



Samatha at Home *(and elsewhere)*

A weekly newsletter for the Southern Sangha: 7

Thursday May 14th 2020

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Samatha at Home 7

Dear friends,

More uncertainty about the future this week – but the practice, we hope, is still there for us! Some in the UK are going to have an easing of lockdown; some are not. Some are happy about this; some are not. So I must say it is at times like this when the continued presence of the practice, others doing the same practice, and the teaching, feels really helpful and cheers you up. We have come in our sequence to the sixth factor of awakening, concentration, or perhaps, in experiential terms, unification and peacefulness. But we have a problem: concentration does not strike one as being the obviously easy thing to do at the moment! In fact the last few days have been for some fraught with uncertainty. What can I do now? What can I plan? Will I be able to fulfil commitments? Living with things being unclear must, I suppose, mean that we will find a deeper sense of balance if we can still the mind. It can just feel hard though... so we hope you enjoy the newsletter, and feel it helps things to go along.

A number of people are saying that they feel very grateful to have the practice, and the company of others doing the same, during lockdown. I think we all feel that. Some have been asking how they can show their gratitude. During these tough times, we really want the teaching, the company of others, and samatha activities in general, to continue to be there for people, and for the teaching to be open to anyone who wants to try this practice. Like all aspects of the teaching, meditation teaching is freely given. In fact at our centres for some years we have no longer charged for meditation weeks, and have left it up to individuals to give as much or as little as they felt like as a donation. This has worked very happily so far. But our centres are not in use now, and there are still bills to pay. So if you feel like making a donation now, it would be most welcome. Here is the link to the webpage:

<https://www.samatha.org/donations>

It looks like the newsletter could be going on for a while...so do please send us any pictures, reflections, poems or anything else to help us all keep on track! Next week we look at the seventh factor, equanimity (*upekkha*).

Many thanks this week for written and pictorial contributions from Claire Heaton, Paul Shelvey and Gwil Wright.

Warm wishes,

Guy and Sarah

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

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This week's story is about the young quail and the seventh perfection of a Bodhisatta: Truth (*sacca*).



You can view the video of the Story of the Quail online via this link:

<https://player.vimeo.com/video/417638130>

If you prefer, you can download the video and play it on your own device with this link:

<https://vimeo.com/silverbrookfilms/download/417638130/cf6106370a>



The Sixth Factor of Awakening Concentration (*samādhi*)

With all the uncertainty this week, one of the things many people feel they need is stillness, just from time to time. It helps one to restore oneself, and see things from another angle, as well as being something that is interesting to explore in itself, as it always leads on... One of the most effective images to describe the effects of concentration, the sixth factor of awakening, is of a ball of soap flakes, moistened together to become one. It is the image that is used of the first meditation in the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*, and is used for concentration too. This unificatory, joining together quality is something that we can feel when we are alertly interested in something: perhaps expectant, or just peaceful, but unified and with the mind coming to rest without strain. It seems a very restorative way of finding peace at the moment. I get it sometimes when I hear really beautiful music, or are happily absorbed in something and feel ‘at one’ – a synonym for concentration in the Abhidhamma is ‘oneness’, or the ‘the peak of oneness’, *ekaggatā*. Stillness, evenness, concentration, unification: these are all translations for the word *samādhi*. They all arise when there are other factors in the mind, that they hold together, just like the water that holds together the soap flakes.

So when we look at the sixth factor, it seems important not to see it in the way we often use the word ‘concentration’ in English. For *samādhi* is not really like the way we understand it when we say, ‘Concentrate hard’. If I hear someone saying that, it is, in my experience, usually a way of making sure that I immediately become extremely grumpy, panic that I have got it wrong, and then lose all interest! But that kind of forcing really is not the meaning of the word *samādhi*. In meditation, concentration has a feeling of things naturally coming together, and things becoming one – because you want them to. The mind just wants to be doing what it is doing.

Thinking about this, I felt that the word ‘concentration’, our usual translation, could be a bit misleading sometimes. So it seemed interesting just to see what the definitions of concentration were in the commentaries. Here is one:

It is concentration in that it places the mind evenly on the object, or it places rightly, or it simply the collecting together of the mind. Its characteristic is absence of wandering or absence of dispersal; its function is the binding together of the dhammas (events in the mind and body) that arise together, as water does for bath-powder. Its manifestation is calming down; its proximate cause is, especially, happiness. It should be seen as steadiness of mind, like the steadiness of lamp-flames in the absence of wind (*Vism XIV 139*).

What interests me is how it says that happiness is particularly an immediate cause of this kind of concentration. It is when the mind alights on something that is genuinely interesting, or brings happiness – like seeing a really amazing view from a mountain, or enjoying a walk and coming across a rill or a stream that you just want to look at. I like the image of the lamp-flame too, as a kind of steadfastness, or being true to something.

