

Seven Factors of Awakening: Concentration

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Here we are on the sixth day of the Seven Factors of Awakening. Today's factor is the factor of *samādhi*, often translated as "concentration." I think it's important to notice that *samādhi* is the sixth factor and it's preceded by developing states of mindfulness, investigation, effort, joy, and tranquility. There is an understanding that before that, the support for the Seven Factors of Awakening is our virtue, our good conduct – living by the precepts. All these supporting conditions are in place before the arising of *samādhi*.

It is important to say this because many people consider concentration to be the be-all and end-all of meditation. When someone is a beginner and they read about meditation, they believe that means they're supposed to be concentrated, so they huff and puff, push, tighten up, have expectations, and measure themselves – "Am I there yet?"

But *samādhi*, the state of concentration that the practice certainly emphasizes, is partially a byproduct rather than a beginner's practice. It is a byproduct of doing the practice, being open, relaxed, happy, and settled, with a sense of well-being. We are preparing, tilling, and fertilizing the soil so that the seed of *samādhi* can germinate and arise.

I think of *samādhi* as a gift, rather than something I work for. In fact, the idea of working to develop concentration seems to go against the grain of what really is happening here and what is supportive and helpful. It is as if we make ourselves a vehicle, a vessel for *samādhi* to arise, more than we do *samādhi*. But there is certainly a combination of things that we offer and do in practice, along with allowing what is a gift to occur.

The last time I looked in an English dictionary for the meaning of the word concentration, there were two primary meanings. One is "a focus of mind," like zeroing in on something, I suppose. The other meaning of concentration is "a gathering together of things or people." A gathering of people in a crowd is a concentration of people, I guess. When people think about *samādhi* or concentration in meditation, I get the impression that many people think of the first definition – focusing the mind. An extreme version of that is a laser focus, pinpointed, narrowing down and really hooking into something.

The other meaning – a gathering together of something – is actually probably closer to the meaning in the ancient Buddhist texts. The word "*samādhi*" and related words sometimes translated as concentration have the meaning of "gathering together, unifying." In one dictionary *samādhi* means "to come into harmony with things."

It is easy to see how fragmented we can become, and even be at cross-purposes with ourselves when we direct our attention to one place and our mind is concerned about something else. I think most people who sit down to meditate will have that experience sooner or later, probably sooner. We sit down to be present, and the mind is thinking about something else, somewhere else, other times and places, so we are kind of at cross-purposes. The mind does one thing, and we're trying to do something else.

There can be many different kinds of fragmentation going on at the same time. Our body has a legacy of the experiences of the day or of a lifetime, which can be quite strong. We carry tensions and resistance. We pull back

and shut off parts of ourselves. All the different parts of us with different emotions that happened over a lifetime are also vying for attention or pulling away from attention. We can have multiple concerns going on at the same time and the mind jumps around between them.

There can even be multiple emotions happening at the same time. For example, there could be an overall sense of well-being and contentment, but there is a little something in the back of the mind, a little hint of concern about whether I forgot to turn off the stove – a little bit of fear, or anything at all.

The mind has no chance to settle when it's fragmented, because it moves between all these things. So *samādhi* is not only the settling of the mind, it's the unification and gathering together of all the different faculties of attention we have. All the different ways that we can be in our body, our mind, our emotions, and our hearts come into harmony for the same purpose, the same intention.

This harmony happens through simplification. The mind becomes simpler and simpler when it is gathered around one thing. Classically, that might be the breathing. We become simple with just a breath. Some people might protest that this is too simplistic. But it is a phenomenal, very sophisticated process of bringing all our different aspects into harmony so they are settled together.

The image that I have for this is that of rainwater starting to flow down a hillside when the hillside and creekbeds are dry and parched from a lack of rain. When it starts to rain the water flows into the creeks, into the streams, and into the rivers. There is a gathering together of all the water. By the time all the water has come into a big river, there is a kind of one-pointedness as it flows in the current of the river. The water is just here. But it is also all these different things that have become unified and gathered together.

