

Samādhi (5) In the Context of Compassion

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Welcome to this fifth introductory talk on the topic of *samādhi*. The experience, the dedication, and the practice of *samādhi* lies at the heart of Buddhist meditation. It is integral to the development of deep concentration, mindfulness, and *Vipassana* itself.

Mindfulness and *Vipassana* are not the same. Mindfulness is a practice, and *Vipassana* is a consequence of that practice. The word *vipassana* refers to the deep, liberating insights that can come when the practice of mindfulness is co-joined with *samādhi*. *Vipassana* arises when mindfulness is united with a strong, stable, steady, focused, still attention – when it is combined with *samādhi*.

The Buddha taught that there is always preparation for *samādhi*. There should be no direct frontal assault on *samādhi*. Many people, maybe highly idealistic, will learn about meditation and *samādhi*. They will say, “By golly, I’m going to do this.”

There is a story of a very capable young man who was successful at school, in sports, and in many different areas of his life. He was very capable, and for some reason decided to address his suffering by going to a monastery to practice. He explained to the abbess, “I am quite dedicated. I learn quickly. I am skilled in many things, and I can apply myself. I have discipline. If I come to the monastery to live and practice, how long will it take to become enlightened?” The abbess said, “Well, probably ten years.” That seemed pretty long to him, so he said, “No, you don’t understand. I can really give myself wholeheartedly to the practice and apply all of myself to this. I will do it full time. How long will it take if all my capacities are engaged?” Now she said, “Oh, in that case, it will take 20 years.”

Willfulness is the wrong attitude to have with *samādhi*. Although this attitude is not uncommon, it is not the preparation that is needed. This week has been about some of the things that we can do to prepare ourselves for *samādhi*. These five qualities are all set together and support each other. They don’t necessarily have to be in any order.

The first quality we discussed was discovery. This is why mindfulness is so helpful. To know yourself well is so invaluable and necessary for *samādhi*. I have known people who, as young children, have had very, very difficult lives. There may have been a lot of suffering and violence. The only relief they could find was by somehow separating, detaching, or disassociating themselves from their ordinary life and mind. They practiced concentration and could go into very deep states of concentration. It gave them safety. It gave them a place to be away from all the challenges of their ordinary, daily life. But they had never really opened to experience and associate with themselves. They had not connected and healed what was there. It is often a sign that people who have this deep, quick ability to concentrate don’t know themselves very well.

The idea is that for *samādhi*, not just concentration, but for *samādhi* to be effective, it needs to include everything. Discovering and knowing who we are is important for *samādhi*. As we practice, new things will appear about ourselves, and we welcome that. This, too, needs to be included and known.

The second thing I talked about was awareness. This is the attention that discovers and is present for things. We experiment so that there is no strain to our attention. There is no forcefulness or willfulness to it. There is a lightness to it. There is a feeling that the attention is open, receptive, accepting, available, and non-contentious. There is a light touch to it.

Of course, that light touch, or lightness of attention, makes it easier for thoughts to hijack attention and for the mind to wander away. The art of meditation practice is to have a deliberateness and intentness for being attentive without having strain. This takes a while to learn.

One way to learn this is to understand that when doing *samādhi* practice, we are consciously not bringing our life with us. Even though we want to include all of who we are in our practice, in *samādhi* practice, we enter a sacred space, a special time. We might go to a sacred place in nature – a grove of trees, where things are meaningful, peaceful, and still. It feels like we can relax and be whole. We might feel like we now belong to the world.

There is a quiet and peacefulness, like we have left the world behind. In that peacefulness, all of us can be there. We can feel and know ourselves in a deeper, fuller way than if we brought all our preoccupations, concerns, desires, fears into *samādhi*. To have this light touch that doesn't wander off into thought, there must be an appreciation that this is a distinct time and place. We are here in a different environment, a sacred environment that is meditation.

We want to be somewhat deliberate about this. Some people will bow, or light a candle or incense. Some people will put on a meditation shawl or even robes. Some will close the door or lower the light. Others like to meditate outdoors and go somewhere under a tree. The idea is to do something intentional. It feels like we are going into a different time and place. It is valuable to meditate in the same place every day. Then there is an association with the place that has to do with meditation. The deliberateness, association, and familiarity kick in when we are there.

Today, we will consider compassion, care, and love. There is a whole family or palette of caregiving emotions that we can choose from. People experience love in different ways. For some, compassion is what is close at hand. For others, it could be friendliness, kindness, or a simple feeling of caring. This wouldn't be called love, but it has gentleness, tenderness, and warmth to it. For some people, it is just a feeling of warmth, loving warmth. All of them have care and appreciation in common. There is a valuing and a respect for the objects of that love, that care.

In *samādhi* practice, that can be for ourselves. We sit and create an atmosphere of intentionality and deliberateness for entering the world of *samādhi*. This supports the lightness of awareness. We somehow infuse or connect that lightness of attention with something tender, soft, and warm. It feels like we are dropping into a warm bath or on a cold day, sitting in front of a warm fire with a blanket over us. It helps us feel like this is a special time for care, love, and warmth. This is so as we are practicing *samādhi*, there is not a lot of greed and force. There is not a lot of disappointment and discouragement that it's not going well, that we are not getting concentrated.

Concentrating with *samādhi* can happen without concentrating in the normal kind of way. There can be a settling into a center rather than focusing on a central point. Sometimes the movement towards *samādhi* is best approached from the sides or the back. It is not this frontal, determined approach, this is what we are going to do now. This approach might work well for some people, but this week, I am trying to emphasize to deliberately and, if the idea works for you, to ritualistically create the conditions of intentionally entering *samādhi*. Take the time to focus on putting these conditions into place. And today, the last condition is to have compassion as part of it.

That can be the overall motivation for *samādhi* practice. *Samādhi* practice is not for its own sake. The Buddha offered *samādhi* so that we can see things as they are with care, love, and compassion. This is so we can become free of our suffering. We can enter and live in the world free of suffering, clinging, distress, and anxiety. We can live stable, strong, settled, and peaceful lives. We can live with a clarity of purpose and meet the suffering of the world. We can live a meaningful life.

The purpose of *samādhi* points back to how useful it is to prepare for *samādhi*. If the purpose of *samādhi* is to be free of suffering and to awaken a care for the world then the preparation for it is to begin with care, and to begin with compassion as a context for doing this practice.

So, thank you very much. We will continue this discussion for several weeks. I'll be back next week, and we will continue. Thank you.