So, in terms of the sequence of the factors of awakening, to feel that though, you need the help of a few of the other factors too! Concentration of this kind, where there is a natural and easy interest, really seems to need the other factors in meditation in order just to be what it is. It feels like the combination of all of the awakening factors so far, all coming together. Mindfulness is established, there is a naturally investigative part of the mind engaged, there is vigour, and perhaps, some joy and tranquillity. When these are settled together it is a bit like the music of an orchestra where the musicians are playing in awareness of one another, but each comfortable playing their own sound. The word *sama*, from which *samādhi* is derived, means even. So it used for evenly rounded shoulders for instance, or the even note of a well-tuned musical instrument like a guitar, or, in ancient times, a lyre, when the string is not too tight, and not too lax: the middle way of tuning where there is not too much effort, or too little. In fact the word *sama* is the same root as our word for the 'same' – it happens in meditation when everything comes together to produce a sense of wholeness and peace.

In meditation, *samādhi* applies to a sense of stillness you feel sometimes, and balance. This can seem far away sometimes. But it can happen quite soon too when people start practising, when for a few moments perhaps you feel a sense that you are doing the practice because you want to, and the breath is a place where the mind wants to rest, even just for a while. One can 'get' something about the relationship between you, the mindfulness of the breath, and the stage you are doing at the time. The stages of the practice are geared to us trying to find this sense of balance, with mindfulness. The concentration and the mindfulness seem to work together, rather than against one another.

How does this work? So, the counting means that we let attention rest on the numbers, and let mindfulness be of the whole breath. In practice, this can mean trusting the fact that the breath does know how to breathe – it has had a bit of experience of that! Then, you just go to the longest, longer, shorter or shortest lengths, and fit the numbers to the breath, rather than the other way around. If the breath is trusted to do its job, it can be a bit of relief, and it is matter of asking it or getting it to breathe at the length you want, and then doing the counting so that that suits the breath. If there is more mindfulness, rather than concentration, there can be awareness of all the things going on, the processes, the disturbances etc in the breath, and a sense of some balance there. But if the concentration has come into play too, it starts to be interesting, steady and reassuring. The practice feels not just balanced, but unified too.

In the following, the attention of concentration moves to just following the breath, and the mindfulness becomes more overall. In the touching, the attention moves to the tip of the nose, and mindfulness is aware of the whole breath. And in the settling, the attention moves simply from the tip of the nose to the visual field, and again, you need the mindfulness of the whole breath in the body to keep it going. So at all times, concentration in our breathing practice is in fact concentration with mindfulness: the breath sustains it, keeps it fresh, and makes sure it does not get too sleepy.

Because, as we all have found at some point, there can be problems with concentration if the mindfulness dips. The first one is, I find, that you can get into too much focus, without

the breadth and balance of awareness of the breath and the body. So the attention becomes hard or forced. We need the breath, and mindfulness of it, to keep the concentration light and fresh and ‘moist’ – the ancients said that *samatha* was the ‘wet’ approach to meditation, and this always seems a very apt way to describe the sense of engagement with the breath that can happen sometimes. I think of it as being a bit like when you are making dough for pastry or a cake: the bits can be a bit flaky and hard unless the moisture level is right. If the mindfulness comes into balance with the concentration, you can get a really good dough that feels malleable and light and you can do something with it. As with dough, it is important just to handle it in a light way too, so that it does not have too much interference getting in the way.

The other problem is a well-known one, of sleepiness. If the mind comes together, then sometimes, one can nod off in the practice! Sometimes the reason is simply that one is very tired, and the meditation, by making one more mindful of what is going on inside has simply made one aware of that. I think that happens sometimes after a very busy time of dashing around a lot. But sometimes there is a state that is a bit like sleepiness, but just the concentration developing, which just needs a bit more minimal attention to the breath. If it is this, the practice gradually changes, and you realise you were not actually sleepy at all, but just becoming more unified. This latter problem used to come to *Moggallāna*, a follower of the Buddha who later became one of his chief disciples. He just used to nod off regularly, pretty much all the time, on his way to awakening. But, interestingly, he also turned out to be particularly good at *samatha* meditation too. His predisposition to settle, and come to rest made him dozy, but meant he also was one of the meditators of the greatest powers when he developed the *jhānas*. An encouragement to those of us inclined to snooze sometimes in mid-meditation!

