



Samatha at Home (and elsewhere)

A weekly newsletter for the Southern Sangha: 8

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Samatha at Home 8

Dear friends,

And so we come to the last factor of awakening – equanimity. Most of us have been learning something about this elusive quality of necessity over the last few weeks. It is the only way of dealing with uncertain futures, delayed plans and the still present threat of infection! And having got used to lockdown, we are on the perhaps rather more difficult stage of knowing how we should negotiate the gradual easing of restrictions – and it might not be as easy as it seems. For we are finding out about how to start getting takeout coffees, and walks in parks, and actually talking to people more. It is rather like coming away from a retreat. If you have been at home all this time, you might feel you need to take things gingerly. And if you have been out at work all this time, as so many are, it might start to be a bit annoying that streets and roads that were so beautifully calm and ‘yours’, start to be taken over again!

So once again, we hope this newsletter eases the process a bit, and thanks for contributions from Charles Shaw and Paul Shelvey

Next week we will look at all the factors of awakening, or any of them! Do send us pictures, reflections, poems or stories.

Thank you!

And have a good week...

With warm wishes,

Guy and Sarah

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

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This week's story is about Temiya, the mute prince, and the development of the eighth perfection of a Bodhisatta: *adhithāna* (resolve).



You can watch the video online via this link

<https://player.vimeo.com/video/420668693>

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

<https://vimeo.com/silverbrookfilms/download/420668693/9c041ca327>



The seventh factor of awakening (*upekkhā*)

On the chimney stack of the cottage next door there sits a seagull, who has been there most of the time for a week or so. He has found his perch, is happy to look around at the hills, sea, people below him, other birds and the road, and sometimes just feels like flying off, or swooping down. And then he comes back, and remains on his perch, seemingly enjoying the air and the view, still and attentive to all the big views around. He sits apart, but calling out to other birds sometimes. He always seems a really good emblem to me of equanimity, the ability, literally to 'look on'. I suspect that what is going on in his mind is not always as composed as it looks, but it does remind me that there is a perspective that is possible that does indeed look on, from a position of stillness, the 'perch', where you can see the world, still act when needed, and come back to a strong supportive base.



While I was musing on equanimity, for some reason a very longstanding monk kept on coming to my mind, now in Canada, called Ven Viradhamma. He has always impressed me with his warmth, rare capacity to listen and to notice the individual, and his ability to be himself, composed and apart, yet connected to everyone he meets. As he likes to point out, being mindful and being aware of impermanence does not mean you start to become 'detached'. On the contrary, more mindfulness makes you more involved. You start to listen more, to notice people, and be aware of the moment to withdraw from a conflict, and to know when it is time not to get involved. This, he says, makes you much more connected to a sense of awareness of others, and oneself. Interestingly, he also relates this to the capacity to have wonder. He seems to me to demonstrate a rare sort of equanimity, that does engage, but knows not to let the mind get caught. It notices small details, but is aware of the whole too, and finds something in the familiar world to appreciate: equanimity gives the space for the mind to notice it. This is what he says, in a book of his I was pleased to find on the internet:

But we can't just create wonder by desiring it, can we? Go out there and create wonder! If we think to ourselves, "I'm going to create wonder," we can't do it because it doesn't work that way. And we can't generate a sense of wonder by trying to get rid of things. For instance, we don't want negative states of mind, so we try to get rid of them. When we do that, we block our innate capacity for wonder and connection, which are totally accepting. In fact, they go against the grain of the desire to reject or get rid of something. It's desire that creates alienation and takes us away from the way things are. On the other hand, connection—or the recognition and acceptance of things however they are, attractive or unattractive, appealing or unappealing—grounds us in the reality of the way things are. That grounding is what leads to wonder, because you—with all the likes and dislikes attached to "you-ness"—are getting out of the way. That's the odd thing about non-attachment: non-attachment is actually connection.

