



Samatha at Home *(and elsewhere)*

A newsletter for the Samatha Sangha: 12

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www.samatha.org

Samatha at Home 12

Dear Friends

As we officially begin to enter a further phase of relaxing some of the constraints that we have undergone over the past few months, there is a reminder that it is rather more a new phase than an ending. One of our cities has to remain in lockdown for an additional two weeks to quell a sudden rise in infection and others may have to do likewise. To keep ourselves and others safe and well, we have to maintain our awareness of distance and the regime of washing hands and wiping down surfaces when we go to the shops or meet with friends and family. This heedfulness is so very much like the practice of constant mindfulness on strict practice. The right attention, not too little or too much effort, in order to maintain it to the appropriate degree of awareness, and to function in our every day lives.

As we enter this new phase at the weekend, we also have a full moon. Our first article this week looks at the moon's cycles, reflecting on how the breath and the cycles may have things in common, and inviting us to look and see for ourselves.

We also have an article on how the impact of the pandemic on our meetings and classes has affected the way we maintain these activities through Zoom and Skype, and the surprising effect these tools have had on what we do.

Finally, there is an article on *Abhidhamma*, a general introduction, some personal experience of working with the material, and how it has been used to develop the practice in our Samatha tradition over the years.

We also have another video story. This time we have drawn from the stories behind the sayings in the *Dhammapada*.

Please do continue to reflect on these times, on practice and Dhamma in general – and send us any contributions, articles, poems, reflections, pictures, as they are very welcome.

Thanks for contributions this week from Roger Barnes, Mark Rowlands and Charles Shaw.

With warm wishes,

Guy and Sarah

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This week we have another video story, this time from the *Dhammapada* commentaries. This is a story called Tissa the Fat, and concerns the events behind verses 3 & 4 of the *Dhammapada*.

You can play the video online using this link:

<https://player.vimeo.com/video/434355726>

If you prefer, you can download the video to your own device and play it there, using this link:

<https://vimeo.com/silverbrookfilms/download/434355726/3351f19f5d>

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

Breathing with the Moon

Do you breathe with the Moon?

If you don't know where the breath comes from, bring to mind the emptiness of the New Moon.

The in-breath first slips into awareness like a first sight of the thin, glittering silver of the crescent Moon.

The flow of in-breath is like the waxing of the Moon.

When the body is full with breath, the invisible gap between in-breath and out-breath is like the exact moment when the Moon becomes full.

The flow of out-breath is like the waning of the Moon.

As the out-breath nears its completion, the Moon approaches the Sun, becoming gradually emptier.

In the depths of winter, when days are short, the full Moon rises early and sets late: is this like the longest breath?

At the height of summer, when days are long, the full Moon rises late and sets early: is this like the shortest breath?

Observe the Moon's cycle and its subtle changes from month to month: this is good practice for keeping continuous mindfulness of the breath.



On Zoom

Mindfulness of Zoom...

The new form has opened up wonderful possibilities. Throughout lockdown international meditation teachings and discussion have been made available for us. The resourcefulness that arose out of lockdown perhaps found its greatest outlet in Zoom, and other online platforms. It has all just bloomed! Personally, I have had practices of a depth I would not have thought possible, heard quite inspirational talks, had really useful and meaningful conversations, and enjoyed a sense of group in ways I did not think could happen. I just did not imagine that a whole organisation, and a whole sangha, could find such new and creative ways of keeping in touch. And perhaps the very depth of these meetings arose precisely because we have all been feeling uncertain and insecure. Knowing about the risk of infection and death, the first noble truth of suffering, was like an underlying tension. From that awareness and understanding, because it was shared with so many others, we all found a sense of path and freedom through the very constraints our new conditions were placing us in.

So you log on to a meeting and there is a series of faces. Zoom has helped us see ourselves, and others, differently. At the same time as we see ourselves, we see others, all equalised too on the screen. So, in big meetings groups of faces, arranged in gallery view, defy geographical and spatial boundaries. It is a new perspective and one that is arousing reflections: the evenness of being one amongst many.

How to do it?

How can one be mindful within and of Zoom? At a recent evening talk for the full moon the speaker described the curious 'self-fashioning' that goes on: we see ourself as others see us. All wrinkles and the bit you did not brush in your hair are emphasised by the light mechanisms in the camera. Selves emerge and stay awhile there. How to experience loving kindness to them all? Zoom is changing how we see ourselves and how we see others. There is a chance, as the speaker at the full-moon meeting pointed out, to develop *mettā* for many different selves, as we can notice how we are responding as well as how the responses come back.

