



A narrow footpath
People smile and stand aside
Social distance walk

Samatha at Home

A weekly newsletter for the Southern Sangha: 1

A letter from the editors

Dear friends,

We are two *samatha* teachers in the Southern Area. We hope you are keeping well, and that the practice is helping too. These are strange times. We realised that for many of us who are not so tech-savvy, or who feel like a quiet read, the most comfortable way to feel in contact with other meditators and to feel settled with one's own practice, is to have a weekly newsletter. So we are going to send one every Thursday. There is also a chance to listen, too: there is a guided *samatha* practice for those who would like it and feel a bit rusty:

<https://player.vimeo.com/video/402778687>

and a bedtime *jātaka* story on audio:

<https://player.vimeo.com/video/402961990>

We will add to these audios each week.

Thank you for contributions so far! We would really welcome them too from anyone else practising *samatha*, at any stage. How are you finding it at the moment? Where do you enjoy your meditation? How are your walks?

Contributions in the form of photos, drawings, articles, poems, haikus, and comments are most welcome. Please send to Guy Healey guy.healey@outlook.com and Sarah Shaw sarah99shaw@gmail.com

Warm wishes,
Guy and Sarah

Freedom from Fear, Mindfulness and the Middle Way

The *Buddharūpa* in the main shrine room of the Samatha Meditation Centre in Milton Keynes has the hand gesture (*mudrā*), known as the *abhaya mudrā*: freedom from fear. This seems very apt in the current climate. It is shown on the first page of this newsletter.

The coronavirus crisis has led to an increase in fear and worry for many in the community. This fear can be even more contagious than the virus itself. However, there are others who have the opposite reaction, one of no concern at all, freely mingling in parks, cafes, pubs and restaurants. But this is not the freedom from fear that is indicated by the *abhaya mudrā*. This lack of concern is accompanied by heedlessness, such as the failure to observe the social distancing required to disrupt the spread of the virus. Neither fear nor heedlessness are helpful to us. The middle way between these two extremes is to practice mindfulness (*sati*).

Mindfulness is the process whereby we bring our attention to the present. Practising mindfulness of breathing each day helps us to develop this skill. Mindfulness is the state of recollecting and being fully aware of what is present. It also refers to “non-carelessness”, “non-distraction”, “non-fuzziness and confusion”. The breathing mindfulness practice helps us refine this skill by developing these qualities with regard to the breath. The gentle but determined repetition of practice helps with a more wakeful state during the day; the ability to draw back from flights of fearful fancy regarding what may arise in the future; and the avoidance of heedless activity regarding our daily tasks. To borrow from a well-known monk, when he was asked what he would do in a series of future, usually doom-laden, scenarios, he replied: “If I am mindful now, I will know what to do then.”

Depending on our current circumstances, the development of mindfulness in daily life may take different forms. Some of us will be particularly busy, with work, children and/or elderly relatives at home, and a range of other tasks. Focusing on one thing at a time is a well-known practice, but it is at times like this when that simple principle can be easily forgotten. Never mind if that happens, just start again. A bit of mindfulness will lead to more mindfulness, and little by little, again and again, it will develop over time.

For those of us who have much more time than we are used to, then there is the opportunity to go further and begin to practice *appamāda*, heedfulness.

Heedfulness (*appamāda*) refers to the uninterrupted presence of mindfulness in our daily lives. Rather than being fearful of the future or heedless of the present we can bring ourselves back to present moment awareness regardless of what we are doing. This can be an extremely peaceful and calming thing to do in itself.

The importance of heedfulness is referred to by the Buddha many times in the *suttas*. The following is a significant example:

“O Bhikkhus, the footprints of all land-bound creatures fit within the footprint of the elephant; the elephant’s footprint is said to be supreme in terms of size. Similarly, all skilful

states have heedfulness as their base, converge within the bounds of heedfulness. Heedfulness may be said to be supreme amongst those states." (*Samyutta Nikāya, Mahāvāravagga §253*).

So, in addition to our daily breathing mindfulness practice, we can take the opportunity of our current situation to develop heedfulness. This can be done by simply bringing to mind the breath during the day, or being aware of the bodily posture (for instance, walking, standing, sitting or lying down), or the feeling that is present (notice if it is pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feeling). Simply to know what is present is what is required. If the mind is caught up in fear, then bringing it back to the present, knowing the breath, or knowing the bodily posture, or knowing the type of feeling, will help in the calming process.

Mindfulness is one of the seven factors of awakening (*bojjhaṅga*) and each factor can have a role to play in our daily lives. The next *dhamma* newsletter will explore these seven factors in more depth.

Suggested further reading: Right Mindfulness by P.A Payutto (free versions available online).

The Factors of Awakening (*Bojjhaṅga*)

Many people will have heard the *bojjhaṅga paritta* chant. It is a short chant which was given by the Buddha to some arahats who were ill; they got better when they heard it. It is still chanted for people when they are ill, to this day.

You can hear it on our website:

<https://samatha.org/explore-publications/chants>

So why are the seven factors of awakening considered so healing? I have found they are really are ways of producing a happy and cheerful mind, and a healthy one too. I have been noticing during the lockdown that I need all seven of them, just a bit, during the day, at different times.