.... I've been describing how a sense of wonder and connection stems from our ability to be aware and accepting. But if we think that we're practicing these things in order to feel wonder and connection all the time, then that would just be another desire mode we're getting caught up in. As humans, we have the profound possibility of touching a deeply silent and compassionate way of being quite naturally. So when we sit in meditation for an hour, we're engaged in a very deliberate exercise in connection. As Ajahn Chah would say: "If your meditation makes you peaceful, accept it. If your meditation doesn't make you peaceful, accept it." It's not the quality of the experience that counts, but rather our being connected to the experience. This acceptance I'm referring to is not simply an intellectual action. Staying connected is an attitude you bring to life.

(Ven Viradhamma *The Contemplative's Craft*. 2017. Ontario. Tisarana Monastery: 11).



This certainly resonates with me as good instructions for *samatha* breathing mindfulness meditation. One way I can guarantee that I will not want to sit in my meditation is to start thinking of hindrances that I want to get rid of, or that I should be improving myself in some way! People vary, I think, but the only way I find to be free from hindrances, is to do

something else: become interested in the breath, or try and extend some loving kindness to them. And even if that does not work, and one is having a ‘bad’ practice, one is still connected, in the way Ven Viradhamma describes.

One of the problems in finding equanimity, of course, is that various hindrances do indeed get in the way. But one meditation teacher a while ago said something very interesting. He said he found though hindrances of course arise for all sorts of reasons, they usually do for him and people he taught, with regard to feelings or contacts with other people. The hindrances are not ‘caused’ by people, but seem so often to settle around them: annoyance, wanting to be with them and not here, feeling lonely because someone hasn’t called, hurt at something someone said, and restlessness about something that was said or not said etc. So yes, the hindrances are the problem, but they are, he said, so often, rightly or wrongly, elicited by responses to others. I have been thinking about this ever since, and have found it really does feel like that. The breath helps us to feel connected, but, by its movement, means that no one event clogs up the mind, or lets it get stuck. And, by following the breath you start to be less focused on the person that is arousing the problem for you – of course, one’s own responsibility – but on noticing the effects the problem is having in experiencing the breath. The tension, the excitement and the sense of anger perhaps, after some encounter, are the manifestations of this. It does not feel so wonderful to be annoyed at the neighbours. The breath helps us to steer through these obstructions and tightnesses. I find you have to have a bit of loving kindness to the hindrance itself. And then, with that there, it helps us to look on, with equanimity, rather than getting caught up.



The four divine abidings (*brahmavihāras*), of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity, seem to need space. Being less interested in a hindrance means they can come out of hiding. In the Abhidhamma, one of them is said to be there whenever there is a skilful or healthy mind. And equanimity is the culmination of these. As I do not find it easy

to find, for me sometimes the best approach seems through the others, particularly loving kindness, first. So sometimes I do a loving kindness practice before the meditation, rather than after. It just seems to make me feel a bit more friendly to what is going on in there. And then it is easier to let that grow sometimes to equanimity, that watches on, and stillness.

Sometimes people say that they are a bit worried about the stilling of the thoughts in the mind as the breath becomes so interesting. Will I lose my critical intellect? I think the only thing to say to that on the basis of my experience, yes, you might for a moment. But as anyone with a critical intellect knows, a) this can be a refreshing relief and b) it is not going to disappear suddenly! And, interestingly, the very part of the mind that is usually involved in criticism can be mobilised and useful for the practice, as if it now has some time on its hands to do something useful. Equanimity, through the breath, seems to change our basic orientation, and use natural tendencies in a helpful way. So what had perhaps gone to annoyance becomes a kind of tool: it is a transferable skill, as, freed from dwelling on the objects of irritation or upset – what other people did or did not do – it can then look at the breath and find areas where it does not feel so smooth, or has gone a bit jagged, or needs a bit more warmth, and it can then it become very steady, and rather useful. At that point it can be so wonderful to let go of the events which have prompted all the problems. Equanimity frees up the critical part of the mind to do something else: to explore, if need be, and not, just rest.