Usually in conversations we read through the bodily reflection of ourselves in others' responses, and respond according to our more natural, unobtrusive mirror: how people shift and subtly communicate their solid, physical presence to communicate and show how they feel. Normally we 'read' them and ourselves through this. With Zoom, changes in people's bodily movement, gestures and smiles, signals transmitted through the physical body, are no longer providing our solid basis. These are the natural, organic regulator of our species. In usual interactions, like other animals, without even knowing it, we are reading others, and ourselves in others, all the time, and our bodies respond, perhaps without our knowing, by a shift in weight, a movement back, or a feeling of the ground. We usually depend on this overall mindfulness of our own presence along with the bodily interactions and presence of others, and Zoom does not give it in quite the same way. Instead, we depend on the screen to see how we are behaving. It can feel a bit of a strain

sometimes, as we struggle sometimes to hear or to read what someone is saying from a little screen. We are learning to react to different signals.

So it seems a good idea to consider a little how to be mindful while using Zoom, and how the medium can be used to best advantage.

The main thing I find is that arousing bodily mindfulness is different, but becomes even more important. During a Zoom meeting it is easy to try and focus on the screen and forget basic mindfulness of body. So before a meeting I try and 'locate' myself as I would before a practice. I try and be aware of the room I am in, the contact with the ground and the seat, and just the sense of space around me. I try and keep some sense of this during the meeting, otherwise I feel you can start straining towards the screen and losing a sense of centredness. Being aware of the breath and contact with the seat throughout the meeting also helps, and stops that leaning forwards you sometimes do that somehow means the body is off balance. A big change for me happened when I realised you do not have to hold your ipad or device. It is actually much better to prop it up and sit back during a conversation and just trust the fact you will be able to hear and listen and respond. This sounds an odd thing to say, but for a long time when I was having Zoom meetings I felt like someone peering up through a window, and that I had to hold on to the ledge, trying to look in! If I felt the Zoom screen as the window in which others were also trying to respond to me, it was possible to relax and not be on edge all the time. Windows do tend to stay in the same place, and it is possible for both sides to relax and sit back! It feels like a kind of trusting of the space between us: that we do not have to peer or strain, the contact will be there. Keeping that basic awareness of the body and the breath all the time in the meeting, ensures that one keeps balanced and relaxed. This also takes advantage of a natural plus about meetings of this kind: that people are all at home, and in surroundings where they feel safe and comfortable, so can relax and practice together very easily.

The advantages... and some problems

Where Zoom and Skype come into their own for me is conversations and practices with one other person, and group practices, with a little discussion afterwards. These work so well. Each person has chosen and selected the space where they feel happy and comfortable. In one-to-ones it is possible to chat a bit, and to make contact with one another: you feel you are back in touch with the essence of that person, the reason why you are meeting, and the good feeling of the practice. This works in small groups too. It often does not take much to do this. And then you practise. I have no idea at all why this works so well. But under those conditions over the last few months I have had practices of a depth and sense of stillness, against a background of quiet communion, that are extraordinary. In usual circumstances it could take years to find such a sense of sangha and that ease in being able to feel one can explore and relax in the meditation. Dare I say it – but Zoom and Skype sometimes feel almost better for this? This even works too in large groups, like a shared practice with fifty people. Not everyone feels this, I know. But no one is worried they haven't got enough cushions, or the ground in an unfamiliar room is a bit hard, or that they are in a strange environment. The needed preparation has all happened before you sit. You know the others are there – but can sit in great peace and quiet where you are. Just the occasional instructions of the person leading the practice,

the quiet or otherwise of your own home, and a sense of freedom that comes from that. This to me is the great excellence of an online practice: the deep peace, and the communal and shared silence. You don't have to chat or interact or strain to hear and be heard. The communion is natural and you are just all sitting together, knowing the others are there too. I really do not know how on earth this happens, but somehow it does. I have felt more in communion with samatha meditators as a whole sangha than I have for years! It is not the same as being with them, but it sometimes has its own peace too.

