructions for meditation is unable to settle and rises frequently from the practice, to check the instructions, or whether it is an appropriate place or time to practice. My own reflection on this simile is that it is pointing to a feeling of helplessness that arises with restlessness and worry. The mind's inability to settle. Freedom from this hindrance is akin to freedom from a sense of helplessness and a stronger sense of self-determination.

### **Sceptical Doubt and Crossing a Desert**

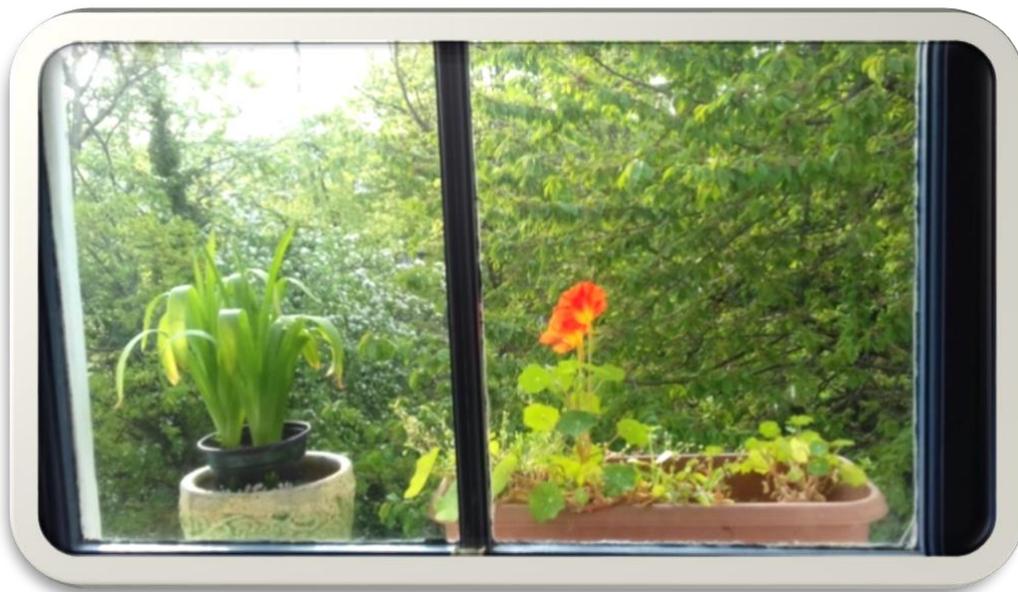
The hindrance of doubt is compared to a man crossing a desert or wilderness, aware that travellers can be attacked, robbed and even killed. So in crossing such a place, the sound of a twig snapping or a bird calling makes him anxious and fearful. He will be hesitant, stop more frequently than walk, looking around all the time and may even turn back. The commentary expands on this simile comparing the one who overcomes doubt as like the person who surrounds themselves with company and crosses safely: “There is a strong man who, with his luggage in hand and well armed, travels through a wilderness in company. If robbers see him even from afar, they will take flight.”

For me, the imagery in this simile is particularly powerful. It quite perfectly captures the state of mind of someone in the grip of doubt. The overcoming and abandoning of doubt is depicted by one grown strong and well protected, like a meditator who has come back again and again to the meditation subject, examined it thoroughly and subsequently grown strong.

I hope these similes are as helpful to you as they have been for me. If you have not come across them before, they are certainly worth exploring more carefully.

For further reading I recommend “The Five Mental Hindrances and Their Conquest” by Nyanaponika Thera. In the final section of this pamphlet he gives a translation of the relevant section of the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* and commentary on these similes. The link below is one source for this text.

<https://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel026.html>



## Washing the physical and mental hands

In this time of the coronavirus, we are all now used to frequently and thoroughly washing the hands. This situation reminds me of various *Dhamma*-teachings which relate to washing. In the *Visuddhimagga* (IV, 61), it is even said that ‘making the basis clean’, i.e. keeping one’s person and belongings clean, is an aid to the *samādhi bojjaṅga*. So, ‘cleanliness is close to *samādhi*-ness’ ☺. That said, good cleanliness is not the same as *obsessive* cleaning!