So the other thing about equanimity is that it tends to help out when needed, as if you have been mulling over a problem and meet a friendly neighbour directing you where your mind can go. Equanimity allows your mind to find what it needs to put things right. I think Isaac Newton probably had some equanimity when he noticed the apple falling. He just let the mind let go, and rest a bit... and as he let his attention settle idly, he noticed he had the answer to the problem on his mind right there in front of him. I think that is

the hallmark of equanimity. Having a snooze when you have been working on something helps too, sometimes, I find.

And just as the hindrances are easily aroused by people, so it seems, the cure to that is too. Company in meditation helps the divine abidings. Yes, the hindrances so often arise from difficulties or worries about other people, but it works the other way too. Though some people really do not relate to zoom at all, for most people being there with other people, through meditations on zoom in groups or one to one, works surprisingly well.

In the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*, equanimity is strong in the fourth *jhāna*, the completion of the four form meditations. Filled now with equanimity and mindfulness, or the equanimity arising from mindfulness, there is a 'purified and translucent mind'. The practitioner is described as being like a man covered from head to toe with a pure white cloth; no part of the body that is not enveloped with the purified and translucent mind. It is a lovely and curious image, but it describes well that sense of a new perspective. You need the other divine abidings, to put yourself in touch with feeling. Equanimity feels like the relief when you find a place that seems clear and free within that, and can let go and just stay there for a while. It helps us to focus in when need be, but also to step back and to 'look on' and enjoy the view. Equanimity can feel, interact, and respond, and can be proactive too, but it feels at the lucky times when it is experienced like the seagull finding safe haven on the chimney stack; a sensing of a place where one can feel free from events, yet be free to engage too.



The Law of Octaves

The Samatha tradition in which I learned meditation continues to draw on many sources of knowledge. I was introduced to one such type of knowledge in the early years of training known as octave theory, or the law of octaves.

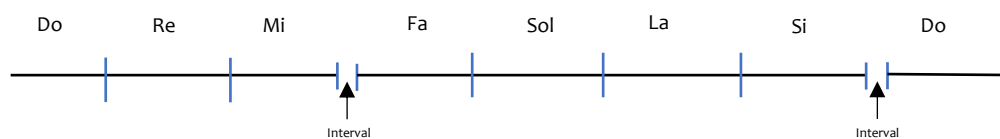
This law is one among a small number that can be applied to all processes, whether they be to the universe as a whole, processes found in nature, or the processes that human beings go through. In the book “In Search of the Miraculous” a record of P.D. Ouspensky’s eight years work as the pupil of the mystic and philosopher, G.I. Gurdjieff, there is an account of the law of octaves which begins with the following:

“Laws are everywhere the same, in the world as well as in man... some laws are more easily observed in the world, others more easily observed in man. Therefore in certain cases it is better to begin with the world and pass on to man, and in other cases it is better to start with man and pass on to the world.” (In Search of the Miraculous, Chapter Seven, Ouspensky, 1949).

In the case of the law of octaves, the examples given are applied to the world in the first instance. The account begins with the importance of regarding the universe as consisting of vibrations. But the notion that vibrations have a continuity is mistaken. Rather vibrations have a discontinuity, they slow down shortly after the beginning of a process and once again shortly before the end of a process.

The origin of this law is derived from ancient knowledge, forgotten in its application in almost all cases, but surviving to the present time in its application to music. Gurdjieff shows that the process delineated by an octave has two interval points, places where a process can be disrupted, turned off course or even terminated.

The process is shown as follows:



To summarise and perhaps simplify the account that is given, this process can be seen in all natural phenomena. It can also be seen to act on all processes of development that we go through as human beings. The octave is a description of a complete process, but one that has two significant points that need to be crossed in order for the completion to be fully realised.