But it is a medium that needs a particular attentiveness and a lack of rush. For the chat and discussions after or before a group meeting, less is often more. With Zoom and Skype the length of the group meeting needs to change completely. One-to-one sessions can be very long and that is great – you can chat forever! But group meetings that become very long just do not work so well on Zoom. I do not know why that should be or if this is just personal. For a group meeting with a practice, on Zoom or Skype, the best time feels to be about an hour to an hour and a half. After that the body and mind tire. I wonder if it is because our bodies and minds have not yet adapted and caught up to this. Bodily interactions are probably usually helping us in meetings and we are not quite used to these online. It would be interesting to hear if anyone has tips or observations in this regard. Also, sometimes difficulties people are having can be less easy to work with on Zoom. You don't feel in quite the same physical space to help and respond. I think this can be a real drawback. Surprisingly, a phone conversation can be better, I find. Perhaps our minds and bodies feel sometimes more relaxed on phone, which we have using all our lives.

But on the whole, Zoom works well if treated with care. For me, a good practice and then a chance for some really good talk afterwards, is best. It often feels more helpful if it is not rushed, there is a feeling of plenty of time for silence and reflection on things people say, but no one feels a need to extend it. The Saturday morning talks are so good for me for the same reason. The talk is about 45 minutes, which works well when you are sitting and listening, then a short practice afterwards, and then a bit of a discussion and a blessing. The talks were a really wonderful idea, as they bring together the best aspects of Zoom and Skype: you can relax and just listen at home, but there is the chance to sit in meditation with the others too. This has often been inspirational and happily informal too. They use the medium to its best advantage.

I expect we are all learning mindfulness of Zoom and Skype and their strengths and weaknesses. For me, it has been quite wonderful for certain things: for 'one-to-ones' where it now feels completely normal, for the quiet of a group or shared practice, for discussions about our practice and experiences, and for listening to dhamma talks. But it is so good just to meet people too. I miss people!

And do we keep Zooming?

It will be nice to meet in 'real' rooms and locations again. I hope that is not too long now. We are all looking forward to going on courses with 'real' interactions and a shared meditation centre. But when this happens, I hope all these group practices and groups continue. There are now so many samatha meditators internationally it is wonderful to be able to practise and discuss things so naturally, in ways we did not dream were possible.

There is something about such meetings that, if taken at the right moment, and with the attention and mindfulness appropriate for the gathering and the medium, just works so well on their own terms. Long may the online meetings and talks flourish if and when the crisis ends! For older people and for international or isolated meditators they have opened new doors. In fact they have helped us all so much – so I would like them to go on. There are problems, but Zoom and Skype have helped us to distil the essentials of the practice, find them in a new way at home, and find communion with others too. For many of us, they have been a lifeline in these isolation times.



Abhidhamma in the Samatha Tradition

Everyone will have their story about how they came to do samatha meditation. In my case, it was slightly unusual at the time. In my third year of University, I asked to join a tutorial on Buddhist Thought which included Abhidhamma, specifically the *Abhidhammattha-Sangaha*, a classic commentary and introduction to Abhidhamma. About 18 months later I began my first samatha class at the centre in Chorlton. That led to group work a few years later involving an approach to the study of Abhidhamma that required drawing on experience as well as intellectual understanding. The way this works in combination with samatha practice is not unique to work on Abhidhamma. But Abhidhamma does have certain challenges due to the nature of the material and group work helps each person come to a better understanding.

The *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* is one of the three baskets (*Tipitaka*) comprising the Pali canon in Theravada Buddhism.

The three baskets are:

1. The *Vinaya Piṭaka* - the rules and discipline for monastics (monks and nuns)
2. The *Suttanta Piṭaka* – the collections of discourses, stories and verses recording the Buddha’s teaching at a certain time and place.
3. The *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* – the philosophical and analytical summation of the Buddha’s teaching.

Abhi means higher or greater and *dhamma* can be translated as truth, reality or teaching. So *Abhidhamma* can be translated as higher truth, reality or teaching.

Buddhism refers to two types of truth or reality: conventional reality and ultimate reality. Both are real, but it is important to understand the distinction. The language of every day life is conventional.



An eminent meditation master and scholar, Venerable Anandamaitreya gave the following example to a group at the Manchester Centre: He said that in every day language we talk about the sun rising and the sun setting, and that is perfectly understood. But from the ultimate perspective, the sun does not rise and set, the earth spins on its axis and orbits the sun. However, if someone objected to the every day use of ‘sun rise and sun set’ saying, “no, the sun does not really rise or set, that is an illusion” then that would be rather odd. We understand the difference. He went on to say that in the suttas, the Buddha talked about this person or that person, and it would be understood that this was conventional speech, pointing to ultimate truth. There is often talk of a time, a place, people, a sequence of events and a teaching. In the Abhidhamma, the subject is the analysis of ultimate realities and the conditions affecting them, and the reality that is not subject to conditions. There are no beings, everything is analysed from the standpoint of ultimate reality.