The image of the water on a slope conveys the idea of a natural process. There is a natural gravitational pull towards *samādhi* in human beings, if we get out of the way. I think that in *samādhi* there is a deep-seated feeling of wholeness, and contentment, with everything in harmony. To not allow that is to be fragmented, to be tense, to be caught up in things, to be clinging to things, or resisting things – all the forces that by themselves eventually feel quite dissatisfying.

For some people, it is clearly very nourishing and settling to really be absorbed in an activity such as doing a craft or reading a book, and let everything else fall away.

Samādhi or concentration is kind of a gift that comes when we have laid the foundation for it to arise. The idea of “this too” is part of that foundation. We learn how to not be in conflict with anything, not be opposed to anything, and not make anything into a problem. We can add layers and layers of problems on top of the simplicity of what is actually happening. So we relax the outer layers of the problem-making mind. Just being with what is – trusting ourselves and being here – is an important part of laying this foundation for developing concentration.

There are two different kinds of practices associated with concentration that support it. It is helpful to realize there are two because some people think there's only one, or only focus on one.

The first is the practice of returning the attention to the object of attention. In meditation, if the object of attention is the breathing, of course the mind will wander away from time to time, or much of the time sometimes. The practice is to return – to redirect the attention back onto the breathing. In different words – sometimes language is so important in these metaphors we use – we *allow* the breathing to return to attention, allow the breathing to come back into awareness. Rather than going to the breathing, it returns to us. Doing this sometimes lets the mind be quieter and less active – “Just opening. Okay, back to the breath – let the breath return.”

This has to do with starting over, beginning again. Meditation has a lot to do with starting over again and again. One of the great skills in meditation is learning the art of starting again, starting over, as if it's the first time, and doing it in a way that's not discouraged, annoyed, irritated, pouncing back, or being forceful. The return itself, the beginning again feels satisfying. We feel, “Oh, this is nice to start again.” The mind opens, things relax, it's an easeful – “Okay, let's start again.”

The second practice is that of sustaining the attention and hanging in there with what is going on. This means really hanging in there and being with the experience so the attention stays in the present moment with what we're focusing on. The reason I emphasize both practices is that some people are very good at the first one. They come back, they start again, but then they become complacent and don't do much more. They're kind of there, but the mind wanders off very easily.

But the two practices are needed together. They are slightly different functions or activities of the mind – starting again, and then hanging with it, lingering with it, and sustaining the attention over time. There is an art to having the sustaining be enjoyable and nice. One way to support that is to not have a high standard or expectation about how long you're going to be able to sustain the attention. Just do it for as long as you can.

Keep doing it – “Okay, here I am. Let's stay with this experience of breathing. Let's do a couple of breaths.” Slowly, over time, we are able to sustain it longer. We can rest with the experience longer and be attentive and connected. It is the massage of wandering off, starting again, and sustaining the attention; wandering off, coming back, starting again, and sustaining the attention – being there, and opening to the experience. Think of it as a massage. You are massaging the mind-heart so it gets softer, easier, more relaxed, and less caught up in its concerns. There is less momentum of clinging, wanting, and doing. The mind begins to rest, relax, and settle.

With the combination of these two – starting again and sustaining the attention – the word that I like for the awakening factor of concentration is “steady.” You might say it to yourself. Can you come back and be here with the breath, or whatever you're going to be with, and just say, “ steady.” Let yourself be steady – steady in the body, steady in this posture, steady in the mind, steady in attention, steady in the heart, just steady. Keep it steady, keep it steady. Then the mind wanders off. Try to stay steady and to return. Start again and be steady. It is kind of like holding the ship steady.

So we have: “here, what, this, yes, relax,” and now “steady.” Thank you so much. We will finish the Seven Factors of Awakening tomorrow morning.