Having been come to learn of the law of octaves in passing, through attending various meetings after the first few years of practice, I began to understand its significance more after hearing a story related by a teacher to a group of meditators who had been practicing meditation for three or four years. After explaining the theory, the teacher gave the following story to help illustrate the nature of the law of octaves in its simplest form. It went something like this:

The Story of the Young Man who loved Roller Skating

There was once a young man who decided to take up roller skating. Every day he went out to the park with his roller skates, practicing his turns and jumps, speeding around the specially laid tracks for roller skaters, and every day he felt the joy and thrill of it, returning home exuberated.

Then, over time, the joy and thrill began to wane a little. The roller skates that were taken off the peg by the back door each day started to be left in place occasionally and then more and more often. Roller skating was no longer providing that exuberance he used to feel and although he continued to go out roller skating on his own and sometimes with others, the days he lifted the roller skates from the peg by the back door were fewer until eventually the roller skates remained there untouched for weeks.

One day a friend of the young man was visiting and he saw the roller skates hanging on the peg by the back door.

“Oh, you do roller skating!” said his friend.

“Well, yes,” said the young man, “I used to.”

“I love roller skating; shall I get my skates? It would be great to go to the park today!”

Reluctantly the young man agreed. He wasn't really in the mood, but to please his friend, he lifted the roller skates from the peg and off they went.

At the park they put on their roller skates and took off, and suddenly the young man recalled that first thrill again, “I really enjoy this” he thought. On he went, round and round the park, remembering the turns and jumps, the roar of the skates on the track and the tarmac as he sped along.

And so his love of roller skating was rekindled, but it was different now. He was more experienced, wiser even, in the ways of roller skating. When he joined others in roller skating, he could give advice and encouragement to those who were just learning, and he shared experiences and techniques with his roller skating peers.

And so it went on for many years, the man had his roller skating friends and they developed their skills together and helped newcomers learn.

But after many years, once again something was changing. It was no longer enough to join in with his group and to help newcomers learn. Now it was a matter of doing something more for roller skating itself.

So he set about meeting this need in ways he considered appropriate, such as ensuring the knowledge of roller skating was preserved, or the history of roller skating was recorded, for each person would find different ways to meet the needs of this stage.

This is the end of the story. It shows the different stages that can be experienced in the course of completing the development of such a process.

The first phase can be described as “work for oneself”. The new activity or skill is learned either by oneself or in a group and the person is in the process of learning the fundamentals and developing themselves in mind and body.

Then the initial shine wears off and the person comes to a dry patch and this is the first interval. It is at this point that many people will leave the field of study. The first interval can be got over by an external shock or infusion of energy. In the case of the story above, it is the friend who comes to the house and urges the young man to come out roller skating again.

In samatha practice, it may be helping with a new group of meditators, either as a disciplinarian or as a teacher. Or it may be engaging in mindful work sessions to learn and understand how meditation works in action; or in a period of group work focusing on an area of the teaching; or going on a strict practice; or all of the above and more!

If the person developing an area of skill and expertise gets over the first interval, then the second phase may last many years and be full of reward and new experiences. This second phase can be described as “work for others”. Although the person learns new things and derives benefit from that, they are also benefitting others either through their participation in joint activities or directly supporting or teaching others.

Finally, comes the second interval. This may be many years later if considering lifelong learning. The work that is being done is no longer enough. There is a yearning and a need to do something more. This can lead to disenchantment and again a point where the activity can be abandoned or fade away. This interval point cannot be addressed from an external shock or infusion of energy, but must come from within, from an internal shock.

If the person gets over the second interval, by discovering a way forward with the work, then the progress henceforth can be described as the final phase which is “work for the work’s sake”. The work that is done is a tribute to the area of work itself.