Ven. Anandamaitreya at the Manchester Samatha Centre, June 1982

The scope of Abhidhamma is to examine every mental and material state that can arise, or is present from the standpoint of ultimate reality. It is meticulous in this examination. Abhidhamma classifies ultimate realities in a number of ways. Dividing realities between *nāma*, mental phenomena, and *rūpa*, physical phenomena, is one way. *Nāma* experiences something whereas *rūpa* does not experience anything. The eye consciousness, for instance, experiences form and colour. The physical eye base and the physical object of the eye consciousness do not experience anything, but eye consciousness arises in dependence on the eye base and form and colour. These phenomena arise and fall away in rapid succession, but we tend to take them for self.

Nāma and *rūpa* are classified into four further categories known as the four *paramattha dhammas*. The first three are conditioned, that is they arise because of supporting conditions. The fourth *paramattha dhamma* is unconditioned. Due to the specific

meanings of various terms, English equivalents can sometimes be too broad and therefore misleading, so the *Pāli* terms are often used.

Citta – a moment of consciousness or experience which is conditioned and arises with an object

Cetasika – mental factors which are conditioned and arise with the moment of consciousness

Rūpa – material phenomena arising due to conditions

Nibbāna – unconditioned reality.

There are 89 different types of *citta*. They are either *kusala* (skilful) *akusala* (unskilful) *vipāka* (resultant) or *kiriya* (causeless). Apart from two *cittas* that occur in the thought processes of ordinary beings in the sense sphere, the *kiriya cittas*, which do not produce any results, only occur for arahants, fully enlightened beings who are free from all mental defilements.

Every *citta* has an object, it knows or experiences an object, but this is not necessarily the same as thinking about the object. The first time eye consciousness arises, the *citta* at that moment simply knows the object. There then follows a sequence of *cittas* that examine the object and respond to it either skilfully or unskilfully. The following is a list of the eight skilful *cittas* that occur in the sense sphere – the sphere we occupy as human beings. These *cittas* arise when we perform any of the 10 bases for skilful action (see Samatha at Home Issue 3, P. 10)

1. One consciousness, spontaneous, accompanied by pleasure, associated with knowledge,
2. One consciousness, instigated, accompanied by pleasure, associated with knowledge,
3. One consciousness, spontaneous, accompanied by pleasure, dissociated with knowledge,
4. One consciousness, instigated, accompanied by pleasure, dissociated with knowledge,
5. One consciousness, spontaneous, accompanied by indifference, associated with knowledge,
6. One consciousness, instigated, accompanied by indifference, associated with knowledge,
7. One consciousness, spontaneous, accompanied by indifference, dissociated with knowledge,
8. One consciousness, instigated, accompanied by indifference, dissociated with knowledge.

The *cittas* above are described as spontaneous or instigated. They are also accompanied by feeling, either pleasant or indifferent, and in some cases associated with knowledge. When we practise meditation, listen to a *dhamma*, provide a service, or any of the 10 actions that are the bases for skilful *citta*, one of these *cittas* will be the dominant of

consciousness in the thought processes accompanying those actions. They arise and fall away at an extraordinary rate. When we do something that is skilful, we can pay attention to the mind and note its nature, the feeling, the sense of spontaneity or level of instigation present. The more things are practised the more spontaneous they become, the more pleasant feeling tends to arise and the more understanding tends to arise, in conjunction with those thought moments.

Feeling and knowledge, which are mentioned in connection with the skilful *cittas*, are *cetasikas*, mental factors. *Cetasikas* are the second of the four *paramattha dhammas*. There are 52 types of *cetasikas*, mental factors arising with various types of consciousness. The consciousness knows an object. If it is one of the skilful types of consciousness, it will be accompanied by a combination of 25 skilful *cetasikas*, such as faith, mindfulness, generosity, loving kindness, compassion, wisdom and so forth. There are also seven *cetasikas* known as universals which are present in all types of consciousness, like contact, feeling, perception, and six particulars which are present in most types of consciousness, whether skilful, unskilful, resultant or causeless. There are also 14 types of unskilful *cetasikas*, such as greed, hatred, ignorance, restlessness, worry, doubt and so on.

In daily life, when I note *cetasikas* I tend to see the unskilful ones first, such as greed, or torpor, or ill will, but when there is a clear noting, seeing the mental factors that arise and pass away, there also follows a burst of mindfulness and joy in the heart area. There is also the potential for direct understanding to arise as well and repeated noting over time will help that come about. As the Buddha says in the *Dhammapada*, no matter how small the skilful action, we increase our skilfulness, just as with one drop of water after another, a large water barrel can be filled.