They are:

Mindfulness
Investigation
Vigour
Joy
Tranquillity
Stillness (concentration)
Equanimity

I find if one can get a taste of these during any one day, the day goes much better. Mindfulness is always a good start – and starts this list. The present situation is making us

mindful of our self and others, and the whole planet too. We have to wash our hands a great deal, for a start, and this simple activity seems imbued with new significance. Years ago a teacher in Manchester, Russel Williams, said that if you wanted to get mindfulness going, the best thing is to find one activity you do several times a day, like the washing up, or washing the hands, and just be mindful while you do it. These conditions seem a good moment to try this: to be aware of the breath, the contact with the water on my hands, the room, and my body, with my feet on the ground. Warm soap suds, feeling the dishes, being aware of the breath, moving the toes. When I remember, I have always found this helpful: one realises that there is actually no point in the process which is actually unpleasant! So isn't it odd that washing up is something we often do not want to do? Making it an interesting ritual is a real mindfulness exercise. You notice your shoulders are tense; or that you are not relaxed in some way. The soap suds, I find, help one to be aware of the whole body too. If, like me, you sometimes like to sing while washing up, being aware of the body and breath really helps, and makes you get a sense of the body and the song. I can't pretend it makes me good at singing, but the experience is a very 'whole' one then.

The other factors all seem really pertinent to trying to keep one's mood stable and happy. So, during the day, I need something that arouses investigation – a puzzle, or an interesting recipe, for instance. Vigour is a tricky one at home. How do you keep fit? I have been trying to keep up lots of steps during the day to keep the body and mind reasonably active. It really is deadly boring – until you try and do it while being aware of the breath too. Then it becomes rather interesting and even fun. As does the daily walk – even if it is very cold! More on that below. Joy, the middle factor, is also essential for a healthy mind and for our sanity. For me, it is important to have something to look forward to doing and to laugh at something sometimes! Tranquillity for me arises when I am getting on with something I enjoy, and find it more interesting than me and my problems. So, as I love knitting, that has been the way to calm down. I am making something very difficult at the moment: a tranquil and sometimes exasperating challenge. But it makes me forget other problems. Trying to get into the rhythm of the stitch and the patterns you are mixing together is an art, as you have to keep it even, and it soon becomes just more interesting than anything else. The whole process of knitting just makes me feel tranquil and absorbed. Linking the breath, and a feeling of loving kindness with the breath to the rhythm of the stitch and the clack of needles are part of a wider awareness that becomes so satisfying and content. Problems seem to drop away for a while. Other people will have different solutions and prefer other activities to arouse tranquillity: they might find knitting itself stressful! Stillness, or concentration, comes in the meditation: just to put everything aside and come back to the breath itself, and enjoy and appreciate each one. It is a real appreciation we can practise now. Again, this is always more interesting than 'me', and makes one realise if one has been tensing up in the day: for in lockdown, there are all sorts of things to try and organise, and potentially worry about. One needs the time just to let go.

And so, lastly, to the awakening factor of equanimity. Like many others, I find there are moments in the day when they are really intense emotions, sometimes sad, and, occasionally happy, at some good news. One finds oneself thinking of one's family and friends, and wondering how they are. This is strange, as we are, like everyone else, in a situation where there is nothing we can do to change things. I have been finding that coming back to awareness of the breath, and the body, during the day at odd moments. This

has a way of allowing oneself to be more of an ‘overseer’ of the mind, the traditional image for equanimity. There is an odd peacefulness that comes with knowing that one has done all one can sometimes – we just have to let go.

That is a start to considering these seven factors. They seem a very good ‘checklist’ of things to keep oneself sane and to keep the spirits and meditation even. If you think about it, it is these seven factors we like to see in young children, as they grow up, and they are good for us too. They all help each other too, I have noticed. I can get plenty of investigation going as I try and work out why my Zoom isn’t working properly, but need a bit more tranquillity and mindfulness to stand back and let go. If it doesn’t work....that is not the end of the world. Sometimes, I find that something on Facebook or the TV is very funny, and I get restless and excited – a need again for tranquillity.

Anyway, we thought we would take one factor each week and see how that works during lockdown. So next week we will start and go for mindfulness... Mindfulness is always facing the unfamiliar with friendliness and equanimity. How do we do it now? If you have any tips or observations on being mindful at home, or on walks, do send them to us. We really look forward to hearing from you.

And a last bit on walks....

Those of us in a rush in the twenty-first century have sometimes neglected the common or garden walk. With lockdown, a number of people I know have commented how good it is just to go for a walk these days, with no purpose – they realise they have been starved of this simple pleasure by so much indoors work. I find walking is a kind of nourishment, and really lifts the mood. So, I have been trying to make the most of my walks, and be mindful of the space around, the sensation of the ground under the feet, and the air on the face. It is a time to appreciate the breath, as well as practising loving kindness or equanimity with any other beings, animal or human, one meets. As I am just going for a walk, with no other purpose, I find myself noticing much more. Spring is getting going, and some new buds, flowers and birds coming out of hiding. In spring, cities are also becoming beautiful, if perhaps eerily so, with deserted streets, vistas, spaces and objects one had not noticed before. If you have any observations from your mindful walks, and what you are seeing in the countryside or urban cityscape around you, please let us know. Likewise, if you would like to send us any pictures: perhaps of your shrine, or your Buddha rupa, please do. Thank you.

....Another walk haiku

Pheasant running across grass
red green red green red
dozing lambs tell him: no rush