The five hindrances – desire for sense-pleasures, ill-will, dullness and drowsiness, restlessness and worry, and vacillation – are akin to dirt that infects and dulls the brightness and purity of the mind, aiding ignorance (*avijjā*). They are ‘makers of blindness, causing lack of vision, causing lack of knowledge, detrimental to wisdom, tending to vexation, leading away from Nirvana’ (SN.V.97). When your car windscreen or glasses are dirty, you can’t see the way ahead clearly.

In keeping the hands clean so as not to contract or transmit the virus, one needs to be heedful, so as not to overlook having touched a possibly infected surface, or to be negligently perfunctory in washing the hands. A relevant very *samatha*-quote here is: ‘this *citta* is brightly shining (*pabhassaram*), but it is defiled by defilements which arrive (*āgantukehi upakkilesehi*).’ (AN.I.10). Hindrances and other defilements often ‘arrive’ or visit the mind, so one needs to be mindfully vigilant in guarding against them and their mind-dulling potential. AN.I.11 emphasises that negligence, heedlessness, is a key thing that helps unwholesome states to arise and wholesome ones to decline. If one negligently leaves crumbs around the ‘kitchen’, the ‘mice’ of the defilements may visit more often and grow strong.

As in the simile of the border city, with mindfulness as like the wise guardian of the gates (SN.IV.194–95), we need to be careful what we let into the mind that may activate unwholesome tendencies within us.

Here I am reminded that the Vajjian republic, whose mode of government and conduct was praised by the Buddha (DN.II.75–6), was defeated by King Ajātasattu only once he sent in agents to cause disruptive disharmony in it.

It is said that ethical discipline (*sīla*) and understanding/wisdom (*paññā*) support each other like two hands washing each other (DN.I.124). There is no mention, here, of mental composure/concentration (*samādhi*), but one can think of it as like the soap used in hand washing, that helps to loosen the dirt of the hindrances and guards against them returning.

Just as how, after a good wash, one feels refreshed and more alive, it is said:

When one sees that the five hindrances have been given up in oneself, gladness (*pāmuja*) arises, and when one is glad, joy (*pīti*) arises. When the mind is joyful, the body (*kāya*) becomes tranquil (*passambhati*), and when the body becomes tranquil,

one experiences happiness (*sukha*); the mind (*citta*) of someone who is happy becomes concentrated (*samādhiyati*). (DN I 73)

Then the simile for the first *jhāna* is:

It is as if a skilled bath attendant or his pupil were to sprinkle bath powder into a bronze dish, and then knead it together adding the water drop by drop so that the ball of soap absorbed and soaked up the moisture until it was saturated with moisture, yet not quite dripping. (DN.I.74)

Here one can think of *vitakka* and *vicāra* as like two mental hands which engage with and explore the *nimitta*. This mindful, gentle work generates a ball of activated cleansing agent that flows around the hands, guarding against remnant of subtle defilements, with no ‘dripping’ of attention outwards to ordinary objects. I think it helpful to think of the first *jhāna*, and the lead up to it, as ‘cleansing and refreshing’. This then prepares the way for going on to the fourth *jhāna*, whose simile is about being in a very clean enclosed space:

It is as if a person were to sit down having wrapped himself from the head down in a freshly washed/white cloth, so that there were no part of his whole body that was untouched by that freshly washed cloth. (DN.I.76)

So, let us be mindfully kind to ourselves and others in not ingesting or transmitting material carrying the virus for the hindrances, which cause the illness of Co-avijjā-5. Let's practise well and so strengthen our hindrance-fighting mental immune system.





As dawn precedes the sun, good friendship precedes the factors of awakening