The third *paramattha dhamma* is *rūpa*, material phenomena. There are four primary elements that comprise of *rūpa*: earth, air, fire and water. These are the names given to specific qualities, such as hardness or softness, movement, temperature and cohesiveness, which can be experienced directly as material qualities. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* in the Middle Length Sayings (MN10) the Buddha outlines how to be mindful of the four elements in the section on mindfulness of body.



We can experience these four elements in every day life. I make a habit of noticing the elements from time to time. When walking, noticing the hardness or softness underfoot when the foot is firmly on the ground. Direct experience of the earth element. Noticing the movement of my arm when reaching out for something and noting the air element.

Noting the elements directly rather than seeing a foot or an arm. Sometimes I do this as soon as I wake up in the morning, going straight to the experience of the *paramattha dhamma* of *rūpa*. I find it is a good way to wake up. It is not a huge effort, just noting directly the contact with the ground, the sense of hardness or softness.

There are also derived material phenomena based on the four elements, such as colour and form, sound, smell, etc -these are material qualities and they do not experience anything, but can be objects of consciousness.

The fourth *paramattha dhamma* is *nibbāna*. The first three *paramattha dhammas* all arise due to supporting conditions and fall away rapidly, rising and falling in patterns according to their supporting conditions. *Nibbāna* is *nāma*, it can be experienced through the mind-door, but it is not *citta* or *cetasika*, which are conditioned. *Nibbāna* does not rise and fall, it is not conditioned, it is outside time, so ever present. Regarding direct experience of *Nibbāna*, I remind myself that since it is outside time, since it is ever present, then it can be experienced here and now. We do not have to go anywhere to know it. We just need to bring the mind back to now and know the present. The famous Thai meditation teacher, Ājhan Lee, refers to this in his book “Frames of Reference”. He says: “You have to keep your attention fixed on these things at all times to be able to know the arising and falling away of the mind – and you will come to know the nature of the mind that doesn’t arise and doesn’t fall away.” (Frames of Reference, Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu).

In the Samatha tradition, group work has been one of the main ways to approach the theoretical aspects of the Buddha’s teaching. This tends to comprise of taking a particular text and for group members to examine various sections and present their findings. Abhidhamma lends itself to this type of work, and over the years various groups have met and some have produced works published by the Samatha Trust. There is necessarily study involved, but with the aim to use that study to understand the subject under consideration through personal experience, intuitive understanding or artistic interpretation. Reformulation of the points of *dhamma* under consideration is a common approach, requiring each person to reflect on their experience and frequently find unexpected insights arising from the work on the material, often due to the requirement to present some findings. Sometimes verbal presentations are spontaneously accompanied by gestures which convey as much, if not more meaning as the words. Calming meditation is used as a basis to allow insights to arise through the group work which may otherwise not arise through individual investigation alone.

I remember that group work on Abhidhamma was challenging but rewarding. We have to look at the world in a completely unfamiliar way. The actual work on the material itself has an effect and through many years of group work and individual study, the knowledge can give rise to moments of intuitive understanding; for instance, mindfulness of a

particular state is suddenly enhanced by a flash of recollection of the mental factors in such a state. Not necessarily all the factors individually, but the sense of them. This sense of them has an undeniably illuminating effect. At other times, a systematic approach, using Abhidhamma material, can be the basis for insight, such as the exercise of being mindful of the sense objects arising at the various sense bases (see Samatha at Home issue 7, page 9) or mindfulness of the four primary elements, their different manifestations, characteristics and functions.

As with much of the Buddha's teaching, revisiting Abhidhamma over the years reminds one of things absorbed, often at the level of feeling as much as anything, that things are being processed and understood, but not in an obvious way; and the promise that there is much more to discover and understand.

Suggested further reading:

Abhidhamma Papers, 1982, published by the Samatha Trust:

<https://www.samatha.org/sites/default/files/abhidhamma-papers-final.pdf>

Abhidhamma Adventures, 1996, published by the Samatha Trust

Abhidhamma in Daily Life by Nina Van Gorkom (3rd edition 1997)

Survey of the Paramattha Dhammas by Sujin Boriharnwanaket (2005)

https://abhidhamma-studies.weebly.com/uploads/2/7/7/2/27729113/survey_of_paramattha_dhammas.pdf