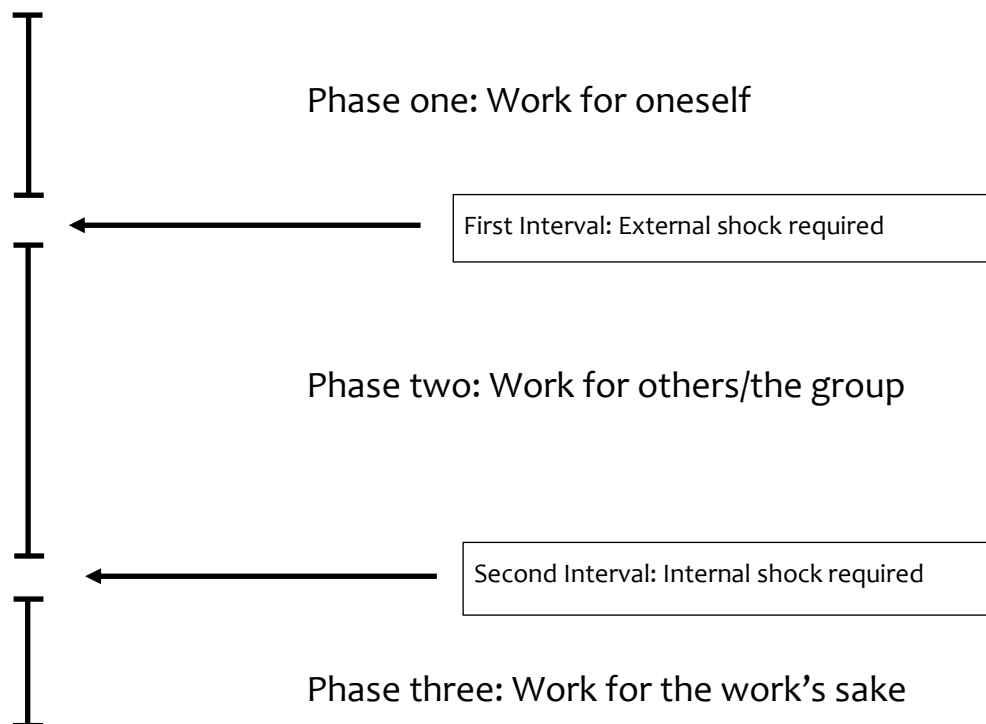
Examples of this stage can be seen in some public figures. I remember the golfer Jack Nicklaus, a towering figure with a long career, was once offered an exorbitant sum of money to join a one off event, no doubt to lend it a dignity it probably lacked– he turned it down, “it would not be good for the game” he said.

This process is not restricted to development over a lifetime. It can be observed in all sorts of process – according to the theory, it can be observed in every process. For example, continuing with the theory applied to personal development, consider a course of study, a university degree, for instance. In the first year, the course can be initially very engaging, full of new insights, interesting colleagues and surroundings. By the end of the first year it may be a challenge to keep the enthusiasm going. At this point comes the first interval, and an external shock in the form of examinations. Some people will leave at this point, but others will continue. The second and third years will be the time for consolidating and building on the knowledge acquired, but towards the end, things begin to wane a bit, the approach of the second interval. At this point, exams have become routine and do not

provide the shock or infusion of energy they once did, so an internal effort or infusion of energy must be found. For some this interval point may not be bridged, they carry on and obtain their degree by doing what is necessary; but for some others, this is not enough. This might manifest itself as the strong desire not just to get the degree, but to do the years of work justice by getting the best result possible.

And of course, the octave can be applied to the process connected to completion of a period of strict practice; or a single sitting of a meditation practice; or a single breath.

Regarding the example of long-term development, the progress through a process can be shown as follows:



The knowledge that developing the practice over a long period of time is subject to the interval periods, but that they can be addressed, is extremely helpful. The awareness that the practice can have a particularly dry feel at some point, and that this is a normal part of the stages of development, helps to maintain the determination to calmly and patiently keep going, and to engage in the things that help to bridge the intervals.

A more detailed account of the law of octaves can be found in “In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching” by P.D. Ouspensky beginning with Chapter Seven, although a reading of the entire book is also recommended.

Haikus

Laying foundations
For ancients of the future,
Past, future, present.



She walked three miles
To a meditation class,
A hopeful yearning.