

Mindfulness of Breathing (54) Deepening *Samādhi*

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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We are continuing with the topic of *samādhi*, the eleventh step of mindfulness of breathing. *Samādhi* is sometimes used as a generic word for meditation – cultivating our mind or body in the meditation practice. When we look within the universe of *samādhi*, we are gathering together all kinds of things. We are unifying to develop, grow, and enhance our experience.

Samādhi is not an experience that diminishes, lessens, or deprives us. It is actually the opposite – it is one of the richest ways of experiencing ourselves. It is very fulfilling and nourishing. It is about developing these beautiful, wholesome qualities and states of mind. It is also about getting out of the way, without adding extra tension and stress that can exist in the mind. *Samādhi* moves us toward less and less stressful states of mind or states of being – less and less activated places of agitation – and into deeper and deeper peace.

As we do so, even wholesome activities of mind that are more energetic than necessary begin to be shed, relaxed, or settled. It is a movement from more energetic states to quieter and stiller states. I think some people have negative experiences of quietness, stillness, and silence. So we have to try to put those associations aside and realize that the quiet, stillness, and silence we are developing – this letting go – is filling us with feelings of real goodness, contentment, fulfillment, and satisfaction.

There is movement toward less and less agitation – fewer energetic movements. In the context of the mind getting more and more peaceful, things that were wholesome and wonderful before can feel a little bit too agitating or stressful.

For example, in *samādhi*, there can be a lot of joy. But, at some point, joy seems like it is too much, too agitating – even though, at the beginning, it felt like the best thing anybody could ever experience. As we get more familiar with joy, the energy of it becomes too much. And we settle down more and more into peace, or a quiet place that feels even more satisfying.

Developing *samādhi* is a movement from more agitated and energetic states toward less energetic states. We feel more and more satisfied as we go into them. A guiding principle for tuning into our practice – the way to see the path forward in *samādhi* – is to appreciate that what felt really wonderful at one stage of practice is now something we are ready to let go of. We become quieter and move toward a less energetic, less activated state. That is the direction in which the practice is going. Various landmarks stand out along the way as we settle more and more. There is more peace.

The principle is that we are moving in this direction. It is helpful to keep this principle in mind, because sometimes, when people read about *samādhi*, they learn about the four stages of *jhāna* – deep absorption. It becomes a bit mechanical or technical, like, “Am I in the right place? Am I on the first *jhāna* or the second *jhāna*?” It’s like “*samādhi* by numbers,” which can be overdone. People can get too preoccupied with the technical definitions and aspects, rather than living in the organic flow of *samādhi* – just allowing things to unfold, and not being so concerned with the numbers, stages, and how far we have gotten.

It is easier to do this if you understand the principle that we are going from more to less activated states – more stressful to less stressful states, more agitation to less agitation. There is a trajectory to the path. One landmark for this is feeling real appreciation for and relief from no longer being actively engaged in unwholesome ways of

thinking. If we have spent a lot of time with resentment (“Why did that person do that?”), desire (really wanting something), hostility, or fantasy – after a while we feel the flatness, the two-dimensionality of these mind states, and the ways in which they keep us stressed.

With *samādhi* – developing meditation – we start to let go of those things. When we become separate from, temporarily put aside, or deactivate those “apps” of greed, hate, and delusion – the unwholesome – it is such a relief. And gladness and joy well up.

But, more importantly, with the goodness and happiness of this relief, now the meditation can really begin to do the gentle work of practice: staying present, applying the mind, and staying there. The gentle work of, “Stay here. Be with this. Hang in there. Come back. Be here” is now done without the stress of having to struggle against unwholesome distractions and difficulties of mind.

The gentle work of staying here can be represented by what happens on the in-breath. In the beginning, the in-breath is a whole new experience. The mind has to connect to that. Then we stay there for the full in-breath. Then we connect again to the beginning of the out-breath and stay there for the whole time. It is very gentle – some people don’t even notice they are doing this. But these two movements of the mind are working, massaging, and kneading the dough.

This comes along with the relief and the happiness of not being distracted anymore – finally being able to be here and do this. As we settle in, there is less and less need to do the work of connecting and staying. It becomes second nature. The mind is starting to become stable. We are able to just rest in the breathing and stay there. There is very little tendency to wander off: “We are here. We are finally here.”

Being able to put aside that extra work of connecting and being gives birth to a different kind of joy. There can be gliding, soaring, or sliding with experience. It feels like petting a cat that begins to purr. We are there, being touched in some deep way. It is like the pleasure principle where we are touched by this beautiful feeling of just staying with the breath and being there. A different kind of joy arises that can be quite strong and energetic at times.

After a while, that joy feels like it is too much. So then we are ready to let go of that level of agitation or activation. By tuning in, there is actually a deeper satisfaction: feelings of contentment, mindfulness, clear comprehension – a simple awareness and recognition of what is happening – goodness, and contentment of just being in this happiness, this deeper sense of pleasure. And we let go of the joy.

Then as we go deeper, that happiness feels – I don’t know if it feels like it is too much – but the happiness begins to soften and relax. It falls away into something that is much more satisfying: a deep sense of tranquility and equanimity, where the awareness is very pure. Sometimes it depends on how we translate the Pali of the Buddhist teachings – but it is awareness that is very closely connected to equanimity. It is awareness purified by equanimity.

The awareness is very peaceful and still. Because there is so little mental activity, so little stressful activity, much of our ordinary way of experiencing ourselves has temporarily fallen away. People may have the sense of not really having a body. The edges of the body fall away. There is no sense of being in a body. It is not being disassociated; it is actually the opposite. We are so connected and still that we do not need the reference points we usually have.

The principle of this movement is toward less and less activity as we go into *samādhi*. Part of the purpose of this is to clarify our gaze – our ability to see, to observe – so that it does not have the agitation, filters, or disturbances of unwholesome thinking. To no longer be overlaying concepts on our experience – even if our thinking, projections, ideas, and concepts we overlay are accurate enough. We are not doing *samādhi* for its own sake. Rather, it is the way that it cleans our perception and purifies awareness, so that we can start seeing in a deeper and deeper way – for the purpose of liberation.