It is concentration that is the distinguishing feature of meditations: the sustained, happy development of stillness, at ever deeper levels. So, the *jhānas* introduce ever simpler, and lighter areas of meditation. The sense of oneness remains, but it is not ‘owned’ or seen as ‘mine’ or ‘self’. So, concentration is really associated in Buddhist practice with the development of *jhāna*. I feel we are lucky we do a breathing mindfulness practice, which has ways of balancing mindfulness and concentration inbuilt into it. In fact I found in one commentary a reference that said it was breathing mindfulness *samādhi* that the Buddha found for himself as a child, when he practised under the rose-apple tree (Ja 1.58). I find it is interesting that this is the side of Buddhist practice that had a bit of dip in respect in the twentieth century in Asian countries, in part because of the influence of various ‘scientific’ and ‘rational’ movements. I think the situation is changing over the last few years, but at one time I found when I went to meditation centres in Bangkok or Colombo, if people have asked me what practice I was doing, they were sometimes quite surprised. Vipassana has become so popular there, that they say, ‘Why do you need *samatha*? Why practise *jhāna*?’ Actually, this is a very interesting question. What is the point of arousing deep stillness? Do we need it? For me, I like this practice because I do, and feel at home with it: if you need calm, the breath is just a natural object to arouse it, and it opens up to deeper and richer kinds of calm and experience. It just feels more reassuring, but adventurous too, as if it is going somewhere. And if you need a bit of waking up to insight, it arouses that too – it rises and falls, is never the same. We do not own our breath. It is definitely non-self! But

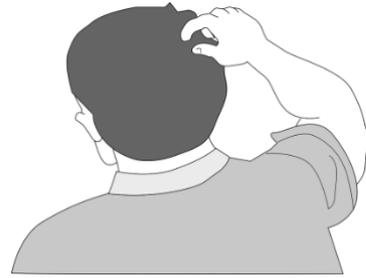
what is the point of practising concentration, and, for some, the full development of the *jhānas*?

This is worthy of a whole article in itself. But the key moment in the Buddha's life, when he decided to take the path to follow the middle way, is because he remembered the great happiness of his mind coming to 'oneness' as a child: the first *jhāna*, or meditation, accompanied by directing the mind, exploring, joy, happiness and unification. It hinted to him at some attitude of mind that is open to the new, fresh and peaceful: the middle way, found, for him through going back to this state, developing it more, and then finding liberating wisdom. The Buddha certainly taught *jhāna*, all the time, to most people, so he clearly felt it was important. So I think as an approach to concentration I like what the Buddha taught to the householder and layman, Mahānāma. He was a practitioner, that lived at home, like we do. He seems to have gone to the Buddha a couple of times to ask how to practise meditation in a house full of children, something many can relate to at the moment, I think! He seems to have had a lot of the usual lay preoccupations. Although he was a member of the royal family, it sounds as if he had a lot of business to deal with. But he had attained a stage of path, so had great insight. On one occasion, he visited the Buddha and asked how he could go further. The Buddha said that he just needed to practise *jhāna* more: he would never be able to give up attachments to the world going on around him unless he knew the happiness and peace he could find in deep meditation (M 1.91-2). Concentration just makes the usual goings on in the mind, irritations and the yearnings, less burdensome. But of course, the reason why I imagine most people practise *samatha*, and concentration breathing mindfulness, is that it just that they want to, and that it helps them. So, rather than why, why not? The moments of peace, and the occasional lucky happiness of concentration, just give a different perspective, that helps in daily life too. It is adventurous, and leads on; it changes how things look. It seems to me too that the development of love on the path, and for others, in its fullest form, needs *samādhi*. There are some kinds of wisdom that do seem possible without this. But in my experience, if I want wisdom, with love, for self and others, it is *samādhi*, peace and depth in meditation, that leads to finding it.



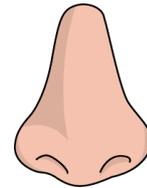
Ditch the Itch!

Itchy forehead,
Itchy cheek,
Itchy nose,
Itchy scalp,
Itch near upper lip.
Tingly sensations on the skin -
Invitations to scratch and soothe
Why?
Where do they come from?



I watch the itch -
It's pesky,
It's persistent,
It's a nuisance,
It's an irritant.
But - it's OK.
I resist – it disappears.
I ditch the itch!

Itches come,
One after the other.
A never-ending, continual stream
Of urges to touch and scratch.
Yet, they fade and go.



Oops – did it again!
I catch myself rubbing my eye.
Instant relief - the order of the day,
Yet that, too, is never long-lasting.

I was unaware of these sensations -
Didn't notice them before.
Itchy eyelid – hand moves closer –
Stopped it, just in time!

Increasingly alert that I need to
Ditch the itch,
I see other people, doing it too ...
Friends, family, TV presenters, politicians.....!



How many other
Habitual and automatic responses do I have,
That I'm not aware of?

*(An investigation on 'touch', in response to NHS advice to avoid touching the eyes, nose and mouth;
part of a study course on the 4 Foundations of Mindfulness.)*

Different types of concentration.

There are various types of concentration which are covered by the factor of awakening *samādhi-sambojjhaṅga*. In samatha meditation, three types of concentration, momentary (*khaṇika*), access (*upacāra*), absorption (*appanā*) and the eight *jhānas* count as one way of classifying the *bojjhaṅga*. Voidness concentration, (*suññatā-samādhi*), conditionless concentration (*animatta-samādhi*) and desireless concentration (*appaṇihita-samādhi*) associated with the work of purification through wisdom are also counted as *samādhi-sambojjhaṅga*. These are meditations using impermanence (*anicca*) unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anattā*) as objects.

The access and absorption concentrations are familiar in samatha meditation, and momentary concentration is often spoken of as preliminary concentration, part of the process to access and full absorption. This is in the context of calming the mind and deepening the level of well-balanced unification of the mind. However, momentary concentration plays a part in the development of everyday mindfulness and concentration. Guarding the sense doors is an example of the use of momentary concentration in combination with mindfulness. Sitting in a garden or a park, especially on a warm day with a clear blue sky, and allowing the sense objects to come to you, knowing their rise and fall, with clarity, is a calming experience, using momentary concentration supported with mindfulness.

There are examples of the use of momentary concentration in a more structured practice. I remember that once a study group in Manchester, (probably Abhidhamma), in lieu of a sitting practice, was given there following instruction by our teacher, Lance Cousins.

The practice was to observe the bases (*āyatana*), 12 in all: eye base, ear base, nose base, tongue base, body base, mind base, visible base, audible base, odorous base, sapid base, tangible base and mind object base.

The instruction was to observe the five sense bases and objects first, initially noting when they arose. So, for instance, noting eye, or eye object, sound, etc. The meditators could move around or stand or sit still, or a combination. Lance said that at first it would be noted that one sense tended to dominant, usually vision or hearing, but letting awareness rest on the continuous rise and fall would allow this to dominance to drop away. Over time it was possible to see the continuous rising and passing away of the different senses and the objects, as a flow, noting the objects continually presented to the respective senses.

I found that walking around did not particularly suit me, and decided just to stand still. The naming of the sense objects as they arose helped to sharpen the attention, but eventually I decided that as thoughts were clearly presenting themselves, to include the mind objects and mind base as well.

The practice went on for half an hour, so it meant settling down and trying to adjust to the constant barrage of data to every sense base. At one point it became particularly stressful, but in the spirit of the instruction, knowing the state of mind, naming it as mind object, was all part of the practice, and as mindfulness developed, eventually it settled down and

then became more of a flow. The naming was no longer necessary, the sense objects noted as they arose. And the overwhelming impression from this practice was that no sense had priority. Each sense object was equal, whether it was coming to the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind.

Many years later, I read of this practice in a book of talks by Sayadaw U Pandita. He spoke of *khaṇika samādhi* as follows: “As the yogi is vigilantly mindful of the arising sense objects in an incessant manner, his *khaṇika samādhi* should flow continuously like a current of water.” (On the Path to Freedom p.172 *Buddhist Wisdom Centre* 1995).

In *Paramattha-mañjūsā*, a commentary to the *Vissudhimagga* a classic manual of meditation, there is reference to “‘momentary unification of the mind’”: concentration lasting only a moment. For that too, when it occurs uninterruptedly on its object in a single mode and is not overcome by opposition, fixes the mind immovably, as if in absorption’ (Pm. 278).

So this is a practice that can lead to another type of *jhāna*, based on constant mindfulness with the attention of momentary concentration averting to all and every arising phenomena, whether *nāma* (mind) or *rūpa* (matter).

In the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* – part of the Buddhist Canon, there is a section on the *āyatana*s, the *Salāyatana*s *saṃyutta* (SN.35) the first part dealing very much with observing and understanding the six internal and six external bases. Here is an example from the opening stanzas:

“Bhikkhus, the eye is impermanent. What is impermanent is suffering. What is suffering is nonself. What is nonself should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self’”.

The ear, nose tongue, body and mind are similarly treated, as are the six external bases. Then the analysis becomes increasingly fine.

When reading this text, I was struck by the similarity between it and the practice given to us by Lance. That practice is a basis for increasing understanding of our direct experience of the bases, and seems to be exactly what the Buddha is pointing to in these suttas too.

Having calmed the mind and suppressed the hindrances through access and absorption, momentary concentration can come back to play a significant role in the development of wisdom.



Haikus

Sweeping

Steadily, I sweep.
Focused, my daughter follows,
Creating fresh mess.



Calming the breathing
Training a bucking bronco,
Mind, body at one.



A wind arises
And mountain gongs are sounded,
Like uncorrupt minds.



Hear an unstruck gong
Complete and utter stillness
Infinite, silent.

Through the gateless gate,
No clinging to emptiness,
No thirst for knowledge.